



NATHAN PAYNE

Sarah Bakker, farmer and general manager of the National Farmers Union-Ontario (NFU), with her family at their Field Sparrow Farms in Bobcaygeon, Ont.

## Women and the future of local food

Women playing greater role in Ontario's agriculture sector

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Farming has traditionally been thought of as men's work. But women have always played a role in the agri-food sector, at least in the background — and that role is changing, as more women are making their voices heard from the field to the boardroom.

This comes at a time when access to fresh, local food has become a key issue for Ontarians, an issue that will be addressed at the Greenbelt Fund's Local Food Symposium on Wednesday. Experts will discuss how to make structural change across Ontario's food value chain to increase access to local food — and more than 50 per cent of those experts are women.

Sarah Bakker is one woman working toward change. She's general manager of the National Farmers Union-Ontario (NFU), with 18 years of experience in marketing and fundraising in the not-for-profit sector. She's also a farmer.

"I did not grow up on a farm — I worked in theatre, marketing and fundraising," Bakker says. In 2008, she and her husband founded Field Sparrow Farms in Bobcaygeon. "My story isn't unique," she says. "I feel like a lot (of women) are stepping out of corporate worlds and coming back to farming and food production." In part, that's because they're looking for more meaning in their work, and farming allows them to balance intellectual and physical pursuits.

Women account for an increasing share of farm operators, rising from 27.4 per cent in 2011 to 28.7 per cent in 2016, according to Statistics Canada's 2016 Census of Agriculture. But they're not only tilling the soil — they're gaining a voice in boardrooms, meat-packing plants, distribution facilities and institutions.

"NFU has a long history of women in leadership roles, to make sure that voice is heard," Bakker says. And that voice will be important going forward, as NFU works with farmers to make local food more available to Ontarians.



ROOTS TO HARVEST

School program co-ordinator Alia Wurdemann-Stam, left, and JoAnne Henderson, a local seed saver and mentor for Roots to Harvest saving seeds at the not-for-profit in Thunder Bay, Ont.

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Many smaller farms don't have the capacity to supply larger institutions — and larger institutions don't necessarily want to buy from 50 smaller farms. "We don't have an answer yet," Bakker says, though NFU is working on it — some farmers, for example, are looking to band together to sell their products in a wholesale capacity.

Daphne Nuyss-Hall, technical director for the Ontario Independent Meat Processors (OIMP), is also seeing more women in leadership roles within the agri-food sector. OIMP is a not-for-profit representing more than 300 members across Ontario, including abattoirs, processing plants, butcher shops and fine food stores.

OIMP is working with provincially licensed meat plants to help them enter retail spaces dominated by fel-

terally licensed meat plants, which means consumers will see a lot more diversity, Nuyss-Hall says. The organization is also connecting producers and consumers by offering a product locator for Ontario meat and poultry on its website and building relationships with large distributors and grocery store chains.

"I've been in (the industry) for a while — I used to be the minority in the room and now we're definitely seeing a big shift even with the operators we have in our membership. If women aren't running the plant, they're definitely in a leadership role," Nuyss-Hall says.

But there's still work to be done. Research by the Canadian Agricultural Human Resource Council in 2016 found an overall increase in the number of women moving into leadership roles over the past few decades — but interviews with female senior managers or board directors found that in many cases they're still the only females on their senior leadership team or board.

One area where women have traditionally played a strong role is in food service. Year over year, women make up about 60 per cent of this sector; that translates to more than 728,000 women, according to Restaurants

Canada, the country's largest hospitality association representing 30,000 businesses.

"Most recently, we've seen more and more women take on positions of leadership, whether as executive chefs and owner/operators of their own restaurants, or as directors of purchasing or presidents/CEOs with larger chains," says Shanna Munro, president and CEO of Restaurants Canada.

And from the farm to the fork, local food is a hot topic. "Consumers are voting with their wallets and palates for more local food, out of an increased desire to eat healthy," Munro says. Indeed, local food remains among the top five hot trends on Canadian menus, according to Restaurants Canada's annual chef survey.

But there are challenges to be addressed. "Obviously, we are a northern country and therefore see a reduction in the variety of produce grown during the winter months," Munro says. Chefs are responding by creating menus that reflect seasonal ingredients. "They are also doing their own sourcing, whether it's by creating their own small kitchen gardens behind their restaurants or making direct connections and partnerships with local farmers."

Women are also heavily represented in the not-for-profit sector — a sector not traditionally associated with agri-food, but one that's gaining a voice. "Not-for-profits didn't used to be involved in food supply systems," says Erin Beagle, executive director of Roots to Harvest in Thunder Bay, which advocates for youth employment, food access, urban agriculture and municipal food strategies.

Roots to Harvest works with youth who are "more comfortable on the margins," Beagle says. "At its heart, it's about working with youth and community and using food as a tool to do that." The organization operates two urban gardens, which employ youth in the summer months and provide local food to high school cafeterias.

"Food as a backdrop is a perfect medium," Beagle says. "It's not a make-work project; there's a mean-

ing for the rest of the community and a relevancy to their own lives."

In Beagle's experience, those in procurement — superintendents, purchasers and managers — are almost always men. But a lot of provincial discussions and collaborative efforts around food access are dominated by women. "I think women are really good at that, taking this big-system approach. It's something that we naturally gravitate toward more."

This approach is key to solving some of the challenges around food access, particularly in the north. Like Beagle, Kathy Loon is focused on food access in northern communities. As traditional programs manager at the Sioux Lookout Meno Ya Win Health Centre, she has a mandate to further develop traditional programs within the hospital, including Michim (traditional foods). The Michim program allows Indigenous patients to access freshly prepared traditional foods once a week.

"Michim is an important part of our daily life. The majority of our patients have to travel from the northern communities to our hospital for health care," Loon says. "It's an important link between health, culture and identity."

The food is donated to the Michim program by local hunters, gatherers and outfitters. These donations include fish, duck, geese, small game, moose and wild blueberries.

Despite these donations, food insecurity is a problem. "The options and prices are significantly worse for the communities in the north. Prices for food make it very hard for families to afford and have access to healthy and culturally appropriate food," Loon says.

The answers aren't immediately apparent, but women will play a role in finding them. Women are "recognizing that we have a voice in this industry and we have a lot to contribute," Nuyss-Hall says. In an industry that demands relationship-building, women can be an asset.

"We're better at reaching out for problem-solving and trying to find those solutions — we don't put our egos out there."