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Putting their energy into being zero energy, NOTL winery takes sustainability seriously

By Luke Edwards

Approaching the Concession 5 Road boutique winery in Niagara-on-the-Lake there's one very obvious sign that its owners always intended it to be as environmentally friendly as possible.

But the huge south-facing roof that now holds solar panels is only the start of it for Adnan and Elif Icel, who bought the property in 2010 as Adnan, an engineer by trade, realized a life-long goal and became a farmer.

"It was a childhood dream," he said. The lifestyle of farming always appealed to him, and he understood how important it is to have people who grow food.

Initially the Oakville couple sought a cash crop type operation but switched to grape growing when they found the NOTL property for sale. Icel said he wasn't afraid to let people know he was a novice. Fortunately, the local agriculture community was there to help, with people like Rudy Kasper helping the couple get started.

One thing Icel knew from the get go, however, was his determination to make sure Icellars was as sustainable as possible. The building, which he used his engineering expertise to help build, is 20,000 square feet with a roof that slants to the south, allowing for significant solar generation. He finally got the necessary approvals to start that solar project last year, making the small winery net energy zero.

Icel believes his is the first winery in Canada to be completely net energy zero.

"We will never purchase power from the grid," he said.

Though there's a natural gas line that runs along Concession 5 Road, Icel said they never connected to it.

Instead, Icellars uses geothermal to both heat and cool their operations. The systems work both on the retail and production side.



Giving a tour of his facility, Adnan Icel shows off some wine barrels. ~ Luke Edwards photos

"It works perfect for us," he said.

Icellars also became certified organic last year in addition to being certified sustainable and practicing regenerative farming.

Hitting all these certifications isn't easy, and isn't cheap. Organic sprays are pricey and Icel must apply them more frequently. Practices that reduce the disturbance of the soil means Icel had to purchase a new no-till seeder and mechanical weeding device. This spring he'll buy his organic mix of cover crop seeds.

And in the winery, he must source alternative bottles, using lighter options. This is all at a time where there is little in the way of government subsidy, and consumers - though increasingly interested in sustainable practices - still won't pay the premium for organic and

sustainably produced wine, like they would for other food products.

But at the same time, Icel says there are benefits. Organic matter in the otherwise heavy clay soil has steadily improved. He saves money on costs with the use of solar and geothermal. And he said the grape vines have developed better self defence systems against disease. In a year where many grape growers struggled as a result of wet conditions, Icel said his vines thrived in 2023.

At the end of the day, the decision is a personal one.

"If you're growing organic, you have to do it for yourself, and you have to do it from your own pocket," he said.

Still, he encourages others to follow suit.

"I want people to get back to organic farming, and it's doable."

And others have become interested. Icel said since installing his geothermal system, others have toured his facility to learn how they can adopt something similar for their own buildings.

Icel still uses diesel tractors on his farm, since electric tractor technology is still a few years away from being viable. It means he has to produce excess solar electricity to offset those emissions. While he's able to do so, he's still eager to replace his diesel tractors with electric versions.

Icellars is located at 615 Concession 5 Rd. in Niagara-on-the-Lake. For more information visit icellars.ca. 🌱



In an effort to reduce the disturbance of his soil and let the natural microbes and critters in the soil do their thing, Icel bought a no-till seeder.



Always in his plans, last year Icel finally got the necessary approvals to hook his solar generation up to the grid.



NIAGARA FARMS

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EDITORIAL

Who says you can't go home again?

The term “home” becomes, for many people, a tad murky in their early adult years.

For me, at least until I was around 20 years old, home was always the farm in Vasey. Full stop. It's been in our family for generations, in fact my dad has told the story about how on the deed it says our family bought the property off a “spinster”.

But then came university (Brantford, with frequent visits to my girlfriend in Waterloo) and where exactly home was became less clear. After a year on the farm following graduation a paper in Niagara offered me a job. I thought, sure, I'll live down there for a year or two and then move back home.

It turned out, home moved to me.

That was 2011. A year later that same girlfriend followed me to Niagara. A few years after that we bought a home. Roots were being laid down.

However, while farming was never going to be my life's calling - my older brother was always the farmer of the three Edwards boys - I missed it. Living in the city has its perks, but nothing beats a nice

summer day in the country. And even though we groaned when it came time to do square bales, there was always a sense of accomplishment when the barn was full of hay. A swim, or in later years a cold beer, after throwing around bales all day, was never better.

Fortunately, about a year or so after I started at Niagara this Week, the editor of the day asked me if I could look after the Niagara Farmers' Monthly publication that month. One month turned into a decade, as I continued on as editor for the paper until Metro-land's quasi-bankruptcy in the fall of 2023 ended that paper's run. Their financial woes also, in a few months time, ended my own run with the company.

Looking after NFM was at times challenging and frustrating, deadlines being what they are. But with the help of a small team of writers like Carla Carlson, Ann Marie Chechalk and the late Erno Rossi, as well as those on the sales and operations side, such as Rob Shepherd, Mark Dawson, Lisa Wilsack and Kathy Foster (and many others throughout the years), we put out a paper each month that

we hoped served the needs of Niagara's farming community, much like it had for decades before that under the stewardship of founder Ivan Carruthers and his stepson, and later publisher, Steve Ecker.

NFM's abrupt end last fall was just one of several shocks felt in the print journalism industry in recent times.

But like the year following a tough harvest, hope springs eternal. It didn't take long before I connected with Stewart Grant of Grant Haven Media. Like me he grew up on a farm and remained passionate about farming even as life took him in other directions.

Which brings us to this month's launch of Niagara Farms.

Our goal with the paper is nothing new: Serve the needs of the region's agriculture and rural community by providing a space to learn about what's happening in the farming world and offer up advertising space to connect local ag businesses with their customers.

And if you see me out in the community - look for the guy with a notebook, camera, and Blue Jays cap - don't hesitate to say



By Luke Edwards

hi, or, even better, suggest a story idea or two.

Something wonderful happened to me over the past 13 years. While our 100 acres of land on “the knob” in Vasey will always be home to me, thanks in large part to the region's farming and rural community, so too will Niagara.

Two homes for the price of one? You can't beat that.

Luke Edwards is a former editor of Niagara Farmers' Monthly and editor of the new Niagara Farms publication. He can be reached by email, luke@granthaven.com.

Missing the people: Former publishers reminisce on life running a farm paper

By Luke Edwards

They grow high quality fruit and vegetables, grapes that turn into world class wines, and livestock that provide eggs, meat and milk.

But farms in Niagara produce something else, too: Great people.

“What I miss most about the newspaper is the good people that are in agriculture and the people that serve agriculture,” said Steve Ecker.

Ecker was the second ever publisher of the former Niagara Farmers' Monthly, which served the region's agriculture community for more than 50 years until it folded last fall as part of then owner Metroland's corporate restructuring. The paper was founded by his step dad Ivan Carruthers, with the first edition coming out in the fall of 1970.

“It was hand gathered, hand folded, hand stapled and then tied up in bundles for the post office with string,” Ecker said, recalling those first editions. The inaugural one came with a warning: It was their first go of it, so forgive them for any mistakes.

Carruthers had previously run a paper that he sold. And the stipulation was that he couldn't open a new paper for two years.

As that period was coming to a close Cecil Chapman came into the Carruthers Printing office.

“He (Chapman) came into the office one day and said, ‘I'm looking to sell,’” Carruthers recalled, who then hired Chapman to sell ads for the new farming paper.

“Best decision I ever made, he was a true salesman.”

Keeping the paper successful, especially while running a separate but related business with the printing operation, was a challenge. Ecker said work on the paper was usually relegated to evenings and weekends.



Steve Ecker (left) and Ivan Carruthers hold up a copy of the first Niagara Farmers' Monthly edition, from September 1970. ~ Luke Edwards photo

But it was also meaningful and rewarding. Many of the first advertisers - such as Ben Berg, Bill Perrin and Cowan Farms - remained loyal. And sharing the stories of Niagara's farm communities shed light on an area that often went overlooked.

“It was a gamble, but it paid off,” said Carruthers, adding they're pleased to see a new paper try to fill the void and share stories of Niagara farming community such as 4-H and of the ways organizations and businesses can help strengthen the sector.

During his time leading the paper, Ecker learned just how diverse Niagara's ag com-

munity is. Grape and wine, and the tender fruit industries may get a lot of the spotlight, but he pointed out there are others, like poultry and greenhouses, that are just as important.

Carruthers and Ecker were ahead of their time being an early adopter of the free community paper. It was another decade or two before free weeklies began popping up more, though Ecker said he believes there's still a role for print products in smaller communities.

“Throughout all the ups and downs of the newspaper cycle the farmers monthly always stayed the same.” 🌱

Niagara communities continue to grapple with chicken bylaws

West Lincoln considering its rules, while St. Catharines couple hopes to bring urban farming to the Garden City

By Luke Edwards

Niagara may become more chummy with chickens in the near future.

