

Organic activist makes a difference

by Ken Rubin

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How I came to be a food activist and an organic farmer

My own interest as a food activist began in the early seventies as a consumer advocate and community worker based in Ottawa. I helped organize and encourage food cooperatives. By the late seventies, I was involved in building a loose national network of citizen groups interested in reforming the food system.

At the same time, I became a part-time organic producer on a beautiful plot of land that my wife Debbie and I purchased in 1977 in Eardley, Quebec, that bordered on the Gatineau Park. There, for the last twenty-five years, we have produced mini-vegetables, herbs and flowers for sale. I joined the Ottawa chapter of Canadian Organic Growers and, among other things, started the distribution of its annual list of area producers.

While marketing farm produce to restaurants, hotels, grocery stores, co-ops and individuals, I met many people truly interested in food production and alternatives. Participating in last year's COG Ottawa Feast of Fields made me reflect on how farming is still a lot of fun and how great it was to meet fellow producers, custom-

ers and friends all in one place. I still like the solitude and fortitude it takes to farm.

My farm experience has, more than anything else, led me to a deeper appreciation of the environment and the outdoors which keeps me probing many environmental and health issues. In fact, the area that I'm best known for, and have put in even many more hours than farming, is that of



Ken Rubin: food activist and organic farmer.

public interest research. For over 35 years, my research has, among other matters, helped uncover various stories about food and environmental safety. It has given me further insight on how the governmental process works, and that's not for a sustainable food system.

For example, I uncovered the successful lobby efforts of the dairy, meat and egg industries to have their food items more prominently considered as part of the 1991 Canadian Food Guide. This

was done to the detriment of plant foods. In the eighties, I was involved in a very lengthy struggle all the way to the Federal Court of Appeal to successfully get secret federal meat inspection reports from Canada's largest meat packers. I also have participated in a variety of citizens' campaigns.

The inequities of the food system we face as organic growers can be highlighted by reviewing some of the data I've found on the GE food issue. Over forty GE foods have been approved through a system of lax regulation and pressure, without much evidence of rigorous, accountable and comprehensive review.

What concerns me, though, is that the current citizen groups' efforts are too concentrated on the GE food fight, just like the organic movement is too caught up in having a certification and business

profile. A grateful food industry and government likes nothing more than groups biting into a few slices of the food marketplace problems.

The food industry rarely promotes local "green" foods and has jumped into organic food sections leaving traditional organic alternative markets small. The harmful environmental effects of over-packaged foods, the downside of buying foods shipped in refrigerated long-haul transports and the problems of buying foods grown

on farms using chemical methods of production are downplayed in supermarkets.

Canadian officials prefer to blame poorly cooked foods or the occasional fly-by-night firm for outbreaks of food poisoning rather than deal with the dangers that genetic, chemical, additive and nutritional alteration pose to our food. Our governments run diversionary wars against obesity and campaigns to reduce smoking while not outlawing and restricting the very tobacco, pesticide, drug and additives that make us unhealthy.

One current issue receiving national and local attention is the sharp increases in the number of large pig farms being set up and all the associated safety and environmental issues like manure runoff. COG must make itself known in opposing these massive pig farms. It's bad for the pigs, it's a bad farming practice and it is none too good for developing healthier foods and local environments.

Food activists have indeed, in a small way, been branching out from just concentrating on the GE food campaign, decrying what the public knows about mad cow disease, about tragedies like Walkerton, and about the food industry's desire for yet more products undergoing irradiation.

Some restaurant owners, chefs and others have recently created a local regional slow foods group that decries fast foods and unhealthy foods, while others locally have actively campaigned at the City of Ottawa for a pesticide use ban on lawns and at parks. More and more citizens are able to share information and insights internationally and to form coalitions so that government and corporate entities don't have free

reign on matters like growth hormones.

We can do it

Organic producers can be both food activists and promoters of healthier foods.

Do not think the answer is to be left alone on family farms and to operate within a small organic market niche. We cannot afford to stick our heads down into better managed soils, when around us lies compromised chemical agribusinesses and a food and political system that sells unsafe and unhealthy foods. We can create alternatives but we still must seek change in public policy and legislative jurisdiction and must fight corporate power.

As growers, we have choices. We must not let our customers, certification boards or tax and agricultural authorities dictate to us without our involvement and contributions. We must not be shoved into little quaint organic market niches and be closed shops when it comes to welcoming competition.

As citizens and consumers ourselves too, we can make a difference. Just because we are very busy, especially on a seasonal basis, does not mean we are not voters, letter-to-the-editor writers, forum attenders and protestors. We can raise issues in the media,

and talk with neighbourhoods and friends.

We cannot just stay on the sidelines, even if we are a minority. We can engage in consumer action if we are to overcome the government and corporate obstacles we face. We can do this with a sense of dignity and humour and show we enjoy good food and a closeness to the environment.

In April, some COG members recently showed that activist commitment in helping to organize teach-ins and media events at several agriculture research stations across Canada. I was happy to take part and pleased that it was data that I uncovered about their testing of both experimental and commercial GE crops that led to this national awareness event.

Our public farms are hardly being devoted to improving organic agriculture and prefer the monies brought in from the likes of Monsanto to do GE wheat and other testing.

Our drinking water, our soil base, our bodies are telling us that change to our eating habits and actions is overdue. We, as some of those wanting to keep a purer earth, can join in, speak out, and act.