

Their success is no secret

For Natasha (l) and Elysia Vandenhurk, building a business on the basis of a vegetable oil nobody has ever heard of has meant long hours, many miles, and a terrific education

By Steven Biggs, CG Contributing Editor

Walking down the aisles I see the posters for nutritional supplements. They all seem to show ripped guys in tank tops and tanned, toned girls. In the crowd, I see anti-GMO pins on lapels, and everywhere I turn I see the words organic and natural on products ranging from tofu and snack bars to Indian cooking sauces, chia porridge, and herbal extracts.

I'm not surprised by the pins and the words organic and natural. After all, this is a Toronto trade show for health foods.

What strikes me as bizarre, though, is that almost everything I see is highly processed and highly packaged.

As I sample vanilla soy milk from a small paper cup, I remember the assignment I've been handed and head to booth 220. That's where I hope to learn more about the three farmers from Saskatchewan who were on the press release from Saskatchewan Trade.

It's not long before I'm at their display, sampling Three Farmers brand camelina oil. I don't meet the three farmers themselves, but I do meet the daughters of one of them: sisters Natasha and Elysia Vandenhurk.

I crunch on a breadstick dipped in the oil as they tell me about the culinary characteristics of their camelina oil, such as the nutty flavour and high smoke point.

Then they rhyme off retailers here in Toronto sell-



ing their oil. I stop listening as they name Pusateri's — a shockingly expensive culinary outlet. “Cool,” I tell them. “I'm impressed.”

Natasha adds that they have about 15 retailers back home in Saskatchewan, plus about 30 here in the Toronto area. People in Saskatchewan, she says, are very excited about the product, but the potential market is small. “That's why we went to Ontario so quickly after launching our product,” she tells me. “We needed a larger market.”

The Vandenhurks aren't waiting for word of mouth or for a food writer to help Toronto to discover their camelina oil. They're here getting it into stores themselves.



Canpressco Products Inc.

The oil and the Three Farmers brand are part of Canpressco Products Inc. The company has four owners, three of whom — Colin Rosengren, Ron Emde, and Dan Vandenhurk — are the farmers growing the camelina. The fourth is Ken Greer, a soil scientist.

Natasha says the farmers grow the same mix of crops they grew before the business began because, for now, the camelina acreage requirement is fairly small. Rosengren later tells me by phone that he

owns 5,000 acres with a mix of about 10 crops. Emde and Vandenhurk, he says, each crop between 10,000 and 15,000 acres and a half-dozen crops.

I ask Rosengren if he has grown specialty crops such as camelina before. He has, but for production contracts, meaning he didn't have to market and process them. Rosengren says he has found a big difference. "It's not an easy track if you're going to process it," he says.

The role of sisters Natasha and Elysia is to get the word out about the oil. Elysia, the product development officer,

trained as a chef and worked for the famous chef Susur Lee in Toronto.

"We needed somebody with more of a culinary background," says Natasha, as she explains her sister's role in the company. Natasha, the director of sales and marketing, studied economics and worked in financial planning before joining Canpressco.

As for me, I've always associated camelina with biodiesel, so I'm intrigued to know what prompted Rosengren, Emde, and Vandenhurk to grow it as a food crop.

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Natasha laughs, saying, “You have to know these three guys, they’re always looking for something new.”

Rosengren tells me they had been looking for an opportunity to market a crop directly to consumers when, in 2007, he learned of the potential of camelina. “We had already been talking about doing something and were snoop-ing around,” he says. Besides being suited to their growing conditions, camelina has high levels of vitamin E and omega-3 fatty acids — both of which are sought after by health-conscious consumers.

Getting started

Selling camelina oil as a food product — not for biodiesel — meant they had to apply to Health Canada for “novel” food status. That required lab reports, paperwork, and information on historical usage. It took about 18 months for approval, which they received in January 2010.

In the meantime, they needed to figure out where in the marketplace to sell the crop, and they needed a product.

Natasha says that the three main channels they considered were as a food ingredient, as a cosmetic ingredient, or as a culinary product. Then they picked one and focused on it. “The culinary (market) seemed to be the most obvious of the three,” she says as she notes her sister’s culinary experience.

