

Sean DeClerc grows fresh and tasty mushrooms

Written By CONSTANCE SCRAFIELD

At a certain point in Sean DeClerc's life, he was helping his rather elderly grandfather, who had been a father to him, clean up the old farm, in Amaranth, in preparation to put it up for sale. Something in him made stop and think ? about mushrooms.

Then, he stopped thinking about selling the farm; he decided instead that he would start a mushroom farm.

He told the Citizen his story: ?Mushrooms have been a thing of mine for the last 18 or 19 years. This farm used to run cattle and New Zealand rabbits ? they were 70 to 100 of them.

?This is my grandfather's farm. I grew up on the farm. My mother got married when I was 10 or 11 and we moved to Mississauga.

After high school, I went to Sheridan College where I studied to be a tool and die maker. Then I did eight years as a journeyman but I hurt my back. I wanted to go to university for mechanical engineering.?

In the spring of 2006, Mr DeClerc came up to the farm to help get it ready to sell.

As an answer to a question about his father: ?I never met my dad. Mom married a French Canadian and we never got along. I was a problematic child. He accepted me more as a person when I got married...?

Having decided that the farm should not be sold, ?I started building the first grow room in 2006 and registered the company in February, 2007, when I was 27 years old,? calling his business Fresh and Tasty Mushrooms.

He laughed that laugh of remembering a tough period of one's history, ?It was an upward battle over the course of the years.

?Now, I grow 13 kinds of tree mushrooms and harvest 40 different wild mushrooms.?

Of the risks those can incur, he explained, ?If you don't know for sure about the wild mushroom, you don't pick it. With the field mushrooms, I have to be 100% sure that I know what I'm doing. I consult with Damon Dewsbury [Drop-in Dinner, Toronto], a mycologist ? he's Sheldon Cooper [Big Bang Theory] in real life, dark hair, a bit stooped but brilliant.

?When I had back issues, I was on the farm and I kinda went around the farmers' markets ? St. Lawrence Market, looking at mushrooms. The science, math appeal to me as a person, do the research ? I decided I'm going to make a go of it.?

He went on, ?I met a man in Wiarton, [the largest distribution of mushroom mycelium (spores) Wylie Mycologicals Ltd.] and he got me started.?

The conversation backed up a bit to his early, formative, years. ?I used to go to Belgium with my grandparents for five or six weeks every summer? to visit their family. I've been to Venice when I was visiting a friend in Croatia. Something about the tomatoes there ? it was the best pasta, the best sauce I ever tasted.?

Mr. DeClerc met his wife through one of the markets in 2007; they dated ? married and now have two little daughters. The older, just going on five, speaks ?German, French, English ? when we are children, our brains are like a sponge and we can just learn and learn.

?My grandfather spoke five languages and I want to speak those languages too. I am fluent in German and English.?

He nursed his grandmother, a tough, wonderful woman who supported him through his life and into the early days of his mushroom business set up, when she developed Alzheimer's. He kept her at home until the last when she went into care.

?It was tough to watch somebody as powerful as her [decline] ? it was tragic. I'm proud of what I did in spite of the stress. I'm a fighter [to see something through] and I always will be. Grandma died three weeks before my oldest child was born. So, she has her name as a middle name.?

His ?amazing? wife, Shannon, has an apiary with 16 hives. ?She had six hives last year,? he told us, ?but we lost five of them over the winter ? it was the worst year world wide for bee loss last year.

?She was taking honey every two weeks but she has taken the last she's going to take now. We don't feed them sugar water, we leave their own storage with them.?

On the farm, there are five acres of garden growing cucumber, squash, potatoes, garlic.

Said Mr DeClerc, ?The mushrooms and vegetables are all non spray. Cucumber beetles just stay with a few plants and leave the rest. But I have a crew going up and down the squash rows ? my rows are 700 feet long ? they pick off the bugs and the eggs and crush them.?

For the potatoes, they crush the greens on top and dig the potatoes after.

As to his growing mushroom crops, during the height of the season, ?We have 300 pounds a week in peak season, June to October. We do five farmers' markets a week and then, in the winter, we do two markets. With the squash and vegetables, we pretty well sell out by Christmas.?

In the right time of year, he ?bring in chanterelles and porcini and we grow cinnamon caps, nameko, lions' mane and large blue.?

Ambitions? Indeed.

?What's next is happening already!? he was delighted to say. ?The mycologist in Wiarton is an old boy and he's getting out of the business. So, I'm building a new barn and a new lab and he's going to set me up with his spore runs. I'll be open for business to other growers that want to buy my stuff.?

Of his success so far, he said, ?I'm definitely not a failure. And I live my life honourably.?

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