
A BIG TASTE OF LIFE AT LITTLE CITY FARM

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY LAUREN CARTER



In the backyard garden, the season's first lettuce glows a shimmering green as my husband Jason and I enjoy homemade yogurt topped with preserved cherries harvested from a neighbourhood tree. An omelette made with farm-fresh eggs, homegrown Swiss chard, and shiitake mushrooms picked from an oak log set in some backyard shade completes a delicious breakfast that satisfies both a locavore's taste buds and a living-lightly consciousness. Served on plates made by a local potter, all of the ingredients in this morning meal – including the flour for the bread – come from within a hundred miles of this unique bed-and-breakfast in Waterloo Region.

Situated on an unassuming third-of-an-acre lot between rarely used train tracks and a quiet city street in downtown Kitchener, Little City Farm, which bills itself as an urban homestead and eco bed-and-breakfast, provides inspiration for those learning to live a more sustainable lifestyle and as a guilt-free getaway for like-minded travellers. Jason and I arrive on a warm day in late May to find the farm's annual spring seedling sale in full swing. Bikes crowd the gravel driveway and several

people browse and admire Thai basil, Black Beauty eggplant, Anaheim pepper, heirloom tomato and other vegetable and herb plants.

Beyond a wooden fence leading into the backyard, the sun is shining on a small pond surrounded by children on their knees pointing to a few bright-orange fish. Between the greenhouse and a large garden, Greg Roberts, co-owner of the property with his partner Karin Kliewer, gestures to a meat thermometer sticking out of the compost pile and gives some tips on the craft of composting to a clutch of intrigued listeners.

Many of the people milling about are here to take part in a free workshop on biodynamic organic gardening, led by Angie Koch, a farmer who drops off vegetables at Little City Farm every week during growing season to members who have purchased shares in her Fertile Ground CSA (community supported agriculture) harvest.

The workshop is one of many at Little City, where Greg and Karin focus on building community, providing education and, simply, in-

Above: Karin Kliewer and Greg Roberts



spiring others. A complete slate of classes, talks and seminars teach skills including beekeeping, soap- and wine-making, and other aspects of the stepping-lightly trade. The couple even turned the recent construction of a straw-bale addition to their century house into a learning opportunity by extending invitations to people to participate in work-bees or to simply stop by to watch.

During the workshop, Jason and I listen intently, eager to learn a few ways to boost the low yield of our own tiny backyard garden. Sitting cross-legged on the grass, we take notes and ask questions. Like many urbanites, we lack confidence in our ability to grow our own food, but Koch is supportive. "Plants are usually really good at taking care of themselves," she says.

After sucking up as much information on companion planting and improving unhealthy soil as we can, Jason and I decide to play tourist and explore some of the other things to do in the area.

Committed to the idea of a low-carbon weekend excursion, we leave our car behind and walk along a short, forested path where Karin harvests wild herbs, and onto a trail that runs beside the train tracks into uptown Waterloo. Twenty minutes later, at the Waterloo Central Railway, we climb aboard a train car built in 1923. With its vintage lights and wood panelling, the train car was once as cutting edge as they come. "It was state of the art when it was built," the railway's general manager, Roy Broadbear, tells us.

Sliding past fields tilled the old-fashioned way by Old Order Mennonites, the train lets shoppers off at St. Jacobs Farmers' Market and continues to the village of St. Jacobs. We disembark and spend a couple of hours wandering through antique stores, eating fresh strawberry-

rhubarb pie and touring a museum about the Mennonites, a culture that Karin Kliewer has glimpsed from the inside. While visiting a pick-your-own organic strawberry patch a few years ago, she met a Mennonite farmer who became her mentor. The older woman is now teaching Karin some skills of the land-dependent lifestyle, gathered from her family's centuries of experience.

"We're doing similar things in a bit of a different way," Karin tells us back at the B&B, over a few glasses of tart apple cider gleaned from the harvest of several abandoned apple trees. Committed to the old-fashioned basics like growing their own food and keeping hens, the couple have also implemented a few more modern methods: a solar-powered greenhouse provides a steady supply of herbs and salad greens in the winter; mini-wetland areas recycle some of the household's grey water; and an outdoor adobe-style cob oven that they built is used to bake bread and pizza for lucky guests.

