

Sowing Seeds, Reaping Profits

Growing a sustainable farm business



ACHIM MOHSSEN-BEYK
REACHVIEW FARM

As President of Quinte Organic Farmers Co-op, Achim Mohssen-Beyk fronts a movement to revitalize agriculture in Prince Edward County.

The Series

Sowing Seeds, Reaping Profits is a series of seven case studies featuring innovative farmers with non-traditional backgrounds. The series shares practical production tips, innovative marketing approaches and creative ways to successfully negotiate the myriad challenges that new farmers face in their start-up years and beyond.

Participants in the series include:

Elisabeth Bzikot - Best Baa Farm and Ewenity Dairy Co-op

Linda Crago - Tree and Twig Heirloom Vegetable Farm

Caitlin Hall - Reroot Organic CSA

Shin Kang - Skyland Farms

Linda Laepple - Laepple Organic Farm

Achim Mohssen-Beyk - Reachview Farm and Quinte Organic Farmers Co-op

Ute Zell - Smiling Goat Farm

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“I am a mechanical engineer, and I worked for a couple of years in Germany, then I started my own landscaping company. Seven years ago, I decided to come here to Canada to do some farming. Ideally, we wanted to be self-sufficient. We’re not striving towards making big money. We want to save the land and produce good quality food. For me, it’s more important than the money.”

“Quinte Organic Farmers Co-op started three years ago at an EFAO meeting. There were around 25 farmers talking about how to market products. We are halfway between Toronto and Ottawa, and there are basically no markets here. Each of us was going to

Toronto and the journey ate up all of our profit. ‘So,’ we said, ‘we have to do something to be able to market together, to make it feasible. If we work together and put our produce together, then we can share all the costs.’”

“I think the co-op is my biggest achievement - being part of it.”

The farm

Reachview Farm is a 230-acre certified organic farm in Prince Edward County, ON. Since founding the operation in 2003, Achim Mohssen-Beyk has shifted the focus of his production from organic ducks and geese to rare-breed sheep and goats. Achim’s herd currently consists of 80 Tunis and Kathadin sheep, which he

“I think the co-op is my biggest achievement - being part of it.”

raises for lamb, and 12 Nubian and Saanen dairy goats. Over the coming years, he plans to expand his operation to include 300 sheep and 60 goats, with the goal of producing organic goat milk.

Achim cultivates 70 acres of hay and 30 acres of cereal crops for his livestock and for sale. He and his parents – who have recently joined him in running the farm – maintain a 1.5-acre market garden, where they specialize in broccoli, Brussel sprouts, and sweet corn. They also grow strawberries and raspberries.

Achim is President of the Quinte Organic Farmers Co-operative, a producers’ group that he helped to form in 2004. He markets 100% of his products through the co-op.

Starting out

Achim settled in the Picton area soon after arriving in Canada, drawn to the region by its relatively mild climate. A new farmer in a new country, he made a network for himself by joining organizations like COG (Canadian Organic Growers) and the EFAO (Ecological Farmers Association of Ontario), and becoming immersed in the organic farming movement. Achim had left Germany with enough savings to purchase a farm, so when a property east of Picton became available in 2002, he did not hesitate to buy.

“This was the first farm we had a look at. We liked that it’s high and we liked the land. It’s not perfect land, but it’s pretty windy here, so it’s good for being off the grid. And

it’s one of the few properties that has good water.”

Reachview Farm’s sunny, windswept location has helped Achim realize his dream of sustainable living. In 2005, he finished building an off-the-grid farmhouse, powered by solar and wind energy. However, farming on this property has presented Achim with some challenges.

“We have so many different types of soil here. You have to really know where you can do what. For that reason, we have mostly pasture. We graze it only once a year, because it’s shallow soil and in the summer everything dries up. There are spots where we have sandy loam and it’s nice to work with, but in other areas, it’s just gravel.”

Over the last four years, Achim has tailored his farming practices to suit the land. He frost seeds his pasture, a technique that takes advantage of the gravelly soil’s tendency to warm up quickly in the spring. He uses green manure crops to enrich the soil for cash cropping and he raises poultry, sheep and goats, whose forage needs are less intensive than those of cattle.

Farming in Prince Edward County

But while Achim has been able to deal with production challenges on the farm, he has faced greater challenges beyond the farm gate.

Agriculture in Prince Edward County has been in decline since the 1950s, and the region’s

agricultural infrastructure has seriously eroded. Many of the agricultural processing facilities that once dotted the county’s landscape are now gone. This has made it impossible for Achim to slaughter and process his ducks locally.

“Especially in poultry, there are not many places left. There was one place an hour away, north of Belleville, but they are not very clean. So we went further away, to Norwood, which is one and a half hours northwest of here. But the cost of processing... for ducks, we paid \$12! And calculate all the traveling, all the feed, and all the work that you do... I would have to charge \$30 for a duck and then make maybe just a dollar each. You can’t do that on a small scale.”

The high cost of processing ducks has forced Achim to reduce his flock to a fraction of its original size, and to concentrate instead on sheep and goats. Fortunately, the Quinte region does retain a small, clean abattoir that processes larger livestock. With a reliable facility so close by, Achim can put his bad experience with the poultry behind him, and feel confident about expanding his herd.