The backyard chicken debate has hatched again in two more municipalities, with West Lincoln staff currently reviewing the rules for that township and potential options, while in St. Catharines a local urban farming couple is hoping to open things up for people in the Garden City.

Britt Moran and her husband Dan are leading a new charge in St. Catharines. They own Adam's Flora, a business that grew out of a newfound passion for urban farming the couple developed a few years ago when Dan's father, Adam, died.

“He was my best friend and he loved farming and natural things,” Dan said.

The couple began growing plants and flowers in their downtown St. Catharines home. Soon they were at the St. Catharines Farmers' Market, and ultimately opened their own storefront.

With a focus on sustainability, the couple believe allowing St. Catharines homes to keep a few chickens on their properties could present many benefits, including: fresh eggs, manure



for their plants, pest control, and a better option for their own food waste.

And while they understand there are concerns about keeping chickens in an urban setting - attracting wildlife like coyotes, rats and mice are chief among them - they say there are both some misunderstandings about chickens, as well as options to mitigate concerns.

“There are ways to solve that,” Dan said, adding they'd like to see a bylaw done “in a way that isn't going to be bothersome to a neighbour.”

The Morans have had to deal with an infestation of Japanese beetles, which attack the flowers they grow on their property. Hens could

be a natural defence against the beetle, and the couple also said allowing a few hens on a property could increase access to healthy foods at a time when food insecurity is a concern.

Last year Pelham council opted to allow six chickens on a property, regardless of whether that property is in an urban or rural setting. Niagara Falls also allows backyard chickens. However, in both municipalities there are stipulations on how they're kept, setbacks and other rules.

West Lincoln is also reviewing its rules, after residents came to council last year to ask for more freedom in the township's urban settings.

At a meeting in February councillors heard from residents both in favour and opposed to allowing chickens in urban settings. Many of the arguments heard in West Lincoln were familiar, from increased food security on the positive side to the risk of attracting more coyotes on the negative.

Staff will be reporting back to council with some more information at a future meeting.

In St. Catharines, the Morans started an online petition on change.org. They're also accepting signatures of support at their market stand and the St. Paul Street storefront. 🌱

Niagara Farms, a new publication with strong roots

There is so much that I love about this first issue of Niagara Farms, but at the top of this list is the story and photo directly to the left of this column. I'm referring to the recent visit that former Niagara Farmers' Monthly editor Luke Edwards had with Ivan Carruthers and Steve Ecker, who were the first two publishers of that publication – which was first printed nearly 55 years ago.

While I'm happy to introduce myself today as the first publisher of the new Niagara Farms publication, the real credit goes to these three individuals – and others – for their contributions to Niagara farm journalism, both past and present.

Readers, I thought you might be interested to know how this publication came to be, so I'll describe the sequence of events.

As you know, Niagara Farmers' Monthly was established by Carruthers Printing in 1970, and over the years had become the premier rural publication for the region. However, as the newspaper grew, so did Carruthers' printing business, and as Steve Ecker described to Niagara This Week in 2006, "In recent years, our commercial printing business and our rural newspaper have grown significantly and it came to the

point where we had to make a decision to focus on one of them."

Metroland Media Group purchased the publication in October of 2006, where Niagara Farmers' Monthly joined a strong lineup of community newspapers, including the St. Marys Journal Argus - which was my hometown newspaper. It was quite notable when Metroland purchased the Journal Argus because it had been owned and operated by the same local family (Eedy) since 1887. In St. Marys, former town councillor Frank Doyle responded to the Journal Argus' sale by launching a competing newspaper called the St. Marys Independent, which I became the owner of in 2014, thus beginning my career in journalism.

Although Metroland (and Postmedia) enthusiastically bought up several news outlets throughout this time, we all know that difficult times would follow as these large organizations had to adapt to a changing internet environment. On November 27, 2017, in St. Marys we were shocked to learn that the Journal Argus would be among three dozen community newspapers to abruptly close, following a joint Monday morning announcement by Metroland and Postmedia.

The Journal Argus was a successful newspaper right to the end, as was Niagara Farmers' Monthly, which closed in September 2023 due to Metroland's financial troubles.

Stemming from the loss of my hometown's 164-year-old newspaper, in these last few years I've made it a goal of mine to try and restore local journalism to its roots – not just in St. Marys but in other communities across Ontario. In 2020 I bought the tiny but beloved Tavistock Gazette, and since then have started new community print newspapers in New Hamburg, Stratford, Woodstock-Ingersoll, and Goderich. These successful ventures have proven that people still want local news, as long as it's done right.

Reflecting on my youth where I grew up on a 40-cow dairy farm, I was excited to expand our business into farming this January when I purchased the outstanding Norfolk Farms and Brant Farms publications from David Douglas so that he could plan for eventual retirement. It was David who suggested that there was a need for a similar publication in Niagara, to fill the void left by the closure of Niagara Farmers' Monthly.

A strong community newspaper is dependent on having talented



GRANT HAVEN MEDIA

By Stewart Grant

local journalists, and in this case, I was fortunate to meet former NFM editor Luke Edwards, who has done an incredible job bringing this April issue together on relatively short notice. To be a worthwhile place for businesses to advertise, it's all about having quality content and I think that coming out with 27 different articles in this first edition is a great way to start.

I'd like to thank everyone who contributed to this first issue and readers, I hope you enjoy it and I encourage you to share this with others and spread the word. Under this new "Niagara Farms" banner we look forward to building upon what Ivan Carruthers and Steve Ecker started back so many years ago. 🌱

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Feds announce funding for sustainability, organic production programs

By Niagara Farms Staff

Two separate funding announcements made by the federal government in late winter will aim to improve organic production and certification, as well as an index the industry uses to track sustainability practices.

All told, the federal Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food, Lawrence MacAulay, announced just over \$3.6 million in funding. The Canadian Agri-Food Policy Institute will receive up to \$3.1 million, and the Organic Federation of Canada will receive just over \$500,000.

"Consumers around the world are looking for more sustainable products, and I have no doubt that our innovative Canadian farmers can meet that demand," MacAulay said in a release announcing the \$3.1 million for CAPI.

That money will be used to improve the National Index on Agri-Food Performance, which companies use to declare sustainability practices they employ. Upgrades, refinement and fixing missing information is expected to result from the funding.

Currently the index looks at things such as how the farming and food sector affects the environment, quality of food and how it helps the economy and society. The new version will help consumers make informed choices, while also helping food brands show the steps they're taking, the release said.

"Together with an unprecedented coalition of partners, we will improve and promote the use of Canada's first agri-food sustainability index in the marketplace. In a more demanding food world, Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada's investment can help the country's agri-food



sector to be a global leader in grounding sustainability claims in data," said David McInnes, executive director and founder of the Centre for Agri-Food Benchmarking.

Funding for the OFC will be used to help it update the Canadian Organic Standards to add new practices and permitted substances. The standard covering animal welfare will also be revised. It'll focus on innovative, sustainable and ecological organic practices. Projects that capture and store carbon in the soil, lower greenhouse gas emissions, as well as regen-

erative agriculture, vertical agriculture and sunless crops will all be included, as well.

"Farmers are proud to apply the Canadian Organic Standards, which are based on principles shared with international markets. These standards are being updated to clarify all the practices and substances that are applied at every stage of organic food production and processing. This will help maintain growth in the Canadian organic market," said Jim Robbins, president of the Organic Federation of Canada. 🌱

Despite challenges, Niagara's agriculture sector plowing ahead economically

Most recent data shows ag industry outpacing overall economic growth in the region

By Luke Edwards

You couldn't ask for anything better in Blackjack, but it turns out 21 was a pretty good number for Niagara's farmers, too.

From 2016 to 2021, the region's agriculture sector's GDP grew by 21 per cent, outpacing the overall Niagara economy, which grew at 18 per cent. This is based on a report produced by Blake Landry, manager of economic research and development for the Niagara Region's Economic Development team. Landry produces a Niagara report following the release of the Census of Agriculture. The most recent census was released in 2021, with Landry finishing his Niagara report in December 2022.

"Generally speaking it's doing very well, performing at a stronger pace than our overall regional economy. It's still critical to our overall regional economy," Landry said of the region's ag sector.

The overall numbers show strength elsewhere. Beyond the 21 per cent of GDP growth during that five-year span, the report also found the industry supports 24,000 jobs in total, including more than 7,800 who are directly employed. It generates \$1.71 billion in GDP for the

region, which represents 8.5 per cent of total regional GDP.

Niagara's ag industry is led by the greenhouse, nursery and floriculture sector that generates \$828 million in GDP; the tender fruit and grape sector that generates \$366 million; and the egg and poultry sector, which produces \$209 million in GDP.

Landry said it's those high-value sectors of greenhouses and tender fruit that allow Niagara to punch above its weight. Despite having only 1.8 per cent of the province's farm land, and 3.4 per cent of its farms, Niagara produces 5.1 per cent of total agriculture GDP impact in Ontario.

