

# Innovation lives here

University town pairs academic success with food, wine and a deep-rooted bootstraps philosophy

*By Quentin Casey*

**Michael Lightfoot's** family has been farming for eight generations. He is the third generation to farm on this particular patch of land, which is situated on the edge of Wolfville in Nova Scotia's Annapolis Valley, an hour from Halifax.

"We've transitioned over the years," he says standing on a road between his farmhouse and a number of out-buildings. "You'll see barns that used to be designated for beef and hay. This was at one time covered in apple trees," he continues. "The different generations have always tried to maintain it and move toward what was profitable."

For Lightfoot, poultry farming has been profitable. Yet, seven years ago, he and his wife Jocelyn decided to contribute to the farm's evolution. They added a completely new agricultural pursuit: winemaking.

Their Lightfoot & Wolfville Vineyards is certified organic, practices biodynamic agriculture and now boasts more than 30 acres of grape vines, on land overlooking Cape Blomidon.

The company is in its third year of actual wine making, but has yet to sell a bottle. The plan is to issue a limited release this upcoming summer, and open a 15,000-square-foot retail space in 2016.

Lightfoot says he is growing about 20 commercial grape varieties and has so far produced wines including Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, and Riesling, as well as sparkling wine. "We know that we make fabulous sparkling wine," he says. "We've made a first-in-Nova Scotia red Pinot Meunier. That's traditionally used in champagne at a very small percentage. We've turned it into a red on its own."



## Top tier workforce

In 2011, 50.5% of Wolfville's population aged 25-64 held some form of university certificate, diploma or degree. The national average is 25.9%

On this day in mid-December, Lightfoot and his wine maker, Josh Horton, are preparing to blend a Tidal Bay, one of more than 15 varieties of wine the company has made in 2014.

"It's a lot of experimentation right now," Lightfoot admits. "It's a huge learning curve. It's three businesses in one: it's farming, it's manufacturing, and then it's retailing and marketing."

Lightfoot & Wolfville is one of the newest additions to the Annapolis Valley's burgeoning wine industry. And Wolfville, a university town of 4,200 (and growing) is at the heart of that wine country.

David Hovell proudly notes that 10 wineries surround Wolfville, including five within five kilometres of the town.

Hovell, the executive director of the Wolfville Business Development Corporation, has an ambitious goal. "We want Wolfville to become the premiere culinary and wine destination in Atlantic Canada," he says.

Hovell argues Wolfville has plenty of assets, in addition to local wineries, that will help bring that goal to fruition, including two dozen downtown eateries, a bustling year-round Saturday farmers' market, and a slew of local agricultural businesses.

The town also has a growing population. According to census data, the town's population grew by 13 per cent between 2006 and 2011. While most Maritime towns are stagnating or dying, Wolfville is growing.

"Wolfville is this place where creative people come together," Hovell says seated in his downtown office.

The town's reputation as a culinary destination certainly received a boost in November, during the town's annual food film festival: "Devour!" The festival, which organizers call

the world's largest food film festival, features five days of cinema, food and wine culture. The fourth edition of the festival was highlighted by an appearance from celebrity chef Anthony Bourdain. Festival attendance hit 6,120 in 2014, up 53 per cent over 2013.

Such numbers are helpful for a town whose economy relies heavily on visitors. "Tourism is an important driver here," Hovell says.

With that fact in mind, he has been working to make the local wineries more accessible to visitors, most notably with the Wolfville Magic Winery Bus.

The double-decker bus appears during summer and fall weekends, shuttling visitors between local wineries. The bus follows a loop and departs Wolfville three times a day, thus allowing visitors to hop on and off at their leisure.

The service, which costs \$20, has run for three seasons and has grown each year.

"In year one we were on the road 14 days. In 2015 we'll be on the road 64 days," Hovell says.

In 2014, close to 5,000 people rode the bus (up 40 per cent over 2013), and upwards of 20 per cent of those riders were from outside Nova Scotia. According to Hovell, the Magic Winery Bus produced an economic impact of \$605,000 last year. It also earned the Tourism Industry Association of Nova Scotia's 2014 Tourism Innovator Award.

"It has authenticated us as a wine destination," he says. "Equally important is that it's an economic development tool that's helped to build more business here."

Peggy Crawford is also trying to promote economic development using Wolfville's natural assets, although in a more formal setting.

