

# Sowing the seeds

## Vancouver Island farmers bring new ideas to the table

| BY KIMBERLEY FEHR



In just two days, supermarket shelves were nearly empty on Vancouver Island. It was November 2003, and the ferry strike had escalated to a complete service shut-down, which meant no ferries, no trucks and far fewer food shipments. That image of empty shelves, and what it could have meant for the people of the Island, still haunts Sandra Mark, project manager for a new organization called Vancouver Island Heritage Foodservice Co-operative.

“We have moved to a corporatized, globalized food system that has hollowed out the infrastructure for local food systems everywhere,” says Mark. “The largest proportion of the food system is owned and controlled by six big transnational corporations.”

Small-scale, local farmers are struggling for survival. They’ve been squeezed out of the market for years, unable to compete with the supply or the prices of factory farms, which means there are fewer farms left on Vancouver Island. “The vulnerability of the Island is really obvious,” says Mark, who for the past 10 years has been working toward a plan to rebuild the local food system on the Island.

The story is the same elsewhere. “California is one of the major suppliers of food to B.C., and people in California can’t eat that food because it’s for export,” she says. “Same with Mexico. Why is there such a demand for local food and so little in the supermarket?”

Mark and Frank Moreland, her business and life partner, are lead researchers for a

partnership called the Island Good Food Initiative. Their work aims to answer an even more pressing question: how can farmers survive on Vancouver Island?

Fifty years ago, Vancouver Island grew most of its own food. Now, the Island grows only five per cent of the food consumed there. (Mark calculates this by comparing food spending per person from the 2006 census and gross farm receipts for the Island.)

“The fundamental problem is that farmers do not make enough money,” says Mark. “And young people see no future in the business because it’s very hard work for nearly no money.” She says many farmers have no choice but to work at other jobs just to support their farming “habit.”

Mark and Nanaimo Foodshare received \$130,000 in funding for community-based research from Vancouver Foundation donors between 2006 and 2008 to address the issue. The Island Good Food Initiative was formed as a partnership of many concerned organizations to guide the research.

“This grant was the best money I’ve ever had my hands on,” says Mark. “We were able to do what we needed to do, to have the luxury of studying this situation and bringing many levels of the food chain to the table.” Now she is helping to implement solutions at the Foodservice Co-op.

There are many answers, but one simple solution is pizza toppings.

Mark explains, “You can sell a carrot

and you’ll get next to nothing .... If you wash it, grate it and put it in a bag with a fancy label, you get a little bit more. If it’s organic, you get more. If you make it into carrot soup, you get quite a bit more for that one carrot.”

Pizza toppings are the pinnacle of the value-added chain. And the man at the top of that pinnacle is Ken Babich, the University of Victoria’s director of purchasing. Babich spends at least \$1 million annually on dry goods, milk, cheese, meat and produce. Pizza toppings alone come in at almost \$300,000. If there’s one truism in life, it’s that students like pizza – lots of pizza.

Mark’s research revealed that farmers’ markets, lovely as they are, are not enough. For farmers to survive, they need business plans; they can benefit from working together in co-ops on processing, distribution and marketing; and they need big clients on board – public institutions like universities and hospitals that spend millions of dollars each year on food.

A few years ago, Babich got serious about buying local after attending a farmers’ meeting on institutional purchasing – part of Mark’s research.

“When you see the heartache and pain these farmers go through, it’s all doom and gloom,” he recalls. “They saw no hope because nobody’s supporting them.” At another farmers’ meeting, the tone changed. There, Babich met a woman from Duncan who had created No Nuttin’ energy bars for people struggling with allergies. Babich, who was looking for local, healthy snacks to sell in university vending machines, told the woman, “We could be selling those in our vending machines.” He connected her with his supplier and now UVic students can buy them.

Babich realized there were also other, more pressing reasons to start sourcing local food. “If we had an earthquake, how would we survive on the Island?” he says. The question hangs in the air as he explains the university’s “quadruple bottom line” approach to purchasing that considers environmental practices, social and labour issues, the community and the economic bottom line.

With help from the Foodservice Co-op, UVic identified produce items that local farmers could grow in sufficient quantities, and stipulated that those products would have to be supplied by Island farmers. In 2009, 46 per cent of the produce UVic purchased was sourced locally. Requests for proposals were broken down into smaller batches so local distributors had an opportunity to bid. A separate contract for pizzas required the toppings to be sourced locally. UVic is following up to ensure local farmers profit from the contract.

It’s these types of connections, and this type of concern, that the Island Good Food Initiative and Nanaimo Foodshare’s work helped to facilitate.

“The image of the fierce, independent farmer is no longer viable,” says Dr. Bill Code, president of the Island Farmers’ Alliance, and a board member for 10 years. “Farmers’ markets make us all feel warm and fuzzy, but we need to move beyond that, working together to solve the problem as a community.”

Code turned to farming after having to scale down his anesthesiology practice following a diagnosis of multiple sclerosis at age 42. His seven-acre parcel in Duncan grows blackberries, loganberries, sweet potatoes and dried beans and is home to emu, sheep and two pasture pigs. He says one reason small farms struggle is a lack of trained labour for farm work and food processing.

In partnership with the Nanaimo Association for Community Living, the co-operative received a \$100,000 grant from Vancouver Foundation’s Disability Supports for Employment Fund in 2008 to create a social enterprise that will train people with developmental disabilities in how to work on farms and in food processing. This pool of trained workers will help farmers produce more, to better meet demand for local food.

In France, certain types of artisan cheeses, butters and other food products are sold under the *Appellation d’Origine Contrôlée* designation, just like wines



from certain regions. Quebec has a similar system. B.C. doesn’t, but this is another option Mark is investigating that may help farmers gain the cachet (and the prices) they need to survive on the Island.

“People are taking much more interest in and responsibility for their food,” says Code. “As that happens, the [perception] of the farmer will grow into someone who is very passionate and knows a lot about food, produces a quality product and feels good about what they are doing for their community and for their grandchildren.” **VF**

To learn more about the Foodservice Co-op, visit [www.heritagefoodservice.coop](http://www.heritagefoodservice.coop), or call 250-591-2216. To support other programs like this one, contact Vancouver Foundation’s Donor Services at 604-688-2204.