"These (greenhouse, tender fruit and eggs and poultry) are high value compared to things like oilseeds and grains," he said.

There were fewer overall farms in Niagara in 2021 than in 2016, going from 1,827 to 1,651. Additionally, there was a slight decrease in overall farm area, which went from 218,251 acres in 2016 to 208,414 acres in 2021.

"We have fewer farms but they're larger on average and producing a lot more in economic value," he said.

Notably, though, Landry also pointed out that three municipalities in the region - St. Cath-

arines, Lincoln and West Lincoln - all gained farmland during that period. Additionally he said land zoned for agriculture increased during that period. Development pressure is the main cause for farmland loss, but Landry said things like the Greenbelt help protect farmland in Niagara.

However, there are some areas of concern that Landry's report outlined. One of them is the lack of succession planning and overall aging of Niagara's farm operators.

"I've been tracking this since 2011, and the average and median age of farmers just continues to get older," Landry said. In 2021 the average age was 57.3 years, and the median age was 58.

Additionally, 1,056 of the 1,651 farms in Niagara have no succession plan. Those that do are predominantly verbal.

The Region is working on a five-year agriculture action plan that's currently in draft form. Katie Boyko, economic development officer for the Region, said they hope to have it complete in the coming months, but said succession planning will be a big part of it.

"That is one of the pillars of the plan," she said. 🌱

Opening of roadside stands a sure sign of spring

By Luke Edwards

When life gives you traffic, you make a farm stand.

When Concession 4 Road in Niagara-on-the-Lake became a through road to deal with increased traffic from a developing Virgil community, the Kauzlarics saw an opportunity. Operating a tender fruit farm since 1978, the sudden increase in traffic on the road convinced the family to open up a roadside stand.

It proved successful. And now, 10 years later, the stand doesn't just sell the cherries, peaches and other tender fruit grown on the farm, but opens well before the buds on the trees even appear. This year they opened the stand at the start of March, selling a mix of flowers, including hyacinths, crocuses, daffodils and tulips.

"We literally just started on the side of the road," said Lisa Kauzlaric, from inside the shed where shelves of flowers are just waiting to brighten the day of a customer. She helps operate things with her in-laws, Milan and Jelica.

Partnerships with some local greenhouses have helped extend the season for them, doubling it from the three months when fruit was available to more like six months nowadays. Last year they opened in time for Valentine's. However, it's weather dependent, and this year the opening date was pushed back a couple weeks.

Flowers will be the main attraction until around Mother's Day,

when they'll start to transition to fruit.

They also sell homemade jam, which Kauzlaric started making a few years ago.

"The jam started as a happy accident," she said.

She was out for a walk with her young son and saw some extra plums lying around. She collected them up and made some jam, which sold out in a heartbeat. They now make several different flavours including a few plum jams, cherry, raspberry, peach and berry jams. The berries come from local berry farms, since they don't grow them on their farm.

Kauzlaric said opening the stand is always an exciting time, as it's a sign that the long-awaited spring and nicer weather is finally on its way. Her favourite of those early flowers is the blue hyacinth, which can be a little polarizing as some don't like the smell. Kauzlaric said she doesn't mind the fragrance and loves the look of the flower.

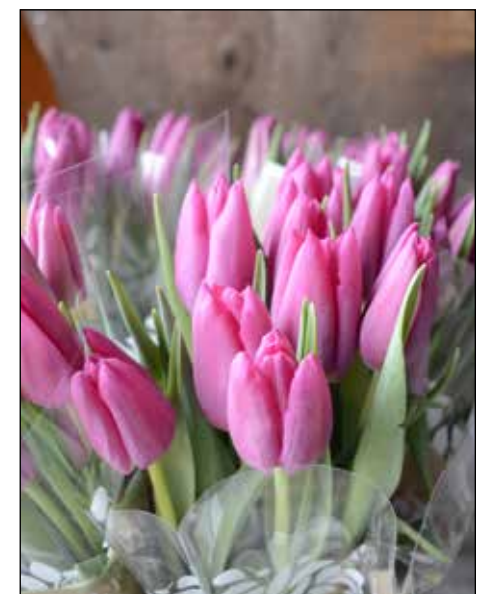
On that opening weekend, Barb Ness stopped by to pick up some flowers that were going to be a gift for a family friend who had been dealing with some health issues and just returned from a stint in hospital.

"They were in a bit of a tough spot this week," she said of the friend as she picked out a few tulips.

The farm stand is located at 1435 Concession Road 4. 🍃



When their formerly dead-end road became an alternate thoroughway around Virgil, the Kauzlarics saw an opportunity and opened a roadside stand. Years later, it's always a sure sign of spring when the Niagara-on-the-Lake family farm begins selling flowers. In the photo is Lisa Kauzlaric and her son Emilio, 9.



The Kauzlarics have partnered with a local greenhouse to ensure flowers are ready for sale as early as Valentine's Day. Selling flowers allows them to extend their roadside market season to roughly six months.



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AT THE MARKET

Niagara Samosa Factory and farm market favourite

Bea Gonfa and her daughter can be found at several Niagara markets

With her daughter recently graduated from Niagara College, Bea Gonfa was struggling to help her find work.

Gonfa came to Canada from Ethiopia 15 years ago. One day she was serving tea and samosas to some friends and talking about how tough it was for her daughter Mel to find work, even though she'd graduated from Niagara College. She'd been serving these samosas at potlucks and church events since arriving in Canada, and they were a popular treat.

"I was having these samosas and tea to entertain them, so one said 'why don't you sell these at the farmers market,'" Gonfa recalled.

At the time, she wasn't even sure how to go about it, but with some help from a friend she soon found herself slinging samosas at the Ridgeway Market.

Fast forward nearly a decade and not only does the Niagara Samosa Factory financially support both Bea and Mel, but they can also be found at markets across the region, and at their bricks and mortar store in Fort Erie.

"Hard work pays, that's my motto," she said.

They use no animal products in their samosas, soups, chips and other items, and everything is made from scratch, she said. Samosas come in a range of flavours, from a sweet apple with fruit from local producer Haist Farm to a spicy lentil.

Where to find them

Niagara Samosa Factory has a Fort Erie store, 562 Central Ave. They're also found at many of Niagara's farmers' markets.

Their products can also be found at select food establishments in the region, and they can be found online at thebestsamosa.com.



Bea Gonfa and her daughter Mel operate the Niagara Samosa Factory, producing homemade samosas, soups and other delicacies while using no animal products.

To nominate a local vendor for our monthly "AT THE MARKET" feature, contact Luke Edwards at luke@granthaven.com

The seeds of a farmers' market are sown well before spring

There's a lot of offseason work that goes into ensuring a successful market

By Michelle Seaborn

While the region was covered in a thick blanket of snow, thoughts of spring were already underway. What to plant, when to plant and will the season be kind are some of the issues that local farm market vendors were contemplating over the winter months.

Ok, so there wasn't much snow this year. Instead, the concern of many growers is the threat of sudden freezing now that the buds on trees are threatening to open. Oh, the joys of farming.

Meanwhile, there are other plans being made. The farmers' market preparations for the new season starts in January. In Grimsby, the market is managed by a market manager and a steering committee to help with some of the more important decisions that come up through the season. In most years, the market location is set, but during COVID-19 many markets scrambled to find suitable locations that kept the vendors and the public safe. We are pleased that the upcoming season will see the market return to Main Street between Christie and Ontario Street again.

There are a few extra steps to planning a market on the road. Permission is sought through the Grimsby Downtown Business Improvement Area because it is their stretch of Main Street most affected by the weekly close. Merchants have come to realize that for the most part the market is a good thing, as it encourages pedestrian traffic in the downtown core bringing many visitors from outside the area to shop at the market but also visit, or at least window shop the establishments along the main street.

Merchants that are able will have their wares displayed on the sidewalk to entice new shoppers inside. The GDBIA approved the market at a recent meeting then it was on to the Town of Grimsby to update the market plans to the Community Services committee, then to council for Town approval. Not done, Main Street is a regional road, so it is also off to the Region of Niagara for road closure permits.

Assuming all is well at this point, applications need to be sent out to returning vendors as well as all the interested businesses that would like to join the market. The Grimsby farmers' market is an actual farm market with greater than 51

per cent of all vendors growing or producing their product themselves, within the Niagara area. The other 49 per cent can be vendors that wish to sell pre-made food such as empanadas, baked goods, perogies. This is the job for the steering committee. Now for the advertising.

Next is to figure out where all these vendors will be placed on the street. It becomes a bit of a logic puzzle trying to place 35-40 vendors, some of whom will require hydro, some will be arriving a bit late, some can't be set up near another vendor for various reasons, big units, small units, double units, the list goes on.

On Thursday, May 30, it will all come together as the street magically closes to traffic, thank you Public Works and Park staff. By 3 p.m., the first farmers' market of the season will open much to the joy for shoppers and merchants as well.

