

Chapter 5: Southern Ontario

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Summary

- All counties have developed some sort of local food branding along with a local food map, models that have been proven successful are being emulated, community support has generally been garnered, and great examples of innovation can be found in this region.
- Emphasis on: collaboration and cross-sector partnerships, taste, biodiversity, need for local solutions, unifying capacity of food, farmers' markets as social and cultural hubs, holistic perspectives, sense of personal investment.
- Concerns: cost of farmland and concentration of ownership, corporate disengagement, food waste, still better public awareness, lack of steady and secure funding, regulatory framework designed for the industrial model, land use planning (food production in competition with other sectors).
- Identified needs: change of government and corporate policies – more substantial entry of local food into the institutional and large distribution chains.
- Regional characteristics: proximity to Toronto and to several large US cities, synergies between wine and local food and culinary tourism, decline of manufacturing and increase in income insecurity (including farmers' income).
- Other highlights: use of social media, need to do away with guilt-driven environmentalism, emphasis on economic sustainability rather than profitability.

Background

For the purposes of this study the region of Southern Ontario included the following counties: Elgin, Essex, Kent, Lambton, Middlesex, Niagara, and Norfolk. Its southern positioning means that this region enjoys the longest growing season in Ontario, and the vast majority of the land is zoned agricultural. Although the entire region's economy has always heavily relied on agriculture, Essex, Kent, Lambton, and Elgin have also been highly dependent on manufacturing. As such, the region has been greatly affected by the decline of manufacturing and particularly the decline of automotive industry. For instance, Windsor-Essex has had the highest unemployment rate in the country since 2007.

Southern Ontario's agriculture is characterized by large operations, many of which are not primarily producing for local consumption. Norfolk County, for instance, produces an impressive amount and array of food, but much of that production goes to supply fast food chains. Leamington in Essex County is home to over 1500 acres of greenhouse production, which accounts for some 60% of all greenhouse production in Ontario. Three quarters of the greenhouse produce there, however, is grown for the US market. This

trend is affected in part by the proximity to the US border and the fact that the region is a part of the North American free-trade “superhighway” with five major border crossings.

Once dotted with food processing facilities, the region is also characterized by a processing void. Of the 3300 food processors in Ontario, more than half are situated in the “Golden Horseshoe” region around Toronto, which combined with the location of the Ontario Food Terminal means that much of the food produced in Southern Ontario is headed either for the US or for the Golden Horseshoe. There are some notable exceptions – Heinz plant in Leamington for instance has stayed in the town where it has been operating for over 100 years. Similarly, the town of Wheatley in Kent County is still the largest freshwater fishery in North America and most of the fish caught there is processed in one of Wheatley's several fish plants.

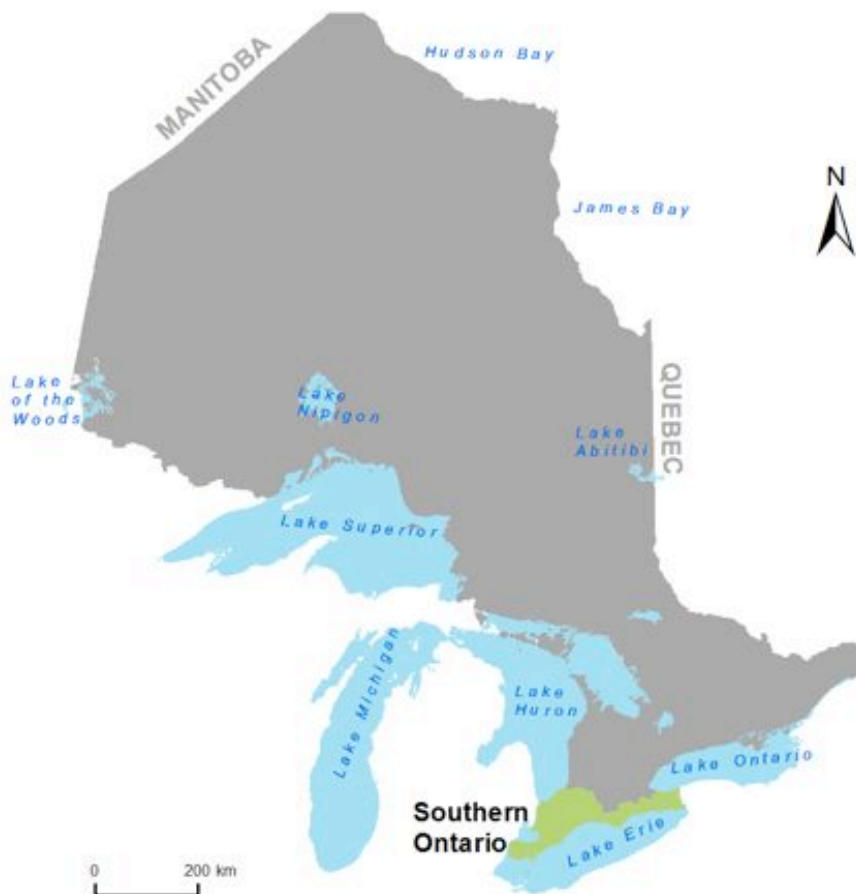


Figure 5.1: Map of Southern Region

Participants

78 initial contacts were made resulting in 21 interviews conducted in this region. The interviews included conversations with farmers' market managers (4), OMAFRA representatives (3), economic development officials (5), community initiatives (4) producer associations (2), producers (3), co-ops (2), a winner of the Ontario Premier's

Award for Agri-Food Innovation Excellence (1), and environmental services program participants (2). While it is impossible to estimate how many people were involved as employees, volunteers and clients/customers across these initiatives, it was clear that participation rates were steadily growing across categories – for instance, farmers markets were experiencing steady growth in both vendor numbers and customer numbers.

