



A new crop of farmers

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BY THE GAZETTE (MONTREAL) JULY 5, 2006



The farm on a quiet country road near Les Cedres looks much like its neighbours. But once you get past Angus, the serious black-and-white guard dog, and into the fields, you begin to notice the differences.

For one thing, there's the youth of its five lean and serious farmers, all in their 20s. For another, they're running their own organic vegetable market garden.

Providing vegetable baskets - some weekly, some each fortnight - to 250 families and selling vegetables to shoppers at two Saturday markets, this quintet is in its second year on the land and going full tilt at improving Ferme Cooperative Tourne-Sol, as they call their five-acre spread just west of Vaudreuil-Dorion.

Besides growing 70 different vegetables and 200 varieties, they have built a heated greenhouse, are turning a former dairy barn into a vegetable packing house, and have just launched a vegetable cookbook for their customers.

In an era when farmers are leaving the land and few young people are even considering what's regarded as back-breaking and unprofitable work, the enterprise has met with an enthusiastic reaction from observers and customers.

"It's a great story of hope - young people going into farming," said Helen Meredith, a Montrealer who has contracted for a weekly basket.

Talking to the young farmers recently, we found them highly organized and optimistic, despite their 10-hour workdays and six-day workweek.

They offered us a weeding demonstration. We set off down long rows of garlic and onions to watch these farmers, each holding a different type of hoe, turn over the earth under every plant in an attack that, to us, was against an invisible enemy. Only a few tiny weeds seemed to fly up in the burst of

activity, but the group kept hoeing the whole row without letting up.

"We get them young, before they grow, before you can see them," Daniel Brisebois, 28, said of the weeds.

In under two weeks, he explained, he and his co-op partners would weed the entire farm - all 140 rows - working at a rate of about 300 feet per person per half-hour.

Planting and harvesting are other tasks the five partners handle as a team. Recently they all picked green peas and cut scapes, the curled flower stalks of the garlic plants that go into salads, soups and stir-fries. Later on they'll harvest tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers, root vegetables, squash, and everything else in its season.

Thursday is deadline day on the property. That's when the baskets, which account for 70 per cent of the farm's sales and are each designed to feed a family of four for a week, must be filled so they can be picked up at the farm or transported to drop-off points in Ile Perrot and Beaconsfield.

Emily Board, 27, runs this aspect of the co-op, which is called the Community Supported Agriculture project and is part of the Equiterre environmental group. She keeps an eye on crops as they ripen and makes sure baskets have something new in them each week - maybe some kale, Swiss chard, kohlrabi or fennel - as well as such basics as several lettuces, carrots, onions and some of the 40 types of heirloom tomatoes.

"And not too much lettuce," Board said, grinning as she tipped freshly washed leaves of several varieties into a salad bowl for our lunch and gestured to a giant head of red, oak-leaf lettuce on the counter of the farmhouse kitchen. One customer had complained that her head of lettuce was so big she had to throw some out at the end of a week.

"Customers like enough so they feel they are getting their money's worth, but not too much that they can't eat it all in a week," said Renee Primeau, 29, co-op member and the chef of the day. The farmers, all of whom live in the house, share cooking duties on a rotation basis.

Primeau fitted preparing lunch into her co-op job, which is running the greenhouses and handling insect management. One of her tasks is organizing the covering of insect-sensitive crops with long bands of gauzy cotton, doing away with the need for pesticides.

We enjoyed lunch of black-bean soup, a vegetable and goat cheese frittata, mixed green salad, whole-wheat bread and lemonade. Cheese for the frittata came from Ferme Diodati, a large goat cheese maker across the road who also produced the eggs in the frittata. It was a low-fat, high-nutrient meal. None of the farmers appeared to have an ounce of extra fat on them.

Meat is not banned, but not prominent on menus, they said. An occasional roast duck and some

sausages were mentioned as meats they could remember enjoying.

Reid Allaway, 28, who had just finished mowing the grass around the house, runs the farm machinery, which includes a tractor, and also manages the buildings. Brisebois is responsible for the irrigation system of long, underground hoses. Frederic Theriault, 24, acts as administrator and accountant for the group.

The five farmers - two females, three males - met while studying for their agriculture degrees at McGill University. Working on farms during their university years - three of the five worked on CSA farms - they knew they wanted to find careers in agriculture, but didn't know where.

Theriault, who is continuing his studies toward a master's in organic agriculture, explained their dilemma: "We had all dreamt of doing our own little thing, but we had no land, no machinery, no nothing."

Then Allaway, looking for a summer job in 2004, talked to the Dewavrin family, which owns 600 hectares (1,300 acres) on the road and uses 500 acres to grow organic cereal crops. The property has been certified as organic for the past 15 years. The three Dewavrin brothers encouraged the would-be farmer.

"We've got a piece of land and we're willing to help young people start vegetable production," Theriault quoted them as saying.

"The Dewavrins knew there is a critical lack of young farmers and no one wants to go into farming. They saw this as a way to build up interest in farming among young people and told Reid they had a piece of land. They were too busy to grow vegetables and it was a way for them to do their little bit," he said.

After that encouragement, "we met and put together our visions," Theriault said. The result was that Allaway ended up buying the farmhouse, and the group rented 12 acres around it. They use more than half the leased land for 30-foot "buffer strips" of grass that separate various vegetables.

They set up "a worker's co-op, a legal entity," said Brisebois. "Everyone has a vote, it's a business. We are living off this farm. It's a challenge drawing five salaries, but we're enjoying the work. It's a nice lifestyle, even addictive, seeing the result of what you do."

Ferme Cooperative Tourne-Sol, 1025 Rang St. Dominique, Les Cedres, sells produce every Saturday from now until mid-October at both the Ste. Anne de Bellevue market on the boardwalk or at Finnegan's Market in Hudson. Hours: 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. It cannot accept more customers for weekly baskets this summer. For more information, visit www.fermetournesol.qc.ca. The coop cookbook of about 50 recipes provided by their CSA members is being offered first to members and will later be sold for \$12 in the two markets.

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