

Living Off the Land: Canadians Build Their Dreams

By Carol Crenna

The following unusual, award-winning initiatives from across Canada began with a simple vision. Though they sound typical enough—a winery in Quebec, a restaurant in Ontario, a brewery in British Columbia, and a town development in Saskatchewan—they are everything but.

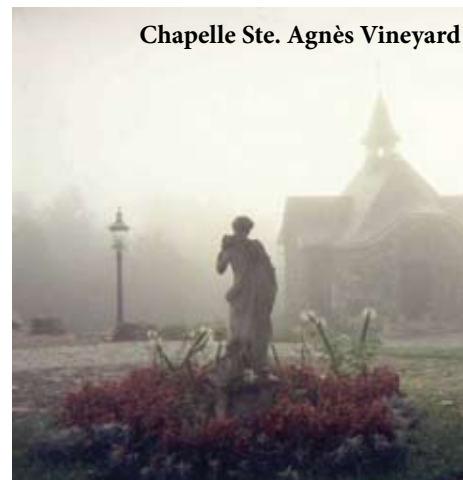
Each of the companies profiled here boasts a level of environmental consciousness that is awe-inspiring. Quality is simply a byproduct of their business as they place emphasis on “old-fashioned” methods within a new, innovative model. Although each group had a similar dream, to respectfully live off the land, all have their own unique stories. So whether you’re searching for an unprecedented place to live or just shopping for a special bottle of wine, read on. Then travel the country and experience these initiatives for yourself.

Eigensinn Farm

You wouldn’t expect to find a world-renowned restaurant in rural Ontario, but that’s where Michael Stadlander’s Eigensinn Farm is hidden. Guests flock to this farmhouse experience even though they must book months in advance, bring their own wine, and drive several hours along muddy roads to get there. At the legendary restaurant outside Collingwood, everything served is 100 percent organically grown, slaughtered and freshly prepared within feet of the kitchen.

Stadlander states, “I went to chef school in Germany when I was 14, and at 15 began planning this. Growing up on a farm, I knew that natural practises had to be incorporated into the restaurant. My wife and I raise our own chickens, pigs, geese, and trout, cultivate a large organic garden, and get everything else from neighbours.”

The results showcase the chef’s culinary prowess. He creates unusually fresh eight-course



Chapelle Ste. Agnès Vineyard

extravaganzas that guests eat in the farmhouse’s dining room. There’s no menu; Stadlander prepares based on what’s on hand. The restaurant is booked three months in advance (it’s only open three nights a week) and serves only ten at a time, priced at about \$215 per person, without wine. In 2002 Eigensinn Farm was ranked the ninth best restaurant in the world by British Restaurant Magazine. One reviewer called Michael Stadlander’s farm “an eco-gastronomic Shangri-La, a community set apart from the restaurant industry and, in some ways, the world.”

Each summer Stadlander goes a little over the top. Last year he and 17 apprentices created an interactive outdoor event in which guests dined in the farmyard, circulating to ten different locations. They sat in a garden where food was picked, prepared and served; in front of a massive brick oven where organic bread was baked; and perched 15 feet in the air in a tree-house (architecturally designed using no nails). The gourmet fare has included beef consommé containing braised oxtail-filled ravioli with mustard greens, and lamb shoulder stuffed with wild

leeks, fiddleheads, and black trumpet mushrooms. Eigensinn Farm, (519) 922-3128, www.eigensinnfarm.com.

Chapelle Ste. Agnès Vineyard

In the mountains of southern Quebec, a fairytale stone chateau is built into the slopes, seemingly centuries old. The chateau houses a maze of vaulted stone chambers with painted murals and 8th century Celtic scriptures, extending 35 feet below ground. This is the wine cellar of Chapelle Ste. Agnès Vineyard, established in 1997, which rests above 7000 organically grown vines that make dessert and ice wine. Created by Henrietta Antony, the vineyard is named after her medieval stone chapel located nearby, which houses 12th century religious artifacts.

Antony methodically planted her vineyard on a steep hillside, with massive curved stone walls supporting 18 terraces, built with thousands of tonnes of stone taken from her 450 acres. The amphitheatre-like bowl made with the stone retains heat and, combined with the southern exposure and two ponds, creates a unique microclimate. Day and night, the vineyard is noticeably warmer than the surrounding area, a factor that extends the growing season and allows the grapes to attain sweetness.

Chapelle Ste. Agnès Vineyard is cultivated by hand without herbicides or pesticides. To enable vines to survive the winter, most Quebec vintners cover them with hills of earth. Ste. Agnès spares the vines this stress and instead, each is dressed in its own insulated coat. Vines aren’t watered because, as Anthony explains, the roots will grow up to 300 feet, pushing through different layers of soil to search for water, creating a richer wine. No pumping or mechanical process is used, and cellars are at different levels underground so that juice flows by gravity from pressing to the fermentation room. There is no filtration, but a long fermentation process that

helps achieve the highest quality. The cellar built below ground creates a cave environment because “wine doesn’t like humidifiers or heating, but natural, consistent temperatures.”

Antony, who arrived in Canada as a refugee when Communists overran Czechoslovakia, took many years to build the magnificent chateau, chapel and vineyard in the image of her European village. Now at age 73, she states, “I bought a few acres, then bought all my neighbours’ properties, with a vision that came from my heart. You would never do this if you first considered costs.” Tours and chapel rentals are available. Chapelle Ste. Agnès Vineyard, (514) 935-9116 or (450) 538-0303, www.vindeglace.com.