We look forward to seeing you on the street!

Michelle Seaborn is the Grimsby Farmers' Market manager.

A guide to Niagara's farmers' markets

By Niagara Farms Staff

With spring upon us, many will soon be on the lookout for local goods and produce.

And while it'll still be a little while before local farmers' markets tables are heaped full of delicious fruit and veggies, there are still some opportunities in the region to visit a market, with more on the way.

Here's a rundown of markets in the region:

St. Catharines

The biggest city in the region has a twice-weekly market that runs mostly year round, from February to December.

It maintains a mix of produce, meats and cheeses, honey, flowers and artisanal products.

The St. Catharines market runs in the city's downtown, in Market Square at 91 King St. It operates on Thursdays from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. and again on Saturdays from 7 a.m. to 1 p.m.

Welland

Another year-round market, Welland's farmers' market runs on Saturdays from 7 a.m. to noon at 70 Young St.

In addition to the meats, cheeses, eggs and produce, visitors can also enjoy a full service breakfast and handmade goods.

The Welland market also holds special events throughout the year, including a special Earth Day market in April and Victoria Day market in May.

Niagara Falls

After years of anticipation, the Niagara Falls Market will move into its new home in 2024 at the recently opened Exchange building.

It's set to open for the season on Saturday, May 18 and run weekly until Oct. 26. The market features music, children's activities, and community events, on top of the fruit, veggies and other foods visitors can expect.

The Niagara Falls market runs from 7 a.m. to 1 p.m. on Saturdays from May 18 to Oct. 26 at The Exchange, 5943 Sylvia Place.

Grimsby

Returning full time to its downtown location last year after a few years at the Peach King Centre due to the COVID-19 pandemic and road work, the Grimsby Market is back on Main Street for the 2024 season, starting in June.

Running Thursday afternoons from 3 to 7 p.m., the market sees a section of Main Street shut down as growers, producers and entertainers take to the street.

It runs weekly until Thanksgiving and features special events throughout the year.

West Lincoln

A new market on the Niagara circuit, West Lincoln's farmers' market opened in 2023. This year it will return with some tweaks. Running in July and August, it's called Music, Market and Park It, and according to a press release "will marry Music in the Park with the Farmers' Market and add in a car show for an intensive experience sure to delight the senses."

Details are still being ironed out. Visit westlincoln.ca, or follow the township's social media channels to stay up to date.

Niagara-on-the-Lake

Another seasonal market, the Niagara-on-the-Lake Farmers' Market will open for the season on May 25 and run until Oct. 5.

It runs Saturday mornings from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. at 111 Garrison Village Drive.

While shopping for your fresh produce, meats and cheeses, visitors can also sit down for a ready made meal at the market or pick up something to-go.

Thorold

Another newer market, Thorold's returns to the Battle of Beaverdams Park in June. Billed as a community market, it features live entertainment, a licensed patio and food offerings, as well as goods from local farmers, vendors and artisans.

It runs Wednesday evenings from 5 to 9 p.m. beginning on June 5. A grand finale event is set for Saturday, Sept. 14.

Battle of Beaverdams Park is located in downtown Thorold, with a parking lot at Ormond Street South.

Port Colborne

The weekly market in Port Colborne kicked off with a special Easter market in March, and will now run every Friday until the end of October.

Run by the downtown BIA, it goes from 7 a.m. to noon in Market Square on Charlotte Street across from city hall.

Fort Erie

There are typically two options in Fort Erie for those who want a farmers' market experience. While we couldn't confirm its return, a Ridgeway market generally runs Saturday mornings from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. in downtown Ridgeway, starting around Mother's Day and running until October.

Horse racing lovers can also enjoy a few special farmers' market dates at the Fort Erie Race Track. The first such market takes place on Father's Day, Sunday, June 18 at 11 a.m.

Wainfleet

Last year marked the inaugural year for the new Wainfleet Farmers' Market, and the plans are to bring it back for year two.

It runs Tuesday afternoons from 3 to 7 p.m. behind the Wainfleet Arena. Its first date is set for June 11, and will continue until Sept. 10.



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Hub model proving successful for Migrant Farmworkers Project

Program allows workers to be 'agents of their own health and wellness'

By Luke Edwards

As the visitor came up to get himself a bowl of chili, the volunteer server warned it was a little spicy. Then, realizing who she was talking to, took it back.

"Maybe not so spicy for you," she told the Latin man who stopped by the migrant farmworker hub located at Beamsville's St. Alban's Church.

For years the Migrant Farmworkers Project has supported the vital, but often invisible, Niagara population of temporary foreign workers who spend months at a time in Canada, working in the greenhouses, vineyards and orchards of the region. Over that time the project has evolved, with organizers creating a new hub model that's proving successful.

"It respects the autonomy of the migrant farm workers," said Rev. Antonio Illas, one of the key cogs that keeps the project functioning. Along with a group of volunteers and the support of local churches, the project helps fulfill the spiritual, social and practical needs of the migrant farmworker population.

On Thursday afternoons St. Alban's opens its doors to any worker who wants to stop by. While there they can enjoy some food and refreshments in the cafe, or they can browse through a collection of clothes, food and hygiene products for items they may need.

Every other week they can visit with a health practitioner provided through a partnership with Quest. Rev. Dan Tatarnic said the fact the workers can communicate with the practitioners in their native tongues helps ensure they're getting the help they need and understand any required followup for future care.

Then there's the bike program, where workers can acquire a bike for a small fee, and have repairs done free of charge at the church.

"We want the workers to become agents of their own health and wellness," Tatarnic said.

The program now runs year round, after Tatarnic and others realized there's a significant migrant farmworker population that exists in Niagara even during the winter months, with many of them working in the region's greenhouses.

"The hub provides the spiritual care, the medical and clinical, the hospitality and the food and social, the clothing and food security, along with the bike shop," he said.

It even recently saved a life. Tatarnic said one worker came in to check out the hub, and got talking to the healthcare workers.

"He didn't know it but he was suffering from a life threatening illness," Tatarnic said.

"They got on top of that and were able to triage him right into the emergency room."

The social aspect is huge, Illas and Tatarnic said, and that can be especially true in the winter months. However, even in the summer Ta-



tarnic pointed out the hub provides an important getaway for workers who could otherwise spend every waking hour with their small group of coworkers.

In addition to the Beamsville hub, the project also runs a monthly potluck and service program at St. John's in Jordan. New this year is a pilot at the Port Church in St. Catharines, where volunteers will help run a similar monthly potluck. It launches on April 28.

And while they lost their Niagara-on-the-Lake location - the church that hosted the project had to close down during the COVID-19 pandemic - Illas said they continue to support NOTL workers where and how they can. They're also open to finding a new site in town, if one is available.

Illas and Tatarnic both say the hub can be a great opportunity to continue to bring the locals and TFWs together.

"We would love the local community to come and see how connections are being made, how friendships are being made and how community is being created," Illas said.

Tatarnic invited anyone curious about the program to come out any Thursday to check it out, visit with some of the temporary foreign workers, and break bread together.

"If you're curious just come and see," he said.

The hub runs Thursdays, typically from around 4:30 to 7:30 p.m. More information can also be found at migrantfarmworkers.ca.



Excitement already building for 2025 plowing match

By Niagara Farms Staff

When it's a first-in-a-century type event, the excitement's going to start building early.

More than a year and a half out, those involved with organizing the 2025 International Plowing Match and Rural Expo are already hard at work. The West Niagara Fairgrounds will be the host of the September 2025 event, welcoming thousands of visitors to the community for the five-day event.

"We're pretty excited about bringing the International Plowing Match and Rural Expo to your community," said Ontario Plowman's Association executive director Cathy Lasby, presenting to West Lincoln council in late February.

The event was last in Niagara in 1926, meaning it'll be making its return to the region for the first time in nearly a century.

"Bringing it back to this region is huge for us," said Lasby.

One of the biggest annual agricultural events in the province, it debuted in 1913 in Toronto but soon became a travelling annual event. Niagara Falls hosted the 1926 match, marking



the only other time it's been in the region. Lasby said the fact it moves around is both a "gift and a great challenge."

At its core is the plowing match, an event that sees participants compete in a variety of categories to showcase their plowing skills.

But it's grown to involve much more. There's an opening day parade, the Queen of the Furrow program, and as the name suggests, a rural expo. Visitors come from far and wide to

check out vendors, exhibits, and to learn about farm life and farm history in Ontario.

It typically includes a large component devoted to educating young people and is a rare day that the Ontario Legislature adjourns to allow MPPs to attend.


"Our event is built on tradition," Lasby said.

More than 68,000 people attended last year, as the match emerged from the COVID-19 years. Studies suggest 72 per cent of visitors are from out-of-town, making it an important economic driver, Lasby said.

A local organizing committee has formed and is already hard at work planning the event.

"Volunteers are key to the success of the IPM," said Renate McGillivray.

