

# Unconventional

Maybe it's time to take Canada's new crop of non-conventional farmers a lot more seriously

BY MADELEINE BAERG

**C**hange is coming to Canadian agriculture, and judging by the numbers, it's coming fast.

Our country's food supply, our rural landscape, much of our GDP and a major part of our national identity all depend on Canadian farmers. But the average age of those farmers has now reached 55, with more farmers over 70 years than under 35.

A major transfer of land ownership and farm management is widely forecast as the older generation exits. But who is ready to step into agriculture's driver's seat?

And are we willing to give the new farmers the support they need — especially the ones who don't quite fit our preconceived notions of a "real" farmer?

Stuart Oke and his partner Nikki Tesar have just finished their first season in the direct-marketing vegetable business. Though each has a decade of experience on other farms, the experience of operating their own agri-business for the first time has been fun and nerve-wracking in turns, a rollercoaster that Oke wouldn't trade.

And it's been busy. Ultra busy. Not only have they started a brand new business, purchased equipment,

built infrastructure, stretched every dollar of input capital, and built up their direct market list and their wholesale clientele, along the way they've also found time to successfully coax top-notch vegetables from the five rented acres in St-Andre-Avéllin, Que., that they call Rooted Oak Farm.

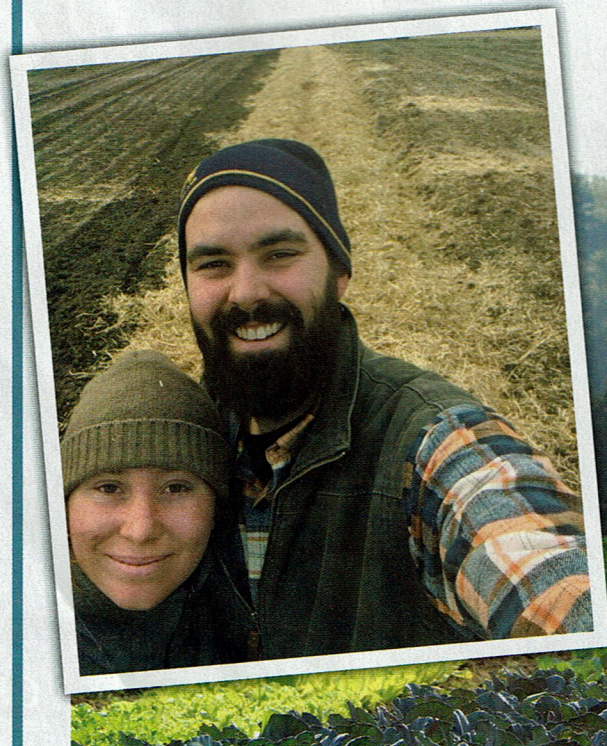
This farming couple doesn't measure their land by the hundreds of acres or their production in hundreds of tonnes. They're not born-and-raised farm kids: both grew up in urban centres. And they haven't been in the farming game long enough to prove their business model. So, do they count as "real" farmers?

But here's the stumper. If we're asking that question, are we part of what's holding Canadian agriculture back, slowing down the growth of a profitable and healthy consumer-based sector?

Oke and Tesar believe they're as real as the very biggest of conventional farmers. They're investing time and money into the land; they're fully committed to their agri-business, they're working to promote agriculture, and they're looking forward to a long future on the land.

"I certainly sometimes run into the opinion that because we're not a large-scale commodity farm, we shouldn't be taken as seriously. But farmers take all shapes and sizes today," says Oke.

For Oke and Tesar, farming vegetables on a relatively small scale is the only affordable path into farming. Besides, they love it.



“Small-scale farmers, organic or otherwise, have been around long enough now that we’ve proven this isn’t a flash in the pan or a fad,” Oke says. “Lots of farmers out there can prove their success. There’s money to be found and a lifestyle to be lived... there are lots of different scales for people to be successful in agriculture.”

Given the skyrocketing costs of farmland, equipment and inputs, a commodity operation is no longer a reasonable dream for many young farmers. Oke and Tesar are just two of a whole subset who are getting started in small-scale, low-acreage, high-intensity, direct-to-consumer production.

But what do we know about new farmers like this farming couple? Surprisingly little, actually.

Julia Laforge, now a post-doctoral fellow at Lakehead University, is a geographer fascinated by socio-nature relationships and the role of knowledge and social movement in Canada. For her PhD research, she wanted to study the experiences of new farmers. But she quickly realised that there has been unexpectedly little public or academic research into who those new farmers are.

So, together with the National New Farmer Coalition, Laforge created a survey for new farmers that looked into everything from their backgrounds and their priorities to the stumbling blocks in their way. In February and March of 2015, the survey went to Canadian ag organizations of all types, university ag faculties, and social media (“pretty much everyone we could think of,” says Laforge). Within a month, 1,326 young farmers from four self-identified categories (new, aspiring, experienced and exited farmers) completed the online query.

Respondents farmed or aspired to farm in all parts of Canada. Most, but certainly not all, were under the age of 40, and almost all operated small farms. Interestingly too, 68 per cent of respondents identified as not growing up in agriculture. In the “new farmer” category, the number was even higher: a whopping 86 per cent of respondents weren’t farm bred.

