



Going back to the land is a lot of hard work, but at the Thompson Small Farm east of Beiseker, it's also the road to the future.

by eric rumble

photographed by colin way



hit the DIRT

"The 'control of nature' is a phrase conceived in arrogance, born of the Neanderthal age of biology and the convenience of man." —RACHEL CARSON

THERE'S A SOCIAL CODE BEYOND SUBURBIA that I've always relished: the casual, oldfangled wave of a hand between strangers. But when pickups, tractors and other heavy machinery reverberate past the Thompson Small Farm east of Beiseker, Alta., they're not likely to get an acknowledging palm from Jonathan Wright.

Wright isn't unfriendly—quite the opposite, actually. It's just that those vehicles and the economy they represent are the bane of the existence that he and his partner, Andrea Thompson, are trying to create. The Thompson Small Farm is a patch of organic plenty dwarfed by huge natural-gas infrastructures and commercial wheat farms that sometimes gleam like airstrips paved with gold. In Wright's ears, those oil-driven engines are the modern age's death rattle.

What Wright and Thompson are creating is the antithesis of their neighbours' philosophy. They own 20 acres of mostly grazing space (and rent another 30) threaded by a shallow coulee with two small ponds. A humble green-and-white bungalow, a trio of hoop houses, a Quonset barn, a chicken-coop complex and a few small, scruffy buildings are grouped around a fenced-in plateau that meets the gravel road back to so-called civilization. They've lived here for a few years and have begun cultivating—essentially from scratch—something that is almost obsolete and ambitious as hell: a staunchly organic farm that doesn't use power from industrial machinery, supported by people who buy shares of the bounty produced by their soil and toil.

My girlfriend, our roommate and I purchased a full Thompson Small Farm share this year. We paid \$500 for 16 or so weeks' worth of food. That's about \$125 a month (July to October) for a decent haul of fresh eggs, leafy greens, root vegetables and other organic surprises. Every Wednesday we'd go meet Jon, Andrea, usually a Frenchman named Manu and often Gulo, one of the farm's six dogs, in the lot north of Edworthy Park. We knew the vegetables we brought home had been harvested that morning, just shy of 100 kilometres from our house downtown. Like the 42 other families or friends who shared this knowledge (the farm sold 24 full and 19 half shares, which go for \$460 and \$230, respectively, or \$500 and \$250 with eggs), we were embracing local food in a way that most Calgarians can't.

In fact, there are only three community-supported agriculture groups in Alberta. (It might have something to do with our climate, but there are 150 in Ontario, 90 in Quebec, 15 in British Columbia and at least a dozen in Nova Scotia). CSAs sell shares in the spring so that consumers are buying a portion of the harvest and part of the farmer's risk. As for the farmers, they are supported by a sort of Chamber of Dinner Tables, leaving them free to get their hands dirty and contend with Ma Nature.



Typically, CSAs practise sustainable farming; Jon and Andrea are striving for a deeper commitment. Their aim is to run a farm that produces zero carbon emissions. It's definitely a work in progress, but what they want to build is both primordial and progressive under the shadow of an economy with other priorities. To pull it off, they need grit, muscle and opposable thumbs in abundance.

At an open house on the farm in early July, Jon told the shareholders that we were welcome any time, whether to look around for a few hours or help out for a few days. When I asked Andrea what they want their supporters to mentally digest, she planted another seed: "I'd very much like to see each and every one of them question their conceptions of everything from food to how a person should live—on many, many levels."

So with a full week to spare in mid-August, I ditched downtown and headed an hour towards Drumheller to work as a farmhand. I arrived under a gelatinous mess of clouds sifting through a powder-blue sky. Driving past the exit to Balzac seven days later—mercifully going against the traffic clot invading the new mega-mall—I was aghast. Thompson Small Farm may need Calgarians' money to survive, but this city won't evolve if it fails to value the cobwebbed wisdom behind what Jon and Andrea are trying to build with a herd of yaks, a pair of water buffaloes, four Clydesdales and all the sweat equity they can plow into the place.

HEAR THE GROUND BENEATH YOUR FEET

In the city, I often see planes flying but can't always hear their engines roar. Out at Thompson Small Farm, their sound radiates from a barely visible altitude. Our physical reality's grumbling is strangely amplified when you escape it.