The local committee wants to make it more than a West Lincoln event and include the entire Niagara region. But given the fairground's home in and connection to West Lincoln, organizers came first to West Lincoln council to seek its endorsement, which they received.

Organizers plan to present to Regional council as well, seeking both endorsement and some in-kind and financial support. 

Federal funding supports clean grapevine project

By Niagara Farms Staff

A Brock University research project that aims in part to give farmers clean and healthy grapevines has received significant government financial backing.

As part of a March 13 bundle of funding announcements, members of Brock University's Clean Agriculture for Sustainable Production (CASP) Field Infrastructure project learned the project would be receiving a \$3.5-million grant from the Canada Foundation for Innovation. The announcements were made by federal Minister of Transport Pablo Rodriguez on behalf of Minister of Innovation, Science and Industry Francois-Philippe Champagne.

"This investment not only transforms research that supports Canada's \$11.6-billion grape and wine industry but allows industry to have access, through research partnerships, to state-of-the-art facilities to identify and produce elite performing plant material," said professor Debbie Inglis, director of Brock's Cool Climate Oenology and Viticulture Institute (CCOVI) and core CCOVI scientist, in a press release. "Establishing all the tools necessary to implement a domestic clean plant program while trialing disease-resistant and climate-resilient varieties will allow industry to become more self-reliant and environmentally friendly."

The project includes two phases. The first, called the Clean Plant Program, helps produce grapevines that are free of disease. CCOVI principal scientist Sudarsana Poojari, who co-leads the project with CCOVI researcher and assistant professor of biological sciences Jim Willwerth, said funding will allow them to increase capacity.

"Through this infrastructure, our goal is to play a pivotal role in safeguarding the health and productivity of vineyards across Canada, making significant contributions to



In March, Brock University received \$3.5 million in a federal grant to support its Clean Agriculture for Sustainable Production Field Infrastructure project. In the photo is Jim Willwerth (left) and Sudarsana Poorjari. ~ Brock University photo

the sustainability of the grape and wine sector in Canada," Poorjari said.

Using microshoot tip tissue culture therapy and high throughput sequencing (HTS), researchers are able to detect and eliminate viruses. The former is a technique where a small part of the apical shoot tip of a vine is cut off and grown under controlled conditions, while the latter, HTS, is a genomics-based test that detects known and unknown viruses.

The second phase takes the focus outside the lab, to see how these vines interact with other plants and organisms in greenhouses and in fields. This phase also includes a precision agriculture component.

"More efficient production practices, and plants that are more resilient to field and urban settings, will economically and environmentally benefit Canada's producers," Willwerth said.

A third phase will turn the attention to urban settings, where Brock's research on the interaction of plants, micro-organisms and other living things can help guide urban programs such as community gardens and green rooftops. The research, Willwerth said, can support biodiversity and soil conservation for such programs.

Several other Brock researchers, as well as outside support, are also involved in the project. The project builds on work by other partnerships and groups such as the national germplasm repository, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency partnership CLEANSED, and the Canadian Grapevine Certification Network. 🌱

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Research centre launches “Discover Vineland” video series

By Niagara Farms Staff

There's never a shortage of activity on the campus at the end of Victoria Avenue, which houses, among other organizations, Vineland Research and Innovation Centre.

A new video series by VRIC aims to give a short glimpse of some of what researchers do there. Called Discover Vineland, the clips are posted to YouTube and feature a quick video of three minutes or less explaining one area of VRIC. The videos can offer an idea about the facilities and services on the Vineland campus that businesses and organizations can use to benefit their sector.

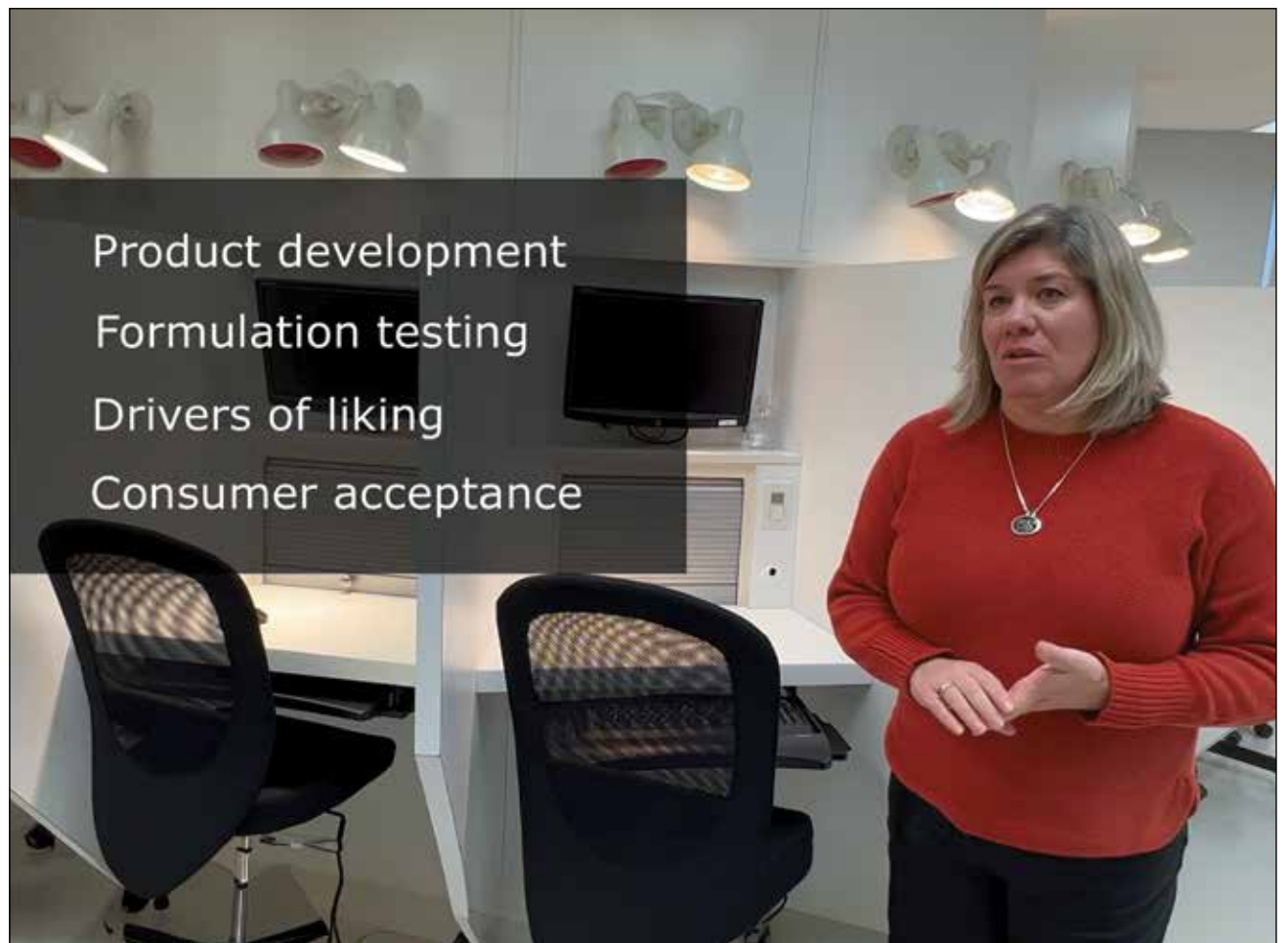
The first one included the Consumer and Sensory Laboratory, which is led by Amy Bowen and offers objective, third-party evaluation of products that can help businesses and organizations boost product development and formulation. It can also help understanding the drivers of consumer liking and acceptance.

Bowen and her team have worked with everything from fresh produce and alternative dairy and proteins, to high emitting odours of agricultural by-products.

Other topics will include the Advanced Pathology Lab, greenhouses, metabolomics and plant variety development.

There should be a new video posted at least quarterly.

Visit Vineland Research's YouTube page to watch them. 🌱



Vineland Research and Innovation Centre has launched a new Discover Vineland video series to offer an idea of some of the services the centre can provide. The first video featured Amy Bowen discussing the Consumer and Sensory Laboratory. VRIC YouTube screen grab photo

Despite sale of fairgrounds in Welland, fair and agricultural society will continue

By Luke Edwards

The show will go on, even after a planned sale of the Niagara Regional Exhibition fairgrounds goes through.

At its annual general meeting on March 24, the Niagara Regional Agricultural Society confirmed that it is looking to sell the land on Niagara Street, and has a deal with an unnamed buyer. The property has been home to the Welland Fair since 1975. NRAS President Colin Bowman, reading primarily from a press release, said the move was made to allow the society to find a new home and preserve the society and fair for years to come.

“We understand that people have been hearing things about our future, and we want to be clear that the future is bright for the NRAS,” he said.

Even while it looks to sell the current property and move to a new location, Bowman said the fair will continue to take place at 1100 Niagara Street for up to the next five years.

