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Putting a face on farm fresh: Local producers cashing in on the groundswell of branding



DENISE DEVEAU | June 8, 2015 10:43 AM ET
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Hank Markgraf and his wife Darcel are among 500 growers that make up the BC Tree Fruits co-operative that recently began producing and selling Broken Ladder Cider. Broken Ladder Cider Company

When Hank Markgraf sees a can of Broken Ladder Cider on a store shelf, it's as if his own name is stamped on it. In a way it is.

Markgraf is one of 500 producers that make up the BC Tree Fruits growers co-operative. Broken Ladder Cider Company, based in Kelowna, B.C., is a recent initiative on the part of BC Tree Fruits that is helping increase the profile of local producers with consumers.

Not only does Broken Ladder represent an entirely new product category for the local growers, it is also cashing in on the groundswell of branding that is putting a real face to food producers. "Marketing has undergone a huge shift as consumers demand traceability for the products they buy and eat," said Chris Pollock, BC Tree Fruits marketing manager. "As a result, producers themselves have become a powerful branding force."

The farmer is the unsung hero and should be recognized

Consumers know when they buy Broken Ladder it supports local growers, he added. "Knowing something is B.C. grown by local families is huge for consumers and the grower base. We have strong competition in the beverage market, and can't compete on the volume standpoint for fresh fruit. So we rely very much on support from those end consumers."

That support is boosted by a website that introduces the public to the individual growers behind the product, complete with stories and photos. Markgraf likes the idea of having a product that builds his personal brand.

"It has all the qualities we value: home grown, local. Unlike other ciders, it has a story to tell. I'm proud of the fact part of my orchard is in there."

Producers are doing well riding the wave of marketing lingo, said Hannah Renglich, network animator for local Organic Food Coops Network in Toronto, whose mission is to co-ordinate the Ontario-wide network of local organic food co-operatives. "Local food is well understood and society is keen to find it," she said.

A vital piece in the equation is food sovereignty, Renglich said. "Ownership remains in the hands of people producing the food. That's incredibly important to so many farmers."

Producers are on different parts of the branding journey, she said. "Some can't keep up with demand already. Others have to do the marketing and education for consumers, whether through farmers' markets or selling into retail."

The success of product lines are a testament to the fact local producers have become a valuable commodity in retail marketing, says Carol Anne Hayes, president and founder of Toronto-based Canada's Own. She has rallied several Ontario farmers to supply products and tell their stories for her successful line of healthy soups, stocks and chili made from local ingredients. The soups also have the blessing of notable chefs Jamie Kennedy and Rob Feenie. "The farmer is the unsung hero and should be recognized," Hayes said.

There's a difference between saying you have a Canadian product and having ingredients that are traceable to individual farms, she contends. "It's the whole bit about traceability. We go one step beyond saying grown in Canada to Ontario, including a write up that brings information about each farmer."



Canada's Own products feature the names of farmers on Canada's Own its packages.

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The branding of farmers — or farm estate branding — is being executed through many channels, from co-operatives taking up the producers' cause, to marketers such as Hayes to self-branded entities such as Rowe Farms, which has opened its own stores. This level of recognition helps to sell marketing immensely, Hayes said. "If you say you use Rowe Farms chicken in your product, people

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names are front and centre. "We had beautiful jars but couldn't even play up the individual farmers even more. In effect, our

self-proclaimed farmer and president of Persall Fine Foods Co. in Ontario is one of those suppliers. Aside from supplying raw ingredients, he has a successful line of non-gmo (genetically modified organism) virgin oils under the name of Gourmet name. His oil products are in high demand with chefs, which is helping him make headway into retail channels.

On a farm, Persall is part of a new breed of craft farmers that work in niche markets to develop specific products that speak to quality, craftsmanship and heritage. "We find that's really resonating with our customers in Canada and the U.S.," he said.



Persall Fine Foods produces a line of non-GMO virgin oils under the Pristine Gourmet name.

Handout/Persall Fine Foods Co.

Persall is well versed in the farm estate branding game, having marketed a product line for more than 10 years. “We were doing this business before the local trend was pushing through,” he said.

“What I dreamt about 10 years ago is coming to fruition now and a lot of larger companies are taking note that farm estate branding is becoming a predominant component in today’s retail world. [Industry] is taking note of branding direct from the farm that is associated with legitimate stories that aren’t some fictitious farm name. People want something authentic and that’s what we hang our hat on,” Persall said.

Demand has grown to the point where Persall recently spent \$750,000 on expanding production of his virgin oil to keep pace with demand. “Like any business, we want to build on our success.”

The only challenge for producers now is having enough product to go around. “We want to keep pushing. But we have to be careful we don’t overdo it. But it’s a good problem to have,” Persall added.

Although, he is quick to point out that while profitability matters, it isn’t just a money game. “Those of us who do this are passionate about our profession. And for me, being able to sit in a restaurant and know they are cooking with our oils and seeing others enjoying their foods is very rewarding. That’s what it’s really all about.”



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