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DOWN ON THE FARM



Niagara's farms, local food supply chain in jeopardy

THREE-WEEK SERIES BEGINS TODAY

As the world gets smaller, so, too, does Niagara's once mighty agriculture base.

Long, long gone are the days of rows upon rows of cherry and peach orchards. Even the fabled roadside stands with fresh-from-the-field fruits and vegetables are becoming more scarce.

So much for nostalgia. Today's business of farming is harsh, and unforgiving, not that it was ever warm and fuzzy toward the hard-working lot, but there was a day when there was a return on the investment from the sweat of their collective brow. These days, there is a lot of sweat, along with hand wringing and nail biting.

Plant closures, pressure from the import market, **Greenbelt**, farm succession, maintaining the food supply chain, as well as the vaunted and elusive hope for the future, agritourism, are just a few of the issues which will be analyzed over the next three weeks.

Where does your food come from? Do you care as a consumer? Read to find out.



‘It’s a good life’

LARRY AND DEBBIE HIPPLE: NOT A LOT OF MONEY, BUT ENOUGH TO PAY THE BILLS

BY JOANNE MCDONALD
STAFF

A farmer by profession and an optimist by nature, Larry Hipple is solidly rooted in the land that has been handed down through seven generations on his Vineland farm.

A slender green shoot grafted to the trunk of a 175-year-old pear tree speaks to the resiliency of Larry and his wife, Debbie, of Hipple Farms Ltd. on Maplegrove Road.

The sugar pear tree is a relic, but it’s part of the family and, they hope, a sign of life for the future as the two youngest of their four children continue the legacy on the farm.

It’s a healthy life – sunshine, fresh air, autonomy – with lots of hard work on 150 acres to produce the annual harvests of peaches, cherries, plums, pears and grapes, including wine grapes, juice grapes and basket grapes.

“We’re always optimistic,” says Larry at the kitchen table, extending the same friendly hospitality that has warmed the hearth of their stately stone home since it was built in 1858.

“We don’t make a lot of money, but we pay the bills. It’s a good life.”

While they may love the life, as for all farmers, it is fraught with growing economic concerns that no amount of resiliency or resourcefulness can mend.

And they’re asking the same question as other farmers across Niagara, “Eventually, where will fresh fruit be grown if we can’t make ends meet?”

“We’re land rich and cash poor,” says Larry, describing a system where, as “price takers,” farmers are limited to the prices that are set for their products. Increasing costs of production cannot be buffered by higher returns in a marketplace that runs a fierce race with global competition. “If we try to get more for our products to cover our expenses, the chains will import.”

They have no protection, says Debbie, and they’re vulnerable under the North American Free Trade Agreement.

“We all realize it’s a global market,” Debbie says, but unlike manufacturers who can build cost increases into their products, farmers don’t have that luxury.

Canadians are accustomed to a very cheap food source and consumers need to educate themselves as to where their food source is grown. Niagara farmers pay the costs of ensuring stringent food and labour safety and it is increasingly difficult to compete with imports that don’t face the same standards.

“It’s great to have the safest food in the world, but it comes at a cost and producers are bearing the costs.”

The word resiliency resurfaces in the conversation. “We’re always optimistic,” Larry says.

Larry has been working the farm full-time since 1969. It was about the same time that he switched to tender fruit and grape production, from the earlier mixed farming

operation.

Larry's grandfather Lawrence Edward Hipple was born in the stone house in 1890. In 1907, they moved to Hwy. 8 "to get off

the mud road." His father Charles Lawrence Hipple was born in 1920, the hydro line came through in 1922 and they purchased their first tractor in 1928 – a Fordson with steel wheels.

They've all been members of the Vineland Growers' Co-op which sells their fruit.

"It's been good," says Larry, a past president. His grandfather also served as president and his dad, Charles Lawrence Hipple, was a director.

Debbie runs a seasonal fruit stand on Hwy. 8 to supplement the farm income.

A trickle irrigation system on the farm since 1980 means they can control one element — water — and it really paid off during last year's dry season.

They work diligently to find ways to produce more per acre to cover their costs and stay abreast of new technology, using 50 per cent less spray and incorporating integrated pest management to diagnose their crops rather than automatically spraying.

They are glad to see the revitalization planned to allow for continued research at the Vineland Research and Innovation Centre in Lincoln. It's a welcome source, Debbie says, for learning about new management practices, technologies, new varieties of fruit and information about what consumers want.

But news that CanGro Food Inc., in St. Davids, Niagara's last fruit-canning plant and the only cannery remaining east of British Columbia, is set to close June 27 is discouraging news for all producers in the area.

It was 1800 when a farmer by the name of Fretz came up from Pennsylvania with his family – his wife, three married daughters and three sons-in-law by the names of Grobb, Hipple and Rittenhouse.

He purchased three 100-acre lots on Concession 3 in Clinton Township. The Grobb family established themselves on one farm, the Rittenhouse family on another and the youngest daughter, Sarah, and her husband, Lawrence Hipple, remained with the old folks.

Clearing the land and growing enough food and livestock to survive was the main occupation of the day.

The second generation was also a Lawrence Hipple, born in 1812. Larry's great-

grandfather, Ephriam Hipple was born in 1850. He too ran the farm and his account book provides a detailed account of the family's means of income.

It consisted of the sale of products from livestock and sheep, and items such as beef, butter, eggs, sausage, spare ribs, some wool, a small quantity of cord wood, a few apples, cider, potatoes, cherries, grapes and grain.

Records dated April 24, 1877 show the purchase of 16 apple and two peach trees.

It's 200 years of history and a legacy in which the entire Lincoln community can take great pride.

"If you look after the farmer, the farmer will look after the land," Debbie says.



Larry and Debbie Hipple work a farm in Vineland that has been passed down through seven generations. They say they are optimistic about the future of farming in Niagara.