So too is our culture's lopsided allotment of resources. I spent close to half my time on the farm helping to cut and collect hay that had been planted but not claimed by TSF's colossal neighbour. We used a circa-1940s dump rake, a rickety contraption with about three dozen skinny, sickle-shaped teeth, to collect the hay into roadside "sausage piles." We salvaged a hay stash the size of a small bungalow, likely enough to feed the horses through half the winter.

Beyond this sort of opportunistic gathering, nurturing is key to TSF's operation. Jon and Andrea have more than 100 soil beds, most of them organized like a crooked-toothed grin on a shrubby beard of grassland. Those beds run north to south, about five-metres long by 10-metres wide, covered by white, see-through hoop houses (to contain heat and deter pests). Their soil has been wed to a remarkable cast of seedlings—all of which get their start in an unheated, sun-filled room in the house. Alphabetically, that cast includes beets, bok choy, broccoli, brussels sprouts, cabbage, carrots, cauliflower, chard (red, yellow, silver), green beans, kale, kohlrabi, lettuce (a few kinds), mesclun greens, onions (bunches and scallions), peas, potatoes, radishes, rutabaga, spinach, tatsoi, and turnips. Nearby, they've planted a small orchard of prairie-hardy cherries, apples and Siberian honey berries that should mature in half-a-dozen years. Up in the three larger, plastic hoop-covered gardens between the house and the compost heap, there are basil, peppers, summer squash, tomatoes, zucchini, and even a few melons and pumpkins.

Some plantings are successful, some are not and some are still curiosities. Taken together, however, they make TSF seem like a rough-hewn haven for edible plants. But one morning, our hands caked in a mixture of healthy soil and water-buffalo manure, Jon punctuated our casual banter by saying, "Trying to grow vegetables here is kind of like trying to raise sheep in a wolf's den."

The late frosts that hit the Prairies this spring wiped out more than half the crops and put the remainder about three weeks behind. (Last year, half of a much smaller harvest also bit the dust.) So why are Jon and Andrea seeding the wolf's den? "Agriculture is the foundation of our civilization," Jon says. "I think to take part in that on a sustainable working farm is to gain an understanding of what life is really about for human beings. The food is your product, and at the same time it's almost like a byproduct."

TSF's product is indeed not simply food. It's a portal into an age of less stress, less blind ambition. It's engagement, real nourishment. *Joie de vivre*. Re-invention. Its byproduct is a bag of greens each week.



REFASHION TRADITION

This idea of rethinking one's byproducts (as opposed to rethinking nature) is also a clue to Jon and Andrea's broader motivation and strategy. Their soil beds were cleared and tilled by the horsepower of two magnificent Clydesdales, Raven and Gwyneth. They don't use pesticides; instead they battle bugs with a cocktail of water, hot pepper, garlic and a biodegradable dish soap, and perhaps a dusting of diatomaceous earth. Even weeds are worked into their equation—stinging nettle for tea, wormwood as a natural antibacterial, mallow as a cooking herb (it tastes a little like spinach and is great for cheese patties).

Jon and Andrea's livestock choices are also alternative, and wonderfully strange. Their two very sociable water buffaloes, Brock and King, came from Fairburn Farm on Vancouver Island, and given half a chance, will expose their bellies like dogs. They're something of an awkward novelty, but they add an appropriate dose of exoticism to a motley crew of mostly chickens, dogs and horses. And then there are the yaks, chosen because they're hardy, low-maintenance, a source of yarn and, soon, milk and meat. The curly-haired, curtain-flanked beasts do pose difficulties, but Jon says, "They're better for the dry climate and the harsh winters, and kind of like having bison, cattle and goats all in one."

The point is that there's *a lot* of experimentation going on at TSF. Call it bucking convention with both feet. Moreover, as much as TSF is about discovering offbeat ways to provide organic, renewable food, it's really about harvesting better approaches to being.

Thing is, most of them aren't new. They're just neglected.