Crannóg Brewery

Brian MacIsaac and Rebecca Kneen wanted to recreate a traditional Irish lifestyle on a ten-acre farm in British Columbia. They ended up creating Canada’s only certified organic microbrewery and one of two farm breweries in the country, and they constructed it by hand. Located in Sorrento, Crannóg Ales produces eight varieties of hops, a market garden, an orchard, chickens, pigs, sheep, and dairy cattle...oh, and several Irish beers. It is based on self-sufficient practises that maintain and restore ecological harmony.

The livestock provides food and manure, and all the brewery byproducts are returned to the garden and hopsyard soil to create a zero-waste system. Spent brewing grain is fed to pigs and chickens, and composted. Spent yeast (Brewers yeast is known for its nutritional properties) is fed to pigs and dairy cows, or added to the compost along with spent hops. Water comes from the farm’s spring-fed well, and all wastewater is treated and reused within the brewery for watering livestock and the gardens. Only eco-friendly cleaners (designed to break down other organic solids) and sanitizers are used. The garden feeds the family, with surplus product sold to support the farm. Everything they can’t build or grow is sourced from neighbours.

Kneen states, “We’re very hands-on because we feel that the greater contact with our processes results in a product with a more personal style.”

Certified organic ingredients (including raspberries, cherries, plums and crabapples grown on the farm) are used for beer, with the spring water’s hard qualities giving ale a genuine old-world flavour. “Ales are a part of Ireland’s history, and we don’t often get to taste real Irish ales this side of the pond,” says MacIsaac. Their robust Irish ales include Backhand of God Stout

and Kick in the Pants Bitter Ale. Crannóg Ales, (250) 675-6847, www.crannogales.com.

Craik Eco-centre and Ecovillage

If you’re not careful, you’ll miss this town entirely while driving the highway between Saskatoon and Regina, yet the tiny municipality of Craik is making international headlines for its progressive plans. With a mandate to reduce the size of their “ecological footprint,” members of Craik began developing a truly sustainable community in 2001.

They embarked on a long-term project that includes an educational Eco-centre, an eco-restaurant, and eventually, an Ecovillage. This housing development will consist of 14 families who build energy-efficient homes with environmentally friendly materials, and use the land to generate part or all of their income in a sustainable way. The municipality will address everything from land use to how food is grown and produced, how energy is generated and conserved, and how water and waste is managed.

Craik Mayor Rob Haugerud has taken an active role since the project’s inception. He says, “My house will be the first in the subdivision, which is being built now using flax straw bales from local farms in the construction. Flax straw is a waste product that is usually burned, so using it not only recycles, it reduces air pollution.”

The educational Eco-centre (which includes the Solar Garden Restaurant) opened in 2004 on the edge of a river valley, overlooking a lake, golf course and regional park. It features energy-efficient building design, heating and cooling, and renewable energy using wind turbines. The 6000 sq ft building was constructed using recycled timber from demolished grain elevators and has straw bale insulation. It relies on solar and ground-source heating, a masonry oven, composting toilets and solar hot water. Rain water collected from the roof supplements fresh water from the lake, with an in-house filtration system. Native species gardens and landscaping around the Eco-centre reclaim the natural diversity of native plants, which act as windbreaks and noise barriers and also create habitat for wildlife. The restaurant serves breakfast, lunch and dinner and includes home-baked organic bread sandwiches and locally produced pork, bison, beef, and chicken. Craik Ecovillage, (306) 734-2242 or (306) 734-2299, www.craikecovillage.ca.

Carol Crenna has been a lifestyles journalist for 20 years. She is also a certified nutritionist. She has written for publications in New York, San Diego, Seattle, Montreal, Toronto, Calgary and Vancouver, including nine years as columnist for The Vancouver Sun.

Guelph Organic Conference and Sampling Fair

The Guelph Organic Conference, which is celebrating twenty-five years in operation, offers the most comprehensive information on the state of organic production in Canada today. It is a one-stop venue at the University of Guelph campus and this year takes place January 26 to 29, 2006.

Highlights include free access to the **Organic Expo Canada Sampling Fair** where over 25 vendors will be providing samples of organic food products in a marketplace setting. This year, over 130 exhibitors will represent North America’s leading organic processors, certifiers, distributors, non-profit associations, and environmental educators.

Cornell University professor of ecology and agriculture Dr. David Pimentel will give the keynote speech. He will discuss his research findings, which conclude organic farming approaches use less fossil energy with little environmental impact compared to conventional farming.

In addition, the conference offers over 30 educational workshops and seminars designed to give the novice or experienced grower tips on organic production.

According to Natalie Cajic, media relations director, “The Guelph Organic Conference is one of the oldest and most reputable organic conferences in North America. The growth of the conference over the past two decades has mirrored the explosion in popularity of organic food. What was once a small niche is now becoming mainstream. It’s not unusual to walk into a grocery store and see a shelf of organic products. The mass media is paying more attention to organic food so consumers are demanding it. As a result, the retail sector is paying more attention to the organic conference.”

Registration for workshops and seminars is required. Prices and times are posted on the web site. Admission to the Sampling Fair is free.

For more information, call (519) 824-4120, ext. 56205 or visit www.guelphorganicconf.ca.