Crawford works in Acadia University's office of industry and community engagement. An Acadia graduate, Crawford returned to her alma mater six years ago to serve as the university's research and innovation coordinator. She arrived back at Acadia around the same time Ray Ivany became the university's president. Ivany is best known as the chair of the Nova Scotia Commission on Building Our New Economy, which examined the many economic challenges facing the province. The commission's resulting report is typically referred to simply as

the "Ivany report".

Sitting in her Horton Hall office, Crawford says Ivany, long before issuing the commission's report, called for more focus on using the university's resources (including students, researchers and lab space) to boost economic development.

"He challenged us within our unit particularly to (be) more engaged with our communities in terms of economic development," she says. "That's been a bit of a major shift."

The office of industry and community engagement is tasked with, among other things, better linking the university with industry, and helping to spin start-up companies out of university research.

Crawford guides me from her office to the building next store. With exams nearly over, the campus is eerily quiet. The fifth floor of Patterson Hall (the old biology building) is now called the Rural Innovation Centre.

The centre houses a collection of small entities aimed at either aiding existing companies or creating new ones. Its tenants include: the Acadia Tidal Energy Institute; the Acadia Institute for Data Analytics (which is focused on using Big Data to help agricultural companies); and the Atlantic Wine Institute, which supports the Atlantic Canadian wine industry with research, advice and testing.

The centre also houses a representative from Innovacorp (a Crown corporation that provides venture capital and mentoring), and Launch Box, a space for students to generate and explore entrepreneurial ideas.

"A lot of this has happened in just the last couple years," Crawford says of the Rural Innovation Centre. "I think there's great potential for economic development."

Down the hall, John Frost and a colleague are huddled in front of a computer, working on Frost's new start-up: Aerhyve. Started in late 2014, Aerhyve is one of a handful of start-ups that pay a nominal fee to work out of the Rural Innovation Centre.

Aerhyve is developing algorithms that could help analyze aerial data gathered by drones. Frost (37) is focused on agriculture, particularly the local blueberry crop. He is hoping to produce software that will analyze images of blueberry fields and automatically recognize poor producing

plants. By pinpointing unhealthy areas, a farmer could target spray or water that area, as opposed to providing expensive blanket coverage.

"We want to help blueberry producers either improve yields or reduce inputs (such as water and pesticides) or both," Frost explains, noting that he envisions eventually developing a suite of algorithms for analyzing many different crops. "It's precision agriculture."

His initial work is funded with the help of a \$15,000 provincial Productivity and Innovation Voucher.

Neither Frost nor his wife (an Acadia grad who is also his business partner) are from Wolfville. So why did they choose this town to launch their idea?

"I just love the Annapolis Valley. I've worked in 15 different countries and travelled all over. I'm actually an immigrant myself. I was born in Portugal and moved to Canada when I was five," he says. "I love travelling but this just feels like home."

Perhaps Frost's technology will one day be used to analyze Michael Lightfoot's many acres of grape vines. For now, the rookie vintner is focused

on blending this year's vintages and, later this particular afternoon, meeting with an architect to discuss plans for the company's retail space, which will sit on a hill overlooking the Grand-Pré dykes.

## Did you know? Wolfville was Canada's first Fair Trade town

Wineries add character to Wolfville and help attract tourists, but they're not for entrepreneurs easily panicked or stressed about cash flow.

As Lightfoot notes, setting up a winery is capital intensive and requires years of work without revenue. He estimates "several" million dollars have already been pumped into the business, including more than a million dollars just for the vines. The retail space will also cost several million. "What we have invested is frightening," he says. "It's a capital hungry operation."

Lightfoot doesn't expect the winery

to be profitable until 2021— five years after opening.

"It's a real balancing act. It's three years from when you plant a vine until you even see the fruit. You're looking at eight years out for sparkling wine," he says, standing in the cellar of a restored heritage barn. Once the home of pigs, the barn now houses large French oak barrels, many full of fermenting wine. "I'm hoping to stop bleeding after about five years of being open," he adds.

Lightfoot is able to finance the multi-year setup thanks to the family poultry business. Though not profitable yet, the fledgling winery is a way of extending the family's farming lineage one more generation.

Lightfoot's daughter, Rachel, a recent graduate of Brock University's viticulture program, has joined the company as a wine maker. "It's a real family business," Lightfoot says. "To have Rachel become the fourth generation to work this land... makes us so proud." •

#### FEEDBACK

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