



The fresh, young face of farming

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Wind in my hair tells me how it feels
Farm house, silver roof flashing by
Tractor-trailer truck says goodbye with a sigh
And I'm going to the country"

BY THE GAZETTE (MONTREAL) AUGUST 11, 2008

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- Going to the Country, Bruce Cockburn, 1970

It's Friday afternoon, and the five members of the Tourne-Sol Co-operative Farm, 50 kilometres west of Montreal, are packing fresh-picked produce to sell at two open-air markets the next morning.

"Two hundred cukes for Finnegan's?" shouts Emily Board, as she rinses fresh-picked cucumbers and packs them into plastic bins.

"Sounds good," responds Reid Allaway.

Up since 6 a.m., the farmers, age 27 to 31, will have toiled for almost 12 hours by the time they lay down their weary heads to sleep.

They founded the co-operative market garden four years ago, after graduating in agriculture from McGill University.

Of the five, not one comes from a farming background. All passionately believe more producers their age need to repopulate the countryside.

"There's a resurgence in small-scale, sustainable agriculture," says Allaway, 30. Born in Sault Ste. Marie to a university professor and administrator, he became interested in agriculture while studying biology at McGill and getting involved in student groups critiquing the industrial food system.

"All of our friends are young farmers," he says. "It's a strong and vibrant movement. In some cases it's people who grew up on a farm, but more often it's people who don't come from the country and who see small-scale organic farming as a way to pursue their dreams."

More than three decades after a million young people took to the back roads of rural North America in a rejection of consumer society, a new back-to-the-land movement is underway.

While less numerous than their forerunners in the 1960s and '70s, today's young farmers are better prepared for the rigours of rural life.

For these new pioneers, organic agriculture is a viable alternative to the environmental harm and health risks attributed to the global food system.

And while the hippies who headed back to the land decades ago were focused on becoming self-sufficient, today's young farmers are responding to a growing demand for fresh, organic, locally produced food.

Slow food. The 100-mile diet. The organic movement.

From destruction of the Brazilian rainforest to raise soybeans for cattle feedlots to health scares over produce contaminated by E coli, concerns over industrial-scale agriculture are creating fertile ground for ecological sustainable, small-scale farms.

In an era when the average meal travels 2,500 to 4,000 kilometres from farm to fork, farmers' markets and community-supported agriculture - where consumers commit to a weekly produce basket from a local farmer - offer a viable alternative.

"It's a return to agriculture that makes sense," says Allaway.

Tourne-Sol farm produces food baskets for 250 families and also sells 60 varieties of produce and cut flowers at farmers' markets in Hudson and Ste. Anne de Bellevue.

The five partners each earned \$25,000 last year for a 57-hour workweek. It's not a princely salary, but to these young farmers, it proves that small-scale, ecological agriculture is viable.

And you can't put a price on perks like pastoral surroundings, fresh air and exercise, just-picked food and job satisfaction, Allaway notes.

"If we could get 50,000 people in Canada to do what we're doing, that just might solve our food-supply problem," he observes.

Severine von Tscherner Fleming would like to see millions of new recruits swell the ranks of young farmers.

Fleming is a 27-year-old farmer in Nevis, N.Y.

She is filming *The Greenhorns*, a documentary on the new crop of young farmers (www.thegreenhorns.net).

She also grows rare fruit trees like choke cherry and elderberry, using the berries to make syrups and herbal teas.

"Our work is to feed the nation, and we need a lot more support, because the obstacles are great," she says.

Fleming got the farming bug five years ago as an undergraduate at Pomona College in southern California, where she helped found an organic farm and campus composting program.

"Everybody has this revelatory moment of 'this is what I'm supposed to do,'" she says.

She dropped out of college and worked on farms in Switzerland, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa before enrolling in agricultural ecology at the University of California, Berkeley. She graduated in December.

There are no official statistics on new farmers, but Fleming estimates they number in the thousands in the U.S.

