

NOVA SCOTIA

Open to the world



The clincher

The ever-expanding MorSwift Machines

- PLUS:** Trail Blazer Products: A family affair • Surette Battery's renewable energy surge • The Joggins Fossil Cliffs Institute
- A foodie tour of the Halifax Farmers' Market

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OPEN TO THE WORLD, SUMMER 2008

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Snap SHOTS

On stage

In contemporary dance, catharsis is often the performers' experience alone and can sometimes leave a crowd unenthused. That's not the case with *Given the Circumstances*, the mainstage season finale by Mocean Dance (www.moceandance.com), which had its audience laughing one moment and crying the next.

Now preparing for its 2008-09 season, this contemporary company is known for its eclectic and entertaining repertoire. Mocean's performers—Sara Harrigan, 31; Carolle Crooks, 30; Sarah Rozee, 30; Alicia Orr MacDonald, 27; and newest member Melanie Ferro, 26—are leaders in Nova Scotia's dance scene and are emerging nationally. Presenting original work, the group plans to bring yet more physicality and emotion to the stage.

Mocean members first pursued dance careers outside Nova Scotia, then returned home and formed the group in 2001. In addition to performing, they teach professionally, offering workshops and classes in local schools, and manage their company's business affairs. Led by the resolute and focused Crooks and Harrigan, Mocean has honed its art form well. Harrigan describes it as being "emotionally invested" in their stage work, offering "multi-layered" performance landscapes for audiences.

Not every dancer would tell you that the company vision is to be sustainable or to get a board of directors in place. When Mocean was created, all of the members were co-artistic directors; however, this year Crooks, a tax lawyer, and Harrigan, a fine arts graduate of New York's Purchase College, decided to share the artistic director and entrepreneurial duties. Mocean is Halifax's only full-time, multi-member, contemporary dance company.



HOLLY CROOKS

Mocean Dance's *Given the Circumstances*

Halifax's only full-time contemporary company is known for its eclectic and entertaining repertoire

All of the women received their early instruction at Halifax Dance, the city's oldest school for dance training. Mocean now has five full-length shows in its repertoire, a nine-member board of directors, and a pool of funding through private and government sources.

The ensemble has performed in British Columbia and San Francisco, as well as across the Maritimes. Mocean will take season seven's repertoire to neighbouring New Brunswick in November. In January of 2009, the company will take its main-stage show to the Dalhousie University Arts Centre and then on to Prince Edward Island. — **AIMEE LOREFICE MAINS**

Behind forward thinking

Over the years, Tara Gault had attended many seminars and conferences where business leaders stood up and spouted the usual "Education is the answer" and "We need to engage young people" speeches. For that reason, she wanted the March event she helped organize, entitled Working Together: Building Our Future, to be different.

As chair of the event and vice-president of education for Dalhousie University's Student Union, Gault, along with event partner NovaKnowledge, made sure the event was engaging (the other partners were the Alliance of Nova Scotia Students, Junior Chamber International, and Fusion Halifax). "To address issues like out-migration, students and businesspeople need to have a conversation," says Gault. "We need some dialogue instead of just listening to speeches."

Halifax-based NovaKnowledge, which was created in 1993, is a non-profit member-based organization that promotes a knowledge economy in Nova Scotia by uniting business, government, education, and community leaders. "We have all kinds of skilled students graduating every year in Nova Scotia," says Tim Outhit, NovaKnowledge's executive director. "If we can connect more leaders and students, then hopefully [the students] will see that there are opportunities for them to stay here and work and to grow."

As well as organizing events such as Working Together, NovaKnowledge prepares reports and regular knowledge economy "report cards," which have been instrumental in influencing public policy changes and encouraging organizations to recognize and adopt best practices. "Areas that we address include

The protégé

Symphony Nova Scotia's 29-year-old conductor-in-residence leaps in the air as he delivers the evening's final down beat with his baton. But it isn't Vivaldi or a one of Beethoven's famous symphonies. It is a one-night only performance with Mount Uniacke rapper Buck 65 that brings down the house this past April.

Clearly, Dinuk Wijeratne is not your grandmother's conductor. But Wijeratne loves classical music. He loves listening to it, writing it, and conducting it.

Since moving to Nova Scotia with his mother in 2004, the Julliard-trained Wijeratne (pronounced Wij-jay-rut-ne) has made an impression on Halifax. Over the course of his three-year residency, he's connected with a new generation of classical music fans while conducting the Nova Scotia Youth Orchestra and introduced audiences to the symphony through innovative performances with Matt Mays and Joel Plaskett. For the Buck 65 show, Wijeratne was commissioned by the CBC to write and perform an original piece. Buck 65 was thrilled, but confesses that "being star-struck by Dinuk" was something he had to overcome for the performance. The song was the highlight of the show.

Wijeratne was born in Sri Lanka and raised in the United Arab Emirates. He's part of a small minority who, as a teenager, latched on to Mozart instead of Madonna or Nirvana. There weren't many symphonies

or orchestras in Dubai, so he immersed himself in CDs and magazines instead. With nobody telling him what to like, his ears stayed wide open. "I didn't develop any bias," he explains.

Classical music is increasingly under threat these days. CBC's Radio 2 recently cut the amount of classical it plays. Wijeratne says the classical-music community needs to reach out to audiences with events such as the Maritime Pops series. "But don't dumb it down," he warns, "just present it differently. Intelligent communication is the key."

He likens the struggle between classical and popular music to the push-pull of Hollywood and independent films. "Classical music has a metaphorical quality to it," he says. "It allows us to understand our lives better." — **IAN GORMELY**



Confronting the future of our province in thought-provoking and meaningful ways

educational standards, employment growth, adoption of new technology, immigration policy, and the environmental economy,” says Outhit.

Chris Hornberger, a partner at Halifax Global Inc. and a former NovaKnowledge board member, says that NovaKnowledge has played an important role in developing the Nova Scotian business community. “NovaKnowledge has always pushed the envelope,” she says, “and forced all of us to confront the future of our province in thought-provoking and meaningful ways.”

Celebrating its 15th anniversary has given NovaKnowledge members an opportunity to reflect on both the past and the future of the province. “We’re at a pivotal time,” says Outhit. “We’ve left behind some of our old industries and old ideas and we’ve made some progress, but there’s much more work to be done.” — **MARK BOLTON**

15 years of opening minds

Since 1993, NovaKnowledge (www.novaknowledge.ns.ca) has been providing forums for discussion and exchange of ideas among representatives of the province’s business, government, and education sectors, creating opportunities to shape the future of Nova Scotia’s economy. Members connect with a cross-section of leaders and key influencers in the province at unique events such as summits, open-mic debates, and a popular luncheon series. Its most ambitious undertaking is an annual Knowledge Economy Report Card, in which some of the best minds in the province analyze trends, generate ideas, and help build a common vision with innovation at its heart. — **HEATHER MACLEAN**

Supply chain tracking

After only two years in the business, Halifax IT consultants Nicom IT Solutions Inc. (www.niconit.com) has expanded internationally with its latest product, Maritime On-Line. The principals behind the company, David Nicholson and Pat d’Entremont have updated the software to create a new web-based system for the Maritime Exchange for the Delaware River and Bay (www.maritimedelriv.com). The Philadelphia-based trade association needed a better way to do its paperwork electronically because of increased concern about security and cost efficiency in the U.S.

Nicom’s customized system for Maritime Exchange tracks ships’ movements, personnel, and containers and their contents. It enables customs agents to assess duties and immigration and security agents to vet crew members. It will also inform truckers and railways when to show up and tell shippers when their latest shipment of widgets will arrive.



Nicholson is a 30-year software-development veteran from Glace Bay, N.S. He graduated from the University College of Cape Breton in 1975 with a degree in computer data processing. Nicholson is delighted that Maritime Exchange wants Nicom to sell software to its members because it means the IT company can sell related software.

“Between what we have and what we are working on, we’ll be able to offer a suite of seven products,” says Nicholson. For example, Nicom has recently developed a container-tracking system for the Port of Halifax (www.portofhalifax.ca), which won an award from the Virginia-based American Association of Port Authorities in 2007.

“Nicom understands our business and understands technology,” says Jim Nicoll, the Halifax Port Authority’s manager of information and technology services. “They’re a key partner.” He explains that Nicom’s system tracks and manages the amount of time an import container sits in a marine terminal before starting its journey.

