

LOCAL FOOD AT YOUR FINGERTIPS

LE MARCHÉ DE SOLIDARITÉ DE L'OUTAOUAIS

By Virginie Lavallée-Picard

It's the end of the work day and I am picking up my weekly order of groceries at the Marché de Solidarité Régionale de l'Outaouais (MSRO). As I walk through the door, I am greeted by a pair of volunteers: a young mother and her four-month-old baby calmly chewing on his sling.

The space is full of energy. As waiting consumers socialize, busy volunteers put together grocery orders. I hand over my order and they gather a tantalizing assortment of locally produced vegetables, mushrooms, meats, bread, cheese and much more.



The system is so organized and efficient that within ten minutes I am heading out the door, overloaded with beautiful, fresh, local food.

Bienvenue au Marché de Solidarité Régionale de l'Outaouais. Located in Gatineau, across the river from Ottawa, the old Hull sector is now home to a few community-based initiatives that are contributing to a revitalization of the town and the region. Amongst them is the Marché de Solidarité Régionale de l'Outaouais (the Regional Solidarity Market of the Outaouais), a citizen-initiated cooperative which makes local food available to the people of the Outaouais region and helps farmers overcome distribution and marketing challenges.

As a member of the cooperative, I purchase local food products through a website hosted by the MSRO. With just a few clicks, I can order directly from local farmers who offer a wide range of items that cover most of my shopping list. I have a window of several days to modify my order and there is no obligation to order each week. Within a few days, the farmers deliver the ordered products to the MSRO hub where an impressive team of volunteers and employees receive, sort, store the goods and coordinate pick-ups.

The MSRO is a unique organization with a compelling history. Registered as a solidarity (multi-stakeholder) cooperative, the MSRO has many members, including consumers, workers and producers, who all benefit from working together. The MSRO's mission is to support regional development, increase environmental awareness, and foster a sense of community by creating a direct link between consumers and producers. This model of cooperative

A solidarity cooperative, also known as a multi-stakeholder co-op, has at least two types of members. The rights of each class of membership is set out in the rules of the cooperative.



Above and page 54: Food and fun during the 2010 harvest festival held at La Ferme Brylee in Thurso, Quebec.

marketing is growing in popularity across Quebec, spurred on by proactive consumers and community organizers who seek to facilitate access to local foods and support local farmers.

Solidarity markets

The Solidarity Market idea germinated in 2005. At the time, the popularity of the CSA model was still growing in certain areas of Quebec. However, it was also becoming clear that CSA programs were not suitable or practical for everyone interested in purchasing directly from farmers. The non-governmental organization Les AmiEs de la Terre, which promotes local agriculture in the Estrie region, developed the Solidarity Market as a non-profit alternative avenue for farmers and eaters to connect. The model was simple and effective—with an online custom order platform, scheduled weekly pick-ups, and a central distribution hub. Since then, nine

solidarity markets have been established throughout the province, all inspired by and built using the tools developed by Les AmiEs de la Terre for the Marché de Solidarité Régionale de l'Estrie.

The story of the MSRO starts in 2008 when thirty Gatineau citizens discussed the possibility of starting a Solidarity Market in the Outaouais region. A smaller group was soon formed to lead the effort. They reached out to local farmers and the idea was well received.

The group sought to adapt the Solidarity Market model to local needs. After exploring different options, they decided to incorporate the organization as a cooperative, as opposed to the non-profit designation of the Estrie market. Frédérique Marcotte, a founding member who holds a Master's degree in cooperative management, explains that the co-op structure facilitates shared tasks and responsibilities. "We also felt this would contribute to fostering greater soli-

arity between consumers and producers, which was one of our main goals," she adds.

If generating initial interest for the project was fairly easy, getting the project off the ground required more effort. The founding 11 members demonstrated their dedication to the project by pooling personal funds and raising \$7,000 in initial investments. Shortly after, approximately \$50,000 in start-up capital was provided by a variety of organizations that promote local economic development.

The MSRO today

The MSRO has well exceeded its initial goal of 500 consumer members. Now, in its third year of operation, there are 1750 co-op members, including three worker members and forty producer members. Of their farmer members, 49% raise livestock for meat, 25% grow fruits and veggies and 26% sell value-added products.

A producer interested in joining the MSRO is evaluated by the farmer selection committee. Although the selection process is conducted on a case-by-case basis, the following norms provide guidance.

Prerequisites for value-added and non-transformed products:

- Products must be cultivated, raised or transformed with a 150-km radius from the Gatineau area.
- The farmer must have access to the Internet.
- There must be “room” for the products being offered (i.e. a product that is not carried, that is unique, or for which another MSRO farmer is unable to meet the demand).
- Product descriptions must be available in French.

Evaluation criteria:

- Reliability of farmer
- Availability of products
- Methods of production*
- Involvement in special events
- Location of transformation (value-added products only)
- Sourcing of ingredients (value-added products only)

* This is evaluated in terms of production practices, which must be respectful of the environment, animals and human beings. The MSRO is committed to giving highest priority to farmers with the highest standards of environmental stewardship but will not displace a farmer with seniority.

MSRO: Lessons learned

“By focusing on satisfying the needs of the consumer and developing a system that suits his or her lifestyle, we strengthen the consumer-farmer relationship. If success starts with a happy consumer, producers are the ones that can capitalize on the model.”

—Melissa Bergeron, President of MSRO

“Being in communication with funding agencies and reaching out to other stakeholders and organizations in the co-op development phase proved essential to obtaining funding, visibility, and notoriety early on. Organizations that are included will support, as opposed to interfere with, the initiative.”