The bookshelf in Jon and Andrea's kitchen is the core of their resources. It brims with iconoclastic and obscure books—*Renegade Houses*, *The Horse Doctor Is In*, *Papermaking With Plants*, *The One-Straw Revolution*—that cover sustenance skills, progressive energy use, planting advice and animal idiosyncrasy. The go-to literature includes farming guru Eliot Coleman's *The New Organic Grower* and *The Winter Harvest Handbook*, and what Jon and Andrea call their survival bible, Nathan Griffith's *Husbandry*. Griffith, an American musician who fled

the city for the country, published his meticulous opus in 1998. *Husbandry* is filled with plain, antiquated and practical advice like, "There is very little use for forms of energy besides firewood."

RELY ON STRANGERS

Jon and Andrea met online about five years ago, and the idea for TSF took root quickly. Jon's a recognized expert on bull snakes (he keeps a few in glass terrariums around the house, and used to publish a rag called *Reptile Life*), a former falcon trainer, and spent a decade tracking wolverines in northern Alberta (on an oil company's payroll, no less). His knowledge, perseverance and humour are a great complement to Andrea's resolve and level-headedness. She's the voice of reason, the grounding element. She does all the shopping, cooking, and cleaning. She spins the yak fibre and is prepping the matrons to give milk. She collects eggs and forages. She's also the breadwinner, working in the city a few days each week as the controller for Concorde Group. (Andrea's worked for Victor Choy for almost two decades, and was "Mama Republik" back in the day.) Her flexible gig keeps TSF afloat, even as her commute accounts for the majority of the farm's carbon emissions.

The challenge to running any CSA is that it's neither cheap nor profitable, and the labour can be daunting. In fact, the only other CSA to operate near Calgary in recent memory folded because there was too much work and not enough workers.

Although Jon and Andrea were skeptical at first, their business plan now depends on enlisting Wwoofers, travellers who trade their sweat for room, board and organic agricultural skills. WWOOF (World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms) officially operates in nearly 50 countries, and has been leading folks from all over the planet off the grid for nearly 40 years.

In 2007 and 2008, TSF welcomed mostly "tourist Wwoofers," as opposed to volunteers who would've had a lasting impact. This year, however, Jon and Andrea had a number of workers who made meaningful contributions. There was Reut, an "Israeli woman who was into foraging and wild-crafting, who kind of reinvented an interest we had put on a back burner," says Andrea.

Their most committed and influential Wwoofer so far has been Manu. He arrived from France with a number of other travellers this summer, ended up contributing his patience and ingenuity for four months, and eventually agreed to return in late autumn for a full year.

But while brainpower is priceless in an operation like TSF, it's often brawn that sustains progress. "We've used this adage many times, that 'many hands make light work'," says Andrea. "Some of the most enjoyable days we've had here have been hot, sweaty, long and hard, but they've resulted in the most laughs, and it's because of that camaraderie of working together for a common goal. It's physically challenging, it's mentally challenging, and every day is different and you can't predict it."

Everyone, Jon and Andrea included, is learning as they go. They work hard, but at a gradual pace, stopping for cups of tea and siestas, taking time to breathe. If TSF has anything for would-be volunteers to measure up to, it's a strong idea of what farming *isn't*. "It's not about a guy out there on his tractor all day long in a gigantic field by himself, and you going to the grocery store and buying something from that system," Jon says. "I think the industrial world has done an enormous con job on us, to make us believe that anything rural, done by hand or in any fashion that isn't totally up to date just creates sheer hell for the people participating in it. We'd love to play a part in dispelling that myth... even while recognizing that there are probably people who would come out here, do what we're doing and see it as a living hell."

REVISE YOUR DEMISE

So it's not all manure and giggles out on the farm. Given Jon and Andrea's relative inexperience and their stake in setting a carbon-free example, their plight is probably somewhat akin to what the region's pioneers endured. But that's kind of the point—its about eking out and enjoying life, rather than having everything come to you easily.

TSF's methods are absolutely fallible. Jon and Andrea are always evolving to keep on top of nature's cycles and wild cards, and only part of their vision has come to fruition. Realistically, TSF will gross less than \$20,000 this year. Jon must've blown a gasket when his delivery truck broke down in early summer and the repair bill came to around \$4,000.