Though Nicom has international ambitions, it plans to stay rooted in the Maritimes. “It’s good to have face time with clients, but as an Internet-based company, the point is to show that you don’t have to be on-site,” says d’Entremont, a 25-year veteran of the industry from Nova Scotia’s southwestern shore and a 1974 computer science graduate of Acadia University. “In fact, we deliberately decided not to go to Philadelphia to make the presentation,” adds Nicholson. “We did it all from here, and several people told us that we just blew them away.”

As a result of Nicom’s first successful foray into foreign waters, it has received inquiries from Jordan, Libya, Australia, and the Massachusetts Port Authority. With a staff of 21 full-time employees, Nicom is growing and plans to complete its international business plan by the end of June. However, it will continue to offer everything from website creation to software development locally. “The majority of our work, customers, and revenues come from Nova Scotia,” says d’Entremont. “We’re not abandoning the local marketplace by any means.” — **ROBERT MARTIN**

ISTOCKPHOTO/SHAUN LOWE



Jump-start

Surrette Battery's renewable energy is firing on all cylinders with its international customers

Success never comes to those who wait; rather, it comes to those who act. It's a fact that Jamie Surrette knows only too well. While his second-generation company, Surrette Battery Company Ltd. in Springhill, N.S., has been operating since 1935, he realized early on that staying competitive demands a lot of hard work. "We've had to invest heavily over the last four or five years in our productivity," says Surrette. "This means that we've had to invest in capital equipment, technology, and automation, and ask ourselves whether we're doing this as efficiently as possible."

A lead-acid battery manufacturer, Surrette Battery (www.surrette.com) is in the business of renewable energy. The company manufactures batteries for various applications, including railroad, marine, and solar power. Like many export manufacturers in Nova Scotia, it has faced a range of challenges head-on. "One of the difficulties of the last three years when it comes to exporting has been the rapid acceleration of the Canadian dollar," says Surrette. "We needed to improve our process to compete. Otherwise, we would have been destroyed."

In 2003 Surrette Battery looked into its efficiency processes and explored markets outside the United States. Mainly, the company investigated Europe and Mexico to find ways to respond to the changing markets. "We went into those places with some skepticism," says Surrette. "We weren't sure whether we could compete with the likes of Germany and Mexico from Springhill."

Though the company pursued the global locations with some hesitation, the venture proved to be eye-opening. Surrette learned that using the Canadian flag in its advertising was viewed as a symbol of quality assurance in some countries. The company can get to the



The company's batteries will support daily power use in some Mexican homes.

market faster than European competitors, given that it is just 150 kilometres from the port of Halifax, which means its products can make it into the international marketplace within a few weeks.

There has never been a better time for renewable-energy products. Places such as Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Mexico lose power up to six times a day. Although there are countrywide grids, they frequently become unstable, meaning people lose power. Also, rural areas outside the national grid system often don't have access to power at all. This is where Surrette steps in. "People talk about the [energy] demand on automobiles," he says. "Well, that plays second fiddle to having a light on in your house."

The company plans to market its products in places such as Mexico so homes can function fully on alternative energy. "In my opinion, Mexico is currently the smallest customer base," says Surrette, "but it has the largest potential because the wealth of the nation is increasing, and

the people want a stable power supply."

In places such as Mexico, the essential energy will come from solar power. The sun's energy will be stored in Surrette's batteries, and that power store will be provided to homes that are connected to an electrification power station. There won't be an endless supply of 100% renewable power, but it will be enough to support daily use.

For Surrette, the location and size of the company's operations were never barriers to growth. "It's interesting to look at us as a small manufacturer and see all the markets we touch," he says. "We are a very lean company. We have a staff of about 50 people, and we all roll up our sleeves and get things done. Over the past three years, whenever I've been on a flight and I have a chance to sit back and reflect, I think, we're not buying products from somewhere else and slapping a Canadian-made sticker on them. We're creating great things from Springhill for people around the world."

— SUZANNE DIAB



The natural

Jenna Boon wants the world to know the secrets of the amazing Joggins fossil cliffs

The surging tides of the Bay of Fundy continually rasp against the cliffs of Joggins, N.S., carving a massive window to a past that dominated the Earth 350 million years ago. The cliffs are the world's premier place to study the Carboniferous Period, when the fuel that powers today's world had yet to begin its metamorphosis from lush forests and swamps to coal and petroleum.

Jenna Boon, the director of the Joggins Fossil Institute (below, jogginsfossilcliffs.net), spent a good deal of her childhood in Joggins and knows the wonder of the area's unique



geography. "We have a beautiful resource in 14 kilometres of coastline that's basically untouched," she says. "Whenever I came home as an adult, the first thing I had to do was go down to the beach. It's inspiring; the tides and the cliffs are so powerful."

The Joggins Fossil Institute and Interpretive Centre initiative began in 1996, when community groups, the scientific community, and all levels of government began working to protect and enhance the cliffs with the ultimate goal of being named a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Site. The Cumberland Regional Economic Development Association (CREDA) brought all parties together, and in 2004, when Canada put the site on its tentative list, the formal work of preparing the nomination dossier began. In

2005 Boon was hired to join a dedicated team and worked closely with John Calder, a senior geologist with the Nova Scotia Department of Natural Resources (www.gov.ns.ca/NATR). The dossier was formally submitted to the World Heritage Centre in February of 2007, and a decision will be made when the committee meets this July in Quebec City.

While all fingers are crossed for the official UNESCO designation, the centre, situated on the reclaimed site of the old Joggins No. 7 coal mine and overlooking the cliffs, is a stunning model of environmentally friendly architecture and one of the greenest buildings in Atlantic Canada. It boasts a 50-kilowatt wind-turbine generator, a solar-heating system, harvested rainwater, and a green roof. It's ironic that a building devoted to the Coal Age, and with an extensive interpretation of the town's early dependence on coal, is in the vanguard of structures dedicated to reducing its carbon footprint. But Boon sees no disconnect. "Coal was certainly an important part of the town's past," she says, "but it's a new era."

Boon's passion for the area prompted her to leave a secure position as a manager of the engineering, trades, and technology department of Holland College in Charlottetown. "One of the reasons I wanted to work on this project was to have a hand in the future of Joggins," she says.

There were also tremendous opportunities to develop professionally. "I've learned so much at this job," says Boon. "To go through that process [of putting together the UNESCO nomination dossier], having to exceed world standards to get that designation was a huge challenge, but it was also a huge opportunity." During her time in the college system, Boon worked in Kenya, El Salvador, and all over Europe. Her skill set, combined with her ability to move comfortably in international circles, made her a perfect fit for UNESCO's mandate.

The Fossil Institute also gave Boon a chance to restore some of the vibrancy she remembers from the Joggins of her youth. "In the summer, people would visit Joggins because of its scientific significance," she says. "But I'm ashamed to say, as a resident of Joggins and as a Nova Scotian, that as a youth I had no idea that the first true reptile, *Hylonomus lyelli*, was found here, or that it's mentioned in Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*. That's part of our heritage. I'd like the younger generation to be able to say, 'I'm from this wonderful community' and have a chance to learn about it."

Boon's roots in the area were an invaluable asset when she assumed the job as the institute's director. "The combination of Jenna's international background in education and training, and a real appreciation for the Fossil Cliffs on an academic level, was important, but even more so was her connection to the community," says Rhonda Kelly, the executive director of CREDA (www.creda.net). "That connection is paramount in any community-development project. Joggins is a small rural place, and when you're looking at something of this magnitude, the people need to be able to work with someone they can trust. Jenna is that person."

In September of 2007 the institute and CREDA were recognized for excellence in collaboration at the Celebrating Communities Conference, which was held in Sydney, N.S. "The people [of Joggins] have always been good stewards of this resource," says Boon. "At the onset, the community identified things they wanted and things they didn't want, and we kept going back to that. That empowerment permeated through all our partners and the politicians." With a common vision and deep reserves of community spirit, the new era in this part of the province promises to be powered by a clean, green fossil fuel.

— JOE FITZGERALD



Jenna Boon: "One of the reasons I wanted to work on this project was to have a hand in the future of Joggins."

Back to basics



Michael Dennis (with the BioScrubber Green Degreasing System): "It's an effective, safe, green alternative to solvents."

SCOTT MUNN

With help from Earth's oldest organisms, a bioactive-technology company helps others clean up their act

For Michael Dennis, BlueBio Green Solutions Inc. is more than a company; it's a cause. He sells environmentally safe products and services that reduce toxic emissions, replace hazardous materials, and produce energy from waste. BlueBio provides clean solutions for dealing with such messy matters as garage solvents and restaurant grease.

