

Fields of uncertainty

Local farmers worry they face future of struggle

BY LAURA LENNIE
NEWS STAFF

There are many advantages to buying locally grown food.

It's good for your health, the environment and the economy, says Sarah Megens, project manager of Hamilton Eat Local – an organization that has worked with area farmers to promote locally grown food to consumers since 2005.

"Buying locally grown food means you're getting fresh, high-quality, wholesome food; reducing 'food miles;' and re-investing in the community," she said.

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"Another advantage to buying locally grown food is that it's fun. Spending a summer afternoon visiting a number of your favourite farms is a great way to teach young people about food and farming, get out of the city, do something different, meet new people and just enjoy everything that Hamilton's countryside has to offer," said Ms. Megens.

Despite the advantages, area farmers are struggling to make ends meet.

"I'll be quite frank, in some years our employees make more money than we do," said Murray Puddicombe, president of Puddicombe Estate Farms and Winery, whose 275-acre farm has provided locally grown food for more than 100 years. "Yes, there are other benefits along the way of owning your own business – there has to be something – but by and large, monetarily, the hours we put in, we're making less than minimum wage."

If the farm had to rely on local support in the past, it would have gone broke years ago, adds Mr. Puddicombe.

"Most of our support comes from outside this area, basically from tourism," he said. "Local industry support, in our total sales, I don't think it would account for more than 15 per cent."

Mr. Puddicombe's wife, Carolyn, who is the farm's execu-

tive director, attributes the lack of local support to the fact the area is a "sleeping bedroom community."

"A lot of people work in Toronto or Hamilton, so they stop somewhere close to where they work on their way home and then go home and that's it," she said.

"I guess when you can go to Fortinos and buy whatever you need for dinner, including wine, at one place that's what people seem to prefer," added Mr. Puddicombe. "But it's not necessarily that that stuff's cheaper, it's just more convenient. By and large, buying product on the site of the manufacturer, on the farm is typically cheaper and fresher – it's not bumped around, it hasn't traveled anywhere – it's going to be cheaper for the customer and more wholesome."

As for local industry support, Mr. Puddicombe says it's difficult for area farmers to compete with imported food and the volumes and consistency required by larger grocery chains.

"The problem we're up against is that the local buyers or con-

glomerates aren't giving us a fair shake because of the pressure being put on them by the outside, by the people that are exporting," he said. "For example, typically the stores are buying sweet cherries from California or Washington prior to ours coming on."

"So let's say the last week of June, they're selling for \$3.99 to \$4.99 a pound. Ours come on stream say the first week of July, all of a sudden the price drops to \$1.79 – the same cherries that were selling for \$3.99 the week before are now selling for \$1.79 – so where's the margin going? Who's making that extra two bucks?"

Area farmers are forced to meet the competition's prices, adds Mr. Puddicombe.

Costs to grow produce in this area are higher because of higher wages for labour and environmental pressures.

"If the grower can't make a profit, eventually he's going to get smart and say, 'Why should I keep beating my head against the wall,

against these guys?' because they're big companies and here we are a small industry – local, good product – but we can't make any money."

Ms. Puddicombe says the lack of support is taking its toll on the area's older generation of farmers.

"The Greenbelt is a permanently protected area of green space, which means no development, so what the government's done to the farmers is they've taken away their retirement because they can't make money because of all this product coming into Canada and they can't even sell their property at a decent price," she said.

"Most of these farmers don't have a retirement fund; their retirement fund was either their kids were going to take over and start paying or they were going to sell it and now their hands are tied, because right now their kids don't want to farm. Why would they? There's no money in it, it's not a profitable business to be in and it's hard just to make a living."

The farmers have had the love of the land and have worked hard for 50 years and have now had their shoes knocked out from under them by the government, who is not compensating them in any way, adds Mr. Puddicombe.

"This Greenbelt thing that they've got, sure they do lots of advertising and everything on it and it's really nice and pretty, but they're basically legislating you to be a farmer," he said. "On the other hand, they're not making



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sure you can sell your product at a profit. The old adage is, don't worry about the greenspace, worry about the farmer because if the farmers are going to make money, they'll stay in farming and they'll keep it green."

Roy Shuker, president of the Hamilton-Wentworth Federation of Agriculture says he fears the fruit industry in Ontario is in danger of extinction.

"It is one of the few places in Canada with the climate to grow tender fruit and we are losing it," he said. "The Niagara Peninsula has been declared a **Greenbelt** but if the farmers have no market, it will soon be a weed belt."

Mr. Shuker says it only makes sense to buy locally grown food.

"The produce you buy from your local farmers tastes better and is more nutritious because it is picked when it is ripe not unripe to withstand thousands of miles and several days of travel," he said.

The produce you buy locally is also safest because of the stringent rules Canada must adhere to, adds Mr. Shuker.

"Products are imported that do not have to adhere to those rules," he said.

Though the future of farming is uncertain, there is one thing of which Mr. Puddicombe is sure.

"If you're not going to support the local food industry than be prepared down the road to pay a lot higher prices for your product and be at the mercy of somebody else to supply you with product that you hope is safe," he said.

Ms. Puddicombe remembers her grandfather saying if Canada doesn't look after its agriculture industry, the country will have to depend on other places for food.

"There's a reason why you pick Canadian - to keep everybody in business."

The Hamilton Eat Local Committee has developed a Buy Local! Buy Fresh! map that identifies more than 50 farms that sell local produce in and around the city. For more information on Hamilton Eat Local, how to obtain a map or how to become listed in it, call (905) 572-5967.



PHOTO BY LAURA LENNIE

Murray and Carolyn Puddicombe, of Puddicombe Estate Farms and Winery are concerned about the future of the local food industry.