The region's local food initiatives are largely of rural and county-level type, with the exception of London (Middlesex) and Windsor (Essex) where there were a few urban initiatives and several rural/urban mixed projects. London and Windsor are the only cities in the region with populations of over 100,000 and the initiatives in Middlesex and Essex showed a more pronounced concern with social justice and accessibility. In the other counties, supporting local economies was the primary driver for this work, and the extent of local food initiatives was limited. Elgin, Kent, Lambton, and Niagara counties all proved to be somewhat difficult for recruiting interviews – partly because the initiatives were few, and partly because potential participants often felt that their regions were still in the early stages of such work and that they would have little to contribute. This was sometimes accompanied by a sense of insignificance in scale, and being overshadowed by what is taking place in the larger centres. Nevertheless, even those counties proved to offer some fascinating examples of creativity and enthusiasm around local food.

Common Accomplishments

Collaboration and cross-sector partnerships were identified as fundamental to the work and success of all initiatives. Consequently, the interviewees were often able to discuss initiatives they were not directly involved with. Some also noted that such collaborations are promising and necessary if changes to the food system were to take place. Joe Byrne, a lawyer, farmer, and community development official in Windsor-Essex, encouraged farmers and community groups alike to join co-ops, create coalitions, and act in unison, indicating that such close collaborations bring about “strength in numbers” but also allow for a diverse set of skills to come together.

All counties have developed some sort of local food branding along with a local food map. The campaigns have all involved county level, cross-sector collaborations, and all have been described as successful – to varying degrees but without exception. As a rule, they have been very effective in connecting local consumers with the producers, and have brought a variety of actors on board. Lana Drouillard, Director of Marketing and Communications with the Windsor-Essex Economic Development Corporation, developed the “Grown Right Here: Look for Local” campaign for that region and noted that there was still concern around how the distribution chains can be adjusted sufficiently to support local and small scale producers. Nevertheless, their campaign was launched at the Downtown Farmers' Market in Windsor in 2009 and at a Sobeys store in 2010. They also managed to get some local produce into the Sobeys store. Another partnership was formed with the Dairy Council. The “Grown Right Here: Look for Local” campaign lacks the resources to enter into the education system, but the local education collaboration with the Dairy Council now includes “Grown Right Here” into

school presentations. While such achievements are just small steps towards strengthening local food, they are not insignificant and are palpable symptoms of the changing tides.

The proximity of the region to both Toronto and to several large US cities, has made Southern Ontario a popular tourism destination. The food maps have thus also been excellent tools for culinary tourism. The region has worked extensively with the Ontario Culinary Tourism Alliance and the Ontario South Coast Wine. Consequently, Culinary Trail projects in Niagara, Norfolk, and Elgin have all been instrumental in promoting local food and southern Ontario's travel destinations. The flourishing wine industry in Essex and Niagara, and the budding wine production in the rest of the region have played an important role in attracting tourists and promoting local food. Ontario South Coast Wine, for instance, is working towards meeting the requirements to become a Designated Viticultural Area (which would include Brant, Elgin, Norfolk, Middlesex, and Oxford), and has worked tirelessly to also promote local food by ensuring that their wine events feature local food wherever possible. According to Judy Buck with Ontario South Coast Wine, this is partly because fresh, quality, local food enhances the wine experience, but also partly because small local producers are eager to support and promote one another. In Essex and Niagara, the well-established wine routes have long been collaborating with food producers and a number of the actors in this sector are involved in both wine- and food-related work.

Most of the interviewees spoke enthusiastically about the support of local communities in strengthening the local food system indicating that if affordable, local food is generally the preferred option. The number of people engaged (rather than profitability or any other factor) was most commonly cited as the measure of success. This was particularly highlighted with community initiatives (such as community gardens) that gave community members sense of agency. Municipal support for local food initiatives has been very good in cases of branding, food maps, and promotion of economic development. Several informants also pointed out that the enthusiasm in the local food movement has meant that large projects can be tackled with few resources. Community development was repeatedly noted as a, in some cases unforeseen, positive outcome of local food initiatives.

Food issues were repeatedly remarked upon as having immense power to rally entire communities and bring people together into the realm of determined and purposeful work. Initiatives like community gardens were described as empowering, satisfying, and in some instances transforming. Joe Byrne described one such instance: “I had a group of young offenders visit the farm and we didn't really do much - we just walked around the vegetable patch and talked about it and had a little lunch – and you could see the worry and strain on their faces when they first came to the farm, but within an hour or two they were just kids again and they talked about their rural backgrounds, and they asked questions and they were engaged.”

Farmers' markets in particular were often described as hubs of social activity. Shawn DeVree who manages the Market in St Thomas: “Farmers' markets are incredibly social and that cuts across age groups. I have girlfriends who come out with strollers and chat in

the little cafe area, and next to them are the seniors with their grandchildren, it's definitely a social function for many.” Victoria Rose who runs a local food blog and assists with the Downtown Windsor Farmers' Market similarly stated that this relatively new market (only in its third year) has already become the focal point for downtown Windsor – showcasing local art and community initiatives and providing a place for socializing while supporting local producers. Interpersonal trust was also frequently identified as both a motivator behind local food momentum, and one of the outcomes of such work.

Food resonates with everyone, and local food issues bring a number of wider social concerns into focus – economy, trust, community, health, social justice, and environment. Majority of our respondents discussed this complex nature of food issues and most strongly identified their perspectives as holistic. When asked to discern their most important motivating factors, they could sometimes identify one priority, but the answer was commonly along the lines of “they are all important” or “you cannot have one without the others.” Institutional priorities sometimes helped identify their top motivation – those working in economic development, for example, typically ranked local economy as their primary concern – but even then, their work addressed more than one concern, and all seemed adamant about the fact that one priority did not mean that the other concerns did not matter.