Dennis launched BlueBio (www.bluebio.ca) in 2007; looking back,

he describes it as "a walk in the desert." He says it with a smile, though, because by its first anniversary this past April, the company had landed a client in each of two target markets: automotive garages and the restaurant service industry. BlueBio is now searching for new clients, sourcing additional proven products, and developing new processes at its 4,500-square-foot location in Musquodoboit Industrial Mall, not far from Halifax on Nova Scotia's eastern

shore. “We want to be the trusted source of proven green technology systems and services that make it easy for customers in business, government, and the public to go green,” says Dennis.

The 53-year-old Dartmouth native returned to his home province in 2003 from Montreal to head Genome Atlantic, an organization that funds commercial applications of DNA-based research. With two degrees from Dalhousie University—a bachelor of science and a master’s of science in biochemistry—and a doctorate in biochemistry from the Université de Montréal, Dennis accepted the position after a 25-year career that included stints at the National Research Council in Montreal and Paris’s Institut Pasteur. In 1991 he founded his own genomics company, Montreal-based BioSignal.

During Dennis’s tenure at Genome Atlantic, which ended in early 2007, the organization completed projects valued at \$17 million and raised over \$25 million to support new initiatives in Atlantic Canada. After spending three years there, however, he once again felt the entrepreneurial pull. “I saw an opportunity to apply innovations from the biotechnology sector and meet the growing demand for clean alternatives to common practices,” says Dennis. “My old work was to ‘find a drug for this rich person,’ ” he says. “But now it’s to have a positive long-term effect on sustainability and to accelerate the shift to green practices.”

BlueBio sells a range of products that include the BioScrubber Green Degreasing System. It is a stand-alone machine-degreasing system that works on patented bioactive technology. The system uses a biodegradable water-based cleaning solution containing natural, safe, and Environment Canada-approved microbes. The

microbes move throughout the machine, attacking and eating oil and grease particles. The contaminated fluid is continually cleaned and regenerated by the microbes.

Traditional methods for degreasing metal machine parts are petroleum-based solvents. “Solvents are toxic to humans, flammable, require special storage and handling, and contribute to smog and greenhouse gas emissions,” says Dennis. “The BioScrubber system is an effective, safe, and green alternative.”

Bob Yuille, the owner of Dartmouth, N.S.-based Yuille Auto Works, is BlueBio’s first customer of garage-focused products. “It’s the wave of the future, trying to be clean,” says Yuille. “I didn’t like the products we were using because they were very harmful to the environment. The brake cleaner, for example, was carcinogenic. I’m trying to protect my staff’s health, and the mechanics like the products.”

Dennis wants to do more than just clean things up; next he’d like to see waste turned into energy in the form of biodiesel. That’s where he’s heading with the restaurant-focused side of his business. BlueBio is providing its first restaurant customer, Big Leagues Dining Room and Lounge in Dartmouth, with a service to recover its cooking oil, then filter and recondition it. “This process prolongs the life of the oil,” says Dennis. “When the oil needs to be replaced weekly we collect it and store it, and we’ll eventually convert it into biodiesel.”

Down the road, Dennis envisions more companies being fuelled by their own waste, using the kinds of systems his company will provide. “Ultimately, I’d like to see communities get more involved in their own clean-energy production,” he says. “Our future goal is to be a leader in solutions for urban waste reduction and energy recovery in Canada.” — KATHRYN HARLEY HAYNES

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Products designed for the great outdoors are a big hit with both national and international customers of this family-owned business

by PETER MOREIRA

Back in the late 1980s, Curtis Levangie was faced with a challenge. A keen woodsman, he wanted to improve on a collapsible bucksaw that snowmobilers and all-terrain vehicle drivers could use in the back woods to clear trails. The saw had to be strong enough to cut through a tree that had fallen on a trail, but it also had to collapse into a tubular container that could be easily strapped to the vehicle.

CLEARING A

It took him three years, but in 1990 Curtis developed the Take-Down Buck Saw, and a Nova Scotian success story was born. "I took the product and refined it in such a way that it was workable on the trails," he says. In 1995 Curtis, now 65, launched Trail Blazer Products (www.trailblazerproducts.com) in Dartmouth, N.S., which now exports millions of dollars worth of woods-



SANDOR FIZLI



A PATH

All in the family: Curtis (left) and Shawn Levangie continue to grow their business.

“When the product was originally developed, it was a sporting-good item for bow hunters. Then we noticed that it fit into the lawn-and-garden category, so we expanded around that product” — **Shawn Levangie**

men and lawn-and-garden products to 42 countries. The products are designed mostly in Memramcook, N.B., and manufactured at the company's plant in Dartmouth's Burnside Industrial Park, where Trail Blazer employs 11 full-time staff.

Curtis' son, Shawn, 38, joined Trail Blazer in 1995 after completing a bachelor of commerce degree with a major in marketing at Saint Mary's University in Halifax. He began managing the company's marketing, and in May of 2007 he took over all of the business operations. “I certainly didn't see the company growing into what it is now,” admits Shawn. “I had an opportunity to start when I was fresh out of school, and I took on the challenge.”

By the time Shawn joined the company, his father had moved beyond just selling his Take-Down Buck Saw at local retailers and sporting goods shows. Propelled by the saw's success, the Levangies turned their minds toward new products, especially the rapidly growing market for garden products. They realized that there was a demand for another saw, one that could be attached to a pole to cut down high tree branches.

“When the product was originally developed, it was a sporting-good item for bow hunters,” says Shawn. “Then we noticed that it fit in the lawn-and-garden category, so we expanded around that product.” The result was the Xtend-A-Saw, which can be screwed on to a broom pole or anything like it. The popularity of that product led to a series of extendable products, including paint poles and shovels.

“When we come up with a concept, the senior executives get together to brainstorm on features that could make it a market leader,” says Shawn. Once they have a rough design for the product, they use the computer-assisted design (CAD)

expertise of Delisto Engineering of Memramcook. After the CAD design is complete, “We have the ability to estimate all of our production costs right away,” says Shawn, “and then we decide if the product is viable.” If it is, the product is then built in Dartmouth, with Scotia Scientific Inc. of Debert, N.S., supplying the plastics injections and Hawkins Industries Inc. of Shelburne, N.S., providing the fibreglass. “With the Take-Down Buck Saw, we had to go through a steep learning curve,” says Shawn. “But the design process for our product line is a lot faster now. The saw took three years [from concept to sale], and now we're doing three products in one year.”

Shawn's marketing skills gave the company the impetus it needed to attack new markets; it now generates about 65% of its revenue from export sales to stores such as L.L. Bean, True Value Hardware, and Wal-Mart in the U.S., and Manufactum and Globetrotter in Europe. Sales have been growing by 30% annually since 1995, largely by focusing on roughly 10 growth markets. “Our top 10 winners are markets in Canada and the U.S.,” says Shawn, “and European markets based out of Germany.”

Trail Blazer sells its products through 20,000 independent retailers, such as Home Hardware outlets, in Canada; North American and European markets have proven lucrative as well. The company currently has 63 sales representatives in all 50 U.S. states and in every Canadian province. “We're hoping to build on our

export market,” says Shawn, “and in one to two years start to develop a similar sales force in Europe.”

As part of the marketing and sales efforts, Shawn attends international trade shows to drum up business and usually participates in two or three trade missions each year, including those with Team Canada Atlantic, Nova Scotia Business Inc. (NSBI), and NSBI-World Trade Centre.

Through the trade missions, Shawn has come up against the argument of the cheaper cost of manufacturing in Asia compared to having his products made in Nova Scotia when talking to potential retailers. Unable to compete on costs, he has won clients through customer service, including a “satisfaction guaranteed or your money back” policy. “We really focus on the independent dealers like Home Hardware, Kent Building Supplies, and Atlantic Garden Centre,” says Shawn. “They want to please their consumers, and our job is to make their job as easy as possible.”

Shawn also asks what retailers want in terms of products and is interested in the feedback they're receiving from their customers. “The biggest key to success is to follow up, ask people what they want, and make sure you can deliver it,” he says. “Our clients know that if they call Trail Blazer and ask for something, we can do it.”

That formula is working; not only is Trail Blazer's business growing annually, but rising costs in China also mean that the fierce price competition of the past few years is easing. Though Shawn admits that commodity prices are increasing, the company can cope with the rises and has enough capacity to increase production at its Dartmouth plant.

Working with the company's account-

Through the trade missions, Shawn has come up against the argument of the cheaper cost of manufacturing in China. Unable to compete on costs, he has won clients through another means: customer service

ant, Grant Thornton LLP, and the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency, Shawn recently hired an efficiency expert specializing in manufacturing to assess operations. The result: the company has improved its output by almost 30%, which means that it should have no capacity problems for the next couple of years. Trail Blazer is also hiring a production co-ordinator to oversee the lean manufacturing processes and monitor inventory control.

