

# Fall preserves – a small harvest of ideas.

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October. Harvest fairs. Steaming cups of coffee held close in chilled fingers. Clear, deep-blue skies. Wood smoke. Soil, rich with the after-taste of this year's crop, stretching luxuriously in the long rays of the afternoon sun before settling down for winter. Fallow fields, snugly-buttoned into overcoats bursting with secreted treasures, dreaming of how good it will feel to be worked up again in the Spring. Muscles hard and fit at the end of another season flex in anticipation of some serious kick-back time of their own down the road...

And so, a fall-fair kind of column: a small harvest of ideas to munch on during the winter months. Starting with a little sizzle: an update on Cuba!

### AN UPDATE ON CUBA

Thank you to all who contacted me in response to my August column on the BC — Cuba farmer exchange! A well-rounded and diverse group of farmers has expressed interest in the project; the challenge will be in limiting it to the 15 or so full-time, commercial farmers/farm couples that appears to be an appropriate size group for projects of this nature.

In his thoughtfully-worded letter of September 21, Lic. Juan Jose Leon Vega, Direccion de Relaciones Internacionales, Ministerio de la Agricultura, Habana, Cuba officially confirms the Cuban government's strong commitment to this project:

*"We appreciate all your efforts in finalizing your proposal for Canadian funding to make this exchange a reality... I confirm to you that our Ministry of Agriculture is very interested in pursuing this project and our Direccion will be able to provide at no cost to you some interpreters and guides as well as the necessary bus transportation for the farm tour while in Cuba... Mid-January will be a good date for your farmers to visit Cuba and July is a good month for Cuban farmers visiting B.C. Eight days would be sufficient to visit Cuba's farming areas. They could stay at Veradero Beach for a few days [before or] after the tour and finish off in Havana for an afternoon and evening before returning to Canada the next day. Cuban farmers could have a two week visit... We will do our best to make possible the meeting of your farmers with Cuban farmers who will be travelling to Canada. We also feel this will be a wonderful opportunity for the farmers in both our countries. "*

Air Transat (one of Canada's main charter airlines) has kindly agreed to postpone reservation deposits until October 20th and have block booked the required number of seats on their charter flight leaving Vancouver for Veradero, Cuba on Monday, January 11th and returning to Vancouver Monday, January 25th. (Optionally, those farmers who wish to extend this stay by one week could do so and return instead on February 1st.) Return air fare to Cuba is approximately \$750 (Canadian funds). The Cuban government is negotiating "best rates" on our behalf for accomodation — eight nights of which will be "rural" and five nights "resort".

While government funding has yet to be confirmed (remember, we are hosting the Cubans visit to BC for a farm tour in July and also hope to fund a small "project" identified by BC farmers while in Cuba) I would hope to be able to offer our farmers a subsidy of 10% - 15% to assist them with their air fare and accomodation expenses.

To all of you who expressed interest, I will be directly in touch shortly as we need to firm up commitments by October 20. For those who missed my August column but are keen to go, put your name in quick! (No promises, but I'll see what we can do!)

HYPING HOGS

Having had the opportunity to look a little bit at hog production on the Prairies this summer at the request of the CBC, I was struck by certain similarities in the "hyping" of hogs and hemp...

Over the last couple of years, farmers on the Prairies — suffering from three years of low prices and encouraged by politicians jack-lit in the economic high-beams of large contract integrators (increasingly banished from many American communities for environmental reasons; proportionally speaking, hogs produce roughly three times the bio-solids of humans; that's a lot of pig-shit) — went into hog production in a big way.

What happened? When prices plummeted, the competitiveness of prairie pork production — only yesterday rabidly cheer-led by some very pricey consultants — changed dramatically. The Asian flu? Perhaps. A glut of red meat on world markets? Perhaps. A fall-down in Russian demand? Perhaps. Obviously events that "for some reason or another" fell off the scenario charts of "the experts"... And who wears it? The farmers... As anyone who has done it can tell you, constructing a hog barn ain't cheap. Many farmers (primarily the young ones) who mortgaged the farm to get into hogs are toast. Will the province help out the farmers that they took down that road?? Don't hold your breath...

The problem with hogs on the Prairies goes well beyond short term market issues. An independent study on large scale hog operations in the US (Thompson and Haskins, Center for Rural Affairs, Nebraska) analyses in detail three recent studies presented at a conference promoting such operations. Its findings? Small scale units produce 35 - 37% more jobs, 23 - 30% more employee income and total local revenue, 20 - 25% more net revenue for the state, and 7% more property tax revenue. More importantly, "returns to labour and management per hog delivered to market are greater for the smaller operations." Says Taylor: *"It has become almost a mantra among some people that opposition to large, industrial operations is based on emotion rather than sound science. Such statements might have more credibility if we could rely on science being sound. Instead, we see too many government officials and too many farm organizations blindly putting too much faith into scientific research that deserves more critical analysis."*

Hello, hemp...

Industry analysts and uninspired governments will inevitably bleat on about "rationalization" (smaller farms giving way to bigger ones). But it's about far more than that, really... It's about the death of farming for many third and fourth generation farmers. We scramble to save heritage apple varieties. Carefully preserve some hundred varieties of potato germplasm. Yet collectively fail to recognize when we are running to ground our most precious resource - our farmers.

#### WINTER INVENTION IDEAS...

When governments get out of the business of providing solid and objective information on which the farm community can make balanced decisions, it's not surprising to see private capital interests jump right in there to lead the parade. As governments assure us, this stimulates further growth in sectors such as (ever-darling) hi technology. Maybe they're right... Look at the growing interest in hand-held, truck and/or barn-mounted bullshit detectors... Perfect for separating fact from fiction when politicians and those thirty-something, red-suspended, cel-phoned stock promoters loudly define for farmers the next bandwagon. (Also works for separating public servants from bureaucrats, though I understand the audible alarm can be somewhat of a problem; apparently, it has a tendency to squeal when pointed in the direction of Victoria...)