

BUILDING BRIDGES

The deMartines family works to bring pork farmers together with the public and with chefs and pave the way for others to follow

Story and photos by Keith Roulston



Fred de Martines stands outside the little store on his Sebringville farm.

Even before the so-called “swine flu”, it often seemed that city/town people and hog farmers were in separate camps, seldom if ever to meet.

And often it’s hard to figure out who is more leery of whom. Pork farmers, stung by criticism of the smell from their barns, accused of inhumane treatment of animals in their increasingly large operations, and worried about biosecurity, often long for invisibility. Even farm neighbours, let alone town residents

or city-dwellers, have to wonder what happens in those windowless barns as large as factories at the end of laneways where signs warn against entry.

Fred and Ingrid de Martines have been working to break down those barriers. They have even built a viewing room on their Sebringville area farm so that visitors can see inside a pig barn without actually entering.

As he shows off the room, Fred de Martines says he decided to build it

after he heard accusations in the media about how pigs were mistreated in the modern hog industry. He wanted people to be able to see that his pigs were happy and contented. The view through the bay-window that protrudes into the finishing barn allows people to see just that.

The de Martines’s effort to build bridges is a natural outgrowth of their own unique farm business. After coming to Perth County from Holland with a small amount of savings in 1979, they had to start small and take a different route.

Fred had trained as a swine specialist back in Holland but had no farming background. In Canada, Fred worked in construction while Ingrid worked in a Stratford store. They were fortunate enough to find the farm they wanted to buy within weeks of arriving.

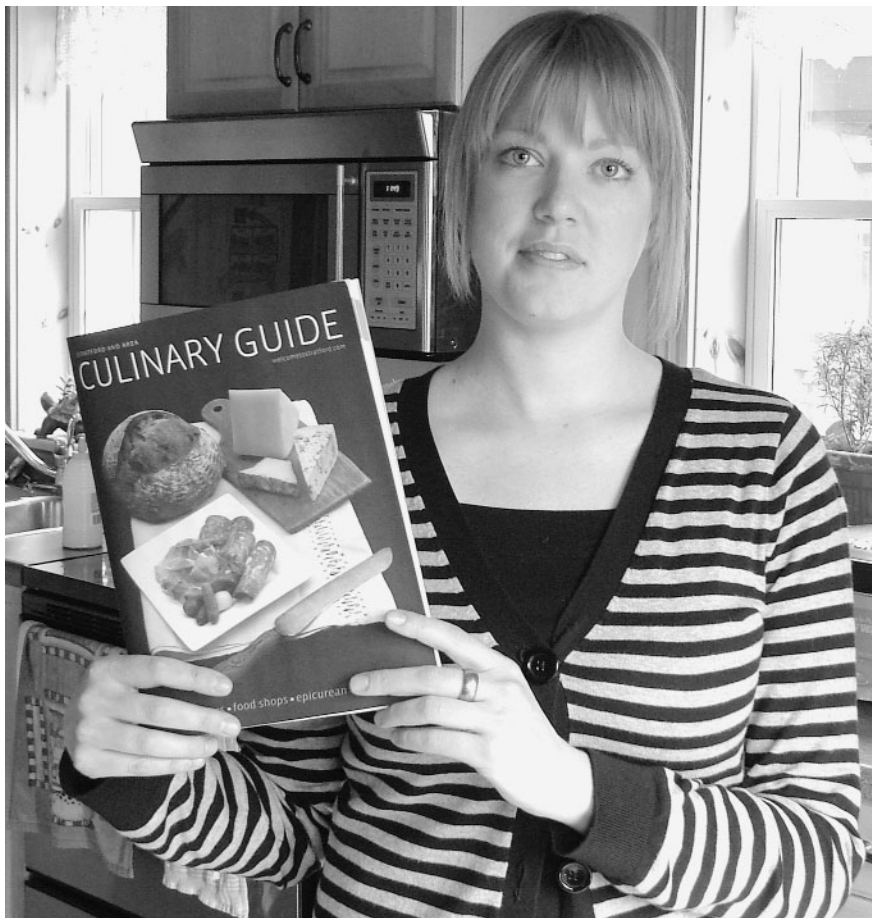
Because they couldn’t start big, they adopted strategy to bring the best return on a smaller volume of business and that was through adding value. Their venture has grown into Perth Pork Products Ltd. which sees them marketing as much of their farm’s production as possible directly to consumers or to chefs in high-end restaurants.