Their most pressing goal is to become self-sustaining. "I look forward to the time when we are both here full-time," says Andrea. "We have complementary strengths, and we can seem to achieve so much more when we're working actively together. That potential is exciting."

About the time I left, Jon and Andrea were starting to learn what happens when yak bulls sour with age. Sam, the three-year-old patriarch, started a territorial pissing contest by goring the backsides of two horses, and eventually he broke the leg of Richard, another male yak. One way or another, Jon and Andrea will be eating yak meat soon enough—but the task of containing Sam's aggression on a small farm certainly tested their patience, and left them questioning their choice. "We haven't really achieved anything yet," Jon told me one afternoon. "We're still in the process. It's an attempt, is what it is."

They've now got solid mulching and watering strategies in place to evade environmental damage to next year's crop, and expect their first true bounty in 2010. Their new pigs, Doncaster and Petunia, will bring (or, more accurately, leave behind) a fertility boost. They're sorting out another way to water their soil beds without using hydrocarbons—this year, in a pinch, the hand pump gave way to a small, gas-powered generator. They'd love to make fewer trips to Calgary—especially Andrea—or at least find a lighter approach to CSA delivery. Jon fantasizes about driving a horse-drawn trailer to the train line

and heading to market the old-fashioned way. "Maybe they'd drop me off at the zoo," he jokes.

TSF is gunning to eventually sell between 50 and 60 full shares. The farm's arable land could be tripled, and eventually Jon and Andrea want to supplement their income with educational or trade exchanges. "The soil's only going to improve as we're getting more mulch in there," says Andrea, speculating on TSF's future. "It's twofold, the condition of the soil and then its fertility—managing both is feasible, but it's not quite there yet. Even with all the things we've learned this year, I don't think we could do a 60-share CSA next year. It's something we need to work towards."

And work they will. While most conversations with Jon come back to the fact that humans live rapaciously, TSF's work-in-progress gives him hope. "I look at it and see that it is working, and it definitely has the potential to sustain itself," he says. "There's definitely the demand for it out there, and we're definitely hitting a nerve with the right kinds of people who are on board and willing to support the whole idea of the initiative, even though it is a very larval, early-stage thing. That to me is a tremendous success."

If anything, TSF and Calgary have that incredible potential in common. TSF can obviously only sell so many shares, but the opportunities to build a greener city are nearly boundless. Calgary's resources are at a tipping point that demands the momentum of its people's ideas, especially as city officials are squabbling together a long-range vision. The sprawl has grown to more than six times the size of the City of Vancouver with only about a quarter the density, and so much of that space could be recast by a sustainability movement.

There's an anchor for progressive transit in the C-train, and a solid system of pedestrian commuter routes already connects portions of the city. Expanding both starts with demand. Blue Mountain Bio-dynamic Farms, near Carstairs, has been considering a CSA collective to serve a single Calgary borough. Ubiquitous activist and artist Paul Hughes is trying to turn nearly 20,000 acres of disused city property into citizen-nominated growing spaces within two years. Volunteers and community gardens both spiked in 2009—more patches of plenty, though no more than about 10 acres' worth so far.

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Hughes is also involved in a campaign called CLUCK (Calgary Liberated Urban Chicken Klub), whose aim is to change bylaws so that it would be legal to keep hens in the city. Many hands can make light work of such things, too.

But even if you don't like the idea of a chicken in the backyard, go rent *Food Inc.* and voice some dissent with your grocery dollars. Just don't drive to shop unless you absolutely have to. As Jon warns in one of his newsletters to shareholders: "We will be stuck in a purgatory of mere gestures towards sustainability until we hit some critical mass."

I agree with him. I rarely encounter much urgency about confronting our ecological dysfunction. And yet there's nothing more important than overhauling our lifestyles in this century, taking a leap in a new, older direction. **S**

To inquire about purchasing 2010 CSA shares in Thompson Small Farm or about volunteering, check out thompsonsmallfarm.ca. Click on the blog link for Jon's newsletters and Andrea's recipes.



At the Thompson Small Farm, horsepower takes on a very literal meaning. Andrea poses with the vegetables (this is the Prairies after all) of their labour.