The biggest challenge Shawn currently faces is that more than 20 companies have

approached him with product proposals. “They either want us to make the products or they want to make the products themselves under the Trail Blazer brand,” he says. He and his team are considering these proposals, but he knows that the company will have to adjust its production process to accommodate those partnerships. “What will not change is the focus on our quality products and our customer service,” says Shawn.

Something else remaining steadfast are the sales of the Trail Blazer Take-Down

Buck Saw, which are still moving briskly after almost two decades. The Levangies have tweaked the design here and there, but it is still the same practical, durable product that Curtis first developed, and it’s still the centrepiece of the company’s promotional literature. “That product has saved people’s lives,” says Shawn proudly. “It has allowed snowmobilers and ATV drivers to clear a track deep in the woods when they had to get out. This product has always sold with a lifetime warranty, but we don’t get any of them back because they just don’t break.” ■

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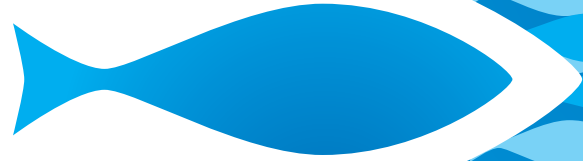
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PRDC

Going with the flow



Seafood exporters find new business opportunities and relationships abroad

BY JOE FITZGERALD

The nutrient-rich waters surrounding Nova Scotia have always been a marine breadbasket and a boon to the province's seafood industry. However, today's global market presents unique challenges. To keep afloat in the ever-changing seascape, Nova Scotia companies have been travelling to the world's largest annual seafood trade show, the European Seafood Exposition (ESE), to buy, sell, and test the waters of the world's seafood market.

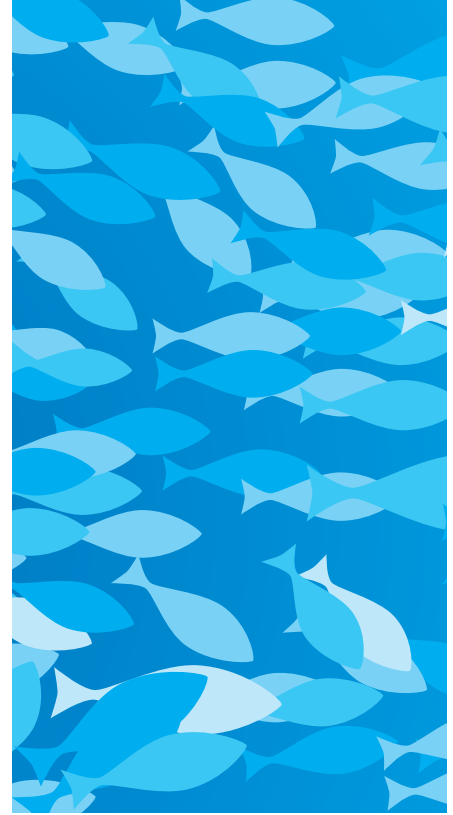
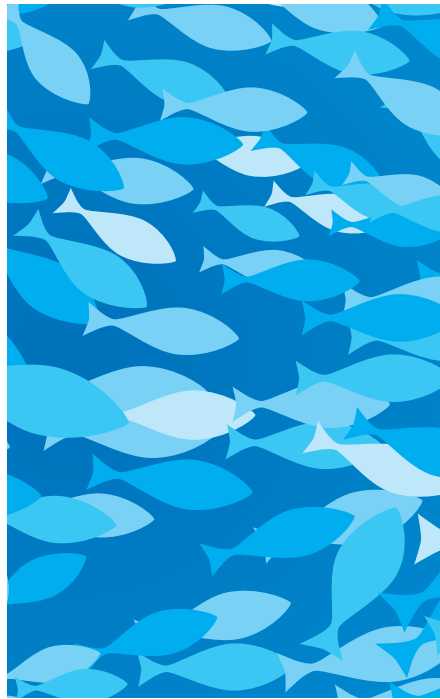
One of the big changes in today's seafood industry compared to past decades is the buyers. Because of mergers and acquisitions, large institutional buyers have a lot more influence in the process. "At one time we would go more through importers and brokers, and now, depending on the market you're going to, you're getting companies that are trying to get closer to the buyer," says Estelle Bryant, the senior planning and development officer with the Nova Scotia Department of Agriculture. "In some countries you had to go in through a licensed importer, which was the only way you could access the market. That's changing."

Bryant and her colleagues in other Atlantic provinces are planning to conduct a study that looks at a number of European Union countries to analyze how the buyer/distribution/client relationship has changed. From there they'll decide on whom they should be focusing their promotional material and efforts. "If your contact

point is the importer, chef recipe cards are not going to cut it," says Bryant. "How you reach that buyer changes. Just from being in the market and going to trade shows, we've realized that the distribution has changed quite a bit in the last few years." For example, at the ESE importers were provided with product sheets that included packing specifications, product forms, nutritional profiles, scientific names, harvesting seasons, the product name in other languages, and a brief description of the product.

In 2006 Nova Scotia landed \$656 million of seafood, comprising one third of the commercial value of Canadian landings that year. Lobster held the highest value: \$372,126,000 for 30,952 metric tonnes. Scallops followed at \$76,919,000, shrimp at \$45,825,000, crab at \$34,949,000, and haddock at \$26,342,000.

Preliminary data show that in 2007, Nova Scotia exported \$955 million of seafood worldwide, remaining No. 1 in the Canadian seafood-export market. Lobster continues to dominate the seafood-export market, with live exports making up 34.3% (\$325 million) in 2007, followed by frozen



shrimp at 10.5%, frozen crab at 9.8%, and frozen scallops at 8.6%.

Although there has always been solidarity with the U.S. markets, the fluctuating Canadian dollar has forced Canadian companies to start diversifying while keeping their American customers. With a 37% change in five years or less, and the price at the wharf barely changing, it's a big economic adjustment for companies; they can only increase their prices so much. Instead, companies have looked mainly to markets in Europe, because it is close geographically and transportation costs are lower, and also to Asia. "If you're a large company, you have somebody that looks after your hedging or you have a bank that does that for you," says Bryant. "If you're a smaller company, you don't have that. One successful but smaller company's strategy was one-third U.S., one-third Europe, and one-third Asia. Given the unpredictability of currency and how big an influence currency has on what you're selling, particularly if you're in a high-value game like lobster, currency has a tremendous influence on where you're selling."

Greg Digout, the sales manager of

Riverside Lobster and Seafood Inc. in Meteghan River, on Nova Scotia's French Shore, agrees. "Everybody in exports, especially on the lobster side, has felt the effects of the U.S. dollar, but this has been going on for the last three years," he says. "Smaller companies like Riverside can change the way we do things quite quickly, which is important for our business. For us it was a pretty easy transition to look more at Europe and Asia. Unfortunately, everybody's gunning for the same business."

With exports, especially lobster, Digout's business is in retraction right now; between 10 and 15 main export companies are all vying for the same business. It's making it tough for Riverside to maintain its profit line and grow its business. "I definitely think it's a cycle, and with the Canadian dollar being so strong it's not just the American dollar, it's all currencies," says Digout. "We're having problems with the Japanese yen, the Swedish kroner, the British pound. People think we're not selling anything into the U.S., but we're having

problems in all markets in all currencies. If the industry could afford to give fishermen seven or eight dollars a pound, they definitely would, but the margins aren't there, the markets aren't there."

The playing field is also changing with the expansion of the European Union. "We used to send a lot of products into Poland, but once it joined the EU there were tariffs placed on those products that weren't there before," says Bryant. "But the economy has improved, and now Poland has become a manufacturing centre, and there has been a lot of investment there from outside areas to develop seafood processing. So it's a changed market, and there are winners and losers."

In any given year, companies may be better off switching their sales to another market. One of the strengths of Nova Scotian companies is that they have always tended to have a product mix that allows them access to diverse markets. "There's a trend right now more toward the pelagic species [open-water fish like mackerel and herring] because we can't compete with Chinese productions," says Hugh Richards,

Best in show

The European Seafood Exposition (ESE), the largest seafood trade show in the world, is held annually in Brussels. The expo attracts exhibitors and buyers from more than 140 countries and showcases every category of seafood products, including fresh, canned, frozen, and value-added. Storage, processing, and handling equipment, as well as a host of seafood-related services, including freight-handling, insurance, and information technology, are also featured.