This southern region of Ontario proved to be a place of innovation in both rural and urban areas. In Norfolk County we found Spring Harbour Farm – Canada's first CSA that started delivering organic produce boxes as early as 1991. Norfolk is also home to Ontario's pilot program for “Alternative Land Use Services” (see below). The county that used to rely heavily on tobacco production turned the loss of tobacco markets into opportunity and a chance for creativity. Other innovative approaches were really responses to such perceived barriers as regulation (industry and government) and inadequate accessibility. David Cook, the owner of the Western Fair Market in London deliberately chose to not join Farmers' Markets Ontario as he felt that some of their policies around sales were serving as barriers to both producers and consumers. The market's independence allowed him to welcome resellers who bring in produce from several different farms (properly labelled) who would otherwise be unable to come to the market – something Cook would not be able to do under the Farmers' Markets Ontario umbrella. Similarly, Steve Green with the Windsor-Essex Community Supported Agriculture helped create an egg co-op after efforts to change the urban hen regulations in the city failed. Rather than giving up, community members decided to find ways avoid the complex regulations around eggs – they now own 24 hens collectively, share responsibility of looking after them, and share the bounty of the eggs. Green's work is also of note as his community garden and egg co-op project started with him posting an ad on Kijiji asking for access to free farmland. He received a response immediately from a family that was renting out farm land and was willing to provide space for him.

There was also a great deal of effort to consider and emulate some of the successful models found elsewhere. The Stop Community Food Centre and Savour Ottawa were two examples that were repeatedly praised. Linda Grimo of the Niagara Local Food Co-op discussed how the co-op was built on the Oklahoma Local Food Co-op model (see

below). Adam Vasey (Windsor-Essex) also spoke of the models like the Stop, as well as the Forgotten Harvest project in Michigan (food rescue and recovery organization that, among other things, takes 'seconds' – or second grade produce – from greenhouses in Essex County). Based on several models from Canada and the US (including the Denver Food Hub), a group in Essex County has recently submitted a funding proposal to develop a local food hub to supply school nutrition programs in the area.

Whereas many of the initiatives struggled to secure funding, several sources of funding were identified by more than one informant, including the Ontario Market Initiative Fund, Trillium, and private foundations like Metcalf and McConnell. The range of other sources identified was wide and it included community development funding like the Green Municipalities Fund, community businesses (particularly community-based entities like credit unions), faith communities, Farm Start, Savour Ontario, and activity-specific funders like the Ministry of Health and self-employment programs.

Common Challenges

Regulation and land use planning were most frequently identified as barriers to the success of local food initiatives. Food production was seen in competition with other sectors. Hence, despite the commonly cited municipal support for local food branding, several informants noted that corporate influence over municipal politics made municipal governments and bureaucracies less supportive than would be desired. Lynne Phillips of the Food Advisory Working Group in Windsor indicated that in Windsor-Essex land is often considered more valuable if set aside for development than for food production and that there was a general absence of municipal planning considerations for things like edible landscapes and local food supply.

Several interviewees spoke about the regulatory framework as designed for the industrial system, which makes it difficult for small producers to compete, and for community initiatives to succeed. This was further complicated by the fact that some of the regulation is subject to interpretation so that the enforcement of the rules varied between municipalities. This was particularly the case with farmers' markets and production. “Red tape” was seen as frustrating and even debilitating. Cindy Vanderstar with Norfolk Tourism and Economic Development puts this into perspective “There was a recent article in our local paper about the amount of red tape farmers have to deal with. They spend a large portion of their time doing paperwork. There is food safety and pesticide inspections, zoning issues, health and safety then there are so many insurance issues – farmers don't want on-farm tours because of liability.” Similarly, Mr. Kim Cooper with Economic Development Services in Chatham-Kent noted: “We need safe food, but we also need a balance... farmers are sometimes discouraged to get into 'value-added' work because processing also means added red tape... they basically need to hire someone just to do their paperwork.”

Cost of farmland in Ontario was also frequently cited as a barrier along with the concentration of land ownership. Concentrated land ownership was a concerning trend even where the cost of farm land was still relatively reasonable. Bryan Gilvesy (Y U

Ranch, Norfolk County) really drove this point home when he noted that one of his neighbour's was cash crop farming 12,000 acres with five employees because this is what the current agricultural system favours: "I understand why someone would run an operation like that, but I also know that this could be 120 farms of 100 acres – supporting 120 families." He also added that such operations were not necessarily in the business of producing food since much of what they produce ends up in industrial and ethanol production chain. The system that supports such a model ignores the fact that small farms can be both sustainable and economically viable. He gave an example that he recently learned about – a small organic market garden farm outside of Toronto grossing some \$21 000 per care. To make that an economically viable operation, the farm would need to use only 7 acres of land, whereas for industrial production a 12 000-acre farm is what is needed for viability.

Celso Oliveira (Windsor-Essex) identified corporate disengagement as one of the main barriers – he did not put blame anywhere, but merely indicated that the community in Windsor-Essex had not sufficiently engaged the big food producers. The big producers give charitable donations but still export most of what they produce, so that the local food system is merely a peripheral concern for them.

Sandy Mason, Petrolia Farmers' Market Coordinator (Lambton), expressed her disappointment with the amount of food that gets wasted while some emergency food services are still unable to accept perishables. Like Oliveira, she did not put blame anywhere, but merely observed that ways needed to be found to more efficiently use our food supplies and at the same time provide better food through food banks.

Public awareness is improving greatly but still needs work. As Cooper noted, many still don't recognize how important agriculture is "in the big picture... we have a cheap food policy and people have come to expect cheap food." One study participant similarly stated: "Many people just don't care... they just want cheap food." Adam Vasey thought that, although many interested individuals and groups are gaining momentum and he did not want to minimize the many recent accomplishments, there was still not enough "resonance with the broader public, not enough to create political pressures... so the lack of political will and even interest continues." Linda Grimo would agree as she described how the Niagara Local Food Coop had no problem getting new members as most people support the co-op as an idea. However, even though the co-op is sustainable, getting the members to shop is a bit more difficult – there is really only a smaller core group that shops regularly.

Bryan Gilvesy, who is actively involved with food literacy initiatives, also noted the importance of education, but he also underlined the need to do away with the guilt-inducing environmentalism. He added that doing ecologically sound things does not have to imply loss of income insisting that the ecological services and economic sustainability can complement each other, and ALUS was just one example of that. He elaborated that the quadruple bottom line – a balance between ecological, economic, community, and cultural sustainability – was possible with some innovative effort.

