

Bela farm offers a new way of stewarding the land

by Doreen Nicoll



Credit: [Jonathan Kemper / Unsplash](#)

What happens when a Toronto-based artist purchases a farm in order to prevent it from being developed into yet another unaffordable cookie-cutter, highway-generating, carbon-emitting McMansion subdivision? Community, carbon sequestering, and local food security with a side of theatre. In other words, magic!

Rochelle Rubinstein purchased 99 acres in Erin, Ontario, ten years ago from Fred and Helen Cox. She named her farm, Bela, in memory of her father. Fred, a lifelong cattle farmer, stayed on to work on Bela Farm for another five years.

That gave Rubinstein time to both learn from Fred and think about the future of the farm. Sixty years of organic matter from cattle meant the soil was in amazing shape and ready to be certified organic along with any produce grown in those rich fields.

As steward of this land, Rubinstein has watched Bela lovingly evolve into a sanctuary for people, plants, and pollinators drawn to this space of community, healing, hope, and as Rubinstein likes to call it, “kind food.”

For the past 4 years, [Everdale Community Farm](#) (ECF) has planted carrots, Swiss chard, squash, potatoes and onions as well as culturally appropriate foods for new Canadians making Guelph their home.

ECF, a farm-based organization and registered charity, provides hands-on, solution-based food and farming education to people of all ages and backgrounds.

In 2021 alone, ECF harvested 100,000 pounds of organic vegetables at Bela to distribute to locals in need. This mighty feat is accomplished through the [Good Food Project](#), a partnership between ECF and [The Seed](#), a not-for-profit food project of the Guelph Community Health Centre (GCHC).

This coalition of community organizations and individuals work to provide food with dignity for 20,000 people living with food insecurity in Guelph and Wellington counties. Their ultimate goal is to increase food sovereignty within this region.

Volunteer harvest days gives everyone in the community a chance to pitch in, and that in turn, makes it possible to provide the food for free or at a minimal price. On any given harvest day, upwards of 30 people show up at Bela.

I visited Bela Farm on a rainy October afternoon. Despite the weather, at least 15 adults were pulling carrots from the field along with a gaggle of kids from the local elementary school. At final tally, the day's yield was close to 4,000 pounds of carrots.

“On paper, the relationship would look like a standard land rental agreement, but Rochelle is far more supportive than that,” David Alexander, farm programs coordinator at ECF, said. “She is engaged in helping in the fields and promoting our work. Always asking how she can help and is there anything else we need to make our work more impactful. We are very fortunate.”

Gavin Dandy, co-founder and Executive Director at ECF, oversees the management of the land they lease at Bela. His role at ECF also has him partnering in other food solutions like the [Shelldale Farm Park](#) in Guelph's Onward Willow neighbourhood. This community garden, located in one of the area's poorest neighbourhoods, provides culturally appropriate foods like okra, egg plant and the ever-popular Jamaican spinach.

[Future plans](#) include adding a community kitchen, four-season commercial greenhouses, year-round hydroponic growing container, composting area, market, outdoor pavilion, picnic tables and trails.

Dandy doesn't see food banks solving the growing issue of food insecurity. He envisions a more inclusive, wholistic approach.

“Shelldale Farm is an engaged food system where everyone participates in their food experiences and solutions. There are mental health and nutrition benefits just by coming out, helping out and contributing to community health,” Dandy said.

Jonathon Harris and Dave Alexander have been working the fields at Bela for ECF for three and eleven seasons respectively. Ten acres in total are divided into three fields. Six of those acres are planted with annual vegetables, while the rest covers crops like oats and rye. This allows for good crop rotation which in turn maintains soil health.

Harvest days always end with soup, sweets and hot drinks provided by chef Stuart Cooke from The Seed. All of Cooke's faire is vegan-friendly and gluten-free. That day, there was a choice of

classic potato soup or vegetable soup with rice and lentils. The sweets included incredibly moist zucchini-beet brownies and zucchini loaf.

Cooke uses upcycled produce, creating meals for the grocery program that delivers groceries and frozen meals through the GCHC and Shelldale Community Centre. On any given day, Cooke is joined in the kitchen by 30 to 40 volunteers. The wonderful meals they create are sold on a sliding scale.

But Cooke's fabulous food and hot drinks are not the only warmth to be found in the lower level of the barn that day. Lively conversation fills the rafters as more and more harvesters and visitors are invited to partake.

During my visit, there was no end to the interesting people I meet. Phil and Gail Winters took time away from their own busy farm to help with Bela's harvest. The Winters' farm in Caledon where they grow organic hops used to brew their [GoodLot](#) craft beers.

GoodLot farm employs environmentally and climate friendly farming practices that sequester carbon into the soil. They also recapture steam in their beer-making processes which use solar power. The Winters are intentionally accounting for their carbon load to ensure they're not contributing to it.

The couple also makes land available for local chefs to grow food for their food trucks, have grown food for Syrian families newly arrived to the area, and have crafted a carrot ginger brew that uses imperfect carrots.

As I finish my soup, a group of young actors make their way into the lower level of the barn. They were practicing a play in the upper level and Rubinstein invited them to share in the food and conversation.

Mitchell Cushman, Artistic Director for [Outside the March](#) Theatre Company, told me the troupe was rehearsing Gillian Clark's new play, *The Trojan Girls*. A modern take on Trojan women that incorporates intergenerational trauma, the immersive experience will premiere in the barn in July 2022. After two days of performances for the local community and supporters, the production will head to Toronto.

While walking around the fields, I spotted a number of bee hives and came across a bee sanctuary. Rubinstein tells me this project belongs to [Shoresh](#), a not-for-profit organization that empowers community members to become responsible stewards of the natural world through nature-based Jewish education.

When I arrive home, I contact beekeeper Sabrina Malach who tells me via phone interview how a Toronto-based Jewish organization found a welcoming home at Bela.

Shoresh, the Hebrew word for 'root,' is on a mission to help community members get back to their Jewish roots through education and experiences. A bee sanctuary seemed like a natural choice.

Bees are important pollinators for fruits like apples that are served on Rosh Hashana along with honey to welcome a sweet new year. Bees also provide wax to make candles for Shabbat and Chanukah.

It was an easy decision to have staff and volunteers create a bee sanctuary garden at Bela offering early blooming shrubs and late blooming native flowers that provide a veritable bee buffet to nourish honey bees, as well as native bees, thriving throughout the property.

Several times a year, the studio at Bela is transformed into a honey house where volunteers harvest the honey, which Shoresh sells to support their programming. Candle making requires a lot of wax, so Shoresh partners with the sisters at Holy Thiotokos Convent in Stouffville, Ontario to create pure beeswax candles available on the Shoresh website.

“Bela is a very, very special place,” Malach said. “Rochelle is a generous and kind spirit who has opened up space for community to grow and engage with the land while subverting capitalism in a gentle way and offering another model for land owners and farmers to work together.”

It’s time to embrace new farming and food systems that benefit many while reducing our collective carbon footprint.