FROM ROOFTOP TO RESTAURANT

A UNIVERSITY CAFÉ FED BY A ROOFTOP GARDEN

By Aimee Blyth and Leslie Menagh

Visible from either side of the Otonabee River, a mere five-minute stroll across the Trent University campus bridge, a rooftop garden and little café are working toward social and environmental change, specifically a shift in food culture.

For about a decade now, Professor Tom Hutchinson, a local farmer and ecologist, has been supervising an intensive vegetable garden on the roof of the Environmental Sciences building at Trent University in Peterborough, Ontario. The reasons for the garden are many. Historically, it has provided a site for monitoring the effects of air pollution and smog on agricultural crops. More recently, it has served as learning space for students in the Food and Agriculture Emphasis Program at the university. And in Tom's own words, "it demonstrates our ability to use otherwise unused space for productive purposes. Since most people live in cities, it behooves us to maximize the ecological aspects of the urban environment. Rooftop gardens clean up pollution and create esthetically pleasing, calming places to be."

Aimee, the gardener, stands next to Leslie, the cook, on top of the world.

Today, the garden grows organic food for local groups interested in food security and sustainable agriculture. Among these is The Seasoned Spoon Café. "The Spoon," as the restaurant is affectionately called, has a mandate to source its ingredients locally, thereby reducing the energy it takes to transport healthy food to consumers. It is the only restaurant of its kind at the university: a student-run, independent cooperative that stands as a politically driven alternative to Aramark (the American food catering giant which provides food on campus from corporations such as Tim Hortons and Pizza Pizza). Like Tom's rooftop, The Spoon provides unique opportunities for practical learning, from studies in small business operation to bioregionalism.

While most students are away for the summer, the rooftop and the restaurant have hired us: a gardener and a summer cook. Although our educational pursuits differ, we share a love for all things gastronomic and growing. Along with staff, volunteers and Spoon customers, we are increasingly aware of the varied components of local food culture and their interdependence. Spoon cooks can often be found weeding, sifting compost or harvesting food, and in doing so, deepening their appreciation for seasonality.

Fast food may have been an attractive novelty some decades ago, but we have seen a significant shift in the desires of eaters at the university towards food that is ethically produced. It tastes better because the flavours are as fresh and varied as local

farmers' produce. Furthermore, the price is easy to swallow as The Spoon's food is often less costly than other food served on campus. We're seeing that taste is determined by much more than what generically-produced, hyper-packaged products could ever offer—the ingredients of which have travelled further than any human is likely to travel in their lifetime and chockfull of unpronounceable preservatives that enable it to do so. People like to feel good about what they're eating. It feels—and therefore tastes—better "to know that the means of production are ecologically and socially sound," says Tim Wilson, customer and member of The Spoon. And at the rooftop garden, we are committed to doing just that.

Rooftop structures are used as supports.

The gardener's story

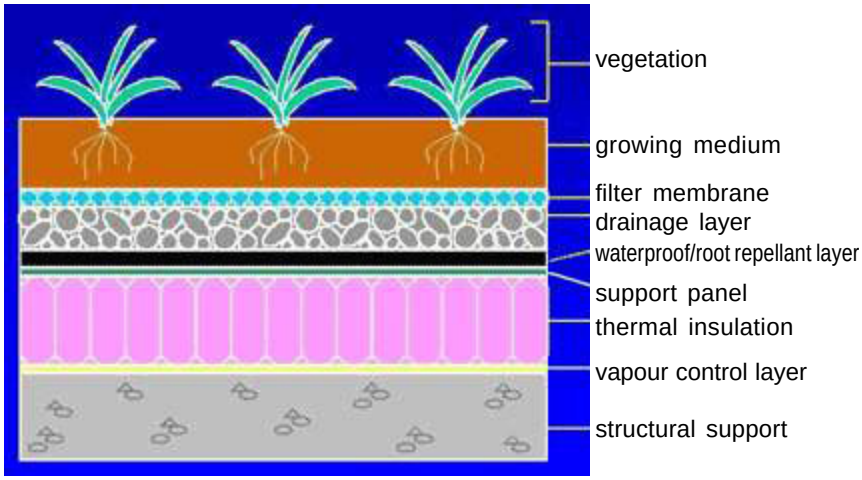
"What is it?", Scott, my fellow rooftop gardener, asked.

I wasn't sure. I'd never seen this striking, green-black striped caterpillar before. We decided to leave it on the plant, and I went home to look it up; parsleyworm is its name. It eats the foliage of members of the *Umbelliferae* family, including the parsley where we'd seen it. Like so many other gardeners, we were charmed by the beauty of this bug. One of my gardening textbooks—a rather dry book that I had thought contained no adjectives—describes the parsleyworm as "stunning." This little caterpillar seems to have escaped the scorn that other garden pests command, such as the cabbageworm (which I, like most other gardeners, pick off whenever I see it). This distinction may not be without justification, however, as the parsleyworm, in the end, did little damage to our parsley crop. The trade-off was its later emergence as yet another butterfly to the garden—the black swallowtail.