As well as a finishing barn that sends 3,000 hogs to market each year, they have diversified into wild boar, and the highly-sought-after heritage breeds Berkshire and Tamworth.

The decision to get into wild boar has shaped the rest of their business. Back in 1992 the family realized they either had to expand their hog operation or diversify into other commodities. They explored options like growing berries and raising emus but settled on wild boar.

“We had to create a market for wild boar,” Fred recalls. “It took about 10 years. Then it took on a life of its own.”

Creating that market set the family



Danielle Brodhagen shows the *Culinary Guide* which includes tours to farms that sell food products.

on the path they're following today. Fred had to talk to chefs to find out what they wanted. He developed a connection with the Stratford Chef School, working with young chefs and hosting visits to the de Martines's farm so they could learn more about how animals are raised.

His pioneering marketing work made it natural for Bruce Thompson, Ontario Pork's consumer and trade specialist, to contact him a few years ago when chefs began asking questions about where to find pork from Berkshire pigs. Thompson was close to chefs through his advisory role with the Niagara Culinary Institute, Ontario's largest trainer of chefs and cooks and as a member of the Slow Food movement.

Fascinated with Thompson's quest for Berkshire pork, de Martines started working with a group of Berkshire producers on marketing ideas and when it became obvious more pigs were needed to meet the demand, he bought some Berkshires

himself.

The result was a new company called Black Bow Farms, a co-operative that markets for a number of Berkshire producers.

The Berkshire project took him into Toronto to expand the process of meeting directly with chefs. Going up Yonge St. the first time and realizing how big the task ahead was a truly daunting experience, he admits. But he got to know the chefs and they got to know where they could find the Berkshire pork as well as his wild boar, and today he can't find enough product to fill the demand.

Recently celebrity chef Jamie Kennedy created a menu at his Gilead Café that featured different kinds of pork in every course.

Next de Martines ran into a Grand Bend-area farmer who was raising Tamworth hogs and organic crops. The farmer didn't have the time to market the Tamworth meat, de Martines explains, and raising slow-growing Tamworths is expensive

enough that you have to find a specialty market because there's no benefit to selling them with commodity pigs.

He bought the sows from the herd, but couldn't buy the boar. The de Martines's were allowed use of the boar for one breeding cycle and by then, he was sure, he'd be able to buy his own boar somewhere. Little did he know that Tamworths have become so rare that there was no boar available anywhere in Canada between Alberta and Nova Scotia that wasn't related to the sows he owned. He finally found a boar to import from the U.S.

In the meantime, with sows needing to be bred and no boar available, he came up with the idea to turn a good-sized wild boar in with the sows. The experiment worked and he ended up with "beautiful little striped pigs".

Searching on the internet de Martines found a breeder in England who was also breeding wild boar to Tamworths and calling them "Iron Age" pigs. He adopted that name and started offering Iron Age pork to chefs.

Today he can offer wild boar, Berkshire, Tamworths and Iron Age, plus a new development he's working on in secret.

"We're staying a step ahead of the chefs," de Martines says. "It keeps them interested. Part of marketing is to keep your customers interested.

"In niche marketing, eventually the main market will catch up with you." Sooner or later either more pork producers will start raising Berkshires or they'll cross-breed to come up with a reasonable (and cheaper) alternative, he says. So a niche marketer has to be creative and keep looking for something new.

"As long as you like change, you're all right in niche marketing," he says. "If you're stuck in a rut, don't get into niche marketing."

Working with chefs and meeting directly with customers who order pork from their regular herd or their heritage breeds through the Perth Pork Products Ltd. website or come to the little shop on the farm to buy, brings a reward of great satisfaction, Fred says.

In his discussions with chefs he often hears of other farm products

they'd like to be able to get and sometimes he's has been able to tie chefs together with with producers of things like partridge or squab.

In the current pork market, after four years of losses in producing commodity pork, a growing number of people are exploring the niche market route. "I'm getting calls from guys all the time – people who have never talked to a chef before," de Martines says.

Which is where he connects with Danielle Brodhagen, programme development officer with the Stratford Tourism Alliance. The

group has been trying to build bridges between farmers, chefs and consumers through various programs. Currently, through an \$89,000 grant from Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs Ontario Market Innovation Fund, Brodhagen is working to define Stratford and Perth County as the province's next culinary destination, following on the heels of such hot-spots as the Niagara region, Toronto and Prince Edward County.

