

**Life / Food & Wine****A new approach to farming**

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IAN BARRETT FOR THE TORONTO STAR

Dominique Boisclair savours fresh produce from the Tourne-Sol co-op.

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**By:** Margaret Webb Special to the Star, Published on Wed Oct 14 2009

One innovative experiment to inject youthful vitality into Canada's aging farm sector looks a bit like the cast of the TV sitcom *Friends* transported from Manhattan to an organic farm 45 minutes east of Montreal.

In this case, the "friends" are Frédéric Thériault and couples Renée Primeau and Reid Allaway, and Emily Board and Dan Brisebois, ranging in age from 28 to 31. The five met while studying agriculture and environmental science at McGill University. Though all grew up in urban settings, they desperately wanted to farm according to what Thériault calls applied environmental science – organics.

Daunted by the challenges of entering the high-risk agricultural sector, they joined forces, established a workers' cooperative and developed a unique business plan that has delivered what has largely eluded Canadian farmers over the past few decades: financial stability, creative fulfilment, companionship in an often lonely pursuit, and pride in producing healthy food.

They represent the most optimistic future for food production in Canada.

The other future? Not so bright.

Between 1996 and 2006, Canadian farmers under the age of 35 stepped off a demographic cliff – nearly 50 per cent left agriculture. More than 40 per cent are now over the age of 54, and one-third of all farmers, controlling half of all Canadian farm assets, will retire in the next 15 years, according to Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada.

The reason is clear: Farmers have been caught in the middle of a corporate squeeze play that has all but destroyed independent diversified Canadian farms.

Increasing consolidation of agribusinesses – seed, fertilizer and chemical companies – has resulted in soaring input costs. At harvest, farmers face the same consolidation among retailers and processors, forcing prices down, often below the cost of production. The top four retailers now control 71 per cent of the food market, according to CIBC World Markets Inc., and they have the power to source cheaper food globally. Just two companies, XL and Cargill, have a 95 per cent lock on Canadian finished cattle slaughter.

The result? According to the National Farmers Union (NFU), while profits were flowing to massive agribusiness and food companies, realized net incomes for farmers plunged to zero for much of this decade.

Without a strong strategy to revitalize farming, especially mid-size farms, the bleak scenario is a corporate takeover of the 50 per cent of farm assets coming available by larger corporate farms (farms of 3,500-plus acres grew at a rate of 50 per cent between 2001 and 2006), and even processors and retailers. Control of Canada's food supply could fall into even fewer hands.

That's a scenario many Canadian policy-makers just don't want to contemplate, says food policy expert Rod MacRae. "The implications are too severe."

Yet, in this crisis, there is a golden opportunity to shift Canadian farming into a more sustainable future.

Young people, like "the friends," want into agriculture, but they're interested in ecological farming and producing food for local markets.

To avoid high start-up costs, the five rented 12 acres from a 1,500-acre organic crop farm operated by three brothers, the Dewavrins. "They really wanted the example of young farmers on the land for their children," says Brisebois.

The friends then secured a \$40,000 new-farm establishment grant from Quebec's ministry of agriculture, perhaps the most innovative farm start-up program in Canada. With it, they bought the limited equipment and supplies required to set up their Tourne-Sol vegetable farm, powered largely by the sun and their own physical labour. For a stable source of income, they rely not on government programs but selling directly to customers through a Community Supported Agricultural program and two weekly farmers' markets. The prices are affordable – about retail prices for produce – yet return a viable living to the young farmers who estimate they feed more than 1,200 people a season.

Families clearly love the connection to the people who grow their food, and the farm. Many visit weekly to pick up their veggie basket. The young farmers established a picking garden so that families can enjoy

plucking and eating veggies right from the soil. "They say it's a highlight of their week," says Brisebois. "The kids just run wild through the garden, and they're eating and loving vegetables."

The young farmers also take care to nurture their own joy in producing food. The co-op model affords them a lifestyle most farmers can only dream of. They contain their work to 50-hour weeks during the growing season, pay themselves salaries with benefits, take most weekends off as well as a summer vacation, and enjoy down time in the winter to pursue other interests or take part-time jobs off the farm. And while they share overall planning, they still get the rush of running an independent business that farmers crave. Each takes responsibility for an area of the farm and has turned individual passions into new ventures – cut flowers, organic seed production, and medicinal tea herbs.

Says Brisebois: "We're able to run a profitable farm without breaking our backs. We live modest lives but we're not worried financially. We make our own decisions. We work outside. We eat really well. I love the diversity of tasks, the constant decision-making. Really, I love everything about farming."

In Ontario, there is a growing clamour for food grown this way. Demand for organic food is soaring by about 20 per cent a year, while the number of organic farmers is increasing by only between one and five per cent a year.

Switching to such labour-intensive, organic systems would require a massive influx of labour. But that employment and rejuvenated local food economy would be a major stimulus to stagnant rural economies. However, enticing these talented young innovators will require major intervention.

Non-profits are stepping into the breach. In Ontario, organizations such as FarmStart and Everdale Farm's Farmers Growing Farmers offer training and business planning for people hoping to realize their farm dreams. That work is helping fuel a resurgence in small farms – those less than 70 acres grew by nearly 20 per cent from 2001 to 2006.

One creative idea is the "condo farm" – several diversified farms and even processing ventures operating within one large farm. That model is one way new Canadian farmers might gain access to expensive land.

FarmStart runs a "matchmaking" service that links up landowners who don't want to farm their land with new farmers looking for land.

Established farmers Ineke Booy and Martin de Groot, who run Mapleton's Organic Dairy, near Mount Forest, discovered that their best marketing venture was offering free land to a new organic farmer, Caitlin Hall, who set up a market on the farm. "People come to the farmer's stall and they always come in for at least an ice cream," says de Groot.

The Afri-Can FoodBasket, a non-profit food security movement, teaches leadership and farming skills to Toronto teens. Last summer, it established some 20 backyard gardens in the Lawrence Heights and Jamestown communities, and worked a two-acre plot on the McVean Incubator Farm, 50 acres set aside for agriculture by the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority.

Next year, executive director Anon Lololi said the group plans to grow specialty herbs and vegetables such

as okra, callaloo and sorrel for ethnic restaurants in the Toronto area. Lololi sees tremendous potential for new Canadian farmers serving Toronto's multicultural communities – and many want to farm. "Ontario farmers are still sleeping. They haven't engaged the most multinational city in the world. Farmers say they don't know how to grow this stuff. Well, they can connect with people who do."

For all the sparkles of ingenuity in the non-profit sector, governments show little appetite for sustaining independent farming in Canada.

According to food policy expert MacRae, the Ontario government has focused its succession planning on encouraging children of farm families to enter the field – and few want to. Leona Dombrowsky, Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, said the Ontario government has committed to establishing a young farmer's program but, so far, there is no sign of it. "We'll be doing something, when the resources are available," she said.

MacRae, a professor at York University, says governments lack urgency on the matter. "Agriculture never gets its due in terms of its importance unless there's a huge crisis."

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