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# PUTTING LOCAL FOOD FIRST

## THE ELMIRA PRODUCE AUCTION

BY CARMEN EVEREST WAHL

It is six o'clock on a quiet July morning. Across Waterloo Region and Wellington County, horses attached to buggies and trailers are gliding along the gently rolling back roads, visions of black clip-clopping through the misty morning. Loaded carefully behind huddled passengers is precious cargo – tomatoes, melons or raspberries, perhaps – all freshly harvested last night or earlier this morning. Onwards they trot towards Elmira and the newest jewel in the local food crown – the Elmira Produce Auction Cooperative (EPAC).

EPAC is the only one of its kind in Canada, a wholesale outlet for produce grown within seventy-five kilometres of Elmira and run by an Old Order Mennonite cooperative. The inspiration came from Mennonite communities throughout the United States, where produce auctions have been flourishing since the late 1980s. This rich agricultural region west of Toronto has traditionally been the base for a wide range of livestock production. However, falling prices for meat and the 2003 BSE crisis, during which the United States closed its borders to Canadian beef imports, crushed the hopes – and incomes – of many farmers. Small growers turned their eyes and hands toward fresh produce and flowers, two markets with increased revenue potential, particularly at a time when more and more people were beginning to value and source local food.

In the spring of 2004, a group of Old Order Mennonite farmers in Woolwich Township approached Foodlink Waterloo Region, wondering if their idea for a local auction would fit into Foodlink's Buy Local Buy Fresh (BLBF) program. The main tool for BLBF at that time was a regional map that profiled farmers who sold their products at the farm gate or at local farmers' markets. Peter Katona, Foodlink's executive director, saw a great fit between his organization's goal to put more local food on more local plates and the growers' need for a business that reflected their community's values.

Up to this point, the local food movement in Waterloo Region lacked a consolidated supply of fresh produce that could be channelled into urban outlets. The auction idea was the missing piece of the puzzle and Foodlink committed itself fully to supporting the fledgling enterprise where appropriate. While the local Mennonite farmers are skilled entrepreneurs and meticulous planners and are more than able to work out most business logistics, Foodlink was able to provide assistance in preparing marketing materials, price and volumes reports, and various communications (the Old Order community does not use email, websites or faxes, and some congregations also eschew phones). Perhaps most importantly, Foodlink played, and continues to play, a role in lining up new buyers and promoting the auction to the public and to the media.

Four years later, the partnership has blossomed and grown in a multitude of ways. On any given auction day, dozens of horse-drawn trailers and trucks begin pulling up to the auction house for the 9:00 a.m. opening. The growers represent both small and large operations that look to the auction as a primary retailer for their produce or as an option for selling surplus crop. First up are the larger, heavier products like melons and pumpkins that are pulled past potential customers gathered outside on a covered platform. The bidding begins with auctioneer Bill Horst calling out the quantity and grade of the produce and its opening bid. Hands are quickly raised and the bidding climbs until the top price is reached. The crowd of buyers then moves indoors, where the smaller items like tomatoes and peppers are proudly displayed, row upon row, in an array of colourful shapes and sizes. Horst begins the bidding again, with the crowd in hot pursuit through the aisles. The buyers tend to be local retailers such as small grocery stores, market stands, or nurseries; other farmers with farm-gate businesses; and institutions such as the universities of Waterloo and Guelph.



The numbers tell the story: Between 2004 and 2007, the number of sellers increased 27 percent, the number of buyers increased 32 percent, and overall sales climbed from \$200,000 to \$1.2 million.

The auction is transforming agriculture in Waterloo Region. Where once the area was known for its numerous beef and dairy herds, more and more of the land is being tilled for fresh produce that local customers are increasingly searching out and buying. While this type of large-scale, wholesale production of fruits and vegetables is new to the Old Order community, the practice of growing these foods is a time-honoured tradition. On all Mennonite farms, the large kitchen garden packed with a wide variety of produce and cut flowers was a full-time job for many members of the family, young and old, as it supplied all the necessary vegetables for the summer and winter. What is different is the size of production now going on. In order to stay competitive, many farmers have expanded their operations to such an extent that greenhouses are becoming almost as common as barns. Year-round, these buildings – often powered by oat husk pellets or recycled wood – produce tomatoes, green beans and cucumbers growing up eight-foot trellises.

For the 222 families that supply the auction, there is hope that growing produce will sustain them for the long term. Not only is EPAC providing an opportunity for local farmers today, it is also ensuring that the next generation of growers can continue to call the farm their home and their place of business. More importantly, these families can make an honest living in a way that respects the values of the Mennonite church and of the larger Mennonite community.

These values include looking after one's neighbour, ensuring that everyone is meaningfully employed, and getting a fair return on one's investment. Buyers acknowledge that if they offer a grower a fair price for early produce in April, they are ultimately contributing to the season's start-up costs and eventual success of the grower's business. This, in turn, ensures that high quality produce is always available. So, although a dozen greenhouse cucumbers was recently fetching \$4 at the Ontario Food Terminal, the Elmira cukes sold for \$7. It may not make sense for hard-nosed businessmen, but it certainly highlights the unique community that is integral to EPAC's success. Old Order Mennonites have no intention of leaving the farming profession, so they have a strong long-term interest in the continuation of a successful auction house. Similarly, buyers of local food value the existence of a local wholesaler that keeps profits up and transportation costs down.

And herein lies the secret to what makes asparagus or cabbage from the Elmira Auction so much better than a similar product in your local national-chain grocery store. Unless you grow it yourself or purchase directly from trusted local farmers at farmers' markets and farm stands, there is no fresher produce and no

greater assurance of quality than what is delivered by horse-drawn trailer three times a week to Elmira. The growers that have committed to this slow trek have also committed to high standards and craftsmanship in all the food they produce. Food sold through EPAC is labelled with the BLBF brand, guaranteeing that the food on your plate is fresh and local.

Today, the food on our plates has travelled thousands of kilometres, on average. Long distance travel requires more packaging, refrigeration and fuel, generating huge amounts of waste, pollution and carbon dioxide emissions. EPAC allows the food chain to shrink dramatically, forging relationships between grower and retailer to reduce the number of hands in the profit pot. In a world of uncertain food prices and supply, in a society where local produce is usually shipped to the Ontario Food Terminal before it can be sold in the local supermarket, EPAC is leading the way to ensuring that farmland supports the food requirements of its greater community in a manner that treads more lightly on the Earth and promotes fair trade. This is precisely why we, as retailers and consumers, need to ensure that EPAC continues to be a strong component of food localism well into the future. □

For information about buying from EPAC, contact auction manager Nelson Wideman at (519) 699-9358. For more information on EPAC, including location and schedule, visit the Foodlink website ([www.foodlink-waterlooregion.ca](http://www.foodlink-waterlooregion.ca)) and click on "Purchasing Local Food."

*Carmen Everest Wahl is a board member of Foodlink, and a regular contributor to its newsletter, "Local Harvest." Based on her belief that Canadians need to reunite with the real flavours of food, Carmen is currently writing a book that explores the history and significance of local foods that grow in fields and gardens across this country.*

