

Bringing customers unique tastes and a sense of community

Off the beaten path



There are a lot of things that grab your attention at the Eglington-area farm of Lance and Sarah Underhay overlooking Little River.

Across the road, there are 15 acres of dwarf and semi-dwarf apple trees that are starting to produce fruit with variety names like 'Porter's Perfection', 'Bulmer's Norman', and 'Muscadet Dieppe' that will eventually be used to produce hard cider and for U-pick.

But as attention grabbers go, it's hard to top the farm's name - Topsy Farmers.



"I get asked about the name every time somebody hears it for the first time," Sarah Underhay says with a laugh. "It actually started as a joke but we kept it because of the cider trees and it's a name people remember."

The catchy name is a perfect fit for the off-the-beaten-path brand Sarah and her chef husband Lance want to create for the farm started by Lance's grandfather in 1942.

For the last three years, the hospitality industry veterans have been using social media, a back-to-the-earth business philosophy and some vintage choices in their apples, pork and poultry in the hopes of making their "middle of nowhere" farm a destination location for foodies and agri-tourists.

"Chef Michael Smith and the Inn at Bay Fortune have proven that a quality product and a great customer experience can put you on the map," says Lance, who apprenticed for Smith before embarking on his own 18-year career as a chef across the country.

Adds Sarah, "We want to show people the difference when you support a small farm and the incredible flavours you get to experience while supporting your neighbour."

Lance was still a kid when his father traded farming for lobster fishing and the Ontario-raised Sarah never lived on a farm before. Both say they wouldn't have been able to attempt this venture without federal and provincial funding support under the Canadian Agricultural Partnership (CAP).

"When you start from scratch, it's tough," says Lance. In 2018, when he returned to PEI from Ontario to take over the farm from his late mother, the land was either leased out or overgrown.

"The biggest problem is capital investment, so the Perennial Crop Development Program and Future Farmer Program have been awesome."

The Perennial Crop Development Program funding allowed the couple to buy apple trees and trellises for their cider and a U-pick operation. The Future Farmer Program assisted in the purchase of an air mist sprayer to help control pests.

With hard cider emerging as the latest up-and-coming craft alcohol, Lance is betting the orchard's mix of older European cider-apple varieties will produce unique flavours that will make their products stand out in the marketplace.

Sarah hopes the U-pick's 1,000 trees will be part of an experience that sees families spending a day on the farm.

The couple will plant another 850 trees this spring, bringing the total to about 4,500. The first 450 trees are expected to produce fruit ready for picking next year.

Although the Underhays were "within inches" of starting construction on a cidery, it is currently on hold because of COVID-19 and some unforeseen circumstances that have Lance temporarily commuting to British Columbia to work.

"I'm working 14 out of every 21 days in Kitimat, B.C. as the food and beverage manager for Sodexo, an international company that provides culinary, cleaning and administrative services to commercial customers," says Lance. "But we hope to open an on-site cidery in 2023 with a food side to it."

The Underhays weren't expecting to get into pork production, but a friend convinced them to try raising a few Berkshire pigs.

The couple instantly fell in love with the rare British breed, one of the oldest pig breeds in England. They are now just one of a handful of Berkshire breeders in Atlantic Canada.

They turned to CAP's Future Farmers Program to help them get the most out of the breed by focusing on creature comforts, including raising them on pasture.

They bought three galvanized metal English farrowing shelters to give their pregnant pigs a comfortable spot to give birth and nurse their young while staying on the pasture.

"It allows the mommas and babies lots of room and their own space when they need it but still lets us be around them, which allows us to gain their trust more quickly and leads to easier handling and less stress for the pigs," says Sarah.

Selling the pork on Facebook and to some restaurants, they haven't been able to keep up with demand.

"We knew we were on to something when an 80-pound box of sausages sold in seven minutes," says Lance.

Their biggest run of sausages, 226 pounds, sold in less than an hour. Their 10- and 20-pound boxes of mixed cuts, with their deep red colour and snow-white marbling, have also sold quickly.

The Underhays are currently charging half of the premium prices that the meat commands in city centres to introduce it to customers on the Island, and they expect demand to grow.

"Last year, we could have sold 10 times what we produce," says Lance. "We can only raise so many pigs on the property without overwhelming the ecosystem or compromising our animal husbandry ideals, so we want to get that premium price for every pig, and that just comes back to brand awareness."



The Underhays also think consumers are looking for something more when it comes to poultry.

With funding support from the Future Farmers Program, the Underhays purchased a chicken tractor, which allows them to move up to 100 chickens twice daily on pasture while providing the best protection against predators.

“The chickens live in a more natural and less stressful environment,” says Lance. “Feeding on a pasture contributes to the development of more nutritious eggs and meat, particularly with Omega fatty acids.”



The chickens’ moving access to the pasture also helps to regenerate the soil while cutting down on bedding costs.

The Underhays are also raising Peking Ducks and one of the most expensive chicken breeds in the world, the Bresse chicken. The French breed is renowned for its excellent meat and its large golden brown eggs.

“It’s an ongoing experiment with these breeds, and we are looking at expanding the flocks,” says Lance.

As the farm grows, Sarah and Lance see it becoming increasingly self-sufficient, with culled apples being used as pig feed and chicken manure being composted as fertilizer.

“We want part of our brand to be a farm that is continually re-generating itself in a natural way,” says Lance.

They also see themselves doing more of the meat processing themselves as they use their culinary and hospitality skills to prepare and package their meats.

“We still have some big learning curves but we have had great support from the CAP programs and the community,” says Lance. “We are excited about where things are going.”

Sarah provides updates to more than 1,700 Facebook followers who regularly hit the like button on her photos and videos.

“Social media has been an incredible tool for sales, and it’s also creating an incredibly supportive community for us,” she says. “We love the connections, and we can’t wait to introduce more people to our amazing food.”