



2010 Ontario's Outstanding Young Farmers' Backgrounder on Finalists

Anthony and Marj Sjaarda, Wyoming
Sjaarda Caprine Farms

Anthony and Marj Sjaarda operate Sjaarda Caprine Farms, a dairy goat operation located near Wyoming, Ontario. Both Anthony and Marj were raised on family farms – he on a dairy farm and she on a hog operation. As a teenager, after a long summer's day of picking rocks, Marj decided that farming was the last thing she wanted to do. However, after completing a nursing degree, and meeting Anthony, her mind was quickly changed and their farming life began.

The farm is home to the Sjaarda's five sons, 750 milking goats, 600 replacement goats, a few dairy cows, chickens, turkeys, laying hens, beef cows and calves and most recently rabbits. They own approximately 97 acres and rent an additional 60.

Farm goals include producing high quality milk, increasing production, improving the genetics of their herd, and maybe most importantly to diversify their operation in order to give their children the opportunity to develop experience in different types of farming.

Anthony and Marj are both committed to the environment and were the first goat farmers in Ontario to develop a Nutrient Management strategy. They also look to continually improve their knowledge and recently completed the Canadian Total Excellence in Agricultural Management (C-Team) offered by the George Morris Centre.

The dairy goat industry, the Lambton County Agricultural Advisory Committee, the Wellandport Farmers' Cooperative, the local church, local youth groups, and the town of Wyoming are all beneficiaries of hundreds of volunteer hours given by the Sjaardas. Anthony also currently serves as Chair of the Ontario Dairy Goat Cooperative.

The Sjaardas want to be seen as “farmers who excel at producing high quality goat milk and meat products, serve as a positive example to others interested in the industry and all the while being proud, engaged members of our community.”

The Sjaardas were nominated by the Ontario Dairy Goat Cooperative

Amy Strom, Guelph
Strom's Farm - www.strom.ca

Strom's farm has been a long time favourite spot for Guelph-area sweet corn lovers. Over the past ten years though, after buying it from her in-laws, Amy and her husband Channing have taken the farm to new levels, making it a tourist attraction for people from all over the province.

Although Amy didn't grow up on a farm, she has completely embraced the work ethic and business and thousands of other skills required to operate a successful operation. Besides the sweet corn, Amy and Channing, along with their two sons Lucas and Evan, added a “Harvest Fun” area including a corn maze, pumpkin chucking, pedal carts, duck races and wagon rides. They also added a “pick your own popcorn area” and bakery on to the farm with the hope of increasing sales with existing customers and now sell

close to 300 pies per week. Strom's pumpkins are also featured in many local restaurants, and even in a "Highballer Pumpkin Ale" made by Grant River Brewery.

Stroms are active members of the Ontario Farm Fresh Marketing Association and credit the organization for providing the mentorship and skills needed to grow the operation. Other members have willingly let the Stroms learn from their mistakes – and in Amy's mind "to be part of a group that shares so willingly and spends time helping other farms prosper is amazing."

Amy and Channing's love for their farm is evident, not only in how they care for their homestead with landscaping, but also in their commitment to the environment. They have planted over 750 trees, implemented an Integrated Pest Management system, rotate their crops, recycle their cardboard and even use bags from 100% recycled materials for their sweet corn.

Quality and freshness are critical to the success of Strom's farm. They have set up their sweet corn harvesting and sales infrastructure to guarantee the customer corn that is no more than two hours off of the stalk. They consistently receive a price which is \$1 to \$1.50 more than other similar sweet corn operations. They also see higher prices paid for their pumpkins, selling them by weight as opposed to size.

The Strom's corn maze is also unique in that it is run as a partnership with a national charity and raises money and awareness for that cause. In the past mazes have been dedicated to Habitat for Humanity; Operation Christmas Child; World Vision; The Salvation Army; Make a Wish Foundation; and Big Brothers-Big Sisters. In addition they donate time and products for local and provincial organizations, run hundreds of school tours, participate in the Rural Romp and have coached a local soccer team.