But I can't help but wonder if their ambitions wouldn't be better served on a few hundred acres of fields, forests and unimpeded overhead solar power. This is a vision they have consciously rejected, the couple explain: "If we need to learn how to live in a manner that's more productive than consumptive, doing it in a city is far more fertile. There



are a lot more interactions and it can be much more effective,” says Greg, joking that the philosophy of “Let’s save the world by moving to the country and buying two SUVs” never made much sense to him.

Instead of just ditching crowded city living in order to fulfill their own bucolic dream, the couple, along with daughter Maya (born the previous July), have created a compelling experiment in sustainable living within an urban setting. “Living in the country isn’t suitable for everyone,” says Greg. “So why not bring the ideal of the country into the city?” And the most unique aspect is that they’ve opened their home for the curious to come, complete with an “eco/social justice” rate for people working in the environmental, non-profit, or social-justice sectors or those who adhere to a low-carbon philosophy of looking for overnight excursions close to their homes in the Waterloo region.

The four-room guest suite, located on the top floor of their house, smells of sweet herbs and homemade soaps. In the eating area, where breakfast is served in cooler weather, a vase of yellow calendula flowers sits on a wooden table beside a sample of Karin’s vegan chocolates. Her soaps, bath salts and tinctures are for sale in a vintage kitchen cabinet.

In the bathroom, organic shampoos and lotions are set out and a framed sign describes the water-saving features of the toilet and low-flow showerhead. In the hallway, books on straw-bale building, local food, herbal medicine and spirituality crowd a shelf beside a guestbook filled with warm comments from contented visitors.

In the morning, after the hundred-mile breakfast, we will add our own inspired praise, but for now we pluck some mint from the garden for tea, find a few books, and settle onto the couch in the living-room area. As night settles in, we chat a bit about our own ambitions for stepping lightly on our small city lot back home before lapsing into a relaxing silence truly fit for country life. □

Little City Farm

www.littlecityfarm.ca

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Be sure to visit Little City Farm’s website for their listing of upcoming workshops and events, to book your stay, or to check out their blog.

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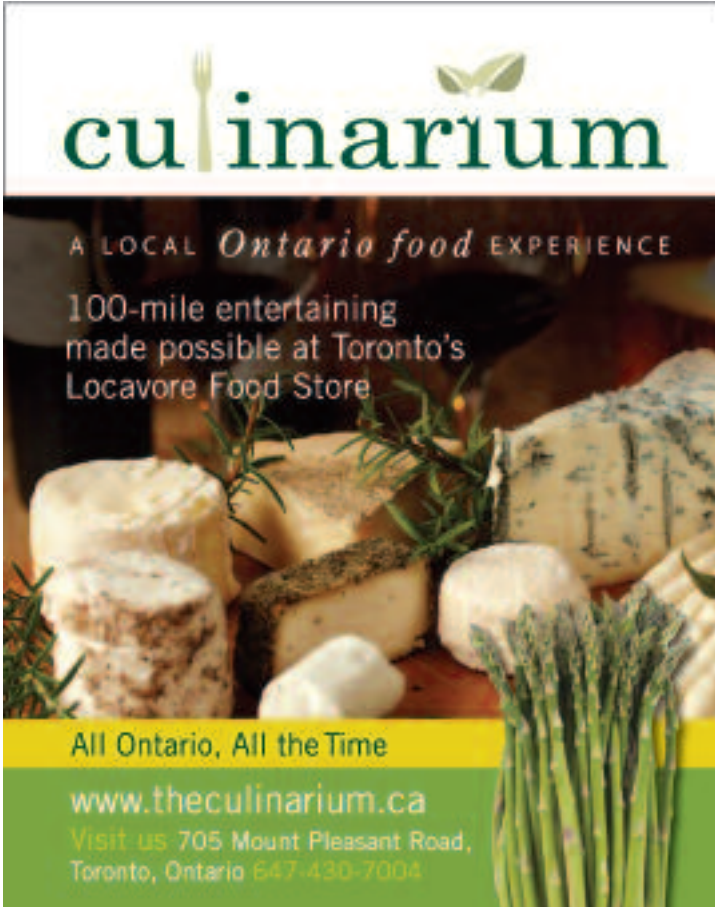


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