She plans to launch a website, www.serveyourcountryfood.net, in the coming weeks so young farmers can stand and be counted.

"In places with groovy food cultures like California and Vermont, there is a proliferation of young people in agriculture, " says Fleming.

She describes the movement as a mix of hip foodies, anti-globalization activists and people who grew up on farms. "You have the dairy-family, rosy-cheeked farmers and the urban gremlin-punk types growing gourmet vegetables on squatted land," she says. "It's anti-strip malls, anti-artificial flavours."

And the movement isn't limited to the countryside. Urban farms are transforming former parking lots in Detroit and even the front lawn of San Francisco's city hall.

The film, scheduled for release late next year or early 2010, follows a group of young producers, from a cheese-maker in Rhode Island to an Oregon horse-breeder and writer.

Despite their disparities, she says, young farmers share a vision: "Here I am and here is the planet, and from where I touch the planet comes food."

Statistics Canada has no statistics on young people entering farming. Between 2001 and 2006, farms in Canada declined by seven per cent to 230,000. During the same period, the average age of Canadian farmers rose to 52 from 49. In Quebec, the average farmer is 49 years old.

Nearly seven per cent of Canadian farms produce organic food, although some are not yet certified.

The back-to-the-land movement of the 1960s centred on self-sufficiency, says Jeffrey Jacob, author of *New Pioneers: The Back-To-The-Land Movement and the Search for a Sustainable Future* (Penn State Press, 1998) and a professor of education at the University of Calgary.

The movement numbered at least one million at its height in 1975, says Jacob, who interviewed 1,300 back-to-the-landers for the book. The estimate is based on subscriptions to homesteading bibles like Mother Earth News.

Disillusionment with the Vietnam War, the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy and rampant consumerism inspired the mass exodus.

"A lot of people said, 'I can't change the system, but I can get a lifestyle that's healthy, that's not exploiting anybody,'" says Jacob.

While environmentalism was an important aspect of the back-to-the-land movement, "the motivation is sharper now because we're looking at doom-and-gloom forecasts."

But, notes Jacob, "there's a difference between loving the idea of getting back to the land and being able to do it."

The vast majority of the first wave of young idealists abandoned farming within a few years. Others took outside jobs to help support their farms.

Most of the pioneers hadn't a clue how to farm, recalls Wilson Freeman, 65, a senior analyst at Statistics Canada who observed the influx of young Americans to Lunenburg County, N.S. "It was naïveté."

Most were academics from Boston and New York who opposed the war, he recalls. Within two years, the majority gave up and left.

Lucille Giroux and her husband moved to a farm in Ste. Hélène de Chester, near Victoriaville, in 1977 to raise their two small children away from the pollution and materialism of the city.

"People called us the invaders," said Giroux, then a 24-year-old nurse at Hôtel-Dieu hospital whose 30-year-old husband taught at Collège Français.

"We didn't know a thing," she acknowledges.

The second winter, the pipes froze and they had to carry buckets from the well to the animals.

But unlike most of their fellow refugees from the urban counterculture, they stuck it out. The sheep farm, La Moutonnière, now sells prize-winning cheeses at Jean-Talon Market as well as meat and wool. (Its website is www.lamoutonniere.com)

"We went back to the land with the intention of staying," says Giroux. "For a lot of people, it was just a trip."

"There were a lot of people with their heads in the clouds. To have your head in the clouds, you have to have your feet on the ground," she adds.

Many of those who persevered on the land became the founders of today's organic-farming movement.

The movement's luminaries, like novelist, poet and organic farmer Wendell Berry, have gone on to inspire a new generation of organic farmers.

Montreal restaurateurs Michael and Liam Makhan grew up in the rural counterculture of Pictou County, N.S. Their childhood friends were among "some of the most interesting kids I've ever met," recalls Liam, 27, a co-owner of the vegan restaurant Aux Vivres on St. Laurent Blvd.

Conditions were harsh at times and chores were a way of life. "It definitely gave us a direct connection with food."

