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ENVIRONMENT REPORTER

White and red flags flicker along the fence and entrance of Andrews' Scenic Acres.

Inside, kids hang upside down from monkey bars and poke their fingers through the fence at baby goats in the petting zoo.

Teenagers in matching company T-shirts offer up hotdogs and ice cream cones.

And then there are the "berry buses" — straw-filled red wagons pulled by tractors.

On a hot summer day, amid all the squealing and giggles, it feels distinctly like a rural fairground. But this is a fruit and vegetable farm.

"Happier customers pick more," says Bert Andrews, directing a mother with four kids in tow to the best spot for black raspberries.

Most days, Andrews will tell you he's a farmer. He grows blueberries, sweet corn and gooseberries — among two dozen other crops — on 270 hectares of land just north of Milton. But, tag behind him for a day, and you quickly discover his other occupations: marketer, camp

Radishes and rutabagas and a bit of razzmatazz

Increasingly, GTA-area farms are offering an array of amusements in order to stay afloat

6 It's just another form of farming. It's a survival technique

JIM FORSYTHE, FARMER

counsellor, schoolteacher, retailer, vintner, delivery boy, bodyguard.

The logistics of his business are dizzying. Beyond the fields and the tractors, he runs a bustling farm market, a fruit winery and wine store, a school education program that shepherds 15,000 children through the farm every year, and an array of amusements for his pick-your-own customers. In the fall, they include an enchanted forest, a hay jump and a corn maze.

Andrews is not the only one. In the face of crippling competition from abroad, entertainment farming is the lifebuoy many fruit and vegetable farmers have grabbed onto to stay afloat.

"Most farmers have realized they can't compete with Chilean peaches or California lettuce," says Bill Redelmeier, who recently packed up most of his pick-your-own business in Richmond Hill and bought a vineyard near Niagara-on-the-Lake instead. "The mantra has become value-added."

There are about 70 farms around the province that offer some sort of entertainment. Most of them are close to urban areas; around a dozen operate around Toronto.

Besides fresh food, they offer everything from rope mazes and jumping castles to walking trails and gift stores. One boasts a pumpkin catapult.

"The guy on the back of a tractor in a distant field, that's not the image of a farmer anymore," says University of Guelph horticulture professor Al Sullivan. "Or, at least, not one that competes well."

Most, like Andrews' Scenic Acres, began as simple pick-your-own farms. That was seen as a way to reduce staff wages and sell directly to customers with little extra overhead except a cash box and a spray-painted sign plunked on the roadside. At its peak in the 1970s and '80s, pick-your-own was a hugely successful business model.

Families would drive out on summer weekends to pick a dozen bushels of Roma tomatoes or five flats of strawberries, take them home, and make preserves to last through the long winter.

But with the emergence of a globalized food chain bringing cheap fresh fruit and vegetables to our grocery stores even in the darkest days of February, people have stopped coming. Over the past two decades, the pick-your-own industry has nose-dived.

"Nobody, except for the purists, picks their own anymore — with two people working now, who has got the time to do it?" says Jim Forsythe, who 30 years ago grew 20 acres of eggplant and 30 acres of tomatoes on his Markham farm for Italian customers. He no longer grows either crop.

"Before Sunday shopping, it was great," agrees Mike Whittamore, a sixth-generation farmer in Markham. "There was nothing else to do. People are too busy now."

The people who do make the time pick less. Where they once left Whittamore's farm with 40 pounds of strawberries, they now buy only a couple. That's after eating an equal amount.

All farmers agree, pick-your-own customers now eat much more.



TANNIS TOOHEY / TORONTO STAR

(Left to right) Helper Alecia Earle, Josephine Premphe, Alex Kouyoumjian and Shelby Kouyoumjian have fun at Andrews' Scenic Acres, near Milton.

