



Free under the sun

Animals live well at Boyle Family Farm

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY JANET WALLACE

Dozens of piglets race towards us, squealing and leaping in the air with excitement. Behind them, two large sows and a boar plod placidly. On reaching the fence, the young pigs start rooting through the soil and toss hay into the air in what seems to be a mix of foraging and playing. They, like all the animals at Boyle Family Farm, exude a sense of contentment. And that's the goal.

"I want all the animals to be free under the sun," says Mitchell Boyle. "Animals kept outside are healthier. And they're happy. I take a lot of pride in this." He points out the boar, named Bear, and the sows, Maisie and Sunshine.

"We take really, really good care of them. They root, they dig, and they shovel outside. And you might think it's better to keep them warm by locking them up in a stuffy barn in the winter, but animals kept outside are so much healthier than ones kept inside. These are heritage animals and their skin is almost three inches thick," he continues. "They like the outside weather. In the winter, they choose to leave their shelter and spend most of the time outside rooting in the snow."

"And they have a shelter in the paddock, where we put lots of bedding. They snuggle together in there and actually snore," Mitchell laughs. "When you walk by, it's like a scary movie hearing them all snore."

As we talk, I look down and see chickens pecking at my boots. One peers up at me with a curious look.

"What's going on, ladies?" Mitchell calls out as we approach the cow

paddock. A chorus of moos comes in response.

"Still limping, honey?" he says to one cow, telling me she's a sweetheart.

"You can see Kendra has a baby bump there," he points to another cow. When the cows show signs that they're close to going into labour, he moves them into the barn's maternity pens with lots of bedding.

The Boyles raise a variety of types of livestock, but started with cattle, specifically purebred Shorthorn cattle. Mitchell raises the heritage variety for beef and registered breeding stock.

The Boyle Family Farm sells their eggs, pork, poultry and beef at the Moncton Farmers' Market and at their own farm store, which is open on weekends for much of the year. Although

Mitchell is the public face of the farm, the success of the operation reflects the work of a team. It's a family business with Mitchell's father Darrell, wife Janice and seven-year-old son Hayden all helping out. Mitchell's cousin also works full-time while a few local teenagers work part-time on the weekends and after school.

Mitchell and his wife bought the 250-acre property on the outskirts of Moncton in 2018. They had been farming nearby and moved the animals to the new location which was a Christmas tree operation. They continue with the Christmas trees because that fits with one of their goals —getting city-dwellers out to the farm.

"We're the largest farm in the proximity of Moncton," says Mitchell with



■ Left: Mitchell Boyle hanging out with "the ladies"—some of his chickens. Above: Pigs enjoy living outdoors all winter, and often are healthier than those raised in close quarters.



■ While the goal is to better connect people with their food supply, the Boyles use fun activities to attract people to the farm. Also, as Mitchell says frankly, “Agritourism is where the money is.”

pride. “There’s a huge opportunity for people to come out here.”

“We have to realize where our food comes from. The first step to educating the public is having them come and see the farm. They can then make a better choice. Wouldn’t you rather eat something fresh from the farm raised with no antibiotics or hormones instead of ‘mystery meat’ from the grocery store?” he asks.

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At his previous farm, customers were invited to the farm for special events, such as pumpkin drives and farm tours. There was no charge to attend, but many people ended up buying something from the farm store.

Mitchell decided to change the approach and now charges a fee for the corn maze and petting zoo. The plan is to expand the agritourism with more activities and even carnivals. In 2019, the farm had four major events (each lasting at least a few weeks); the corn maze in September was followed by the

haunted corn maze in October. With the admission fee, people can wander through the petting zoo, featuring tame chickens, alpacas and rabbits. December is time for Christmas tree sales. In the spring, they hold Easter events with live rabbits and hidden eggs.

The Boyles are converting one field into an orchard where they will plant Honeycrisp apple trees. Eventually, customers can harvest apples in the U-pick operation when they arrive for the corn maze and petting zoo in the fall.

To help make the farm more self-sufficient, the Boyles grow grain for livestock feed and bedding. Due to the cold wet spring of 2019, half of the barley seed rotted in the ground. As a result, they needed to buy feed, but hope they can eventually supply all of their own.

The Boyles themselves try to be as self-sufficient in their diet as well and avoid buying food at grocery stores.

“I think the reason people are getting sick and obese,” says Mitchell “is because of what they buy at the store.”

The reason Mitchell has chosen this lifestyle and work is simple: “I like farming. I like animals and I disapprove of store-bought food,” he says firmly.

“You should see the reaction I get at the farmers’ market. Our eggs have fluorescent orange yolks because the chickens are on grass. There is definitely a difference between a product raised naturally on the grass than the factory-farmed meat. People love this meat.”

■ Mitchell doesn’t sugarcoat issues, such as the fact he raises animals for meat. He feels it’s good to let people know where their food comes from.



“We serve everything fresh. Fresh, fresh, fresh,” Mitchell says. “We have frozen available but at the farmers’ market, we bring fresh cuts so people can try farm-fresh meat that has never been frozen.”

In the farm store I asked the teenager putting packages of meat into a freezer if there was any fresh hamburger.

“Fresh?” he says enthusiastically. “This was all walking in the field just five days ago!”

After explaining that I’m looking for meat that isn’t frozen, he tells me about all the available sausages, including blueberry, his favourite.

“It sounds sort of strange having blueberries in sausages, but they’re wicked good,” he says with a grin.

We often hear depressing stories about farming, such as the high suicide rates, the average age of Canadian farmers being 55, and a paucity of young people entering the profession. Farms like the Boyle Family Farm might be part of the antidote to these problems. High school students work on the farm and like it. Children of all ages come to the farm to race through the corn maze, pat a bunny rabbit or be scared in the haunted maze—and in doing so, they get glimpses of real farm life.

Mitchell doesn’t sugar coat issues, such as the fact he raises animals for meat. He openly tells people that the turkeys they admire one day will be ready for Thanksgiving dinner a few weeks later. He feels it’s good to let people know where their food comes from—even when it means seeing the cows and pigs that will end up as steaks and sausages on their plates.

The approach seems to work. On Open Farm Day he had nearly 4,000 visitors. On other weekends throughout the fall and early winter, the farm is visited by 200 people, mostly families from the nearby cities of Moncton and Dieppe. For some it’s just a fun day out; for others, it’s shopping for grassfed meat and free-range poultry. Either way, a visit to Boyle Family Farm can be educational. It offers a view of a farm where the animals are given the opportunity to move freely, breathe fresh air and be treated well. 