"We already have (food) products for tourists that are authentic," she says as she visits in the kitchen of the

de Martines farm home.

Part of her work is to try to help more farmers deal with chefs and consumers.

"Farmers and chefs both need someone to bridge the gap," Brodhagen says. "They're both caught up in the day-to-day of their work. They're both very insular."

To point producers in the direction of chefs, she has created a buyer/grower directory, a book telling farmers how to distribute their products. The directory will let chefs see which producers offer what foods that might be part of their menus.

She has also created a 40-page Resource Guide to help chefs understand farming seasons and the benefits of serving seasonal foods. (Both documents are available on request by calling her at 519-271-5140.)

These efforts will make it easier for other farmers to follow de Martines's trail to dealing with chefs and the public, Fred says. "Once they get a taste of it, it will be easier. It's that first time that's the hardest – like me going up Yonge St. for the first time."

Another bridge-building effort is Savour Stratford, a food fair that was held for the first time last September and will be expanded to two days this September 26 and 27.

"That event last fall was amazing," Fred says.

The events take place along Riverside Drive. Entertainment is provided on the band shell near the Avon River. Nearby the Stratford Chefs School has a learning centre where people can take in cooking demonstrations and see culinary-related mini-documentaries and hear from celebrity guest chefs and speakers.

The Savour Stratford Tasting Tent pairs local chefs with local food producers to offer samples of tasty morsels as well as wine from Ontario vineyards and beer from Ontario brewmasters. On the same site, the Stratford Perth Museum holds its Flavours of Perth Pig Roast and "BBQ, Brews and Blues".

Monteforte dairy sponsors a children's activity tent with children's cooking demonstrations and a petting zoo and craft area. Elsewhere there's a refreshment tent

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In yet another effort to connect culinary tourists directly with producers, Brodhagen's group is creating an Epicurean Trek, with an invitation for visitors to Stratford to visit food processors and farm producers not just in Stratford, but into the surrounding countryside as far as Millbank, New Dundee and Woodstock.

"The Epicurean Trek lets people have a taste of the area while they're here," she explains. "We're lucky enough to have producers who are accepting tourists (on their farms)." Visits to farms are all made by appointment or during times specified by the farm operator. She's hoping it will lead to a culinary tourism trail that is sign-posted.

The Epicurean Trek builds on the Buy Local, Buy Fresh map produced two years ago by Farm to Table committees of Perth and Huron Counties. The map will be updated and reissued this year, says Brodhagen and the new map will also feature restaurants that use the products of local farms. To be included, restaurants must commit to using raw materials from at least three local farms. Farmers will also list restaurants that serve their products.

This kind of cross-pollination is really good for business, de Martines says enthusiastically.

Things like Savour Stratford and the Epicurean Trek make the Buy Local, Buy Fresh map work better, he says. In the past, people really didn't use the map to find farmers listed on it.

Believe it or not in the midst of one of Ontario's largest food producing areas, there isn't enough local farm production to give chefs what they want, Brodhagen says.

If you're a farmer with a unique product, take it to a chef, she suggests. "The chef will help you understand how to market it to another chef." But, she warns, you have to be willing to listen.

The local food movement also offers opportunities for young people to come back to the farm without a huge investment, she says. "The local food movement gives opportunities to have a smaller farm and make

money," Brodhagen says.

That's the de Martines family's formula for getting the next generation into farming. Son Mark doesn't like producing large numbers of commodity pigs, Fred says. He likes working with the heritage breed pigs where he can work with smaller numbers. He doesn't mind the hard work that is involved like shoveling manure.

Their daughter Yvonne works with the nursery pigs, looking after the young stock before it is sent off to nearby farms to be raised by two young associates, Dan Lennon and

Cole Kelly. (There are other de Martines daughters, Rachel, who works as a bank administrator for Libro Credit Union in Waterloo and Bianca who is studying nursing at the University of Toronto.)

"I like the marketing end of it," says Fred. It's a schedule that keeps him hopping, travelling to Toronto to deliver meat and visit chefs and getting involved in other marketing aspects of the business.

Still, it's the path he loves. "You'll never see me just produce animals and put them on a truck and let someone else sell them," he says.



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