Amy Strom was nominated by the Ontario Farm Fresh Marketing Association

Steve and Lisa Cooper, Zephyr
Cooper's CSA Farm and Maze - www.coopersfarm.ca

When Steve and Lisa started farming, they ran on the mantra that if they couldn't make a living farming just north of Toronto, with such a large consumer base, they couldn't make a living farming anywhere and just the value of their land would be a long term generator of wealth. However with the implementation of the Greenbelt around Toronto in 2005, their way of thinking had to drastically change.

The Coopers started out with beef cattle and quickly realized that weather, low commodity prices and a diminishing cattle market were not going to provide them with financial stability. In the late 1990's they put in a market garden and along with a sweet corn stand delved into direct marketing. In 2000 the cattle were sold and replaced with meat goats, and the cropping end of the farm was altered into an on-farm store and later an agri-entertainment area with a corn maze, kid's play area and fall festival and even more recently an expanded pick-your-own section. Their farm and products have been certified by Local Food Plus.

In 2007, the Coopers entered into a Community Shared Agriculture program for the marketing of their fruits and vegetables. 50 families signed up and paid to receive a weekly basket of vegetables for 20 weeks. In 2008, this was expanded to 235 families from all across the GTA. They continue to expand this aspect of their farm with the building of a small greenhouse and planting late spinach and greens in order to extend the growing season. They have also added pasture beef and pasture raised broiler chickens to the product list.

As with many successful young farmers, Steve and Lisa understand that education and networking are critical to their success. They are both graduates of the Advanced Agricultural Leadership Program and have also completed the George Morris Centre's C-Team program for farm business managers. They also volunteer time to local farm organizations, and Farmers' markets, and several minor sports teams. In 2008 they were featured in the annual OFAC Faces of Farming calendar.

The fruit and vegetable crops require irrigation and the Coopers realize that they must manage their water supply carefully. They do so with by using a biodegradable plastic mulch and drip irrigation. The use of a certified crop scout and an integrated pest management plan has enabled them to reduce their use of pest and disease control products by 75% over the past ten years, also showing their commitment to the environment.

Steven and Lisa feel very privileged to be able to work together and with their children Cayla and Trenton, both of whom are starting to take an active role in the operation.

The Coopers were nominated by Tina Kilbourne.

Matthew Fischer, Listowel Fischer Family Poultry Limited - www.fischerfeeds.com

Matt Fischer has farming in his genes and knew at a very young age that he wanted to be part of the family business. After obtaining his undergraduate degree in agricultural business, completing an MBA in agricultural sustainability, and working at both RBC and Nestle Canada, he returned to the family business in 2005 as operations manager for Fischer Feeds and Fischer Family Poultry Farm. He is the third generation to be involved in the 60 year old company that has grown from a small community feed supplier to a large successful diversified farming operation.

Matt had one goal when he joined the farm – to leave the company and the community in a better place than when he arrived, and to have fun doing it. He has six strategic priorities – the customer, the environment, the employee, quality assurance, research and development and the community.

Environmental stewardship is a major driving force in any agribusiness and Fisher Farms is no exception. Matt developed a nutrient management plan and adapts his crop rotation and manure and fertilizer applications using state-of-the-art soil analysis techniques. The farm has also made large capital investments in on-site composters, introduced no-tillage and buffer strips to prevent soil erosion and have partnered with Forest Stewardship Council to ensure that all lumber harvested from their forest will bare the responsible production certification.

In the spring of 2006, Matt and his wife Amy made the decision to raise their poultry without antibiotics, a move which has allowed them to partner with National Growers' (President's Choice line) new "Free From" line for chicken. To date they have marketed over 10 million antibiotic free broiler chickens and in 2009 were recognized with a Premier's Agri-Innovation Excellence award. Currently they are working with Loblaw's to develop a "Free From" turkey product and last Christmas supplied the chain with 60,000 antibiotic free turkeys. Matt is also featured personally featured in the President's Choice "Free From" marketing campaign.

In addition to their busy farming schedule, Matt and Amy have two young children and are also avid volunteers both for provincial and local organizations including the Turkey Farmers of Ontario, The

Ontario Agri-Business Association, the North Perth Chamber of Commerce, The Salvation Army and Knox Presbyterian Church.

Matt was nominated by The Turkey Farmers' of Ontario

Hugh and Arlene Hunter, Smiths Falls
Maple-Ain Farms Ltd. - www.maple-ain.com

Hugh and Arlene both grew up with dairy cows so it was natural for them to look to farming for their livelihoods. Along with the support of parents and siblings, they established a succession plan to transition ownership of Hugh's parent's farm to them, an undertaking which was accomplished in 2003.

