

Taste of the wild: Ferme et Forêt brings out flare in local fare



By Anastasia Philopoulos

In their first year of commercial production, the dynamic duo behind Ferme et Forêt finds that what sets them apart from the competition isn't necessarily the delicious veggies they've planted, syrup they've tapped, or granola they've baked. It's the wild fruits and vegetables they've harvested that have captured the imagination of Chelsea market goers and Ottawa restaurateurs alike.

"It's actually quite a major part of our business right now. It's taking off a lot more than we had originally anticipated," said Geneviève LeGal-Leblanc of Ferme et Forêt. "People that have come [to the market] previous weeks, say 'what do you have that's wild this week?'"

"We feel that the foods that are wild are naturally adapted to this climate, have more flavour, and actually have more nutritional value than a lot of the food that's already out there."

— Geneviève LeGal-Leblanc

LeGal-Leblanc and partner Sean Butler own and operate their farm, Ferme et Forêt, which is located between Wakefield and Rupert. The pair moved up to the area from Ottawa in early 2013 with their two-year-old son, Téo. They plant and harvest a variety of successful products, but LeGal-Leblanc marvels at how excited people get about the wild foods they harvest.

"We feel that the foods that are wild are naturally adapted to this climate, have more flavour, and actually have more nutritional value than a lot of the food that's already out there," she said.

Beyond wild foods, Ferme et Forêt plant and harvest about 30 kinds of uncertified organic veggies, which they hope to get certified in the coming year. Additionally, they've tapped 320 maples this spring, hoping to hit 3,000 next year, and make organic granola (which was baking in the oven when this happy reporter dropped by). The couple also offer free-range eggs, which are the only Animal Welfare Approved eggs in the region (the most stringent animal welfare certification in North America).

Among the many products Ferme et Forêt bring to market are about 35 wild vegetables and

fruits. Most are sold raw and ready, but some are made into products such as sumac-ade (a play on lemonade). Made of wild sumac berries found on the side of most dusty highways in the region, the couple harvest from the few sumac bushes found on their 154 acres of land, and sweeten it with their homemade maple syrup. The juice is clean and flavourful, perfect for a summer cocktail and – as Butler informs me – has more Vitamin C than a glass of orange juice.

The couple partner with Juniper Farm, who connects the newbies to the vast network of Ottawa restaurants they've developed over the past ten years. Every week, they make a list of the wild produce available, and Juniper Farm makes the chefs' connection, delivering the wild goods as well. So far, Ferme et Forêt have sold their wild foods to the likes of Side Door, e18teen, and Town.

"We actually just ate at Das Lokal and the chef brought us a special dish he had prepared for us, using our dandelion buds, which he had pickled, [and] spruce tips, and sumac," said Butler. "He said he was going to make vinegar out of our chokecherries."

Professionally trained to harvest wild foods safely, the couple is mentored by LeGal-Leblanc's uncle in Mont Tremblant, who has operated his own wild foods business for the past twenty years. "From a very young age I would go into the woods and harvest things with my uncle," LeGal-Leblanc said. "I've been interested in it for a long time. It's just in the last few years that I've really focused our efforts on [wild foods]."

Last year, the couple managed to harvest about 5,000 pounds of wild food, which included many trials of different plants. This year, Ferme et Forêt aims to harvest three to four times that amount. "We walk through the forest and all we see is food. Any season that we walk through, the forest is chock full," LeGal-Leblanc said. "We want to be part of harvesting that. Also, we love eating it."

In the coming years, the couple hopes to expand their business with more wild and planted produce. Butler recently planted an orchard with uncertified organic berries, apples, pears, and even some grapes (both table and wine). They've also planted 200 logs of shitake mushrooms, which they plan on harvesting next year. In terms of wild foods, the couple hopes to launch a wild herbal tea line, as well as offering bags of frozen wild berries, something easy to throw into a smoothie or make into jam.

You can check out any of Ferme et Forêt's delicious products and produce at the Chelsea and Aylmer markets on the weekends, or at their roadside stall along Shouldice Road. Visit fermeetforet.ca for more info.

Top left: St. John's Wort is one of the many wild plants Ferme et Forêt harvests.

Top right: A batch free range eggs, freshly collected no less.

Right: Sean Butler and son Téo hang out with their chicken friends. Ferme et Forêt is the only farm in the region producing Animal Welfare Approved eggs.

Below: A friendly rooster gets cozy with the camera.

Right middle: Téo and Sean Butler hang out on their farm along Shouldice Road.

Bottom photos: Geneviève LeGal-Leblanc picks through a bush of wild sumac on Ferme et Forêt property. The duo behind the business are selling their sumac-ade (a play on lemonade) to Ottawa restaurants.