Quinte Organic Farmers Co-op

Of all the challenges that Prince Edward County organic farmers face, the greatest is likely their geographic distance from major urban centres. The Quinte region is not an affluent place and few people have the means to pay a fair price for organic products. While Toronto and Ottawa support lucrative urban markets, Quinte

If we work together and put our produce together... then we can share all the costs.

farmers cannot afford to travel so far to sell their goods.

Quinte Organic Farmers Co-op was founded in response to this situation. The co-op's aim is to help its members access urban markets in an economical and cooperative way. The group emerged from an EFAO meeting in 2004, when several farmers decided to pool their products at a market stall.

"We said if we work together and put our produce together and we hire somebody to market our stuff, then we can share all the costs. So that's how we did it the first year. We just tried it out in Belleville. But of course, it wasn't very good, because when you hire somebody, the person's not so much behind selling the products -it's just a job."

Disappointed in their initial results, the farmers applied for government funding to hire a consultant and create a better business plan. Their research suggested that a co-op might work best for them.

"So we started the co-op. The first year, we went to Belleville market and had one of our farmers sell products there. Then we expanded in the second year, to Toronto. We used the markets where some of our farmers already sold their products and hired these farmers as market managers. So what the co-op did was say, 'Okay, until now, you drove on your own – you had the risk. So we take over, we pay you \$12 an hour, we pay you the mileage. So you have no risk. Even if you don't sell anything, you have your costs covered, and you have some income. But instead of taking



Since moving to the region in 2002, Achjim has played a major role in strengthening Prince Edward County's organic farming community.

just our products, you sell other people's products, too'."

The co-op buys its members' products at prices set by the farmers. It covers marketing and administrative costs by charging retail prices that are 30 to 40 percent higher. This way, members have a guaranteed market for their goods and the urban consumer pays for transport and marketing.

Marketing and promotion

The co-op now employs five of its thirteen members as weekly market managers, who run stalls at markets in Belleville, Toronto, and Coburg. The co-op's stalls sell a range of organic products, brought from each of the co-op members' farms: fresh lamb, freezer beef, herbs and vegetables

While the co-op doesn't do a lot of formal advertising, it does maintain a website, where it shares information about each of the member farms, the products they produce, and the co-op's market schedule. The co-op has initiated other promotional efforts, aimed at both new customers and new funders and partners.

"You don't have to attract new people to farmers markets because there is already advertising. But we make banners and brochures so that people can get more information. We also got some funding to make a radio documentary. It's about the co-op and about the farmers – why they decided to go into farming, why they do organic, challenges, all of that. So that's something that we

“Last winter, we made carrot soup, and people liked it. It’s a good way to expand the season without storing produce for a long time.”

use to get funding, and to talk to new people who might help us in the future with different activities.

“Of course, whenever we’re invited, we go out and talk about the co-op and show people what we are doing. We volunteer at a lot of events where farming is involved.”

Looking ahead

As an organization devoted to helping its members achieve greater returns on their products, Quinte Organic Farmers Co-op is constantly looking for new, more lucrative marketing opportunities.

Several of its members – Achim included – are leaders within the organic movement, and use their contacts with other farmers and industry leaders to track where the sector is heading, and what new products will be in demand.

“We have very frequent meetings, where we talk about things, and change strategies, or if necessary, re-evaluate our markets. So there’s always something moving. You cannot set up something and then just leave it like that.”

The co-op’s next step may be to develop a line of value-added products. From Achim’s point of view, this seems like an intuitive way to increase the return on the co-op’s seasonal goods.

“We want to use our own over-production to extend the season, by processing it into soups and condiments, and then working with a chef to prepare the food. Last winter, we had some carrots and onions left, and we made onion soup and carrot soup, and people



Achim’s rare breed Tunis and Kathadin sheep are well suited to Reachview Farm’s agroecological conditions.

liked it. It’s a good way to expand the season without storing produce for a long time.”

Lessons

It has taken years for Achim to understand how best to work with his land to produce good food in a sustainable way. As far as he is concerned, there is no short cut around this lengthy learning process. However, he suggests that new farmers start slowly, by apprenticing with an experienced farmer and renting land before they buy.

“Go and try to get an apprenticeship. Work at least one year with the farmer, so that you learn about the farming methods and the techniques and all of that, and then the second year, try to

rent some land – a smaller acreage. The best thing is to rent from the farm where you worked the year before, so that you’re available for helping out, and you can use the land, knowing that you’ve already worked it.”

Achim would like to see Quinte Organic Farmers Co-op initiate an apprenticeship program within the next few years. That way, new farmers could benefit from Achim and his colleagues’ innovative efforts to make farming in this viable through fair, co-operative marketing.

What is FarmStart?

The objective of FarmStart is to **support and encourage a new generation of farmers** to develop locally based, ecologically sound and economically viable agricultural enterprises.

There are many challenges in agriculture today but there are also **many exciting opportunities**. By thinking about agriculture in new and innovative ways we can meet the challenges head on with a variety of solutions that promote a **sustainable, healthy and regional food supply**.

Successful farms make important contributions to the health and vibrancy of both rural and urban communities. FarmStart encourages new farmers to engage in **entrepreneurial strategies that creatively turn challenges into opportunities**.

To learn more please visit www.farmstart.ca or call 519.836.7046



The Ignatius Incubator Farm - Guelph, ON