

# FARM DIRECT

Direct marketing works for Fred de Martines, because he embraces it at every point in his operation

By Steven Biggs, CG Contributing Editor

It's a funny thing to remember about the posh event where I first met Fred de Martines, but the striking thing about lunch was all the trendy meat served up with such great fanfare, including cuts that a generation ago we were told to turn up our noses at.

Believe me, no one was turning up their noses on this day, or closing their wallets either. We were in the ivy-clad Hart House at the University of Toronto, a place that may well be the most famous university building in Canada, and we were seated around linen-draped tables in the aptly named Great Hall.

It is a place meant to breathe culture and sophistication. To be in the midst of it, looking at the polished wooden paneling and the leaded windows that soar up to the vaulted 60-foot ceiling is to live, what in these circles, is the very definition of the good life.

The occasion was a hospitality industry symposium called Terroir. On the agenda were breakout sessions covering topics such as deciding whether or not wine should be oaked, how to use bitters to make the perfect cocktail, and how to create a local menu.

Then, at the end of the day, everyone retired to a tasting session in a more intimate — and absolutely packed — room. I suspected I was the sole farm writer in the clutter of food-writers, sommeliers, restaurateurs and chefs, and I had practically given up any hopes of making any new farm contacts.

Yet it's here that someone introduced me to her “favourite farmer,” and while the crush of people made me feel claustrophobic, Fred de Martines appeared

before me, relaxed and clearly enjoying the ballroom-type mingling.

Later, as I got to the door, thinking I had done more schmoozing than anyone could ever be reasonably expected to do, I took a parting glance over my shoulder and there was de Martines, still chatting his way around the room, looking as fresh and as engaged as at first sight.

It was then that I first wondered what image he might create on his farm. It was hard to imagine him with dirt under his fingernails, let alone s\*\*\* on his boots.

A few weeks later when I did visit de Martines on his farm, Perth Pork Products Ltd., he emerged from the hog barn clad in workboots, dusty blue overalls, a ball cap, and a dust mask hanging around his neck.

He had metamorphosed into the role of farmer, yet the look on his face was the same as it had been at the university.

In other words, that was the moment my education really began.



## CUSTOMERS WELCOME HIM

When I ask de Martines whether his neighbours seem interested in direct marketing, he shakes his head and says, “None of them would want to do what I’m doing.”

It requires frequent trips into the city and talking to strangers — and to many farmers, these are the opposite of what attracted them to farming. But then de Martines says something that might make a lot of farmers think twice: “Each and every customer that I go to is happy to see me.”

No doubt his friendly manner has something to do with the reception he gets, but equally important is the product he is selling. While he has conventional pigs in the modern finishing barn, they don't belong to him — he raises them on contract. The focus of the operation has shifted to rare and heritage breeds with

Continued on page 26



“Talking is easy, listening is hard.”

— Fred de Martines

Continued from page 25

Wild Boars, Tamworths, Berkshires, and Wild Boar X heritage breed crosses. The finishing barn isn't suited to the heritage breeds, otherwise he wouldn't have any conventional pigs at all.

While he does sell to farm visitors, the core of de Martines' direct-marketing business is restaurants and butchers. He rattles off a long list of Toronto clients to me, and those that I recognize are high end. While he has customers all over the province, a good chunk of his product goes to the Toronto market, where he himself makes the deliveries.

## A CONVENTIONAL BEGINNING

To most commercial hog farmers, the idea of heritage pork might carry a whiff of alternative agriculture, but that isn't how it started for the de Martines family. Fred and his wife, Ingrid, purchased their current farm when they came to Canada from the Netherlands in 1979. Fred's background was farming, having trained as a certified swine specialist in Europe.

They were well entrenched in farming hogs conventionally. That's why they built the modern barn, although even here there is a customer-focused difference. De Martines added a viewing room to allow visitors to peer through glass windows to see the animals, slatted floors, and dimmed lights.

De Martines tells me that when a group of visiting journalists got to the viewing room, he decried the fact that so many stories about farming are inaccurate. “It's because of you,” he told them. Another time, a woman visiting the farm didn't want to go into the viewing room for fear she might have nightmares. When she eventually did, she heartily thanked him for the eye-opening experience.

## INTO DIRECT MARKETING

Between rising costs and bad publicity for farming, de Martines was uncertain about the future of conventional pork. In 1992 he decided to raise a few Wild Boars.

De Martines started marketing directly in nearby Stratford because only restaurants were interested in buying Wild Boar meat. As the operation grew, he eventually took on the Toronto marketplace, about two hours away. “I felt that I was ready,” he simply says.

De Martines has slowly built his client base, one restaurant at a time. “You must find out how restaurants work,” he says, adding that such an understanding is critical because what's important to a chef is not necessarily important to a farmer.