Working in the treetops among the butterflies, birds, bees and squirrels, we cultivate vegetables, herbs and edible flowers, including many heirloom varieties. Having never taken care of a rooftop garden before, I was surprised by the ways it differs from a traditional garden. The main differences can be summed up in two words: sun and wind. The growing conditions tend to be extreme. Even after a good rain, it takes very little time for the beds to dry out. Our solution is mulch, mulch and more mulch. Even so, not everything grows well on the roof. In particular, we have difficulty with spinach, peas and beans. Heat-loving plants, however, do very well including tomatoes, peppers and basil.

Another significant limitation on the roof is soil fertility. In the spring, we recruit unsuspecting (or very generous) volunteers to help us haul compost materials from the café. We further amend the soil with sheep manure from Tom's farm, green manures and compost tea. Using green manures or compost tea is labour-saving, because it precludes the need to bring more materials up to the roof through the Environmental Sciences boardroom (the only access to the roof).

Despite these challenges, rooftop gardening provides a



Overlooking the lower campus.

number of incentives. We need not worry about pests such as deer. Furthermore, what is a challenge in the summer—namely the warmer, dryer conditions—is an advantage in the spring when we're able to start gardening a few weeks earlier than the surrounding area. Thus the rooftop climate acts as a season extension.

Fortunately, the rooftop garden was part of the initial building design. Thus, there is proper irrigation and drainage, and the building has sufficient load-bearing capabilities to support eighteen inches of saturated soil. To prevent water and roots from compromising the roof, there is an impermeable membrane beneath the soil. The garden acts as a temperature moderator for the building below, insulating it from the heat in summer and the cold in winter.

On a larger scale, rooftop gardens and sod roofs have similar benefits in a city. A recent study prepared by Ryerson University for the City of Toronto found that green roofs save energy in terms of heating and cooling buildings with savings of 4.15 kWh/m^2 over a year. They also reduce stormwater runoff and the heat island effect. Furthermore, growing roofs help to create more natural green spaces and beautify the city—for everyone, including black swallowtails.

The cook's story

For myself and many others, the field-to-table connection is much more than the transit of food from one locale to another. As described, it necessarily involves a network of relationships (social, economic, and political) that both pragmatically and psychologically change the cooking, serving and eating experience. A respect for the grower and expanded understanding of the history of a food can increase its value in this way. I have a certain reverence, for example, for basil.

My first day on the job this summer began with a basil harvest, probably my favourite food to pick and process. Like so many herbs that come from the garden, basil is one of those intoxicatingly aromatic plants at every stage of its life, and gets my digestive juices flowing right at the plucking. It's also a famous companion for tomatoes in and out of the garden, and will often end up in Italian-style pasta dishes. At The Spoon, basil pesto can find its way into everything from soups and salad dressings, to breads and stir- fried dishes. And basil has done well this year in the garden, so the café can expect to have lots of it on its menu this winter.

You may be curious to know that the word "pesto" is rooted in an Italian word that means "to pound" and broadly refers to a method of preparing or preserving that is not limited to basil. Contrary to the pesto generally found in restaurants and grocery stores, it doesn't have to include garlic, nuts or cheese. These other ingredients can be added later if so desired. For our purposes, the simpler the better, so that versatility is retained for menu planning.

Winter is the most challenging

Tips for rooftop gardening

- Mulch everything.
- Water deeply and often.
- Choose vegetables that suit the environment.
- Use compost tea and green manures to amend the soil.
- Create shade, for example, by using trellises.
- If you don't have the means for an intensive rooftop garden, consider using containers.

time for The Spoon to maintain a varied menu, and so summer sourcing and food preparation has become of vital importance. The four months that the café closes its doors (while most university students and faculty are on hiatus) are essential for stocking shelves with preserves, dried herbs, frozen fruits and frozen vegetables.

Karen Sutherland, one of The Spoon's founders and former board members, recalls that, "When The Spoon first opened, we had to go to farmers directly to pick berries and buy veggies. This was fun, but not an energy- or time-efficient way to go. We couldn't find local distributors, which has necessitated the employment of a summer sourcing person even though the university is closed for four months. Now food gets delivered, and we've got the rooftop, but we still need more producers. In January, we start to run out of food. What does this say about our local food system?".