PICK YOUR FUN

Some Toronto-area entertainment farms:

- Andrews' Scenic Acres, 9365 10th Sideroad, Milton, www.andrewsscenicacres.com
- Chudleigh's Pick Your Own Farm, 9528 Hwy. 25, Milton, www.chudleighs.com
- Downey's Farm Market, 13682 Heart Lake Rd., Caledon, www.downeysfarm.com
- Forsythe Family Farms, 10539 Kennedy Rd., Markham, www.forsythefamilyfarms.com
- Springridge Farm, 7256 Bell School Line, Milton, www.springridgefarm.ca
- Whittamore's Farm, 8100 Steeles Ave., Markham, www.whittamoresfarm.com

Redelmeier crunched the numbers: 15 years ago, the average person sale during strawberry season on his farm was \$8. "We figured everyone was eating \$1 worth, and that was their discount," he says.

Three years ago — the year he decided to get out of the business — the average sale had dropped to 80 cents. And the eating discount had grown to \$1.50.

"Every morning, I'd find 50 to 60 empty baskets on the field. Some people would say, 'We're just going down to the field to eat.' They didn't have a clue."

3 There's a huge amount of nostalgia involved

JESSE LAUZON,
FOOD MANAGER,
SPRINGRIDGE FARM

His breaking point was a father who arrived at the till with a basket of green strawberries he refused to pay for because they weren't ripe. "I asked him why he picked them," he recalls. "He said he just wanted to give his kids the experience."

THAT, IN A NUTSHELL, is the new rationale of pick-your-own customers. They aren't coming out of necessity. They're coming for pleasure — to spend a day in the sunshine on a field with their family.



TANNIS TOOHEY / TORONTO STAR

Marilyn Quackenbush shows kids including Josephine Premphe (right) how to pick raspberries at Andrews'.

For many farmers, that's meant the end of their business. For others, it planted the seed for a new business plan.

"We're entertaining the family farming for a day," says Tom Chudleigh. He owns Chudleigh's apple farm in Milton — just down the road from Andrews' Scenic Acres.

When it comes to entertainment farms, Chudleigh's is the mother-ship. Three weeks before its first apples ripen, you'll find kids screaming across the bouncy bridge in the massive play fort and giggling at the fluffy, cross-eyed alpacas. Come September, as many as 6,000 people crowd the grounds every Saturday — filling and emptying the 1,200-spot parking lot twice a day, and gladly paying the \$6 entry fee.

"If I'm going to entertain them, I'm going to have a log-up on the grocery store," explains Chudleigh, who started offering wagon rides after customers began to hop uninvited onto his tractor.

He's a regular speaker at agricul-

ture conferences around North America, pitching his solution to the demise of near-urban farms.

"I tell them, 'You're sitting on a gold mine and you don't know it,' he says. 'You've got fresh air, sunshine, yellow straw, wagon rides, the romance of a tractor...'"

Tractors seem romantic only to city folk whose idea of farm life comes from high school novels like Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*.

That's the big irony of entertainment farms. It's the demise of local agriculture that makes them marketable.

"There's a huge amount of nostalgia involved," says Jesse Lauzon, food manager of Springridge Farm in Milton. "We often hear, 'My grandparents lived on a farm and we used to visit.'"

Entertainment farming has its drawbacks. Farmers, as a rule, aren't known to be extroverts. Imagine being an introvert and inviting 3,000 people into your backyard over the weekend.

On top of crop rotation and weed management, entertainment farmers need to excel at public relations.

Bert Andrews' cellphone rings constantly, with staff asking about store displays and school trips.

Young mothers use the table on his back deck to change diapers. Cars roll into the parking lot way after closing hour. Some visitors come with picnic baskets and plans for a sunset dinner on his property.

"People think it's a park," he says.

Most entertainment farmers are still primarily in the business of growing food. They bristle at the suggestion they've crossed a line between farmer and entertainer.

Although more than 2 per cent of farms have disappeared every year from the Greater Toronto Area over the past decade, the remaining farmers are still in the business of working the soil, even if they've added some fun and games.

"I'm a farmer right down to the bottom of my boots," says Forsythe. "It's just another form of farming. It's a survival technique."