
DAYS IN THE SUN AND HANDS IN THE SOIL

LORENZ EPPINGER FOLLOWS HIS HEART

BY DEB CRIPPS

Life can be wonderfully unpredictable. At any time in our lives, we might find ourselves doing work we would never have dreamed possible. Comedian Dan Aykroyd was a mail sorter for Canada Post before he hit the big time on Saturday Night Live. Singer-songwriter Elvis Costello worked as a computer programmer before finding his fame and fortune in the music industry. These are reassuring stories. They remind us that we, too, have the option to effect change, to reinvent. Farmer Lorenz Eppinger has such a story.

Twenty years ago, Lorenz lived in Toronto operating his own recording company, AMOK. It was a relatively successful small record label that produced fifteen albums annually with world-wide distribution. But in the recession of the late 1980s, the company was hit hard, forcing Lorenz to transform AMOK into an agency for artists and to move his office to a farmhouse in Campbellville.

Running an agency wasn't dull or boring, but it was hard work. The business was a one-man operation, and Lorenz spent his days either travelling or cooped up in the office chasing new prospects and organizing music tours. He would often meet with his buddy Hugo Rampen, a farmer from Fergus. They'd talk about life, family and work. Hugo envied Lorenz's work. He was intrigued by the music industry and the opportunities to connect with artists. AMOK seemed hugely exciting compared to his days of sitting on a tractor for long hours making nice straight rows. Ironically, the opposite was also true: Lorenz envied Hugo's lifestyle. Hugo was a keeper of the land who spent his days in the sun and his hands in the soil. This was the grounded life Lorenz imagined for himself.

On one of their visits, as Hugo waxed on and on about Lorenz's good fortune, the pair struck a deal that would change the course of both of their lives. Lorenz laughs as he recalls that fateful day: "I said to him, 'Hugo, the agency is yours! I'll trade you my whole business for your manure spreader. You can have everything. Bring your pick-up over and I'll empty my office onto your truck.'" Hugo accepted.

Reflecting on this decisive transaction, Lorenz relates that, "The music industry is a sexy business to be in when you're in your twenties, but I was tired of it. I needed a change and although I had never even

been on a tractor until Hugo took me to a tractor dealer, I was drawn to farming. I know it's a cliché, but I think of nature as magic. I thought, growing vegetables is something that anyone can do; all you need are the seeds. And for me, it was a natural fit to grow organically.

"I was one of those kids who grew up eating a lot of shrivelled-up apples. I was raised in Germany [and] my mom was always health conscious – she bought all of our fruits and vegetables from a co-op. But that was before sophisticated handling processes like we have now. It wasn't called organic then. The food she gave us was healthy and natural, never processed. And when I came to Canada as a teenager, I just rebelled. I couldn't get enough junk food! But then I started farming and I guess her influence came back, because it never occurred to me to use chemicals or not grow organically. I've come full circle."

Lorenz now has over ten years as a full-time farmer and owner of Greenfields Organic Farm under his belt, and is a member of the Ecological Farmers Association of Ontario. He shares a 1920s farmhouse in Campbellville with his teenaged sons Malcolm and Adrian and their farm dog, Boris. Like many working farm dogs, Boris is keen to help out and is worth his weight in gold as the farm's self-appointed chicken protector. He courageously takes on any hungry coyotes that are tempted to visit the coop.

Greenfields Organic Farm is a market garden operation that produces free-range eggs and vegetables for a number of local farmers' markets. Its twenty acres of vegetable are situated in Ontario's scenic Greenbelt. According to Lorenz, "This isn't typical vegetable growing land. A neighbour used to say that, in our area, God thought of us twice when he was handing out the rocks!"

Lorenz has seventy laying hens that are hormone- and antibiotic-free and fed a diet of organic grain. In return, they happily provide Greenfields with sixty-five eggs a day. "Our eggs are like home-grown tomatoes. You won't go back to supermarket eggs after you've had a breakfast with ours," he says proudly.

Most farmers benefit from the knowledge and experience that is passed on from one generation to the next. They grow up on the land



Lorenz Eppinger, with Boris



where Mom and Dad live. As children, they build hay lofts, care for animals, pick stones and weeds and, if they're really lucky, drive their first tractor by the time they're twelve. As a first-generation farmer, the farm was a foreign playground for Lorenz. But consider his accomplishments: he has mastered the art of soil management and the planting, fertilizing, growing and harvesting of crops in a sustainable manner; he raises livestock humanely, and understands weather patterns and the use of farm machinery; and he successfully produces premium vegetables in a niche market.

We give little thought as to why farmers farm. Or why someone like Lorenz, who was not born into the profession, would intentionally choose it. We buy our food without much consideration for the complex system of producers, middlemen and sellers. Most urbanites would think it odd if a family member dreamed of becoming a farmer. But Lorenz will tell you that producing music and producing food have more in common than we might think.

"My previous work taught me how to run a business and promote products. And frankly, selling organic vegetables is a lot easier than selling bands. The arts and farming do have a parallel.... I feel that my fields are little pieces of art. You should see the spring greens and baby lettuce when lined up in rows; they are beautiful. I think growing vegetables is better than flower beds. I grow just about everything except sweet corn and potatoes," he says.

Lorenz's asparagus are dark green, slim to chubby stalks with a delicate flavour. The best way to describe his carrots is to quote one of his customers: "You have to try one of these carrots. They are ugly, but they are the sweetest carrots you'll find anywhere!" Lorenz' laughs and says he agrees with the ugly label, but explains that the secret to the sweetness is his mineral-rich soil. "These carrots have so much sugar in them that it makes the insects drunk!"

Anyone who has spent time on a farm among planted fields knows there is an awakening, a transformation that happens in the stillness of a peaceful rural setting where things grow. As Lorenz says, there is balance. "Boris keeps the coyotes away from my chickens and the coyotes keep the rabbit population down. Here on the farm, all of our energy goes into growing good food. Farmers like me are interested in producing quality, not quantity. The way we farm offers huge advantages for the environment – sustainable farming – a method of growing that doesn't deplete the land."



Greenfields' "ugly" (but very sweet) carrots, photographed at Dufferin Grove Organic Farmers' Market

If you ask Lorenz to share one little gem, one little bit of information that he's learned from his journey into farming, it's this: "Never lose your passion for life. If you are passionate about something, you are likely to succeed." And Lorenz should know. He sold his business for a manure spreader.

For information about **Greenfields Organic Farm**, visit www.greenfieldsfarm.ca. For more about the Ecological Farmers Association of Ontario, go to www.efao.ca. □

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