“Our priority is making sure that our community and our next generations can continue to focus on advancing the standards of agriculture, domestic industry and rural life. The fair will always play



With significant work required for some of the buildings on the Niagara Regional Exhibition fairgrounds, the Niagara Regional Agricultural Society is looking to sell the land and find a new location for Welland's fair. Luke Edwards photo

an important role in that work,” Bowman said.

Bowman said the society board voted unanimously at a meeting in February to move forward with a sale.

The move to sell the property was not without controversy. Over the winter the Welland Tribune reported on strife within the board

on the sale. Members of the Ontario Association of Agricultural Societies were eventually involved and two board members were dismissed in January for publicly sharing confidential matters, according to Bowman.

This year's NRE is slated for Friday, May 31 to Sunday, June 2. Bowman said it's about 75

per cent booked, and will include classics like the midway, demolition derby, and truck and tractor pull.

“We are trying to fill the property and give Welland what they want,” he said.

For more information on the fair, visit niagaraex.com. 🌱

New peach and table grape varieties showing promise

Researchers helping extend the season for these two local crops

By Luke Edwards

Earlier peaches and later table grapes may help both local farmers and fans of freshly picked produce.

During the Feb. 21 and 22 Ontario Fruit and Vegetable Convention Jay Subramanian, professor of tree fruit breeding and biotechnology for the University of Guelph, and Ontario Tender Fruit manager Sarah Marshall outlined some of the promising new varieties of peaches and table grapes that farmers have started, or will soon start planting.

In his presentation on peach varieties, Subramanian outlined several in various stages of development and release. Some are far enough along to have a name, such as Early Blush, which was released in 2020. Others still go by a numbered research name.

While the numbered names may not be as enticing as Early Blush, Subramanian pointed out those numbers do describe some interesting aspects of the development process. For instance, one variety starts with "V96" and that 96 describes how long it's been in development; it began the same year of the Tickle Me Elmo craze, way back in 1996.

But while it takes years to develop, the work is starting to bear fruit, so to speak. Newer varieties are helping start Niagara's peach season earlier in July than ever before - last year a combination of newer varieties and ideal growing

conditions saw Niagara producers start harvesting as early as July 5. Mid-July may be a more realistic timeframe, but Subramanian and other researchers are working to ensure there's a consistent supply throughout the peach season, timing it so there's a new variety ripening just as the previous variety's season comes to an end.

"We're trying to fill that gap," he said.

On the grape side, Marshall said there are several table grape varieties in development that also show promise, following a fall tour of some of the test vines in question.

"We've been looking at new table grape varieties for the last few years," she said.

Those varieties include a mix of green, blue and red, from the green mid-season Timpson to a seedless red Magenta. However, Marshall said there's still work to do, especially on how to manage the new varieties.

"We have a lot to learn on these new varieties," she said, adding they've applied for a provincial grant to look at canopy management and other best practices.

Subramanian said they're still looking for names for some of the numbered varieties, and are open to suggestions, including from readers of Niagara Farms. He said something that starts with the letter V, and/or has a connection to Niagara history is preferred. 🍃



New peach varieties are helping to provide a consistent supply of Ontario peaches starting as early as mid-July. ~ University of Guelph photos



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Officials seek to improve relationship with growers who use TFWs

Inspections can be a stressful time for farmers

By Luke Edwards

Amid frustration among growers who utilize temporary foreign workers, representatives from the federal government tried to show a friendlier face at the Ontario Fruit and Vegetable Convention.

During presentations at the February convention held in Niagara Falls, bureaucrats outlined a new pilot that's meant to reduce red tape and headaches for repeat employers who meet certain employment standards. In a following roundtable members of Service Canada spoke with growers about interactions between growers and inspectors and how those interactions can be improved on both ends.

"Sometimes investigators are just as scared of you as you are of them," Service Canada's Jennifer Newport said.

By and large, growers at the presentation were supportive of an inspection process, suggesting the overwhelmingly high number of inspections that pass shows employers take their responsibilities seriously and treat their TFWs well. However, there's ongoing



An worker picks grapes from a vine. ~ Pixabay photo

tension with some who believe they're being unfairly targeted by either inspectors or those lodging complaints, as well as with timelines that some growers argue can be too strenuous.

"It does affect the perception of the entire relationship," said Stefan Larrass, who chaired the

general labour presentations on Day 2 of the convention. Larrass is a senior policy advisor with the Ontario Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association and said those bad experiences growers have with certain inspectors can sour them on the entire process.

Service Canada's Thomas Moorcroft said they have been working on soft skills training with investigators and other point people at Service Canada.

"We try to make things as easy as we can," he said.

One point of contention that didn't appear to have a solution was the requirement for Service Canada to investigate when a formal issue is lodged. Growers said there are often cases where complaints are either frivolous or possibly done out of some sense of malice towards the grower. Having to deal with the investigator and the complaint not only takes up valuable time, typically during the ultra busy growing or harvest season, but can also give that farmer an undeserved bad reputation, they argued.

However, the reporting process allows for anonymous complaints. From Service Canada's point of view this is necessary to give employees who may fear reprisal from their employer the opportunity to raise concerns. From the grower's standpoint, it often eliminates their opportunity to face the accuser and they argue it's a process can be taken advantage of.

Service Canada's Andrew Kosciw gave growers four pieces of advice to help inspections go as smoothly as possible: communication, staying active during the investigation, employee training and documentation.

"This is your contract with the Government of Canada. You need to follow it," he said.

In the earlier presentation, David Hodges, a senior policy analyst for Employment and Social Development Canada, gave growers an update on the Recognized Employer Pilot. The trial launched last summer and its purpose is to make it easier for employers to navigate through the Labour Market Impact Assessment process, which is typically a key requirement for employers seeking to hire TFWs.

"It's a less burdensome process to navigate," he said.

To be eligible, employers must demonstrate certain high employment standards and must have received three positive LMIA's in the previous five years. They also subject themselves to certain check-ins to ensure they're meeting standards.

The pilot is a three-year trial, and Hodges said a midway report will be issued. Applications for Phase 2 began in January. For more information on the pilot, visit canada.ca.

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Wine and grape sector gets a financial boost from federal government

Wine Sector Support Program extension one of three funding announcements made in early March

By Luke Edwards

The federal government isn't closing the taps on wine support funding, and it's welcome news for those in the grape and wine industry.

As he toured a Niagara-on-the-Lake winery on March 1, federal Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food Lawrence MacAulay announced three separate streams of funding to support a Canadian grape and wine industry that has been hit with rising input costs, faltering demand and crop destruction from severe weather.

MacAulay said the federal government's Wine Sector Support Program would continue for another three years, marking an investment of up to \$177 million. The program began in 2022 as a way to support Canadian wineries as they address new and ongoing challenges.

"We've had to adapt to a new market going forward," said Matthias Oppenlaender, a NOTL grape grower, chair of the Grape Growers of Ontario, and treasurer for the Canadian Grapevine Certification Network (CGCN).

Beyond the \$177 million, MacAulay also announced up to \$5.9 million for the CGCN under the AgriScience Program – Clusters Component for the Grape and Wine Cluster, as well as up to \$836,220 under the AgriAssurance Program.

Oppenlaender said the money will go a long way to supporting the industry both now and in the future. Research and development is ongoing to help grape growers address the effects of climate change, disease, and other threats to the sector.

Growers in Ontario faced a challenging winter of 2021-2022, where severe weather damaged many vineyards and forced increased replanting.

"We want to make sure we plant with clean stock," he said.



Lawrence MacAulay, the federal minister of agriculture and agri-food, announced more than \$180 million in funding for Canada's grape and wine sector at an announcement March 1. The bulk of the money, up to \$177 million, will be spent on a three-year extension of the Wine Sector Support Program ~ Government of Canada Photo

But that just marks one of the challenges facing the industry. A rising excise tax on wine producers, changing consumption patterns and increased input costs are all putting a strain on the industry, Oppenlaender said.

Input costs alone have doubled over the past decade.

Fortunately, he said the March 1 announcement is a sign the government values the wine and grape industry. While it may seem like a lot of money, Oppenlaender said it's needed, and "no one's getting rich off it."

And that was the message politicians were sharing at the announcement.

"Canada's wine sector creates jobs, drives economic growth, and supports so many communities right across the country. This extension of the Wine Sector Support Program will provide vitally important support to our wineries as they continue to innovate and adapt to challenges so the sector can stay strong and competitive for years to come," said MacAulay.

"By extending this program, we are recognizing the vital role wineries play in the economy and we will continue to help them thrive for years to come," added St. Catharines MP Chris Bittle. 🌱

'Peace of mind': Excise tax relief extension a welcomed boost for wine industry

Excise tax increase for beer, wine and spirits will be capped at 2% for another 2 years

By Luke Edwards

There are enough surprises and uncertainties in farming as is. Luckily for the country's grape and wine industry, over the next two years the federal excise tax won't be one of them.