One of the participants touched on another major barrier “We need to find ways to get local food into the big distribution chains... We have to do that if we are going to have any impact.” Another participant, Lana Drouillard recognized that one of the big barriers was not unwillingness on the part of distributors, but the fact that making that change would be costly and “everybody seems to be waiting for someone else to make the move.... retailers want producers to say 'we have what you need' and producers want the retail to make the first move and say 'we'll buy what you have'.”

Kim Reep with OMAFRA in Niagara thought that incentives to grocery chains could perhaps help in creating partnerships between those chains and local producers. Kate Burns with the Economic Development Office in Elgin indicated that, although some barriers still existed in the distribution system, great strides had been made and wholesalers and distributors had really taken on an important role in supporting and even promoting local food. Nick Kinkel pointed that the issue was more complicated – that the distribution opportunities existed, but once looked at relative to profitability they proved to be limited. This, he felt, could be frustrating to both distributors and producers – horticultural producers with large operations cannot be supported sufficiently by supplying a high-quality low-volume local market. “Selling from the roadside and delivering small amounts to restaurants is costly and a lot of work compared to selling large quantities in one place... 100 Mile Market, for example, is a good supplementary customer for farmers but the volumes they buy are not enough for the farmer to be sustainable. As a result the small buyers become frustrated knowing that the farmers have other priorities.” Joe Byrne called for a more direct solution: “This is not a knock at the wholesalers – they do what they need to do to survive in their business and they are very good at this – but there has to also be a way for a small producer to sell to wholesalers... what would really help in this area is to have a wholesaler that bought largely from small producers.”

The decline of manufacturing in the region also appeared to be a barrier to local food in that the growing number of those experiencing income insecurity (unemployed, underemployed, and low-wage) had other priorities with respect to food. This was particularly pronounced in Windsor-Essex where food bank use more than doubled between 2006 and 2009, and where even the university campus had to start a food bank. Colleen Mitchell with the local United Way explained that “food banks are no longer a part of an emergency system; they are now essentially another distribution system.” But rather than seeing local food as less important because of this growing need, Mitchell thought that this actually heightened the need for local solutions, particularly projects that empower and build capacity – like community kitchens and gardens – “because, if you take a value-based approach, you know it's not just about poverty and access, but about access with dignity, about having a say when it comes to your food.” Sandy Mason similarly thought that emergency food services should somehow be enabled to provide better quality, fresh food, as the need to acquire food through food banks does not diminish one's need to eat healthy. Mason felt that this was a public health issue as much as it was a poverty alleviation concern.

Lastly, lack of steady and secure funding was a common theme across these interviews. Many of the initiatives that were lucky enough to get some funding, would find themselves in a bind once that funding ran out. Although many participants commented on how much they were able to accomplish with sometimes really small amounts (sometimes grants of no more than \$5000), there was also much anxiety about initiatives dying away when the resources dried up. This was as much the case with community groups, as it was with community development marketing campaigns – the problem cut across sectors.

Other Common Themes

Several of the participants indicated that their dedication to local food had a very personal overtone, namely, that they wanted their families and particularly their children, to eat good and healthy foods. Some identified the birth of their children as a turning point. Ken McMullen from Spring Arbour farm in Norfolk confirmed this stating that many of his CSA members joined during pregnancy with their first child deciding that they needed to eat more responsibly. Some of that concern was the immediate issue of food safety and the discomfort around foods imported from far away places with different regulations. But for most of our informants the idea of healthy food was more holistic and included concerns about future of local farming, community and environmental health, health of local economies, and the need to have more input into how our food system operates. Steve Green of Windsor spoke of his conviction that the current food system had already failed us by being neither sustainable nor just and stated “We don't really have any food security with the global trade of food... I want have more control over my bread basket, I don't want to be completely dependent on that system.”

In the two urban areas the perception of the current food system as inadequate was noticeably more pronounced, as several informants from Windsor and London spoke about the presence and awareness of poverty and its effects on food accessibility. David Cook, a market owner in London passionately defended his choice of allowing resale of produce indicating that his market “has the more expensive local strawberry for people who are looking for that and don't care how much it costs, but also has the 99c strawberries for those to whom those strawberries may be the only ones they eat this year... We often get slagged for allowing [Ontario Food] Terminal produce, but a study on the Western Fair market showed that by locating this particular market in East Village [in London] we were able to significantly reduce the average grocery bill for someone on fixed income and without a car.”

Adam Vasey who works on poverty issues in Windsor-Essex, noted that when we talk about poverty we have to keep in mind that “farmers are also living in poverty...” so support for local agriculture need also be part of poverty alleviation strategy.

There was a general recognition that food production had to be economically sustainable, that producers cannot be expected to provide good but affordable food, protect the environment, support food security initiatives, and yet not be able to earn an income. As Judy Buck noted, “environmental and economic sustainability have to be considered

together, we have to remember that most producers are just trying to make a living.” It is of note that most of the informants, including those working in food production, spoke of economic sustainability rather than profitability. There was also an understanding that even small-scale production can take place in diverse ways. Nick Kinkel, Agricultural Economic Development Advisor with OMAFRA in Simco suggested: “There is a lot of potential for what you could call 'backyard gardeners', who have an acre or five and love gardening. There are huge opportunities for supplementary family income that can contribute to a small-scale supply chain – such as small restaurants and bed-and-breakfasts for example.”

McMullen, Gilvesy, and Byrne, all experienced farmers, also discussed the importance of biodiversity. They indicated that what was produced on the farm needed to be diverse to make for healthier, more resilient farms. They also pointed to diverse farms contributing to diversity of ecosystem in which they operate.

Another common theme was the need for provincial and federal policy that would do more to institutionalize local food. Some public procurement policies have been commended but seen as somewhat symbolic and insufficient. Several participants thought that there was much duplication with municipalities developing their own food charters and strategies, and that a province-wide policy change would have a quick and general effect on how we understand our local food systems and their role in community life. One of our interviewees drew a parallel between the province-wide efforts to allow chickens in the cities and the clothes line ban in Ontario, indicating that lifting that ban across the province shortcut municipal debates for something that was already inevitable. Allowing hens in urban areas would end the frustrating debates that are taking place in the various municipalities.