In April a delegation of 16 Nova Scotian business and government representatives travelled to the ESE to gauge the state of the market, explore new business opportunities, study existing products, and foster new relationships. To prepare the international market for their arrival, pre-promotional literature went out in magazines such as *Seafood International* that melded Nova Scotia into the Atlantic Canada brand.

"We wanted to maintain the identity of the Atlantic Canada brand separate from the



Canada brand because we are the strongest positioned in the market, we have integrated companies, and we have similar product mixes across all the provinces," says Alexa Vodicka, the program administration officer for the Nova Scotia Department of Agriculture. "The seafood industry doesn't localize their investments within provincial borders. The Atlantic provincial governments want to support their activities by working together."

The night before the ESE kicked off, the Atlantic delegation hosted an Atlantic Canadian showcase for the third consecutive year. Buyers were invited to the event, where a chef presented regional products to offer ideas on how to serve them. To help buyers achieve the right price point, products were explained and shown their full range of possibilities.

"When you attend the European Seafood Exposition, you realize that seafood is a currency," says Art Drysdale, a co-leader of Nova Scotia's recent delegation and a senior planning and development officer with the provincial Department of Agriculture in Halifax. "A load of herring going to Europe might change hands three times on a container boat by computer. The ESE is probably the project we work the most together on as an Atlantic region, because together we have over \$3 billion of export value, and you can start to carry a little bit of clout by combining the provinces. For example, together we're the world's largest exporter of Atlantic snow crab, and that levers us into situations where we can say yes, we can supply it, we can offer these different products." — J.F.

the vice-president of Breakers Fish Company Ltd. in Halifax. China is currently the world's largest seafood producer, primarily from aquaculture operations concentrating on shellfish. "Other than that, the pelagic business has been quite positive for us," adds Richards. "Every year we've increased our business because of new contacts. The world market is small; it's not like it was 20 or 30 years ago, when we were trying to make personal contact on the phone, which was very difficult."

Along with advanced communications technologies, European countries such as Denmark, Germany, and France are increasingly looking for high-quality products and are more conscious of health, versus the U.S. markets that predominately buy processed products for fried foods going into restaurants. A lot of buyers in global markets are looking for a third-party assurance of sustainability. The Marine Stewardship Council and Friends of the Sea are two international certifiers. This is particularly important in

Germany and the U.K. "Initially, sustainability certification wasn't really consumer driven as it was NGO [non-governmental organization]-driven with large buyers," says Bryant. "The large buyers saw sustainability certification as a point of difference that said we are environmentally friendly, we are sustainable, and we have this to offer you as consumers." Third-party certification is costly, however—another price pressure for an already squeezed industry.

Holly Reardon, the marketing director at Halifax-based Clearwater Fine Foods Inc., recognizes the importance of the trend. "That's the biggest change I saw, the face of how people were presenting themselves at the European Seafood Exposition this year. What I saw was the shifting or evolving message of sustainability, more so than the availability of quality designators that are always there. This year there was a major presence by the Marine Stewardship Council and many sessions about sustainability. I think more people are becoming concerned about sustainable fishing practices. One of our fisheries has been certified as sustainable, and three others are in the certification process."

Not all attendees from Nova Scotia were at the ESE to market their products. "We're sourcing certain raw materials, and ESE is a melting pot of the world of suppliers," says Margaret Harpell, the president of St. Mary's River Smokehouse in Sherbrooke, N.S. "So you're going to find or be able to meet with the who's who. I was looking for salmon and came away with leads and closed deals that had been in the works. Retailers are taking a 10% to 15% downturn in seafood sales. Fortunately, we haven't experienced that; in fact, we are still showing growth in the Canadian retail market. Obviously somebody's getting hit, but so far we seem to have avoided it. It helps that we continue to work on a number of new products that are different from the traditional smoked salmon products."

Nova Scotia's seafood diversity and the innovation to adapt and create new products should see the industry through the high swells of this economic squall. And after the waters calm, an ocean of opportunity will beckon. ■

STARBART

Fresh

A foodie tour of North America's oldest farmers' market

by Shelley Cameron-McCarron

“Did he go this way?” the woman asks, peering down a winding brick corridor. We had stopped to linger at a stall and had momentarily lost sight of Dennis Johnston. “We” are a group of eight self-proclaimed foodies who had gathered at 9 a.m. on a Saturday at the Halifax Farmers’ Market (www.halifaxfarmersmarket.com), after signing up for a guided tour led by Johnston, a culinary wizard and a star of Halifax’s dining scene.

“You’re standing in the oldest farmers’ market in North America,” says Johnston, when we meet him near the Hollis Street entrance to the historic Alexander Keith’s Brewery building, where the market is located. Behind him, a guitar player is strumming Simon and Garfunkel’s “America.” Parents wander by with babies in slings, followed by their older children, who are munching on cookies from one of the bakeries.

Johnston is the owner of Fid (www.fidcuisine.ca), a 40-seat restaurant on Dresden Row in downtown Halifax known for its Franco-Asian flare. “Fid is in its eighth year of operation,” Johnston tells us, “and our menu is almost entirely furnished directly from the farmers at this market.” A native Nova Scotian, Johnston spent 20 years working in





Dennis Johnston

AARON MCKENZIE FRASER

Montreal in restaurants such as Les Halles, Les Mignardises, and the Mediterraneo; while there, he also taught at the St. Pius X Culinary Institute. In 1999 he returned to Halifax and the following year opened Fid with his wife and business partner, Monica Bauché.

Arriving at the market at around 4:30 each Saturday morning, Johnston talks with the vendors as they unload their wares, foraging for the best of field and sea. His regular customers have been known to follow him around the market to get a glimpse of what their supper might be that evening; Fid's menu depends entirely on what's fresh that day. As Johnston works his way through the crowded thoroughfares, he stops to say hello, share a joke, and point out vendors by name. "What you're going to see is not a classic market in one sense, it's not just food," he says. "You'll see vendors who sell everything from organic pet treats, jewelry, soap, and hand-painted clothes to cards, hand-knit items, and flowers."

Market economy

Ted Hutton sits behind the Hutton Family Farm stall, which sells 19 types of apples, onions, sweet potatoes, brussel sprouts, carrots, beets, and kale. He hails from Lakeville, N.S., in the Annapolis Valley's agricultural belt, and has been a presence at the market for 22 years. "[The chefs who come here to shop] are open to trying new things," he says. "They'll incorporate something new into their menu if I recommend it."

Hutton picks a ripe Jonagold apple, a winter variety that's a cross between a Golden Delicious and a Jonathan, and begins to slice it. "This apple has a great taste and nice texture," he says, handing out pieces to those passing by. Across the aisle, another busy vendor is Maureen Legg, who gets up at 5 a.m. to travel from her Little Dorset Farm in the Musquodoboit Valley on Nova Scotia's eastern shore to be at the city market by 6 a.m.; her veal is on Fid's evening menu. "It's exceptional," says Johnston. "[Maureen and her family] raise

“We’re lucky with a lot of things here in Halifax, and the market is one of them”

— Dennis Johnston

Growing organically

“This place has been very good to us,” says Fred Kilcup, the manager of the Halifax Farmer’s Market. “Many of our customers really like this setting. I’ve been here for 20 years, and I really like it too.” But Kilcup is excited about the future and the plans that are underway to relocate the market to the Halifax waterfront in a new space called the Halifax Seaport Farmers’ Market.

The new building that will house the market will be environmentally ambitious. With nine windmills, two solar arrays, an extensive geothermal system, and a lush green roof, the building will be 80% more energy efficient than a similarly sized R2000 structure would require. From a business point of view, however, the new market’s real genius will be its flexibility. Currently, its vendors have six hours every week to sell their wares—that’s just 312 hours a year—a small retail window that puts a crimp in the vendors’ growth prospects. Kilcup



COURTESY LYDON LYNCH ARCHITECTS

predicts that the new space will immediately double the revenue generated by the market’s vendors: “Going from one day a week to as many as seven will mean a huge opportunity for growth.” —ANDY PEDERSEN

all of their own animals and grow their own grain. It’s that care and special attention that makes all the difference.”

Legg is proud of her farm’s veal, she says as she stands by her display case housing homemade tourtière, bacon, free-range chicken, wood-smoked ham, milk-fed pork, and homemade sausages. She has been coming to the market for more than 20 years and is starting to see her original customers’ children become clients. Legg and her husband, Ambrose, have been farming since 1981. “We don’t have a second job or income,” she says. “This is what we do for our living.”