In March the federal government announced an extension of the alcohol duty relief program, which caps excise tax increases to two per cent. That cap will now be in place for the next two years.

"We're extremely pleased with the extension to give the industry much needed certainty and predictability for the next few years to give the industry the opportunity to invest and grow," said Richard Linley, president of Ontario Craft Wineries.

The tax increase is typically tied to inflation, with an annual increase every April 1. However, the federal government capped it at two per cent last year in light of the significant increase the industry would have seen otherwise, given the high inflation that hit much of the world in

recent years. Coming off some challenging growing seasons and the ongoing effects of COVID-19 on agri-tourism, the one-year cap was seen as a way to support a sector that had taken multiple body blows.

And while Linley said craft wineries in Niagara and Ontario are eager to get the new tourism season going, the last year has continued to present challenges.

"There's a big focus on trying to boost sales both at LCBO and at retail stores and continuing to rebuild licensee sales, which we're still trying to rebuild post pandemic," he said.

With those efforts ongoing, he said extending the program not only for this year, but for 2025 as well, is good news.

"It gives peace of mind to the industry," he said.

The application process for the program will be open from April 8 to May 24.

Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland and Small Business Minister Rechie Valdez also

announced a second measure alongside the excise tax cap. For two years, the excise duty rate on the first 15,000 hectolitres of beer will be cut in half, giving the typical craft brewery up to nearly \$87,000 in tax relief this year and next.

"This announcement is great news for breweries, distilleries, and wineries from all across Canada who contribute so much to our national economy," Valdez said in a press release. "Not only are they producing incredible products, they are also small businesses who are creating jobs and opportunities in their local communities."

The extension of the federal program, as well as provincial announcements such as the elimination of the 6.1 per cent tax on wine sold at wineries and a five-year extension of the VQA support program that was made late last year have breathed new optimism into the industry.

"We're eagerly awaiting the tourism season to begin in the coming weeks and months," Linley said. 🌱

Microgreens, major potential? VRIC sensory panel tests flavour profiles of microgreens

Project highlights opportunities that exist with centre's sensory panel

By Luke Edwards

Vineland Research and Innovation Centre's team of tasting experts put a niche food product under the flavour microscope last fall.

In an effort to help the microgreen sector better understand its flavour profiles, and to showcase diversity of opportunity the sensory



The sensory panel at Vineland Research and Innovation Centre studied the flavour profiles of 12 microgreens commonly found at local food retailers.

panel provides, Amy Bowen and her team conducted a project last fall that tested 12 different microgreens commonly available at grocery stores. Using various techniques to eliminate potential bias, they tested the microgreens and developed four flavour profiles.

The four profiles show a marked distinction and diversity of microgreens that may not be apparent to consumers who may often see microgreens as one homogenous thing.

"What we really saw was, sure there's a lot of green grassy flavours, but a lot of unique flavour or descriptors to qualify those different properties as well," said Bowen, director of consumer, sensory and market insights at VRIC. Bowen said the research found that microgreens have a diversity in flavour intensity that may not be apparent to the average consumer.

Researchers used word clouds to show the different profiles. While there are some commonalities, they can also vary differently. For instance, Bowen talked about the spiciness levels and how not all spice is created equal. That includes the microgreen world.

"Sometimes it was an immediate onset, some of the other microgreens (the spice) didn't come until the end, it lingered and then caught up with you," Bowen said.

Indeed, one word cloud is dominated by the phrase "immediate heat" while another has a prominent "delayed heat" displayed.

Bowen said the research can be an entry point to help producers with their marketing and packaging. Keeping with the spiciness theme, these lessons could lead to better microgreen mixes.

"They may not actually be congruent flavours from that spiciness perspective because they're being perceived differently," Bowen said.



Additionally, better marketing would mean consumers have a better idea of what to expect and what they're buying.

And while it wasn't a focus for this project, Bowen foresees a possibility of tying similar work into production practices, to see how different ways to grow microgreens affect those flavour profiles.

Bowen said the research also found that microgreens have a diversity in flavour intensity.

The Consumer Insights program has in the past been known for some of its big projects, such as with apples and tomatoes. Bowen said the microgreen mini project shows the department can get creative and give insight in a wide variety of food types. 🌱

Regional irrigation project would bring Niagara to front of the agriculture pack: Witteveen

By Luke Edwards

A lot of people have poured a lot of effort into it, but the long running push to bring irrigation to Niagara continues to progress.

Albert Witteveen, chair of the Region's Agriculture Policy and Action Committee, said he's optimistic the request for proposal process for a regional irrigation system will kick off soon. He's hopeful of an RFP announcement in the coming months.

"There's a huge cool factor to it," he said.

"We all see that this is very important for the future of agriculture."

Irrigation has been Witteveen's top priority since he became a regional councillor. The West Lincoln representative said it's been talked about since the early 2000s when then-Grimsby councillor and current Grape Growers of Ontario CEO Debbie Zimmerman raised

awareness about the need for a regional system.

"When I came on council I said what's the one thing I can push and drive," he said

An Agriculture Impact Study in 2006 identified irrigation as a need.

"And out of there (the study) came 10 action items and this is the last action item. So this has been simmering since about 2007."

To be sure, the irrigation project will come with a big price tag. To start the RFP and develop the design and cost for that design required a \$1.7 million commitment. Installing the system will cost millions more.

Witteveen said the plan is to look at Niagara as four zones, and determine the best zone to start with, the idea being it'll be where something can be installed relatively easily and show the ben-

efits. Regional officials would then use that first phase to show the need and opportunity elsewhere in Niagara.

Niagara-on-the-Lake has its own irrigation system of sorts, but Witteveen said that open water system comes with regulatory, efficiency and maintenance issues. An in-the-ground system would be superior and set NOTL and the region up for a bright agricultural future.

"The next generation is super excited that we're initiating this," Witteveen said, adding years ago the region was seen as an agricultural leader. He's heard from provincial colleagues that a successful rollout of an irrigation system in Niagara could be used as a template for other regions.

"This would put Niagara back at the front of the pack again," he said. 🌱



Albert Witteveen, a West Lincoln regional councillor and chair of the Agriculture Policy and Action Committee, said work on a regional irrigation project is gaining steam. ~ Niagara Region photo

Research key for potential agri-tourism projects, prof says

Operators should understand what the market wants and what the government requires before starting



Claudia Schmidt is an assistant professor of marketing and local/regional food systems at Pennsylvania State University.
~ Penn State University photo

Niche farm stays could provide added income for operators. ~ Pixabay photo

By Niagara Farms Staff

There may be some hurdles to overcome, but there's also plenty of opportunity when it comes to agritourism in Ontario, a Penn State professor told operators recently.

Claudia Schmidt, an assistant professor of marketing and local/regional food systems at Penn State University, provided an outline of some of her research south of the border and how it could apply here in Ontario, during the Ontario Fruit and Vegetable Conference, held in Niagara Falls on Feb. 21 and 22. Schmidt gave an overview of some of the common pitfalls or issues farm operators experience while considering an agritourism project.

Many of those challenges are perhaps somewhat predictable - for instance, access to financial capital and government rules and regulations - but others may come as a bit of a surprise. For example, Schmidt said the term agritourism can often be misleading with respect to the clientele those ventures most often attract.

"Agritourism is mostly about locals," she said. Schmidt highlighted six main themes: Picking the right activities, price potential, time management and third party connections, zoning and neighbour relations, legal liability, and collaboration.

For operators, it's key to find the right activity and the right price. Niche farm stays are a popular option, and according to Schmidt's research, Canadians are most likely to use the following terms when searching for a farm stay: lakes, snow sports, cabins, yurts and tiny homes. Using that knowledge and providing opportunities a customer wants is key.

But it also means drilling beyond basic demographics, which can often not be specific enough to be worthwhile. As an example, Schmidt put up some demographics of an older, wealthy British man. The information appeared to paint the picture of a specific person, but Schmidt pointed out that both King Charles and aging rocker Ozzy Osbourne fit the description.

Collaboration among operators can also go a long way, she said. Trails have become popular and can be a way to attract visitors. Wine and beer regions have taken advantage of this, but it could be expanded. Schmidt mentioned a 1:4 ratio, meaning a one hour drive for a customer needs to result in four hours of entertainment.

"Consumers need incentive to visit a couple different venues," she said.

However, there are some challenges that are beyond an operator's control. Zoning restrictions may exist, and a farm's neighbours may not be fully supportive. In fact, she said the very definition of agritourism can sometimes be fluid and that can cause tension.

"It's important for communities to spell out agritourism uses in their plans and ordinances," she said.

There are also potential liability concerns, as well as biosecurity issues that may need to be given thought for anyone looking to add a new source of revenue through agritourism. 🌱



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NIAGARA 4H

Niagara 4-H gearing up for another busy year

By Ann Marie Chechalk

Awards nights bring out the best of everything. The best food, potluck at the Niagara 4-H Awards nights. Nice clothes, smiling sponsors, leaders with prizes to award and representatives from 4-H Ontario bringing their congratulations to all.