Local food blogs were credited with contributing to popularity of local food, and in general the use of social media and other communication technologies was seen as beneficial, as the 21st century's version of word of mouth. Many initiatives relied on Facebook and blogs to keep the public informed and connected. Several projects are based in virtual space – the Niagara Local Food Co-op and Essex County's County Connect are both virtual markets that connect consumers with local producers.

Finally, taste was mentioned by several interviewees, even suggesting that all the other benefits of local food can be jeopardized if that food is not fresh or does not taste good. This was very much noted by those who work with culinary tourism initiatives. However, it was also mentioned by those who were concerned with accessibility. David Cook noted that “everyone should be able to access food that tastes good” and Lynne Phillips stated “it is still not common to hear discussions of food access that include considerations of taste – it's almost an assumption that people with limited access to food have no taste, or should not have it.”

Case Study 1: Spring Arbour Farm

Location: Walsingham (Norfolk County), ON

Interviewee: Ken McMullen, Owner/operator (recently retired)

Phone interview June 13, 2011 (Irena Knezevic), site visit August 15, 2011 (Erin Nelson)

Photos by Erin Nelson



Summary

- First CSA in Canada
- One-person enterprise that maintained economic sustainability over 20 years of operation
- Winner of the Ontario Premier's Award for Agri-food Innovation Excellence
- Versatile operation with biodiversity as its main organizing principle

Overview

History

Ken McMullen was at the helm of the Canadian Organic Growers in the 1980s, when he first became involved with plant patenting legislation debates. At the time, he was in management consulting in the area of diversity (working largely with issues of multiculturalism and diversity in the workplace). He made links in his work as he saw the contemporary agricultural practices, including patenting, as posing risks to plant genetic diversity. On the other hand he had also worked on issues of public health and community housing and witnessed the power of community gardens.

“The underlying institutional structure, business model in agriculture, is based on monoculture, and the loss of genetic material, the transportation routes, the use of chemicals are actually bandaids to prop up a system that wasn’t really working, which is monoculture, and therefore there needed to be a business model for farms that were based on diversity rather than uniformity. So, I put all of those things together and designed

Spring Arbour Farm to be an integration of a large gene pool, and a customer base that would support the farm.”

The Farm

Spring Arbour was founded as Canada's first CSA in 1991 with 10 shares, and it operated for two decades with McMullen only retiring earlier this year. In the last year of operation the farm was supplying to 100 families (3 of the original 10 still being shareholders), or approximately 300 people. In 2009 McMullen was a recipient of the Ontario Premier's Award for Agri-food Innovation Excellence.

Having lived in Toronto, McMullen had personal connections in the city and the vast majority of his CSA customers over the years were Toronto professionals. He credited the loyalty of his customers to the development of personal relationships with them, having an annual open house at the farm and being transparent about his production practices.

Other commercial components were added over time, so that the farm became financially sustainable because “Each crop is expressed five different ways: I sell fertilizer at the beginning of the year, then seed, then transplants, then fresh produce, and then any surplus is used for preserves... taking the same crop and selling it multiple times.” This gives him sales from May through to December. Having the sales spread out over several months and a variety of products allows for the main purpose of the farm to remain the priority and not be compromised for financial reasons – that purpose being building and maintaining diversity, a shift in values from a focus on uniformity and hierarchical control, to diversity based on a network model of organization. The model is such that shareholders would buy shares in the early spring, he would inform them of the ready-for-harvest produce by email, they would place their order and he would harvest and deliver accordingly, all with zero waste. Now that he has retired, the farm production is just for his family and for maintaining biodiversity he has created there.

Context

When McMullen started in Norfolk County in 1991, on his concession there were 12 farmers, each with 50-100 acres of land under cultivation. Now there are 2 – himself with 10 of his 50 acres under production, and one with 3000 acres farmed. In 1991, McMullen was the first farmer in his area to grow something other than tobacco. Much of the Norfolk agriculture has been revived in recent years with the demise of tobacco farming, which combined with more farmers markets in and around Norfolk, and the proximity of Toronto with its new, more discerning consumer, has created opportunities for more diverse fruit and vegetable production.

Human Resources

Although Spring Arbour has had apprentices over the years, “it was designed to be a one person operation.” McMullen has a good business mind, and he identifies his lack of formal agricultural training as an advantage: “I couldn’t have done this with any agricultural training. Agricultural training would have required me to spray the hell out of everything. There was no training in organic farming when I was starting. The only resource at the time was Rodale [Institute].” He thus had to be creative, learn to work

around crop losses and come up with a motto that “There is no such thing as a crop failure, there is only a marketing problem.” He learned to assume that he would lose 5-6 crops each season, but growing three dozen crops, that loss would be manageable. He also allowed for slow growth of the operation, expanding by sometimes as little as ¼ acre between years.

Physical Infrastructure

His last year of operating the CSA saw him with a 50-acre property, a tractor, irrigation system, refrigerator, greenhouse, and cisterns. In the early years “it was a lot of bootstrapping” taking out bank loans, and buying much of the equipment second-hand. But he had a sound business model, and was good at marketing.

Natural Resources

McMullen is insistent that the maintenance of a diverse landscape is more valuable to environmental sustainability than every piece of land being put to its “best use” in terms of economic profit. He works with the Nature Conservancy of Canada to protect and restore the natural landscapes of the region. They create diversity on the landscape, which has zero economic value but is invaluable in all other respects.

Financial Resources

The farm consists of “profit centres” and each centre covers the cost of its own particular operation: compost, greenhouse, gardens, and kitchen. For instance, one third of the transplants from the greenhouse are sold to cover the cost of operating that greenhouse. Cash from CSA shares means that the members are essentially the bankers, who “loan” the cash up front to get produce later, which means the CSA is selling trust. There used to be a mortgage on the farm, and also a line of credit. The mortgage is paid off now, but there is still the line of credit. McMullen's previous training helped him learn how to put together a financial plan that would seem reasonable to a banker, which made it easier to get loans. He also has generally kept his prices at about 30% above market price which is reasonable but also re-assuring to consumers who have learned to associate higher price with quality. He and his spouse both do off-farm work as well – he does staff training and development and management consulting during the winter. The farm itself, however, does not require the off-farm income: “The farm is sustainable, though not profitable.”

