

# Farming proves to be the best medicine

*Falling in love  
with agriculture*





Sitting in a truck cab looking out over PEI's first large-scale commercial hops operation in Mount Albion, Josh Mayich can't help but think of his late grandfather, John Sawka.

John's family grew hops and other crops for generations on the Polish-Ukrainian border until the farm was confiscated after the second World War. He emigrated to Nova Scotia and started a dairy farm where Mayich spent much of his summers, falling in love with agriculture.

"He is the patriarch of all of 'this,'" says Mayich.

'This' refers to the Island Hop Company, where 15,000 hop vines snake up ropes suspended between 20-foot poles over 22 acres on a former potato farm in Mount Albion. The soft pine cone-like flower clusters of the hop plant give beer its distinctive flavour and aroma.

The company, which launched in 2019 with federal and provincial funding assistance under the Canadian Agricultural Partnership, includes refrigerated storage, automated harvesting and no-touch processing, research partnerships, and an in-house breeding program.

Mayich plans to ramp up production to at least 50 acres on the way to creating the largest commercial hops business in Canada and what he hopes will be a driving force in the Maritimes' already heady craft beer market.

Still, he admits with a laugh that his trajectory in agriculture hasn't been a straight line.

"After my grandfather, it skipped a generation. My father was a specialist in fibre optics and my mother was a cardiovascular nurse, and I went into medicine."

"People ask if me if I am crazy to be doing this, but I guess it has always been in my blood."

The questions are understandable. Mayich dedicated over a decade of post-secondary education to become an orthopedic trauma surgeon.

Ten years ago, faced with the choice of a full-time surgeon's life in Ontario or returning to the Maritimes to try his hand at hops production, he opted to start a two-acre hopyard on Darlings Island in New Brunswick.

Over the next seven years, he grew trials of two dozen hop varieties from around the world before settling on six with the right balance of flavour and aroma, disease and insect resistance, productivity per plant, and cost of production.

The top four varieties that now make up 90 percent of the Island Hop Company's current production ended up being from Europe with the nickname Noble Hops - Saazer, Hallertauer Mittelfrüh, Magnum, and Tettnag.

Mayich says the varieties earned their spots in his hopyards.

"They went into the funnel of trials with newer varieties and the winners came out the other side," he says.

"In our climate, with appropriate care, these are the plants that ultimately produce the highest quality product that allows us to compete in the marketplace."

Local growing conditions mean that these varieties will offer an alternative to European hops imports.

“Our varieties have some distinct characteristics. I think of them as Noble Hops Plus.”

At the same time, Mayich was immersing himself in the culture and science of beer making.

He became a certified cicerone, the beer version of a wine sommelier, trained in brewing techniques and sensory evaluations to judge the differences between brews.



He reached out to hop growers and brewers in the Maritimes and across North America, keen to learn everything he could about the industry.

Already a trained research scientist with a medical background, he conducted many of his own lab tests to evaluate the chemical composition and quality characteristics of his hops.

By the time then Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada Minister Lawrence MacAulay visited the Darlings Island hopyard in 2018, Mayich was selling everything he grew, and was looking to expand in a big way.

“Minister MacAulay suggested PEI, which has a sandy loam soil that hops do well in, plus, there is some really incredible hops research being done by Dr. Aaron Mills at Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada in Harrington.”

Mayich decided the timing was right.

In 2019, construction began on what was a former potato farm in Mount Albion. Last fall, four tandem semi-trailers unloaded poles, wires, and clamps for the hopyards, and the planting began.

It’s a massive and costly undertaking.

Mayich’s business plan for Island Hop Company runs 700 pages. His own investment in the company to date is well over \$1 million.

Even with government assistance through the Canadian Agricultural Partnership, which he says was crucial to getting the company off the ground, he is still practicing medicine part-time to pay the bills.

“The problem is that to really make growing hops work, you need a minimum of 20 acres. And the varieties that we have chosen, which meet the quality and growing characteristics we are looking for, don’t produce consistent flavor profiles until they have been growing for seven years.

“We anticipated virtually no revenue for a couple of years, which means I am still practicing part-time as a surgeon in Bathurst, New Brunswick and in Yellowknife.”

Since the pandemic began, that has meant plenty of isolation at home and more than 50 COVID-19 tests. But Mayich says it’s worth it.

“I just love this industry,” he says. “Hops is a commodity just like anything else and it is competitive, but people in this industry are also very supportive and sharing.”

In addition to producing a high volume of quality hops, which he estimates at 1,200 to 1,300 pounds an acre, Mayich is keenly interested in producing new varieties unique to the Maritimes.

The Island Hop Company already has a three-acre experimental hopyard on the property and last year, the operation became one of the few outside the United States to sign an agreement with the United States Department of Agriculture to work with them on hops development.

Recently, the company received a grant from the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada to work with Langley University in British Columbia to develop new hops varieties.

"It's super exciting," says Mayich.

He also hopes to play an active role in helping local brewers develop new recipes for a customer base looking for unique flavours, using the company's small test brewery.

"In addition to selling hops, we work with brewers on recipe development and maximizing the use of our product in their beer."

Following his grandfather's advice not to rely on just one crop, the company has also planted hazelnuts, raspberries, blackberries and walnuts, again with assistance from the Canadian Agricultural Partnership.

In addition to their sale as commodities, Mayich says the fruits and nuts may also end as ingredients in craft beers.

It's part of a long-term strategy for a business that Mayich hopes will be inter-generational. He's already thinking about his sons who are 11, 10, and 8.

"I want to hook all three of my sons into the operation, and I hope that each will find an interest in some aspect of the business."

Mayich has already seen that the farming legacy of his grandfather John Sawka, who died in 2015 at the age of 96, is in the family genes.

"My grandfather told me about trailing behind his father between the rows of hops and being able to smell when they were ready to be harvested," Mayich says.

"When my youngest son was four, he was with me in the hopyard in New Brunswick and he noticed that the hops were ready to harvest. They smelled different."

Mayich was using oil measurements to determine the right time to harvest in the tight seven-day window before the characteristics of the hops start to change.

When Mayich checked the hops, he found his son was bang on.

"My wife looked at me and said, "There is your proof. You were meant to do this."