Though short days and cold weather once again descended on Niagara over the past few months, the 4-H club has still kept busy. A night

in November brought to completion a well filled 4-H year as members celebrated with their families their achievements.

Congratulations goes out to everyone who came and participated in club meetings. Members learned to always wear hiking boots when completing the Bruce Trail with the Hiking Club, to always wear old clothes at the Scrapbook/Craft Club as painting comes up often and how much spice to use at Spice of Life.

Showing a beef calf can't be easy, they weigh a lot! Training a guinea pig or rabbit requires a lot of patience as does handling a dairy calf or kid goat or striking a land in the plowing club.

Congratulations to The Ontario Plowman's Winner: top agricultural member, Matthew Roszell; the Tricia Vaughan Memorial Award for initiative, mentorship and a giving spirit: Emily Knutt; and The Spirit of 4-H Award and Career Achievement Award: Chloe Grabell. Those were just a few of the awards given out that evening along with showmanship, judging, club awards and year bars.

And now a new year begins. And a new experience begins for some. Matthew Roszell begins his journey moving from member to leader. Novice members move along to help new members and some members prepare to say goodbye to their clubs as they graduate from the program.

Come and join Niagara 4-H as a leader, a member or perhaps a board director and Learn to Do by Doing, the 4-H motto that is the premise at all club meetings. The over 100-year-old organization is still the best kept secret. Today, 4-H Ontario has an expansive reach and can be found in communities across the province, including rural, urban, and suburban areas. Agriculture, food and the environment will always be an important part of the 4-H program, but clubs that cover non-agriculture topics are also important to today's youth.

Join us, try the Cake Decorating Club, or learn how to play Pickleball, join the Dairy Calf Club, the Goat Club, the Rabbit or Cavy Club.

For more information about any of the clubs contact Ann Marie at Chechalk@outlook.com 🌱



The Ontario Plowman's Winner, top Agricultural member, Matthew Roszell, and The Spirit of 4-H Award and Career Achievement Award winner Chloe Grabell, were recognized at the Niagara 4-H Awards Night.

Federal dollars announced to support clean technology in agriculture

By Niagara Farms Staff

Seven Niagara farm operations will be among the 162 across the country to receive funding through the latest round of the Agricultural Clean Technology Program.

Federal Minister of Agriculture and AgriFood Lawrence MacAulay announced the funding in March. All told, the federal government will provide \$97 million to support projects at Canadian farm operations.

"Canadian farmers fully understand the need to take care of the environment and they are constantly innovating to find new solutions to reduce their emissions," MacAulay said in a press release about the funding. "Our investment in the Agricultural Clean Technology Program will help keep our farmers and ranchers on the cutting

edge, so they can make their operations more resilient today and for generations to come."

In Niagara, there are seven projects receiving funding support. At the top of the list is Freeman Herbs in Lincoln, which is receiving just shy of \$1.3 million to install energy curtains and LED lighting in their greenhouses.

Niagara-on-the-Lake's Icellars Estate Winery is receiving \$430,000 to purchase precision agriculture technology. NOTL's Upper Canada Growers (\$300,000) and Van de Laar Vineyards (\$250,000) are also receiving money for precision agriculture technology.

TD Greenhouses in Wainfleet is getting \$242,000 to help it upgrade its boiler and heating system, while Pelham's VanZanten Greenhouses is getting \$157,000 to install an energy curtain and climate control system.

Rounding out the Niagara recipients is Bayview Greenhouses, which is getting \$55,000 to develop a process for nutrient recovery.

The ACT Program provides funding to ag-related businesses to develop and adopt clean technologies that reduce greenhouse gas emissions. It's split into two streams, an adoption stream and a research and innovation stream. In the latest round, 14 of the 162 were in the research and innovation stream.

Over the lifetime of the program, 414 projects have been supported, totaling \$197 million. According to the government's press release "Through the ACT Program, current GHG emissions are expected to be reduced by up to 0.8 megaton as a result of fuel switching and decreased fuel consumption." 🌱

Big growth for Big Country Raw

West Lincoln company went from a home project for some family dogs to major national brand

By Luke Edwards

She may not have fully realized it at the time, but a cup of coffee at a well known local farmer's home was a sign the company Geraldine and Rob Brouwer created in their home was about to elevate into a new stratosphere.

Standing in the middle of their Smithville raw dog and cat food processing facility that by the end of this year will have more than doubled in size, Geraldine recalled that meeting with Andy Alma, a local farmer and land owner with land to sell in the urban boundary.

"We had coffee with him and his wife and we had to tell him what we wanted to do, and I guess he thought that what we were going to create was something he could stand behind so he sold us his land," she said, adding she later

heard that Alma wasn't the type to just sell his land to anyone.

"He was a real farmer at heart," she said.

Big Country Raw is one of Niagara's biggest business success stories, having grown from a home business side hustle to national brand with aspirations of entering the lucrative American market. It started when a dog the family owned developed some health issues. One of Brouwer's first thoughts was to consider the pet's diet.

She was introduced to the idea of feeding a pet dog raw food and reached out to a local butcher. Soon she was making her own raw dog food.

Word of her little project got around.

"It was a little thing I was doing for my kennel, and all of a sudden it grew to making food for six, eight, 10 people," she said.

Hitting \$10,000 in sales was a major milestone that helped convince Rob to give up his well-paying job so they could focus on the business full time.

Then came the meeting with Alma and in 2019 they opened their new location on Spring Creek Road. Now they have the Smithville location, as well as distribution sites in Ottawa and Calgary, with plans of opening



another centre in Vancouver. With that comes the expansion of the Smithville site, which will more than double in total space to roughly 55,000 square feet with this year's project.

As much as possible, Big Country Raw sources its meats from local producers, and maintains partnerships with several local farm operations. Minimizing the time it takes to process and the number of freeze-thaw processes it goes through helps keep the quality high, Brouwer said.

The company processes 300,000 pounds a week at its Smithville location.

In addition to getting all the approvals for and ultimately building the expansion this year, Brouwer said much of her attention will be devoted to the potential market south of the border.

"That will be a huge focus for me this year," she said. While the American population presents huge opportunities, she said there are also export and regulatory challenges to overcome.

Big Country Raw's products can be found in 1,500 stores in Canada. The company employs about 180 works, the majority at the West Lincoln location. 🌿



As much as possible, Big Country Raw sources its meats from local producers

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Spotted lantern fly's arrival a question of when, not if

By Luke Edwards

A pest that has wreaked havoc on vineyards in several states south of the border will at some point establish a foothold in Niagara and Ontario, but officials are hoping to delay that inevitability as long as possible.

In a series of presentations at the Ontario Fruit and Vegetable Convention held in Niagara Falls in February, farmers, government officials and academics outlined the dangers the spotted lantern fly pose on grape growing operations, lessons learned in the decade since the invasive species arrived in Pennsylvania, and what's being done to protect Ontario farmers, namely the important grape and wine industry in Niagara.

"It's a when, not an if," said Hannah Fraser, an entomologist in horticulture for the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs.



Officials are encouraging growers, farmers and the public to keep an eye out for signs of spotted lanternflies this summer, either the pests themselves or their eggs. Government of Canada photos

"The landscape in Niagara is probably conducive to establishment (of a spotted lantern fly population)."

The spotted lantern fly was first detected in North America in 2014. It came from Asia and first established a population in Pennsylvania. It

"The landscape in Niagara is probably conducive to establishment (of a spotted lantern fly population)."

has since spread to 16 other states in the U.S., and based on all predictions will end up here in Canada at some point too. In fact, there's been a population detected in Buffalo that has caught the eye of Canadian officials.

While the reports from south of the border could put a healthy dose of fear into Niagara's

grape growers, there are some positives to take out of it.

"Wouldn't the U.S. have loved the opportunity to get that science and time," the Canadian Food Inspection Agency's Carla Cassone told those in attendance.

"We are seizing those opportunities."


Researchers have had varying levels of success learning how to control the pests. Some sprays have worked, as have physical barriers such as exclusion netting. However, each solution comes with issues. For instance, the exclusion netting isn't practical for larger vineyards, and the timing of spraying can be problematic as the adult spotted lantern flies present the largest problem and are active right around harvest time. Doing a perimeter spray around the outside of the vineyard could help since the pests usually come in from a nearby woodlot or other area. But Pennsylvania vineyard owner Richard Blair said he gave up that practice when the pests simply became too much.

The other issue in Canada is the limited access to some chemicals from government regulations or business decisions from chemical companies.

For now, government officials are stepping up training and inspections at the border and encouraging anyone who sees a spotted lanternfly in Ontario to report it to the CFIA. The agency has a response protocol for reported sightings. They're also doing surveys and other work to delay the pest's arrival as long as possible. 🌱



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