From Stone Soup to Seasoned Spoon

In 2002, the growing concern about the inaccessibility of locally-sourced food led a group of concerned students and food security enthusiasts to organize themselves through the Food Issues Group under OPIRG (the Ontario Public Interest Research Group). As a result, they began The Stone Soup Project. They started by introducing themselves to farmers at the Saturday market and gleaned whatever produce was available. Once a week, volunteers crafted as big a pot of soup as they could, schlepped it up to a university foyer, and filled the bowls and travel mugs of students and faculty by donation. It was quickly realized that the need for this sort of food wasn't being met, and so the roots of The Seasoned Spoon Café took hold.

After much wading through the university's contract with Aramark, which dictates its exclusivity rights, The Spoon's founders established the café's position as a purveyor of fare that "'does not replicate other meals available on campus.' But the other critical point in our exemption was that The Seasoned Spoon had to offer jobs, and research and other learning opportunities to students," says Sutherland. And so in the winter of 2003, we opened our doors, serving—with the exception of a few spices, oils and hot beverages—an all-local menu.

Every summer's growing season and sourcing person generates a slightly different fare for winter. One of the delights in working with what's available is the chance to learn different recipes to suit the season. This year, for example, with tomato plants and peaches in such fine form, I asked my mother to share her family-famous chili sauce recipe. It's another one of my favourite recipes as it complements so many other foods; in wraps, atop potatoes or savory grains, on eggs and toast, you name it! (See box.)

Our experiences as activists and academics have led us out of the cerebral into the sensual. So often, working toward change can seem fruitless. But our work this summer has taken our passion for agricultural sustainability and food security and made it entirely creative and productive. It feels like we've found a tangible way to contribute to our community. We're activating the language we've been hearing for so long about "grassroots initiatives," "planting seeds and letting them grow," where one idea "grows" out of another. We're taking it literally and eating it too.

The Family-Famous Chili Sauce Recipe

6-quart basket of tomatoes
Coarse pickling or Kosher salt to make brine
2½ cups cider vinegar
4 cups organic white sugar
6 onions, chopped
1 hot red pepper, chopped
2 sweet green peppers, chopped
2 cups celery, chopped
A few peaches or pears, chopped (optional, but this is really the secret to success)
2 tablespoons pickling spice

Peel and quarter tomatoes. Stand in brine overnight (alternate layers of tomatoes and salt).

The next day, drain and stir in remaining ingredients except pickling spice. Boil 2½ hours, or until thick, taking care not to allow mixture to burn on bottom.

Put pickling spice in a cheesecloth bag, add to mixture and continue to boil 10–15 minutes. Remove spice bag. Bottle and seal.

Leslie Menagh is now pursuing a Fine Art degree at NSCAD University in Halifax. Her food issues interests have propelled her into community gardens and onto organic farms as an assistant. She has produced and hosted a college radio show on the topic, cycled across Canada to promote sustainable agriculture, and helped to launch The Seasoned Spoon Café.

Aimee Blyth is a Master's student at Trent studying bioregionalism and local agriculture. Her favourite vegetable is the beet.

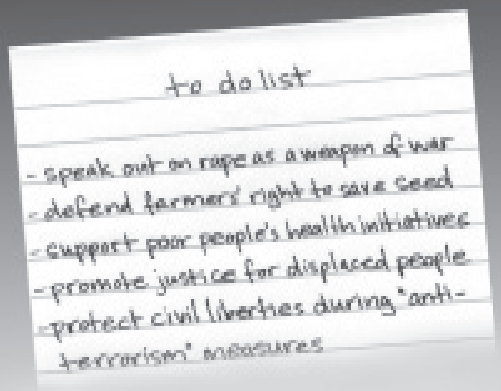
Photos by Leslie Menagh.

For more about:

The Seasoned Spoon, visit www.trentu.ca/seasonedspoon/

The rooftop garden at Trent, contact Aimee at aimeeblyth@trentu.ca

The study prepared by Ryerson University for the City of Toronto about green roofs, visit www.toronto.ca/greenroofs/findings.htm#findings



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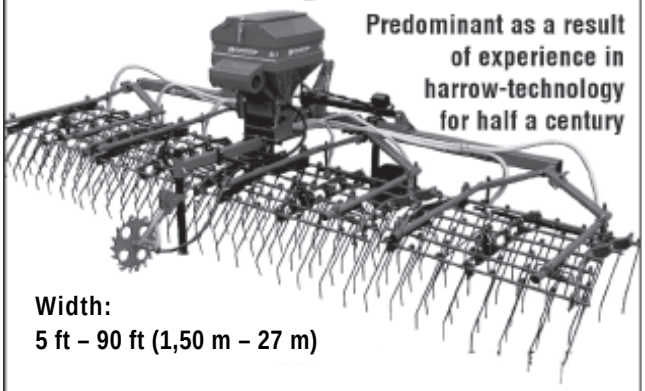

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