As Johnston leads us into one of the market’s main arteries, we pass Foxhill Cheese from Port Williams, N.S., also in the Annapolis Valley, which offers seven kinds of Gouda, several flavours of gelato, and non-homogenized yogurt. The cheese is made solely from the milk of the farm’s 50-head herd of Holstein cows.

As the tour continues, we stop to chat with Norbert Kungl from Selwood Green Farms in Bramber, N.S., a community on the Minas Basin. Kungl is a German immigrant who has been coaxing fresh vegetables from beneath the soil since 1986. “I started very small and built the farm to become the sole income of the family,” he

says. “The nicest place to sell vegetables is here at the farmers’ market, because we get to interact with our customers and connect with them, as opposed to when we drop our vegetables off to be sold at retail stores. Customers here hold us accountable and rely on us.”

Kungl is looking forward to the market’s move to its new location near Pier 21 on the Halifax waterfront (see “Growing organically,” above). “It will be exciting because it’s a beautiful new space, which will create more ease of movement, there’ll be more parking, and maybe more variety,” he says. “People will still go there to buy their groceries and socialize. People come to the market to bump into other people they know.”

On the floor below Kungl’s stall, our group comes upon another of Johnston’s favorites: Boulangerie La Vendèenne, from Martin’s River, about an hour’s drive from the city. “There might be bread left,” says Johnston hopefully, “if we’re lucky.” The lineup of customers here is notorious. “We’re lucky to have him in Nova Scotia,” says Johnston of owner Jean-Marc Riant, who hails from France. “Boulangerie La Vendèenne is an original French bakery in the city.”

At the back of the market is a room full

of Nova Scotian ales, wines, and spirits, and where Johnston must leave us to head back to Fid to prepare lunch for our group. We have half an hour to explore on our own before being invited into his restaurant kitchen. When we arrive, we admire the neat clean space with rows of pots and pans on shelves lining the wall and spatulas and strainers hanging from the ceiling.

Tucked in a semi-circle, we watch culinary artistry in action as Johnston fills plates with jellied rose petals. He then slices, dices, and shreds fresh beets; adds seasoning to seared sea scallops; and drizzles oil on the amuse bouche he has just created. Appetizers are followed by “vegetable mayhem,” a signature dish featuring a medley of different-textured seasonable vegetables primarily garnered from the farms of Kungl and Hutton.

With two courses down and another to go—crispy-skin haddock, with fingerling potatoes seasoned with garlic and thyme, plus stir-fried spinach, all bought this morning—the chef’s talent for inventive cuisine is evident. “We’re lucky with a lot of things here in Halifax, and the market is one of them” says Johnston, as the members of our group sit to break bread together—bread from La Vendèenne, of course. ■

Invented by necessity, a lobster-banding machine expands to new markets

When the rubber hits the road

by TOM MASON

It started out as a friendly challenge and quickly morphed into a raging obsession. When Roland Swift's lobster-fishing cousin told him that he wished he had a machine that could automatically put rubber bands on the claws of lobsters, Swift said he could build one. Naturally inventive with little formal training, he had already developed a reputation for building mechanical devices. But the automatic lobster bander turned out to be a lot harder to make than he expected.

In 2004 Swift, now 43, spent hundreds of hours in his machine shop in Digby, N.S., building one system and one tiny moving part at a time. Dozens of prototypes ended up in the garbage. When things got particularly tough, the persistent inventor began keeping a notebook by his bedside in case he dreamed about the machine while he slept. "I would write down what I dreamt and come in and try it," he recalls. "Sometimes it would work, sometimes it wouldn't."

In April of 2005, the first prototype to make it onto his cousin's lobster boat worked for less than one out of 30 days of testing, but Swift refused to give up. He took the machine apart, redesigned it one more time, and the new prototype worked perfectly. Later that year Swift's machine was banding lobsters at the rate of 100 pounds in six minutes.

The finished product is striking in its simplicity. Elastic bands are sliced from a long rubber tube that looks like a brightly coloured bicycle inner tube. Four metal arms grab the elastic and snap it open, holding it so the lobster claw can be slipped inside. When the claw is in position, the operator presses a switch and the elastic snaps into place. The machine is totally pneumatic,



Roland Swift: "I figured that if I could put rubber bands on lobster claws, I could put them on vegetables and fluorescent light bulbs and hockey sticks too."

SANDOR FIZLI

gaining its power from compressed air and a network of thin plastic tubes. No electricity is required, meaning it can be used on lobster boats operating in remote locations.

Lobster fishermen in Digby were duly impressed, enough so that in 2006 Swift was able to quit his job as a Nova Scotia Department of Transportation truck driver and snow plow operator and form MorSwift Machines Inc. (www.morswiftmachines.com) to build and market his new invention. He even secured \$60,000 in local investment money. It seemed as though he had the beginnings of a profitable business, but it didn't take long for fate to throw him another curve ball. Around the same time that he launched MorSwift, the lobster fishery took a sudden downturn, leaving most fishermen unwilling to shell out \$12,000 for an automatic lobster-banding machine.

"It was a great idea, and everybody told me I was going to be a millionaire, then lobstering went into a slump," says Swift, who had no intention of throwing in the towel. "I saw rubber bands on other things, and I figured that if I could put them on lobster claws, I could put them on vegetables and fluorescent light bulbs and hockey sticks too."

With no market studies or purchase orders, Swift set to work redesigning his machine one more time. When it was ready, he started taking it around to packaging companies. "We started by introducing it to people who had done banding by hand, and they liked it," he says. Swift's latest creation is a machine that he has dubbed the RBV, a vertically oriented version of an earlier horizontal machine. It's one of the most revolutionary pack-



“Anything you can put tape or vinyl strapping around, we can do it with a rubber band, hundreds of times faster than you can do it by hand” — Roland Swift

aging machines on the market today, according to its inventor. “Anything you can put tape or vinyl strapping around, we can do it with a rubber band, hundreds of times faster than you can do it by hand and more efficiently.”

Speed and efficiency are only two of the RBV’s selling points; the machine is also safer on the environment. “We’re cutting down on packaging,” says Swift. “Companies like Wal-Mart use huge amounts of tape and vinyl strapping. All of that is garbage once you use it. A rubber band isn’t. Once you take it off, you can use it for something else. Everybody knows that. If you have a rubber band on your mail, what do you do? You put it in a little cup on your desk, and when you’re ready you use it

for something else.” Thanks to last year’s tainted-spinach crisis, American law will soon require vegetables to be stamped with field of origin and other information. Swift is already working on a machine that can stamp that information onto rubber bands as it wraps them around the vegetables.

The same tenacity that Swift has shown from the outset is apparent in his choice of locations for his business. He is determined to keep his operation in Digby, an economically challenged part of Nova Scotia where jobs are scarce. Part of it is a desire to create jobs and give back to the town that stuck by him while he was creating his company. But Digby is more than a two-hour drive from the regional centre of Halifax, and an unusual place to operate a specialized busi-

ness with international customers.

With no local packaging companies currently using his machines, it’s also hard to perform field tests on new prototypes. Instead, Swift has found a giant vegetable-packaging company outside of Nova Scotia that has been willing to work with him on beta testing, the last stage of testing before commercial release. “We don’t have any customers in Nova Scotia,” he says. “All of them are in Quebec, Ontario, Alberta, B.C., and the United States. For a small company like ours, to try to do R&D and beta testing, it means I have to drag one of our machines out of province every couple of weeks, which is expensive. That’s our biggest challenge right now.”

Cash flow was another challenge Swift

Welcome additions

Increasing the diversity of its communities
is a high priority for Nova Scotians

by TOM MASON

Like many immigrants, Dr. Balakrishnan Prithiviraj's journey to Nova Scotia was a convoluted one. The Indian-born microbiologist first arrived in Canada in 1998, when he went to Montreal to do post-doctoral work at McGill University. He later took up a research position at the University of Colorado.

Prithiviraj and his wife, Kalyani, a molecular biology researcher, quickly fell in love with the beauty of the Rocky Mountains and the fast-paced milieu of the university town of Fort Collins, on the outskirts of Denver. After living there for more than three years, it wasn't easy to uproot again and move to Truro, N.S., in 2005, but an opportunity with Acadian Seaplants Limited (ASL) and the Nova Scotia Agricultural College (NSAC) was too good to pass up.