Community Resources

The trust of the customers is key in small-scale food production: “A shockingly intimate business is knowing what people eat...It was a dialogue I carried on with people for 20 years, and the trust was the essential element, that I kept building on year after year, but it was also something that could be easily broken. It could be as simple as a rotten tomato.”

McMullen also collaborates with the Nature Conservancy of Canada in preservation. Although not directly involved with either, he credits Foodshare and the Toronto Food Policy Council for some positive policy changes. “They have picked up the institutional response to what I tried to start before.” He also identified Slow Food as instrumental in linking him with new CSAs, although many of those are no longer CSAs: “There are easier ways of making money in agriculture. The pull of the monocrop.”

Policy and Program Resources

McMullen pointed to Quebec as the most progressive province in terms of policy: “They tend to put an emphasis on agricultural innovation and small scale.” Ontario, however, has for so long been telling farmers to “get big or get out... their policies reinforced what they saw, and what they saw was a rationalization of the land base in Ontario, whereby small scale farmers were bought out by mid sized farmers who were bought out by large-scale farmers.” There is also a dearth of policies that build social capital in rural areas, and preservation of local expertise.

“At the small end of farming is the CSAs, farmers’ markets, small-scale farmer, there is an intensification at that level... but it’s not centralized and it has no political clout. We have no political representation.” This despite the fact that small farmers outnumber the large-scale one by 3:1. “The barrier I feel is not policy, but...institutional resistance. The fact that institutions don’t change very easily and very quickly. It’s a crystallization of beliefs, and the belief that is crystallized is that monocropping is the only thing, and large-scale farming is the only profitable way.” This in turn results in taxation system, access to grants, and food processing regulation that are really tailored for large-scale.

Desired Assets

McMullen reiterated the importance of the Quebec results. The government there worked with banks to create a loan portfolio for small-scale farmers, gave grants and subsidies for small-scale farmer start-up, wrote off bad debt, allowed leverage for purchase of equipment. “Where I see most small-scale farmers having difficulty is with the institutional frameworks. It’s the feeling of being on the outside. Many of them are afraid of local bankers.” He was able to navigate the institutional morass more easily because of his past work experience, but suggested that new farmers are always on edge about loans.

He also called for a publicly funded breeding program. “It’s what used to be called the public good, and there is no longer any policy that deals with the public good. There isn’t a budget line I can think of in OMAFRA that is rationalized based on public good.”

Constraints/Overcoming Them

He is critical of what he identified as excessive and narrow focus on “local” only: “I don’t think local food is the solution...It is the production values that go into the growing of food that give quality, not the distance from the market place.” The development of farmers’ markets has been very beneficial, giving producers another access point to customers without the middle man of grocery giants, but he also indicated that farmers’ markets are a hard way to sell, especially when there is competition from resellers.

McMullen also identified personal expectations as a potential constraint: “My own emotional desire to be successful was one of my biggest constraints, and what it leads to is a panic in the first 3 years of bootstrapping a new business.” That tainted Ken’s first marketing attempts, and also what he considered success on the farm. “As time went on, the feedback from my customers reinforced that I was doing it right, or I adjusted it to make it right.”

The overall system is geared to large scale production so he has to compete with organic produce in large grocery stores. Yet, he always knew that keeping the prices up a bit was important to signal quality. The advantage of a CSA is that he could do his marketing during the winter and sell the CSA shares months before his produce is actually delivered. The advance sales means that sales take place when produce prices are higher everywhere, and fresh produce less available. Financing a small operation can also be a challenge, the one he overcame mainly because both he and his spouse had off-farm income.

McMullen feels that the declining numbers and ageing demographics of Ontario farmers leave them with little political clout. This, combined with much of the farm labour now being migrant workers who cannot vote, places farming on the political margins. Agricultural policy and programs are still geared towards large-scale monocrop production, and small-scale, particularly organic, growers are under the radar. His successes have been in spite of policy and programs, not because of them. He highlighted that his neighbours provided a lot of support, and the building of those trusting relationships was key: “The best thing I ever did was ask my neighbour for help.”

Successes

Stable clients are McMullen's most important accomplishment, “a stable client base that is integrated into the farm and feels that the farm is theirs. I just realized, the thing I miss the most [since retiring] is the little kids running to the door and saying ‘Farmer Ken is here’.” He already misses the relationships that were formed, which were the greatest success of his CSA. Consider the following exchange between McMullen, and our researcher Erin Nelson: “I’ve got a generation of kids that knows that food comes from somebody, from some place. Their peers have no idea what food really is, but my kids do.” [Nelson: You think of them as your kids?] “Yeah, that’s right. I do. I think of them as my kids. There’s a piece of me in every one of them, a very large piece in fact. They’ve grown up on my food.”

Relevance

When asked about how his work would be relevant to other producers and other initiatives in other communities he listed a very focused set of lessons he learned and would advise everyone to consider. The first of those lessons is simply “add value” – in the case of his farm the value is in the transparent production on a diverse, organic farm that contributes to health of his customers and of the environment. The second lesson is “spread income opportunities throughout the year and understand that expenses generate income.” Anything he buys for the farm he buys wholesale and resells at retail thus lowering his operating costs. The third bit of advice is to focus on building good customer relations, especially by giving the customer more than they’re expecting.

McMullen also sees his model increasingly viable for Ontario and thinks the direct sales aspect of food production will grow rapidly. “The bigger picture is the squeezing of the middle class. It’s a self-directed opportunity for people who find themselves overeducated and underemployed. I can see it happening already in the urban centres where people are borrowing backyards, or rooftop gardening, inner city greenhousing. I’ve seen quite a few projects emerging around that area, and I call that farming, but

OMAFRA wouldn't, because it's not taking place in the rural areas. In the rural areas it's a good opportunity to transition away from monocropping and chemical agriculture, and I'm finding a number of young farmers are willing to try it as a way to stay on the farm."