It took de Martines 15 years to ramp up the business to its current size. In the beginning he finished one non-conventional animal per week. Now he does 20, and the limiting factor is his production capacity, not his sales.

De Martines has no regrets about moving into direct marketing. “I really like it,” he says. Chain stores, he explains, are intensely focused on price, despite assurances they promote locally raised food. “There's no interest in the farmer,” he says.

That contrasts with the butchers to whom he sells. They make sure he gets a price that allows him to stay in business and continue to provide a product they want.

De Martines cautions that direct marketing may not be the right choice for everyone. “If you're doing it only for the money, don't bother,” he says, adding that it takes a lot more than a ready smile and a change of clothes. For example, he must understand how every client wants their meat cut. That means not only attentively listening to client needs, it also means spending time learning about butchering. “Talking is easy — listening is hard,” de Martines says.

When I ask about food events, he says, “I'm talking to people who really enjoy good food and really appreciate it,” adding, “It's a lot of fun.” Along with the hospitality symposium where we met, he recently participated in an event called Savour Stratford and a big Slow Food event in Toronto called Picnic at the Brickworks. These events help build contacts, he stresses, and he makes a point to speak with every chef.

De Martines places a lot of emphasis



on conversation skills. “If you show true interest, you can talk about things other than pork — it’s important,” he notes. He also engages with everyone, not just the executive chef or butcher. The line cook today may one day be the executive chef.

As for challenges, he says the main thing is the long lead time, which for some of the rare and heritage breeds is 1-1/2 years to two years — an eternity compared to commodity pork.

“That lead time was a bit nerve wracking,” de Martines says. He goes on to describe the time and commitment it takes to find new customers and he emphasizes, “Repeat customers are so important.” The key to repeat customers, he says, is quality. “You have to have a consistent quality.”

When I ask what his farming neighbours think of him, he shakes his head and says, “They think I’m crazy,” adding that many of them wonder who will eat the stuff he produces. He is still a farmer, although he only spends part of his time on production. The rest goes to sales and marketing. “Just me,” he says, when I ask whether he hires anyone to help with marketing.

The family designed the farm logo to make Perth Pork Products easily recognizable. It has a smiling pig over the outline of Perth County, with the tag line Quality From The Farm.

“The message I want to leave with people is that they’re talking to a friendly guy,” de Martines says. “You can be very serious and still have fun.”

## BUILDING AND PROMOTING A BRAND

De Martines says that he doesn’t actively seek out media coverage but the media seems to find him. A short while after visiting Perth Pork, I found an article about the farm in a general-interest Montreal quarterly magazine, and after my farm visit I received a copy of the Perth Pork email newsletter, which tells customers that chef Lynn Crawford of the Food Network show “Pitchin’ In” spent the week filming an episode on the farm.

The de Martines’ son, Mark, has started breeding Tamworth pigs and selling them to Fred and Ingrid to finish. It’s a

good way for him to get into farming. But Fred points out that raising Tamworths is only worthwhile if there is someone to manage direct marketing, giving more value for the premium animal than a distributor would.

As we finish the farm tour, we pass a pen of Wild Boars and de Martines shovels in some black walnuts. The Wild Boars have their mouths open as they use their molars to crack open the walnuts, and Fred explains that is why the crunching sound we hear is so loud.

Walnut-finished pork is a premium product. But more than that, the walnuts turn out to be a means of engaging with homeowners in nearby Stratford, who rake up bags and bags of walnuts every fall. Until he offered to take the walnuts, they went to landfill. Some people like to drop off bags of walnuts at the farm so they can feed a few to the pigs — if not, de Martines makes a run into town to pick them up.

What’s next? He’s looking for a source of acorns. Customers feeding the livestock nuts: that’s a change of thinking. **CG**

# GIVE YOURSELF A RAISE!



University research confirms deep-tilling raises yields and income. Research also shows tilled soil warms faster in the spring for enhanced germination and more vigorous, early plant growth. You’ll reap all these benefits in a single trip with the Unverferth Zone-Builder® subsoiler and its Strip-Builder attachment.

Zone-Builder subsoiler shanks are 3/4" wide and shatter hardpan up to 20" deep. The Strip-Builder attachment is angle and depth adjustable to create a 12- to 15-inch wide slightly raised seedbed. An optional 15-inch Rolling Harrow® basket is available for additional soil leveling and firming.

The Unverferth Zone-Builder subsoiler is available in three different models with 2 through 16 shanks to match your operation. See your Unverferth dealer today for complete details.



## Unverferth

Manufacturing Company, Inc.

P.O. Box 357 • Kalida, Ohio 45853  
(419) 532-3121 • FAX (419) 532-2468  
unverferth.com

**1-800-322-6301**

**\* Innovative design • Quality manufacturing**