Today Prithiviraj is an assistant professor and the Industrial Research Chair at NSAC (www.nzac.ca), a position that is partially paid for by ASL (www.acadianseaplants.com). He spends 80% of his workweek conducting research for the seaweed-processing company, unravelling DNA to find out what makes certain species of seaweed such good plant fertilizers. The other 20% of his time is spent teaching. It's a unique arrangement, he says, and a big part of the reason he and his wife chose Nova Scotia as their new home (Kalyani also works in her field at NSAC). "I don't know of any other place in the world where you could work so closely with private industry and have a research position at a university at the same time," he says. With three industrial patents and more than 70 published papers in some of the world's most prestigious science journals to his credit, Prithiviraj was a huge catch for both the NSAC and ASL.

Foreign talent has long been an essential resource for ASL, starting more than a decade ago when the company recruited Dr. Raul Ugarte from Chile to head its seaweed resource-science department. It also has a number of marketing representatives on staff, hailing from such countries as Brazil, Venezuela, China, Japan, and Bangladesh.

More than 25 years ago, ASL began developing fertilizers, beauty additives, food ingredients, animal-feed additives, edible seaweeds, and a host of other products using common seaweeds that



Dr. Balakrishnan Prithiviraj (right) and Dr. Alan Critchley of Acadian Seaplants, in the lab at the Nova Scotia Agricultural College.

“I don’t know of any other place in the world where you could work so closely with private industry and have a research position at a university at the same time” — Balakrishnan Prithiviraj

it both harvests from the sea and grows at its huge land-based commercial cultivation facility in Charlesville, N.S.—it’s the only operation of its kind in the world. The Nova Scotia-based company has 300 employees in eight countries, grosses over \$30 million annually, and is the largest producer of seaweed-based specialty products on the planet, processing nearly 36,300 tonnes of seaweed every year.

Dr. Alan Critchley is ASL’s vice-president of research. He’s also an immigrant; he was born in England and was working in France in 2005 when he was invited to move to Nova Scotia by ASL president Jean-Paul Deveau. Critchley was attracted by the Charlesville facility in particular—“the dangling carrot,” as he calls it—a seaweed scientist’s version of an amusement park. In a field as narrow as seaweed production, he says it’s not surprising that the company has to scour the world looking for top experts, but ASL doesn’t just hire scientists from foreign countries. Because it sells most of its products to countries outside North America, hiring immigrants to market to those countries is also vital. “Acadian Seaplants is successful because it has a staff that understands the nuances of the various cultures it does business with,” says Critchley. “They speak the language and they know how business works in those countries.”

Some of ASL’s marketing talent comes from the Metropolitan Immigrant Settlement Association (MISA, www.misa.ns.ca). The Halifax-based organization offers a six-week job-placement program that gives newly landed immigrants a chance to work for companies in Nova Scotia in unpaid positions to test the work environment against their skills. “The programs that our organization provides are essential for immigrants who often arrive in Nova Scotia without an established support network of family and friends,” says MISA executive director Claudette Legault.

The way immigration typically happens is that a few pioneers move to a region and pave the way for relatives, friends, and others from their home country. It’s critical mass, which is what makes places such as Toronto and Winnipeg so successful at attracting and keeping immigrants, and what puts Nova Scotia, without a high level of recent immigration activity, at a disadvantage. “Once an immigrant community has developed a critical mass,” says Legault, “it can act like a magnet in attracting other people from the same area.”

SHARING STORIES

Some Nova Scotia immigrants told their stories at the recent Metropolis Conference, which was held in Halifax in early April. The conference was hosted by the Halifax-based Atlantic Metropolis Centre (AMC), one of five such centres across the country. Established in 2004, the AMC (atlantic.metropolis.net) investigates factors that influence population migrations to and from the region. The research priorities of the AMC are attracting and retaining new immigrants to Atlantic Canada. The centre is

Helping with the transition

The Metropolitan Immigrant Settlement Association (MISA) was created in 1980, in response to one of Canada’s most dramatic influxes of refugees: the Vietnamese boat people, who fled their home country in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. “We began with a couple of volunteers, one table, and one chair,” says MISA executive director Claudette Legault. Today the organization has evolved into a vital resource for thousands of immigrants and refugees living and working in Nova Scotia, with a roster of more than 200 volunteers and 45 full- and part-time employees.

MISA has experienced many firsts throughout its history, but one of the accomplishments Legault is most proud of is the pioneering work it has done with immigrant entrepreneurs. For more than a decade, MISA has been running programs to help newcomers establish businesses. “In the early ’90s, we began to see a significant number of entrepreneurs immigrating to Nova Scotia, so we introduced services to help them succeed,” says Legault. “It’s pretty hard to start a business at any point, let alone if you’ve never lived in the country you’re doing business in.”

There are other innovative programs as well. A six-week unpaid placement program called New Beginnings allows immigrants to work with an employer to see if their skills fit, but with no obligation for the employer to pay or hire the person at the end of the term. Legault calls it a kind of extended job interview: “We’ve had hundreds of companies participate in the program, everyone from large companies like Michelin to three-person IT firms. We’ve had a huge success rate for both participants and employers. A lot of times, the company will realize that this is just the person they need.”

More often than not, language is the biggest hurdle. MISA works closely with the Halifax Immigrant Learning Centre to offer a range of language and communication courses tailored for the needs of job seekers. “We will talk to employers, find out where [the immigrant’s] weaknesses are, and then work to strengthen those areas,” says Legault. “It could be filling out forms, talking on the telephone, or giving a PowerPoint presentation.”

In recent years, MISA has also begun reaching out to the broader community, conducting public-information sessions and breaking down the systemic barriers that exist around employment qualifications, such as the lack of recognition of immigrant training, education, or experience. “By nature, Nova Scotians are friendly welcoming people, but they don’t always understand the challenges that immigrants face,” says Legault. “We’re trying to change that.” —T.M.



A reception at Pier 21 in Halifax for April's Metropolis Conference.



Round table discussion on immigration issues.

managed by the following three Maritime universities: Saint Mary's University (www.smu.ca), Dalhousie University (www.dal.ca), and l'Université de Moncton (www.umoncton.ca).

An important forum on immigration issues, the event attracted more than 900 professors, policy-makers, representatives of immigrant groups and industries, and government officials from across Canada. The 10th annual conference, held at the World Trade and Convention Centre, is just a kilometre away from Pier 21, Canada's shrine to immigration. In the days when immigrants arrived by ship rather than airplane to begin their new lives, this unassuming harbourside landmark was the first piece of Canadian soil most ever set foot on.

Amid the gala receptions, the art exhibitions, and tours of Pier 21 (www.pier21.ca) and the Black Cultural Centre (www.bccns.com), the conference featured three days of frank discussions, workshops, and round tables on the issues that new immigrants face upon arriving in this country. Metropolis looked at issues such as regional disparity, how provinces such as Nova Scotia can compete with the siren song of Western Canadian jobs, and how immigrant families can best adjust to their new lives in a foreign place. But one idea was repeated often: immigrants must be seen as much more than just workers to fill job descriptions. They are thinkers, soccer coaches, cooks, helpful neighbours, and patrons of churches, theatres, and concert halls—social and cultural fuel for the province and the country who bring everything from their ethnic cuisine and language to their unique world perspectives to their adopted home.

"This was the first time a national Metropolis Conference has been held in Atlantic Canada," says Madine VanderPlaat, a professor at Saint Mary's University and director of the AMC (of which Saint Mary's is also the administrative lead), as well as the chair of the Metropolis Conference's organizing committee. "The post-conference evaluations were positive and spoke to the quality of the panel discussions. It was

a huge success."

Marguerite Cassin is a professor in Dalhousie University's school of public administration and a director of the AMC. She says that Nova Scotia faces some unique challenges when it comes to attracting and keeping immigrants, but with a rapidly aging population, it's vital to bring new people into the region. Right now, less than 3.5% of Atlantic Canadians were born in other countries, while the national average is 20%.

"The first thing we've done right as a province is that we understand how important immigration is," says Cassin. "Now we need to follow it up, by figuring out what we do best and working on that. To be successful, we need to attract individuals and families to this province who don't need to live in a culture that's familiar to them."

Refugees are an excellent resource, says Legault, even if they don't have professional skills. Cassin agrees. "The last two Governors General of Canada came to this country as refugees," she says. "Refugees are incredibly resilient and they have a strong work ethic." They are loyal too; Cassin recounts a story of a Colombian political refugee whom MISA recently assisted, a man who chose to stay in Nova Scotia even though his skills garnered attractive job offers in other parts of the country. "He said his first choice was to stay here, because 'Nova Scotia was the place that took us in.' For a lot of immigrants, Nova Scotia is the right fit, and they don't want to move again."