The first few years on the farm were busy ones. For two years, Arlene commuted two hours to Ottawa every day for a job in order to help support the farm financially. A year after taking over, they built a new barn, and a year later had their first child, Maryn. In 2007, Duncan joined the family. The Hunters credit their family, and their support staff including an accountant, crop advisor, nutritional advisor, bank account manager and veterinarian for helping them make well-informed decisions.

Since taking over, Hugh has brought on a professional crop consultant who has helped them achieve production increases in both corn and hay, as well as to balance the nutrient needs of their soil with their application of manure. Approximately 200 acres of their farm is made up of forest and wetlands and they are home to a 'veritable wildlife preserve', one they allow their neighbours to also enjoy. With increasing urban sprawl in the area, the Hunters want their neighbours to fully value the beauty of the rural landscape.

The new dairy facilities and a concentration on high profile genetics have brought about large increases in milk production, improved herd health and cow comfort, international embryo sales and many tours. In the winter of 2007, they became the first commercial dairy in the world to install a new DelPro herd management system through Delaval Canada. Using blue-tooth technology, they can monitor and manage information such as milk weights, reproductive performances, health and treatment records and feed intake.

Hugh's love of dairy cows has led him to become a judge for Holstein Canada and in 2009 was chosen to officiate at the National Jersey Junior Show at the Royal Agricultural Winter Fair. He's also involved with the local Holstein club, the Eastern Ontario Holstein Council, is a 4-H dairy Judging Club leader and also plays baritone in the Smiths Falls Community Concert Band. Arlene volunteers with the Mothers of Preschoolers, the Ontario early Year's Centre Board and the Trinity United Church.

The Hunters were nominated by the Ontario Holstein Association.

Katie Normet, Arthur
River's Edge Goat Dairy - www.GoatMilkProducts.ca

Raised in Oakville, Katie knew from early on that she wasn't a typical city girl. At two years old, her mom had great difficulty detaching her from the leg of an RCMP horse during a Christmas parade. Today it's still as difficult, although her animal of choice now is the dairy goat.

After graduating from the animal science program at the Ontario Agricultural College at the University of Guelph (much to the chagrin of her brother who thought agriculture was totally not cool), Katie successfully persuaded her parents to become her business partners in a farm. They purchased their first goats in 2001 and started shipping milk that same year. The first year was tough as the demand for goat cheese had dropped and many farmers were dumping their milk. Knowing that she couldn't afford to take do the same, Katie looked for other options and came up with the idea of making goat soap.

In the spring of 2003, she enrolled in a self employment benefit program through the federal government which provided her with skills in sales and marketing, bookkeeping and all other aspects of running a business. The goat soap business grew quickly and customers were soon asking for additional goat products including cheeses. Cheese-making quickly became a passion of Katie's and led to her completing a Cheese Makers' certificate from the Vermont Institute of artisan Cheese. She is currently only producing fresh cheeses, in her provincially licensed on-farm processing plant, but has plans to develop a line of hard cheeses which can sell at a higher price.

Currently River's Edge Goat Dairy milks between 50 and 75 goats and produces everything from goat milk, yogurt, cheese, whipping cream, goat butter tarts, goat milk chocolate truffles, goat meat, soaps and moisturizing creams, and goat skins and fleeces. In order to grow the profitability of the operation Katie is looking to increase the number of customers, and the amount of money spent by each person. She has plans to redecorate the on-farm store, offer more product samples and provide opportunities for customers to see the goats.

Besides their top products, Katie and her parents have received recognition for their environmental improvements. Since purchasing the farm in 1999, Katie and her parents have retired 12 acres of land. With support from the Grand River Conservation Authority, they have planted well over 3000 trees on their property. In the fall of 2008, they received the Grand River Conservation award for their work on protecting and improving the quality of water which flows through the farm.

Katie says "the problems that arise in farming are the reason why I farm. It is never boring. It's a constant challenge and the possibilities for learning are never ending. I could never imagine going back to the life I had growing up in the city."

Katie was nominated by The Grand River Conservation Authority