Case Study 2: Western Fair Farmers' Market

Location: London (Middlesex County)

Interviewee: Dave Cook, Owner/operator

Phone interviews July 12 and September 9, 2011 (Irena Knezevic), site visit September 17, 2011 (Lisa Ohberg), additional information from a conversation with Sarah Merritt, Old East Village BIA, September 16, 2011 (Irena Knezevic).

Photos by Lisa Ohberg



Summary

- Farmers' market located in what is otherwise a food desert
- Has been shown to have influenced (lowered) overall food costs in the neighbourhood
- Economically sustainable, while providing a launch pad for small producers
- Dedicated to providing opportunities for producers while also ensuring access to affordable food

Overview

History

The market opened in December 2006. At that time David Cook, who had been roasting and selling coffee as a hobby decided to try coffee as a side business. His coffee business took off and he eventually quit his job as an executive in food distribution industry, and started selling at Western Fair and other farmers' markets. He then started working one day a week with the previous owner, and in November 2008 Cook took over the entire operation of the Western Fair Farmers' Market (WFFM). In 2009 he was approached by Maisonville Place mall to start up a seasonal outdoor market, which now has about 40 vendors. In 2011 another outdoor market, Southdale, was added.

The Market

WFFM is a year round indoor market with some 100 vendors located on two floors of a historical building in London's Old East Village. The main floor is dedicated entirely to food, and the second floor booths feature mostly vendors selling crafts and other local products. Though the market is only open on Saturdays, the space is not used for any other purpose, so some of the vendors, including Cook's coffee roastery, are also using their market spaces as production sites. Overall, Cook identified that the market was a really a small business incubator – a launch pad for producers who can start by creating a viable side operation to then grow their business in the market. WFFM, though only 5 years in existence, boasts some of the highest traffic counts among London markets.

Context

The market is located in Old East Village, a low income area of London that is otherwise a food desert and has a high concentration of social agencies. Sarah Merritt with the local BIA explained the neighbourhood had long been a marginalized part of the city that had “been left out of the game” but local community building efforts guided by multifaceted redevelopment plan are now transforming the area and the Market is a big part of that. The neighbourhood had been experiencing a range of challenges common to many Canadian urban core neighbourhoods, and the BIA in partnership with the Community Association and the City of London decided to implement a capacity focused approach to addressing local issues. This approach was in contrast to a number of failed revitalization attempts that were deficiency focused. As Merritt described it, it was about “working with what we have, recognizing that everyone had something to contribute... we're not about gentrification (although there is nothing wrong with neighbourhoods like ours looking gentrified) we are about improving the lives of the people who live in this neighbourhood.” It is in this context that the WFFM started operating and although the area has traditionally been considered challenging for retailers, WFFM has had no difficulty attracting shoppers.

The neighbourhood was identified as a food desert in a 2008 study by two University of Western Ontario researchers (Larsen and Gilliland) who at the time also showed that London was indeed a textbook example of a suburbanization of supermarkets and low-income inner-city areas that had become food deserts. Their 2009 research, however, declared that the Old East Village was no longer a food desert, demonstrating that the market had resulted in significant nutritious food basket savings (12%) for local residents, as well as greater availability and better variety of fresh fruits and vegetables – thus crediting the market with improving both economic and physical access to food in the area.

Cook indicated that all the markets in and around the city are estimated to still only attract only 5% of the population and that the potential to stay financially viable and even grow was excellent for local markets in general and WFFM in particular. “If there are days when the numbers are lower, it's not because there are too many markets, but because the public is not engaged enough.” Cook also pointed out that with the newest outdoor markets, the market day is Sunday so that they are not competing with other markets in the area.

Merritt also explained that the market traffic has made it possible for the BIA to think bigger: “We want to grow a food district here... to incubate businesses from the market onto the [main street] corridor and have other outlets that sell food that the market does not offer - because farmers' markets are not meant to be selling everything”

Human Resources

Cook comes to this enterprise with a wealth of experience. He worked for years in the culinary industry and then for nine years for Sobeys, where he excelled and eventually worked at the head office. In other words, Cook is well-equipped to run a large and complex operation and is well aware of what is required to keep such an operation economically sustainable.

Cook also has a team, which he described as “people who are highly motivated and quick to learn and develop new skills.” He gives the employees a lot of space to grow, so they are all highly skilled in what they do. The team consists of a manager, a maintenance person, and a part-time office person. Occasionally he has had volunteers who come in and help with a specific project, but those instances are on-and-off cases, so there is no organized volunteer support to speak of.

Physical Infrastructure

The market operates from a rented building that provides them with 56 000 square feet of open space (approximately 44 000 square feet of selling space). The building is owned by the City of London, and is a historical structure – it was built in 1927 as an exhibition hall for the Western Fair. This adds to the character of the space, but also comes with all the downsides of old buildings – it is difficult to heat, there is no air-conditioning, and there have been no major investments in the structure for a number of years. It is equipped with an audio system that is used to make announcements every so often about the products and sales that can found at specific food vendors' booths. The building is located on London's main street, but in the area that is experiencing some disrepair. Adjacent to the building is a public park (Queens Park) that had been underutilized for years, although it is now starting to see increased activity due to the market. There is also a small 1917 building on the property that has not been used for anything for at least a decade. Cook is now looking to take on that space as well, and use it to relocate some of the production from the market. Other than the building, there are carts and dollies that are needed to operate the market, but no other physical assets.

Financial Resources

Table fees are the only source of revenue for this business. The market has not received any funding from anyone thus far. Cook would like to see more investments into the building, but that is simply not feasible yet. The table fees at the market are \$50 per day for a 10'X10' booth on the main floor, second floor booths are \$30. Some vendors take more than one booth and the booths are permanent, so many vendors leave their non-perishables there, and some have really built their booths up and created beautiful displays. Cook acknowledges that the fees are higher than they are at other markets, especially municipally-run ones, but this market pays a monthly rent of about \$15 000.