Balakrishnan Prithiviraj agrees with that sentiment. The fears that he and his family had about leaving Colorado and moving to Nova Scotia have largely been assuaged. "I love this place, even better than Colorado," he says. "It's not over-commercialized. Five minutes outside of Truro and you're in beautiful countryside. In 30 minutes you're at the beach. Metro is close by. Everything is in reach. Nova Scotia is a good place to raise my children. They love it here, and so does my wife. I don't see a place better than this for us." ■



Two Scotlands

Leveraging cultural ties between old and new Scotland will provide economic opportunity for both places

You need look no further than in any Nova Scotia phone book for last names starting with “Mac” to recognize the strong cultural ties we share with Scotland. It’s common knowledge that our relationship dates back 400 years to the early 17th century, when Sir William Alexander began colonizing “New Scotland” at Port Royal, N.S. Today more than 4.5 million people in Canada claim Scottish heritage, and almost one-third of Nova Scotian residents claims Scottish ancestry.

There is a growing desire among both business and government in the province to rekindle the connection between Nova Scotia and Scotland by moving beyond such cultural elements as a shared love and talent for Celtic music. For the past 18 months, Scotland has had its eyes opened to the potential economic advantages that Nova Scotia has to offer following several trade missions in Stirling, which is centrally located halfway between Edinburgh and Glasgow. Provincial Finance Minister Michael Baker, Community Service and Communications Minister Judy Streach, and Conservative politician Gerald Keddy, among others, have attended these missions. The head of the Scottish government, First Minister Alex Salmond, has expressed his desire to promote stronger economic and cultural ties with Nova Scotia, and Nova Scotia Premier Rodney MacDonald wishes to reciprocate.

Now we must leverage our cultural ties and push open as many doors as possible to take advantage of potential economic opportunities in trade, education, and tourism. Some Nova Scotian businesses are already ahead of the curve. Representatives of Lewis Mouldings, a family-owned business in Weymouth, recently visited Stirling to investigate ways to break into the British market. Jim Reid, originally from Edinburgh, immigrated to Bridgewater in 2004 and continued working as the CEO of Green Solutions North America Inc, an international

corporate-recycling solutions company he helped found. Then there’s Scottish entrepreneur Sir Tom Farmer, a self-made billionaire who visited Nova Scotia in January and who is expected back to announce a large investment in a company in King’s County.

The educational institutions of both Nova Scotia and Scotland have solid reputations, so it should come as no surprise that 40 schools and three universities in Scotland are interested in establishing exchange programs with Nova Scotian schools. International students can be a huge economic driver; they bring an estimated \$120 million to the province annually. And students who end up returning to Scotland will still benefit the province, spreading word of their time here and leveraging the contacts they’ve made as they continue to do business at home.

Although Scotland is located across the pond, Nova Scotia’s geographic position in Canada makes it one of the closest provinces to Europe. Glasgow is only a 5.5-hour direct flight from Halifax via Zoom airlines, which is less time than it takes to fly to Vancouver. That short flight time brings access to a prosperous nation of 5.5 million English-speaking people.

As for a tourism boost, just picture scores of Scottish tourists among the many international visitors wandering along Halifax’s waterfront boardwalk during the summer. Gordon Banks, one of Scotland’s MPs in the British parliament, recently met with provincial tourism leaders and Premier MacDonald to discuss how both the United Kingdom and Nova Scotia could work together to ensure that both countries can increase their tourism revenue. “Nova Scotia is pushing at a door already half open to Scotland,” says Banks. “A little push, and it’ll swing the rest of the way.” — **IAN RUSSELL**

Ian Russell is principle of The New Wave International Business Development. He can be reached at benview7@netscape.net.

“Nova Scotia is pushing at a door already half open to Scotland. A little push, and it’ll swing the rest of the way”

— Scottish MP Gordon Banks

faced. Funding to develop his products and his market came from the Digby–Clare Community Business Development Corporation, the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency (www.acoa.ca), and the Business Development Bank of Canada (www.bdc.ca). Swift anticipates he'll need to raise another \$1.2 million to progress his company's growth. His bottom line improved recently, when MorSwift won the first provincial I-3 Technology Start-up Competition, managed by InNOVAcorp (www.innovacorp.ca). MorSwift's RBV beat 121 other competitors from five regions across the province to claim the \$100,000 first prize.

THE CLINCHER

Dan MacDonald, InNOVAcorp's president and CEO, says the decision to declare Swift the winner of the I-3 Competition was a unanimous one for the judges. Despite a large number of high-quality competitors, the Digby inventor stood out right from the start. "Roland is passionate about what he's doing," says MacDonald. "He's not someone who's sat in a room coming up with an idea on paper. He has gone to the broccoli fields in California, he's been on the lobster boats and in the packing rooms in Montreal and Toronto, developing a product that works like no other product around. He has shown his tenacity and his creativity. His product is unique, and he's done a good job protecting it with patents. At the same time, he's gotten funding to get the company off the ground. There was no one else in the competition who had the whole package like that."

For now, Swift is selling his machines one at a time. Most of his potential customers don't use rubber bands now to package their products, so it's up to him to convince them that it's the way to go. A print-shop manager challenged him to put rubber bands around 13,000 magazines, a job that he expected would take more than 60 hours. Swift showed up with two banding machines and completed the job in 12 hours. Meanwhile, a crab processor in New Brunswick has increased its processing capacity from 1.2 million pounds to three million pounds in one year by installing several of MorSwift's machines. With that kind of production potential, the market is huge. ■

Igniting the spark

In April of 2006, InNOVAcorp developed a competition that would showcase innovative businesses operating in Cape Breton: the first I-3 Technology Start-up Competition. "We knew there was a lot of great entrepreneurial activity happening in Cape Breton," explains InNOVAcorp president and CEO Dan MacDonald, "but it was hard for us to identify. Our staff came up with the I-3 Competition as a way of engaging entrepreneurs and the community to identify these businesses. Eighteen submissions were received and scored and feedback was provided. From there we chose five finalists, then narrowed it down to three, and then the winner was named. It was a phenomenal success."

So successful, in fact, that in September of 2007 InNOVAcorp took the competition province wide, attracting 121 businesses

from five economic zones. Each zone winner received cash and services totalling \$100,000 and faced off against each other for grand-prize bragging rights. A self-cleaning pill dispenser, a shipping system for live seafood, an interactive video game to improve hockey skills, and a web-based management system for the music industry were among the finalists, with Digby-based MorSwift Machines Inc. finishing as the overall winner. Breaking the competition



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InNOVAcorp president and CEO Dan MacDonald speaks at the I-3 Competition reception.

up into five regions was vital, according to MacDonald. "We knew if we had businesses in Yarmouth competing against businesses in Halifax, we wouldn't get the community support that we needed." Judges in each region included lawyers, accountants, entrepreneurs, and community leaders.

The I-3 Competition was an important way of flushing out high potential start-up companies, says MacDonald, only about 20% of which were known to InNOVAcorp before the competition began. It was also an important exercise in branding InNOVAcorp, letting innovators who are outside of the Halifax business milieu learn about the agency that exists to help them develop their ideas and businesses.

"Innovations are important for the future of any economy, but it's hard for a lot of innovative entrepreneurs to get the visibility they need to truly succeed," says MacDonald. —T.M.

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- Environmental Industries
- Food and Beverages
- Forest Industries/Pulp & Paper
- Government
- Import/Export Services
- Information Technologies and Telecommunications/Related Services
- Medical and Health Care Products and Services
- Mining & Energy
- Non-Profit Organizations/Association

- Ocean Industries and Offshore
- Retail Wholesale
- Tourism/Travel Accommodation
- Transportation Other (please specify) _____

4. How many employees are in your organization? (please check one)

- 1-10 11-25 26-50 51-100
- 101-500 501-1000 over 1000

5. Which best describes your job function? (please check one)

- Owner/Executive Management Senior Management
- Departmental Management Marketing Management
- Other (please specify) _____

6. The budget you manage is: (please check one)

- Under \$500,000 \$500,001 - \$1,000,000
- \$1,000,001 - \$10,000,000 Greater than \$10,000,000

7. The primary function of your business is: (please check as many as apply)

- Service Importing Manufacturing Exporting

8. Does your company plan to: (please check one)

- Expand facilities within the next 3 years?
- Open new facilities within the next 3 years?

9. Were you born in Nova Scotia?

- Yes No

10. Did you attend university or community college in Nova Scotia?

- Yes No

11. Have you ever worked in Nova Scotia?

- Yes No

12. If you do not live in Nova Scotia, are you currently doing business here?

- Yes No

continued on next column

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