—Frédérique Marcotte, founding consumer member

“It is important to foster and nurture the partnerships within the co-op. Not only between consumers and producers, but also between producers. Cultivating responsiveness to feedback and collaborating with one another makes us strong and resilient.”

—Brian Maloney, founding producer member

“The success of the Solidarity Market model depends on producers taking ownership of the project. There’s nothing like a high quality product to build customer loyalty, and vice versa.”

—Manuel Penagos, MSRO Coordinator and worker member



The MSRO logo: the green text represents the environment, the sunflower symbolizes local products, the characters represent co-op members, and the red watering can represents solidarity, the driving force of the organization.

According to Melissa Bergeron, President of the MSRO board of directors, this distribution of farmers reflects the agricultural profile of the Outaouais region. At this point, approximately 10% of farmers are certified organic.

To join the cooperative, consumer members pay an annual fee of \$20 to help cover operating costs. Producer members are required to pay \$100 upon joining the co-op, and worker members make the same contribution as consumer members. Producer members sell to the co-op at prices they determine themselves. The expectation is that farmers will ask for a price that is fair to both themselves and consumer members. The objective is for MSRO to guarantee the best local food prices in the region, with the exception of farm gate sales. In turn, the co-op sells to consumers at a 15% mark-up to cover the rest of its operating costs. This 15% mark-up is the main revenue of the cooperative.

Melissa explains that the co-op could not function without the very significant contribution of approximately 100 volunteers who are involved in several MSRO committees and/or lend a hand on pick-up days. Volunteers who provide support on these busy days pay the

wholesale price for their food (i.e. no 15% mark-up).

The MSRO board of directors consists of two producer members (one meat producer and one vegetable farmer), one worker member and four consumer members. Major proposals are brought forward at the annual MSRO general assembly. True to the cooperative model where one member equals one vote, all MSRO members are invited to participate in the decision-making process. Other co-op events are organized throughout the year, including a Christmas market, a spring market and a harvest festival.

A farmer's perspective

Brian Maloney operates La Ferme Brylee, a grass-fed beef and lamb farm in Thurso, Quebec. He represents producer members on the board of directors. From his perspective, the MSRO model presents several advantages for farmers. For one, joining the co-op means accessing an entirely new and large pool of customers as well as benefitting from the co-op's targeted marketing and publicity.

Secondly, the product is pre-sold and the farmers do not have to spend time dealing with distribution and retail, or, to the relief of a few, being social. However, farmers are encouraged to play an active role in special events and connect with consumers. Also, several farmers collaborate to save time and costs through co-transportation initiatives. All these elements free up a significant amount of time for the farmers, thereby allowing them to focus on their farms.

Brian says half his sales are generated through the MSRO. But he

points out that MSRO sales vary greatly between farmers, depending on consumer demand, the nature of the product and other factors. As Melissa Bergeron points out, "We cannot predict what the consumer members will want. This represents a challenge for some producer members."

Consumers want to purchase from enterprises that operate at a human scale.

While meat and value-added producers have the advantage of being able to preserve their products, fresh vegetable production requires more complicated planning and management to supply an inconsistent demand. For this reason, most vegetable and fruit producers do not conduct the majority of their business through the MSRO. Instead, they use the MSRO to complement other marketing methods, such as CSAs and farmers' markets. Melissa explains that the MSRO tries to help farmers by following and communicating trends in supply and demand, and the farmers are developing creative marketing approaches.

MSRO in the future

Consumers want to purchase from enterprises that operate at a human scale. However, collaborating with these enterprises can be logistically challenging and often financially intensive. At this point, the MSRO's central goal is to become financially autonomous. As a very young co-op, the MSRO still mainly operates on the external funding received in the start-up

phase. In upcoming years, making the transition to financially self-sustaining operations will be essential. Manuel Penagos, MSRO Coordinator, explains that each week, an average of 15% of their members (approximately 260 people) place orders.

MSRO objectives include the following:

- Finalizing the new version of the online order platform.
- Increasing the flexibility of the model to encourage consumer members to purchase on a more regular basis (e.g. by offering more pick-up locations to facilitate distribution and reduce transport). The target is an average of 700 orders per week (40% of total membership).
- Strengthening the relationship between members by encouraging consumer members to provide more feedback to farmers and worker members.
- Revising the adhesion (initial membership) fee and possibly include an annual contribution for producers.
- Giving the possibility to all members to increase the value of their share in the co-op.
- Incorporating innovative ideas, such as renting a part of the MSRO local to like-minded businesses (i.e. locally crafted soaps) on pick-up days, thereby further diversifying the products offered with minimal logistical implication.
- Developing local partnerships. For example, the MSRO is collaborating with a researcher from the Université du Québec en Outaouais to develop innovative marketing strategies for regional products and to investigate existing barriers to MSRO members placing orders more frequently.



Volunteers assemble orders for consumer members who are required to bring their own tote bags.

- Actively tracking local food prices to ensure co-op prices remain competitive.

In conclusion

Sixty years ago, if I were searching for ways of connecting with my community, my best option would have been through the church. But the church is no longer a major vector of social life in Quebec. We

now see citizens working to promote connected and autonomous communities by rekindling the concept of solidarity. By encouraging the growth of a healthy, local and resilient food system, the MSRO is contributing to bridging the gap between rural and urban communities through food.

From my perspective, the MSRO is more than a customer- and planet-friendly approach to grocery shopping. By tasting new products and connecting with farmers, I am also rediscovering my home, the Outaouais region, and getting to know its foodscape.

More information on the MSRO is available in French at www.portail.marcheoutaouais.com

More information on the *Marché de Solidarité Régionale* movement (in French) at www.atestrie.com

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