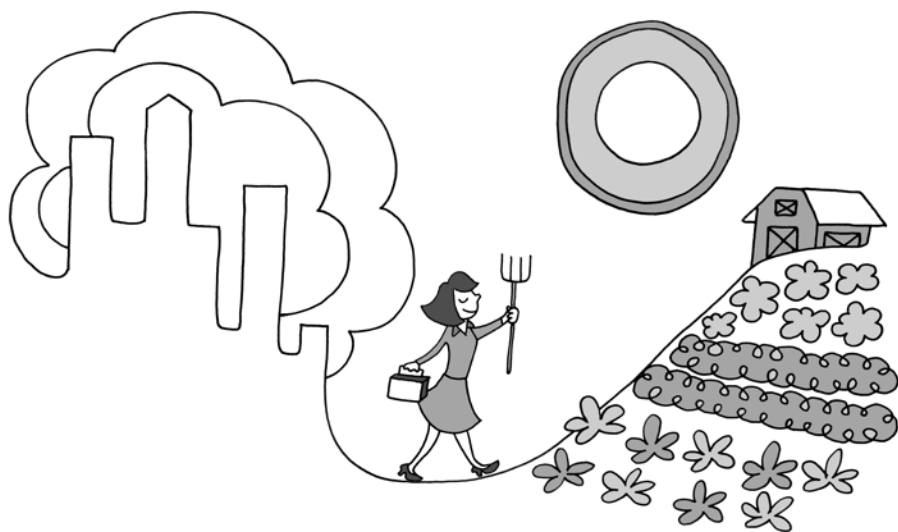


GROWING A NEW CAREER

A city slicker traded her corporate job for life on a rural organic farm. Now she's trying to cultivate new attitudes along with her vegetables **BY JESSICA LEIGH JOHNSTON**



Brenda Hsueh wants to change the way you think about your food. The 34-year-old organic farmer grows a cornucopia of vegetables: chard, kale, squash, beets, spinach, carrots, peas, tomatoes. Some people think her wares are too expensive, but she knows something they may not have stopped to consider: food costs money to produce, and farmers need to eat, too.

“Our food in Canada is too cheap to be sustainable globally,” Hsueh says. “We have the cheapest food of anywhere in the world, and that’s because we are exploiting a lot of other countries, the people in them and their environments.”

It’s been a year and a half since she traded her home in downtown Toronto for a farm in Chesley, Ontario (population: 1,900), and she’s never looked back.

Not many people would leave big-city comforts for a life of rural labour, but for Hsueh, the decision to become a farmer was easy. “When you care about the environment and you care about food security and you love eating, really, what comes out of that except for sustainable agriculture?”

Hsueh is not alone in this thinking: she’s part of a rapidly growing movement of

small-scale organic farmers. Unlike conventional farming, which typically practices monoculture (one type of crop planted at one location), organic farmers strive to work in balance with the ecosystem, planting many different crops, using natural plant properties to keep soil healthy, and eschewing commercial fertilizers. This is both environmentally sound and practical, because if one crop fails to grow, there are still plenty of others.

Hsueh learned her new trade at Everdale Organic Farm and Learning Centre, just outside of Guelph, Ontario, which offers an internship program for would-be farmers. She arrived there in June 2008 as a volunteer; she’d planned to stay for a month, but ended up staying for the entire growing season. She loved everything about it — including living in a tent — and she fit right in.

“There was a major click,” Everdale co-founder, Wally Seccombe, says, recalling how Hsueh endeared herself to everyone there, when on her first day she volunteered to clean the outhouse that had been frozen all winter. “Brenda goes from Bay Street to jumping down the hole and cleaning all this stuff out,” he says, laughing. “It became like, ‘Wow, we’ve got a winner here.’ She’s cleaning this out on her very

first day. This is not exactly the most appetizing thing to start your farm career with.”

Indeed, farming life is difficult, and not all that easy to access in the way Hsueh has; she was able to finance her farm through the sale of her condo, and she doesn’t expect to turn a profit for five to 10 years.

Beyond the financial challenges, the greatest obstacles facing farmers are negative stereotypes about farming. “People need to realize that farming isn’t for people who aren’t smart, or people who can’t do something else,” Hsueh says. “Farming has to become a respected profession again.”

Running a farm takes a diversity of skills, from business planning to marketing to the athleticism required to physically work the land. An understanding of biology helps, too. “Farming is a hugely sciency thing to do because it’s all about natural cycles,” Hsueh says. “It’s all about getting things into balance, understanding how nutrients flow through a system. To me, farming is like a giant science experiment, a constant science experiment that just takes years to run.”

Bridging the urban-rural divide has always been part of Hsueh’s goal of being a farmer, and, with her new business, she aims to better connect people to the source of their food. She does this in part by selling directly to subscribing customers in Toronto. Every week during the summer, she drops off boxes of veggies at customers’ homes in the city. It’s less wasteful than selling at farmers’ markets, she explains, as it allows her to harvest only what is already sold.

Hsueh brings her farm to Toronto, but she also brings Toronto to her farm. Last year, she hosted an open house for friends and family that drew 100 visitors — more than she’d hoped for, and one of the many moments that make her new adventure feel worthwhile.

“I’ve had friends come to visit me with kids,” she says. “Some of these kids have never seen vegetables in a field before, and they pick their first bean and eat it straight from the field. It’s really wonderful.” **S**

Visit Brenda Hsueh’s blog at www.justblacksheep.com.