In November 2010, Three Farmers camelina oil hit the shelves in Saskatchewan, and soon afterwards — in April 2011 — it launched in Toronto.

I ask Rosengren what his neighbours think about the product. He responds by saying, “We’re really focused on urban areas.” Selling at his back doorstep isn’t the priority.

Creating a brand

As we talk about the brand, Natasha says, “We tried to make it scream Saskatchewan.”

They want camelina to appeal to people wanting something natural. Being producer-processors, they can offer consumers traceability. “We really wanted to connect consumers back to their farmers and put a face to their food,” she says.

It’s a point of differentiation, and

it’s right there in the product brochure, which says, “We are a handful of farmers, passionate about growing natural, healthy food and driven by the desire to reconnect with you, the food consumer.”

“We had to think about what kind of consumer would enjoy something like this,” says Natasha as she talks about the flavour, scent and health benefits. She says health food stores are interested in carrying the oil because of the omega-3 fatty acids and vitamin E content, while farmers’ markets are a natural fit because shoppers there are often interested in connecting with farmers. “We need to be very focused,” Natasha adds, noting that it would be easy to try to market the product more widely and go off-strategy.

Natasha says that an engaging brochure and website aren’t enough to win over shoppers. “A really big part of this project is just educating people about it because nobody has heard of it,” she says, adding, “It’s a lot of face time with customers, and we enjoy that because that’s where you get feedback.”

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For farmers Dan Vandenhurk (l), Ron Emde and Colin Rosengren, camelina means business

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To market

“That’s one of the best pieces of advice we received,” Natasha continues as she explains why they haven’t partnered with any distributors yet. They were warned that their lone product could be buried amongst the array of products in a distributor catalogue. “For every retailer that we’re in right now, it’s been a knock on the door to introduce them to the product,” she says.

The upside to this approach is the strong relationship with retailers. “I feel like they’re actually rooting for us,” she says, noting that if retailers have any questions about the product, they call directly.

The downside is the extra work. It means they warehouse and ship product themselves. Natasha says that they’re at the point where they could consider partnering with a distributor, now that they have forged the brand and retailer relationships. A distributor would make her life easier. “I spend 85 per cent of my time working on shipping and logistics,” she laughs. “Essentially, I’m a mailman.”

The other advantage to dealing directly with retailers is getting a feel for what product attributes resonate with retailers and shoppers. “You have to read your surroundings when you go in somewhere,” says Natasha as she talks about pinpointing what retailers and shoppers find appealing.

It could be that the product is new, it has unique culinary properties, it is from Saskatchewan, or that it comes straight from farmers through a vertical supply chain. As an example, she points out that at Pusateri’s, customers seem interested in the trendiness of the product — it is brand new and sexy. At some stores, she says, clients are more interested in the story. “They care about where it came from, that my dad is one of the farmers. And they love that story!”

People who know the story, Natasha says, are often repeat buyers.

Getting out there can mean media attention too. A MACLEAN’S magazine article came about after a tasting. “Most of the media we’ve had has been free,” says Natasha as she talks about a recent blurb in the NATIONAL POST. “People are looking for interesting things to write about,” she says.

Those city streets

Managing distribution themselves means a lot of travel time for the sisters. During a later phone call, Natasha tells me how Elysia is travelling from Vancouver to Calgary right now. And they’ll both be back in Toronto next month. She doesn’t see any alternative to all of the travel, saying, “It’s really just a matter of getting out there.”

At consumer shows, for example, customers often recommend stores where they could sell the oil, a worthwhile payback. It strikes me as neat that all the off-farm travel they do to Toronto and other cities allows them to be involved in the farm business.

Canpressco will soon introduce a line of infused oils. They’ve considered other products too. Camelina oil makes great hummus, Natasha tells me. But hummus is a perishable product and that would introduce lots of logistical problems that they aren’t yet ready to tackle. There will be lots more shows and tastings. “Once people try it, the feedback is so positive.”

As I walk towards the escalators to leave the health food show, I pass a booth promoting broccoli lotion. The labels look cluttered to me. Then I pull out a sample bottle of Three Farmers camelina oil to look at the label. It’s simple and classy. Reading the text, I see, “Taste: earthy, nutty, light on the palate.” I bet that description resonates with Pusateri’s shoppers. **CG**