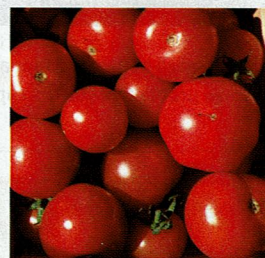
According to Statistics Canada, there are just over 40,000 farmers in Canada under age 40. Obviously, 1,300 surveys from a possible 40,000 young farmers isn’t representative of the whole group.

But, says Laforge, the results “certainly capture... something.” And that something may have a fundamental impact on the future of Canadian ag.

“I look at those numbers — 86 per cent of new farmers not being from a farming background — and I think, how can that not be some kind of demographic change? It’s such a contrast to what we expect. There are so many implications of that in terms of training, land ownership, everything. If we don’t have a good handle on who young farmers are, we need to take a step back and say how do we get a better idea? It definitely warrants more followup.”

One thing that’s clear, she says, is that this group feels ignored by government and industry.

“We had an open comment section at the end of



the survey. One of things I wasn’t expecting was a lot of comments saying ‘thank you.’ Respondents said things like ‘I feel really validated,’ and ‘I’ve never had opportunity to share before.’ There was a lot of resonance with what we did,” says Laforge. “Small-scale farmers, especially those who farm only part time, face challenges of being identified as farmers. That devalues a whole sector of food producers who really need support.”

Studying the survey results, Laforge says she felt both optimistic for agriculture’s future and sad about opportunities that have already been lost.

Laforge sees opportunities to better meet the needs of new farmers of all kinds. The respondents indicated that they did not know much (or, often, anything) about financial supports and education opportunities available through each province. Any business training they did manage to find they reported as being prohibitively expensive. Industry infrastructure like processing

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PHOTOGRAPHY: OKE FARMS



Even a small non-conventional farm can involve prohibitive startup capital.

facilities and marketing opportunities was frequently described as inadequate, unavailable or difficult to access. And most respondents had little or no idea of what provincial extension is or how to access it.

"There are a lot of challenges but they aren't insurmountable. There are opportunities to build supports that could make a real difference," says Laforge.

Amanda Wilson, co-ordinator of policy and community with Food Secure Canada, agrees that the demographics of Canadian agriculture are changing and that industry and government need to respond.

"We need to shift our understanding of who new farmers are. They aren't just young kids from rural backgrounds whose parents farmed. Some have had careers elsewhere and are interested in getting out of the city. A growing number are immigrants who had extensive farming background in the country they came from. The kinds of sup-

ports and tools these farmers need won't necessarily be what works for large-scale, commodity producers."

One of the big issues is that government isn't yet responding to the changing priorities, operating structures and business models of new farmers.

"We need more concrete steps to support the diversity of farmers," Wilson says.

For example, she says, last fall, the federal government announced a new loan program for new farmers. While excellent news, the loan was only accessible to new farmers operating at large scale.

"There are whole swaths of new farmers operating at small scale," says Wilson. "We need to make sure programs and supports are equally accessible to all. We need to appreciate the diversity of agricultural practices. We want to see our food system move in the direction of sustainable, diverse and secure."

Knowing the federal government is to release a new Ag Framework in 2018, Farm Secure Canada gathered various industry voices in 2015 and 2016, with 22 food and farming organizations signing off on a policy brief that calls on government to better invest in the next generation of farmers.

Specifically, the Farm Renewal Brief recommends:

- The creation of a farm renewal, business development and labour pillar in the next ag policy framework to address the diversity of new entrants to farming.
- Supporting programs to protect farmland that are accessible to all farmers.
- Increased access to start-up capital and financing.
- Training opportunities that are financially accessible to new farmers.
- Supporting best farm business management practices.

Instead of not taking new farmers seri-

ously, government, industry and other farmers should strive — actively, consciously, and passionately strive — to see new farmers succeed, the group says.

“We need to figure out from a government program and policy perspective how we can help farmers not only start up a farm but grow and sustain a farm over the long term,” says Wilson.

“It’s really important to help farmers make that first step, but then we need to ask: how do we help them take second and third steps so that their businesses are sustainable, not just ecologically and socially but financially too.”

Stuart Oke agrees. When he isn’t working to build his farm, he’s busy as youth president of the National Farmers’ Union, a role that suits his commitment to other farmers and to co-operative and collective action.

Oke knows firsthand exactly how challenging farm startup is, and he wishes he

and Tesar didn’t have to tackle each hurdle so entirely alone.

“None of us want handouts, but we are looking for supports because there are very real barriers to getting into agriculture,” he says.

Education and training opportunities are sorely lacking for aspiring farmers, he says. And banks are too risk-adverse to lend capital.

“We’re not asking government to throw money around. But, for example, in Quebec you can take a business plan to an organization, get a stamp of approval, and then take that stamp to any bank and the government will underwrite your loan. That’s just one example of what a program could look like at a federal level,” he says.

For himself, Oke is contagiously enthusiastic. “We’re full steam ahead,” he says. “We’re looking at big expansion in the years ahead.” **CG**