



When Brenda Hsueh talks about soil pH and sustainable growing practices, her passion is palpable. “It’s been ridiculously idyllic,” the 41-year-old owner of Black Sheep Farm in Grey Country, Ont., says. “Even when things are really stressful and hard, I’ve never wanted to throw in the towel.”

CAREER

Betting on the farm

Uninspired by cubicle life, Brenda Hsueh turned her passion for food into a viable career as an organic farmer

By JENNIFER GOLDBERG

But Hsueh didn’t always feel that way about her job. Less than 10 years ago she was working as a database manager for a Toronto-based financial company, crunching numbers by day and hobnobbing with other urban professionals by night. She owned a condo in the downtown core, and while “life was good,” deep down she wasn’t satisfied with her career. Then the 2008 financial crisis happened. “It was a wake-up call for me,” she says. “I was feeling morally complicit in an industry I didn’t care about, so I asked myself, ‘What do I care about?’” The answer, she realized, was food.

Hsueh quit her big-city job and enrolled in a volunteer program to learn everything she could about organic farming. The experience taught her a lot about herself. “I lived in a tent. I worked really hard outside and I loved it. I discovered I wasn’t as prissy as I thought I was.”

Soon after, Hsueh sold her condo and began shopping for the right property. “I knew if I wanted to make this work I had to be smart about money and couldn’t put myself into debt,” she says. She visited 20 different farms, testing the soil to ensure the land could support vegetables and livestock. She also assessed each farmhouse for its potential to generate revenue as a bed and breakfast in the future. Eventually she purchased 40 acres of “picture-perfect” land and got to work. She cultivated five acres of vegetable fields and launched a community-supported agriculture business, supplying salad, turnips, eggplants, peppers and other veggies to members of a produce-buying club. She also added a small flock of 14 sheep, for meat and wool and to help rehabilitate the soil.

Eight years into owning Black Sheep Farm, Hsueh still loves her work but admits her dream job hasn’t come without its challenges. Her income is largely controlled by the weather, and when conditions aren’t favourable, money can be tight. “Farming is a significant financial risk,” she says. “This is not a career choice for making a lot of money.” While the farm is profitable, Hsueh has diversified her income by working as a food security consultant and at a local accounting office during tax season. The extra cash helps her pay for big-ticket farm items, like a new truck. It also helps her save for retirement (she’s on track to have a \$200,000 nest egg by the time she’s 65).

Hsueh has also learned to live on less in order to keep costs down. “I don’t buy many clothes or eat out nearly as often as I used to,” she says. “I live a lot more simply, but I don’t feel deprived because the farm is something I love.”

With Hsueh and her partner expecting their first child any day now, Hsueh is planning to hire her first full-time staff member; it’s another cost she’s had to save for. But she’s confident the farm will continue to flourish and grow. “If you’re doing something you love, you find a way to make it work.”



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