Despite the success of his operation, Cook also noted the importance of being realistic about what it takes. Running a market can be hard and stressful work and to start something this big, skills, dedication and capital are required: “The businessman who started [WFFM] had access to \$250 000 to open it, and he was dedicated to the idea, so that's what it takes.”

Community Resources

The market is embraced by the neighbourhood BIA and it has benefited from the marketing work the BIA has done. It has also received academic attention through the work of Jason Gilliland at the University of Western Ontario.

Desired Assets

Cook suggested that it would be very beneficial to have a local small business development organization come on board as a financial partner and further develop the incubator model. He would like to see a support network that can facilitate small business lending as well as business skills development. “I came from a business background and I had some pitfalls along the way that I had not anticipated. So someone who does not have that background is even more likely to encounter struggles. We already have many of these things [loans, skills development], but it would be really good to have all that in one place and have a business development agency partner with us.”

Cook also indicated that he would like to see more institutional purchasing policy in the province. While he is aware that some good initiatives have been taking place, he thinks that they need to be more substantial.

Constraints/Overcoming Them

The City of London has classified the Market under the “hawker/ peddler” category, which comes with a \$1000 licence every three months. The market is not registered with the Farmers' Markets Ontario , which has created some obstacles along the way. However, by making the decision to not be a member of the association Cook is able to do things other markets are not. For instance, he can have one person selling for multiple farms (though he requires that produce is labelled showing which farm it comes from), rather than having to follow the 70% rule at other markets (can only sell up to 30% from other farms/producers). This, Cook stated, diversifies the offerings in the market and makes market participation more economically viable for producers. On the other hand, this also allows him to bring in resellers of food from the Food Terminal, which ensures that in addition to quality and artisan local food, there is also affordable produce for those who have to shop on a budget – an important consideration when operating in a lower income neighbourhood. He also does not have to inspect his vendors farms – if he had to do this, he would simply not have the resources to inspect every vendors' production site.

Cook also described how he was having difficulty getting traffic on the second floor of the market building and consequently the rate of occupancy there was only at 60-70%. His roastery had been at a different site, so he decided to move the roasting operation on the second floor and opened up another cafe and “the traffic literally doubled overnight. The quality of offerings also went up and I now don't have an empty booth to rent, in fact, there are 15 people on the waiting list.”

An additional obstacle was identified with regulation. The Health Unit recently requested more facilities, for instance some vendors are now required to have triple-station hand washing sinks. To keep the market going, Cook estimates that some \$100 000 will have to be invested over the next couple of years to meet that requirement. "It's a significant cost. That said, however, I understand why they are doing this, I agree with it and want to meet their requirements. We want to make sure the opportunities that the market offers continue to grow."

Successes

WFFM is a successful, economically sustainable business. It has been embraced by the community and it has provided incubator opportunities for numerous businesses. "There is creation and strengthening of relationships, support for local business and people becoming more astute in voting with their dollar, and people want to eat better, they want quality and hence have a vested interest in local food" Cook stated, adding that his big motivation was "The celebration of food artistry... creating a strong food culture and recognizing that strong food culture is intimately involved with food security"

Cook also has the coffee roastery that has done very well, having grown by 65% in the last year and having recently secured a contract with Sobeys. That business is now employing more than a dozen people, and projecting a \$1.5 million year for 2011 revenue. But Cook is careful to acknowledge how instrumental WFFM has been for that business: "this is a business that started at the Market and has in its entirety been developed in the Market." And his business is not the only one doing well: "I can name a half a dozen business off the top of my head that re doing upwards of \$250 000 in sales a year, and that is one day a week at the market... the economic development component is right there, written on the wall." The estimates for overall market sales are around \$110 000 a Saturday in the summer.

For the two outdoor markets, the fees are only \$20 per booth. This makes it somewhat hard to grow those operations, especially because Southdale has been slow to take off (although Cook noted that some farmers there are really committed, and they are now looking to move the market elsewhere for 2012). Though there is no real profit from the two outdoor markets, Cook sees them as marketing opportunities for the WFFM and farmers' markets in general.

Relevance

Cook thinks the market is an excellent model for how to provide a platform for small businesses to get started inexpensively. "The employment potential of that can be enormous." Merritt similarly explained that the informal incubator model in the market really works because "the table fees are low enough that if your business does not work out, the loss is so low, you can afford it... at the same time, being at the market exposes you to opportunities for experiential learning from other vendors."

Cook would like to see his model replicated, but he also underscored the importance of accessibility in such considerations. He indicated that his markets showcase food that is more expensive, for those who are looking for such food, but also feature inexpensive

foods from the food terminal with an awareness that his markets are in areas that are largely food deserts. He suggested that we needed more markets that are affordable. “There are a lot of examples of high-end markets in Ontario, but there are not many cases of markets locating in economically depressed areas.”

Cook felt that markets can really play a role in supporting local connections and relationships, “The community I live in, which is not where the market is, has a void of 'community'. There is no third place. You know how Starbucks says they are the third place – Starbucks is not the third place. Third place is something that is not quite defined yet here, but that's what the market is starting to do.” Merritt agreed, saying that “We joke here that the farmers' market is the only place in the city where it can take up to six hours to buy a dozen eggs... it's our equivalent of the Italian piazza.” She added that the relationship with the community was key: “His business and any other business that thrives in this community are businesses that understand that it is community and commerce together... you have to understand your role in community building – if you don't, the community will not be there to support you when times are tough.”

Cook also felt that hubs of local economic activity were increasingly important amid the ongoing loss of local food producers in North America, and the current economic crisis that has affected Southwestern Ontario: “The trust we once had in the large transnational corporations has been damaged through the recession because they left us... the economies that were supporting London disappeared when they decided that they were no longer financially viable.”

Cook also emphasized the importance of collaboration, noting that he does not want to compete with other markets but would prefer to join forces in promoting farmers' markets and growing the customer base for markets as a whole. Although he has created a successful business without any funding, he was in favour of micro-loans for local food initiatives: “Often it's not a lot of money they need – for some projects as little as \$1000 or \$5000 can really make a difference.”