



The hopeless blight on our strawberries

Fresher and tastier? Yes. But California leaves our growers in the dust

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CATHERINE PORTER
ENVIRONMENT REPORTER

Red-tailed hawks circle overhead as Ron Breckon eases the family van along the rutted dirt road.

The seats behind him have been ripped out. In their place are 69 trays of strawberries, some picked just seconds before.

"I'll have to drive carefully," he says, rolling up the window and cranking the air conditioning. Already, the cabin is dense with the perfume of warm berries. Any hotter and they will melt before he delivers them to the grocery store.

It takes him only 20 minutes – past where the farm fields give way to more subdivisions – to roll into the lot behind Food Basics in Georgetown. Already in the lot are two 18-wheel tractor-trailers, one finishing a delivery while the other waits its turn.

They are refrigerated, and each has space for at least 20 loads the size of Breckon's.

"Oh Jesus, oh my God – we've got to wait," he says, gripping the wheel tightly. "We've got perishable stuff here. If it's left in the vehicle in the sun, it's going to be roasted."

Inside the store, two sales clerks scoop up strawberries that have spilled from the Ontario display. Their price: \$2.88 a quart. Next to them is a stand of California strawberries that have travelled more than 4,000 kilometres over three days first to a central warehouse and then here. Their price: \$2.88.

How is that possible?

"Ours can be sold while they're still warm from the field and those have come all the way from California?" mutters Breckon. "You can't tell me they're not dumping them."

It's a common gripe among fruit and vegetable farmers in southern Ontario. They can't compete with the quantity or prices of food arriving daily in a convoy of tractor-trailers from California. Look around at the produce in your local grocery store and you'll see that most of it comes from elsewhere.

It wasn't long ago that the city largely fed itself. But now, we in Southern Ontario ship in as much as 80 per cent of our fresh fruit and vegetables. The average head of lettuce

has travelled more than 3,700 kilometres, according to a recent Region of Waterloo Health study.

"We're being driven to extinction," says Boz Toic, a lettuce farmer from Waterford who sells his produce at the Ontario Food Terminal. He arrived one morning recently with 300 boxes. By noon, he'd sold only 18. "The only time we can sell stuff is when there's a pestilence someplace else," he says. "You can't work six months ahead hoping for a pestilence."

THE COMPETITION IS especially cruel to strawberries. The season lasts roughly a month. And each berry lasts only a couple of days before turning to mush. For a farmer, that means a lot of money riding on tight deadlines.

There was a time when Ontario strawberry growers had a gentleman's agreement with their California brethren, in which the latter would back off during the local season. That expired several years ago.

The California strawberry industry has just grown too big. Every year, it expands by 8 per cent. It now pumps out almost 1 billion kilograms of berries a year – more than 130 times what Ontario growers produce annually.

While an average strawberry patch in Southern Ontario will span 4 hectares, in California they stretch 20, says Kevin Schooley of the Ontario Berry Growers Association.

The California climate is perfectly suited for the finicky berries: not too hot, not humid. And unlike Ontario, the state can grow them year-round. One hectare of California land will yield more than 34,000 kilograms of berries, compared to 2,000 in Ontario.

But their overheads are the same, says Mike Schreiner, vice-president of Toronto's Local Flavour Plus, a company promoting and certifying local, sustainable food. "The cost of land, the property taxes, the equipment, tractors, planters, coolers – think of that amortized over the number of crops you get per year," he says. "That gives the California farmers a pretty significant advantage."

But it's not only price that gives them an edge. It's the quantity they offer and Ontario's food system is dependent on bulk sales.

Think of it as an hourglass on its side, says Brian Cook, a research consultant who studies food issues for Toronto Public Health. "You've got thousands of farmers on one side, and consumers on the other. In the middle, there's a bottleneck."

Those are the supermarkets. Last year, the five biggest chains in Ontario controlled 82 per cent of food sales in the province. "The Canadian food system is more oligopolistic than any other Western country," Cook says.

Farmers looking to sell their food in Ontario only have a handful of doors to knock on. More and more, they don't open for them.

While the giant grocery chains once accepted direct deliveries from farmers to their local stores, they have since built massive supply warehouses. Farmers who once trundled a dozen boxes of asparagus to the back of their local grocery store in the family van, now face orders calling for 500 cases.

"Chain stores are so big, they don't want to have 50 small producers at the door delivering an inconsistent product," says Peter Streef, vice-president of Streef Produce Ltd., a wholesaler that delivers to the three biggest grocery chains. "They're obviously looking for the larger volume producers that can bring them continuity of supply."

California growers can fill those orders in winter when our farms are under snow. That gives them another edge, year-round.

"We have a relationship with the suppliers in California," says Tom Meschino, vice president of J.E. Russell Produce, another fruit wholesaler in Toronto. Even now, at the peak of Ontario's season, he buys only California berries.

"The guy gives me strawberries all winter long and now I'm going to say I don't need them? We feel obligated to take them."

It's not just the sellers who have formed allegiances to long-distance food while watching our own local farmland wither.

It's the buyers, too, you and me.

We might all agree that Ontario strawberries taste better. Some of us even seek them out – at local greengrocers as well as at the big chains. But on the whole, we buy California ones. They're bigger, smoother, unblemished. They can last for weeks in the fridge.

By comparison, our Ontario crop looks "not so sexy," says Jack Comella, president of The Garden Basket stores. He sells them in his Markham store alongside California berries at comparable prices. Which ones do shoppers snap up? "They're deciding California because they look better."

BRECKON'S LOAD comes from Andrews' Scenic Acres, a dozen kilometres southwest of Georgetown. When Bert Andrews bought the farm almost 30 years ago, there were many strawberry growers in the immediate area. He's the last one left.

The only reason he's left standing is that most of his customers come directly to him. They pick the strawberries on most of his fields themselves and pay \$3.75 a quart – compared to the \$2 he can get from the grocery chains.

He's one of the few farmers left who's permitted to make direct deliveries. But they pay only in sentimentality. "Sometime I'm not sure why I'm doing it," he says, but then adds: "It's kind of nice to supply your local neighbourhood, your local community."

Andrews' closest neighbour, Peter McCarthy, sold to a developer last year after an especially gruesome season. Two weeks before the strawberries on his patch were due to glow red, the nearby chain he counted on to accept hundreds of quarts daily cancelled. It no longer accepted back-door deliveries.

Then, California berries hit rock-bottom prices – 89 cents a pound. That wouldn't cover McCarthy's costs. So he cancelled his picking crew and left 40 per cent of his crops to rot on the field.

"Why should we spend money to lose money?" he says. "This is agriculture in Ontario. Where is the future?"

