



The Three Farmers team (l-r): Dan Vandenhurk, Elysia Vandenhurk, Natasha Vandenhurk, Ron Emde and Colin Rosengren

Three Farmers

Sowing the seeds of invention

Saskatchewan company creates new natural food category.

By Mary Del Ciano

Three farmers from Saskatchewan are doing something that's never been done in Canada before. They're growing camelina — an ancient oilseed that originated in parts of Northern Europe and Central Asia — for food consumption, and launching it into the Canadian marketplace.

Camelina is a non-GMO oilseed with many nutritional benefits, thanks to the high levels of Omega-3 and Vitamin E inherent in the oil.

In 2007, the farmers — Dan Vandenhurk, Colin Rosengren and Ron Emde — learned of the seed's benefits and that it was well suited for the growing conditions in Saskatchewan. They saw an opportunity to do something more with it. That's when their company, appropriately named Three Farmers, was born.

Today, Saskatoon-based Three Farmers sells three flavours of camelina oil, which can be used to replace any cooking oil and can also be used in salads, dips, dressings and marinades. The oils, which the company compares to a quality extra-virgin olive oil but with the Omega-3 profile of flax, can now be found in 950 stores across the country. But it hasn't been an easy journey.

For two years, the partners experimented with how to grow the seed properly before they were ready to move forward. In 2009, Vandenhurk's daughter, Natasha Vandenhurk, jumped on board and is now the CEO. She focused on the business side of things and determined the markets in which to launch the oil, examining possibilities in skin care, nutraceuticals and food.

"We decided to go down the food path," she explains. "It just has a competitive advantage there. It has this great taste [with light, nutty, earthy tones]; it has a high smoke point [up to 475° F]; and it has high Omega-3 and Vitamin E — a combination of characteristics that no other cooking oil on the market had."

That's when Natasha's sister, Elysia Vandenhurk — a Red Seal Chef who has worked under celebrity chef Susur Lee in Toronto — joined the Three Farmers team as chief operating officer. The company applied to Health Canada and secured novel food status for camelina, which had never been sold as a food product in Canada before. The sisters then started building the Three Farmers brand, which emphasizes natural and sustainable growing, healthy and

wholesome foods, and traceable products.

The company makes every step in the production process transparent, applying a batch number on the back of every product it sells. By entering the number into the company's website, customers can learn the complete history of their bottle of oil — from the moment the seed was sown, to the name of the farmer who planted it, the GPS location of the field, the area where the seed was pressed, and the bottling date.

The idea is to close the gap between farmer and customer. "The only way you can really trust your food and understand it is to speak directly with your farmers," says Elysia. "We're really trying to take that farmer's market kind of atmosphere on a larger scale."

In addition to traceability, sustainability is very important to the farmers. They practice intercropping — what you take from the earth, you put back in. For example, because camelina needs lots of nitrogen to grow strong and healthy, they intercrop with lentils, which puts nitrogen back into the soil. They also practice no-till farming so that the nutrients within the soil naturally build on their own.

Three Farmers uses natural ingredients, minimal processing and no chemicals. The camelina is cold-pressed, ensuring that all of

its natural nutrients, flavours and colours remain intact.

The sisters were so confident in their product that they brought it to CBC's *Dragon's Den* in 2012. Although the deal they made with Arlene Dickinson never closed because they couldn't agree on the terms, the business has "completely exploded" since their appearance, going from 150 retailers to 950 in two years. Restaurants have also started using the oil, and online sales have increased.

The company also produces packaged snacks. It has recently added two flavours of roasted chickpeas to its roster of offerings, with two more flavours coming out in 2015. The sisters are looking at moving into a larger facility so they can bring the production of their chickpeas in-house. And while its main focus is Canada, Three Farmers recently shipped its first container of oils to China.

It's an exciting time for the Saskatchewan sisters and their three farmers.

"Camelina oil was non-existent until we built it," says Natasha. "Not a lot of companies can claim they've started an entire category of food, but that's what we've done here."

Three Farmers is now humming along like a well-oiled machine. ■



Natasha and Elysia Vandenhurk



INCORP. IN
2007

SOLD FIRST
PRODUCT IN
2011

Camelina is cultivated in **MIDALE, SASK.**, and transported to local facilities throughout **SASKATCHEWAN** and **MANITOBA** for processing and packaging.

SOLD IN **950** STORES ACROSS CANADA



PRODUCT LINE: Three flavours of camelina oil (original, roasted garlic and chili, roasted onion and basil), and two flavours of roasted chickpeas (barbeque, balsamic and cracked pepper).