Ghislain Jutras, a market gardener in St. François-Xavier de Brandon, near Sherbrooke, is a leading member of Quebec's new generation of organic farmers.

Jutras, 30, also teaches ecological agriculture at Laval University.

A suburbanite from Quebec City, Jutras fell in love with farming at age 12, on a one-week stay on a farm.

He was fascinated by the multiple skills involved in farming, from carpentry, plumbing and electrical work, to gardening and animal husbandry.

In the evenings, he was captivated by traditional country music for fiddle, guitar and piano. Jutras took up the accordion and now joins in the music.

He now rents a small acreage on the same farm, the Ferme et bouchèrie St. Jean, where he raises produce to feed 80 local families. Jutras's market garden is called Les Jardins Naturlutte; the name evokes his love of nature and the word "turlutter," which is the tum-tiddy-tum singing featured in traditional Quebec folk music.

Two years ago, he founded a network of 60 young organic market gardeners across the province. "I know many young people who want to farm. But the problem is getting access to land." (For information on the Réseau des jeunes maraîchers écologiques, contact Jutras at Ghislain.jutras@fsaa.ulaval.ca)

Every week, Jutras's customers, who all live within a 20-kilometre radius of the farm, stop by to fill their own produce baskets.

It is that close connection to neighbours in the region around him that makes his role especially meaningful, says Jutras.

"It's like a drop of water that falls and makes circles on the surface of the water," he says. "I am the drop of water."

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- The Tourne-Sol Co-operative Farm is at 1025 St. Dominique Rd., Les Cèdres, www.ferme.tournesol.qc.ca. The farm does not sell directly to the public, but visitors can drop by, with advance notice appreciated. Call 450-452-4271 or email paniers@fermetournesol.qc.ca

- Severine von Tscharner Fleming's documentary on young farmers is called The Greenhorns. You can see details at www.thegreenhorns.net

- The website www.surveyourcountryfood.net, where young farmers can register, will be launched later this month.

- La Moutonnière is at 3688 Rang 3, Ste. Hélène de Chester, 819-382-2300. Send email to fromagerie@lamoutonniere.com or visit www.lamoutonniere.com.

SO YOU THINK YOU'D LIKE TO FARM?

For anyone interested in taking the leap to become a farmer, Reid Allaway and the team at Tourne-Sol Co-operative Farm offer these tips:

DO

- Spend lots of time planning.
- Spend at least one season as an apprentice on another farm like the one you'd like to operate.
- Aim for direct marketing whenever possible (farmers' markets, CSA basket programs, direct sales meat, food buying clubs, etc.), thus ensuring that every dollar spent on your products is yours.
- Assemble a strong business plan and use it to leverage start-up grants or wage support for start-up period.
- Budget carefully for start-up and establishment phases, making modest investments as necessary but maintaining solvency.
- Follow organic production rules and certify your farm organic as rapidly as possible.
- Pursue rental or barter agreements for land but protect yourself with legal leases or contracts.

- Find a way to live on the farm or very close by.
- Barter your labour or abilities against other goods or services when possible.
- Get to know your neighbours; they can rapidly become strong supporters and powerful allies.
- Keep lots and lots of records during the growing season, aka learning from your successes and mistakes.
- Aim for exceptional quality and freshness in all your products.
- Learn to live simply, thus avoiding need for off-farm income in establishment years.
- If you're building a greenhouse or walk-in fridge (cold room) build as large as you can afford at the time - you'll grow into it.

DON'T

- Target markets at great distance or offer home delivery - farm tasks can't get done if you're stuck in traffic.
- Take the first land opportunity you find unless you know it's ideal. Shop around and learn about soils, communities, resources, etc. before committing to put down roots.
- Enter into binding working partnerships with people you've never worked with before.
- Work 80-plus hours per week unless that is what you really want.
- Let weeds get ahead of you or produce seed.
- Spend a whole lot of money on a tractor, new or used, until you know what you really need.
- Take on debt or an off-farm job to service debt.
- Undercut other farmers' prices at market.

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