



‘Philosopher BUSINESSMAN’

Busy restaurateur lives intentional life committed to environmentalism as well as culinary flair

BY BARBARA AGGERHOLM
PHOTOGRAPHY • DEAN PALMER

The walls tell tales in the red brick home of environmentalist-restaurateur Bob Desautels.

Desautels is himself a storyteller, but that’s not likely how you know him. The popular Woolwich Arrow, known as “the Wooly” in Guelph; Borealis Grille and Bar in Guelph and in Kitchener; and Mijidaa café and bistro in Guelph are owned and operated by the Neighbourhood Group of Companies, of which he is founder, group director and chair.

The restaurants are trailblazers in serving locally produced fare and operating in a manner that treads as softly as possible on the environment.

As you walk around the restaurateur’s home on a narrow street with lush backyard gardens near downtown Guelph, it becomes clear that family, history and the environment, as shown in vivid art works on his walls, are important to him.

Desautels’ eclectic art collection includes a

grandmother’s oil paintings and pictures by restaurant workers, some of whom went on to careers in art. Former employee Patrick Moore’s large sketch in white chalk on a black-painted canvas of an old trestle bridge high above the trees draws the attention of guests who never fail to congregate in Desautels’ kitchen. The room is designed like a restaurant kitchen with cupboards tucked away in a pantry and a small wine cooler within reach.

“On New Year’s Eve, there were 16 people and everyone stayed here,” he says.

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On this day, before sitting down to talk about his life and his commitment to run his restaurants in an Earth-conscious way, Desautels shares a dramatic story about one artwork in particular that hangs on the wall of one room. It’s the actual exit door of a Lancaster bomber, the very same plane in which his veteran father, Robert Desautels of Montreal, flew during the Second World War.

“It almost makes me cry to tell the story,” he says.

Bob Desautels is founder of the Neighbourhood Group of Companies, which operates four restaurants in Kitchener and Guelph.

“Instead of grabbing a microphone, (Bob Desautels) chose to teach by doing, or by example.”

BRYAN GILVESY

The plane door, labelled “To Open Pull Ring / Parachute Exit,” came from the nose of the Lancaster bomber that carried his father and six other men before crashing in France on July 19, 1944. His father was able to parachute out. He was the lone survivor.

“He would have been lying on that,” Desautels says, pointing to the Lancaster door.

His father, who was Québécois, joined the French underground, Desautels says, and tried to make his way to Switzerland with a group of French men. But they were captured and the French underground members were executed. His father, who was still wearing his dog tags, was thrown in jail in Épernay, France.

He escaped from jail before the Germans were to evacuate the town and he found a local cathedral where he told a priest he was Canadian.

The priest did not want to fall into a trap. In an exchange related in the book “The Evaders” by Edmund Cosgrove, which tells the story of Robert Desautels and seven other Second World War airmen shot down over occupied Europe, the priest said: “A Canadian, eh? Do you happen to know my good friend, the Bishop of Montreal, Monsignor Plessis?”

“The only Bishop of Montreal I know by that name died in the 18th century,” he told the priest, according to author Cosgrove.

“So he (the priest) took him to the convent down the road and hid him until the town was liberated,” Desautels says.

Many years later, in the mid-1970s, Robert Desautels returned to the convent in France to thank the Mother Superior for hiding him.

Amazingly, his father found the tree where he had landed in his parachute.

“The clips were still in the tree over 30



Among the artwork in Bob Desautels' home is this exit door from the Lancaster bomber his father escaped from during the Second World War.

years later,” Desautels says.

With help from the Canadian air force, which had brought many “evaders” back to France, Desautels’ family became acquainted with people in the town where his father’s plane crashed. Desautels found townspeople who had kept pieces of his father’s Lancaster, including the exit door hanging on his wall today.

“The piece had been in a field.”

Robert Desautels died of heart disease in 1983 at age 63. He requested that his gravestone note the day he was shot down.

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Friends call Desautels a “philosopher businessman.”

He’s also an award-winning environmentalist, an author, a wine aficionado (he has just finished updating his first book, “WineSense: The Three Keys to Understanding Wine”), and an exceptional golfer who once played professionally on the Australian tour and Canadian circuit.

He has a bachelor of commerce, majoring in hospitality and tourism, from the University of Guelph. Interested in comparative religions, he later earned a master’s degree in philosophy. He taught at the university over a 10-year period, ending in 1991.

He learned to question when he was a child.

“Especially Sunday nights, we always had discussions about things you’re not supposed to talk about – money, sex, not much religion. I love arguing and my Dad loved arguing.”

Though he rejected the repetition he found in church services, he read the Bible’s New

Testament two or three times when he was a teen growing up in Montreal. He credits the book “Zen in the Art of Archery” with helping his professional golf game when he was in his 20s. At university, he took a course in Greek to compare Bible translations.

Today, he enjoys relaxing in a small meditation room that he created in the basement of his home where he listens to the music of pianist Glenn Gould or reads the Tao. There’s a rug on the floor, photographs of his grandchildren on the wall, a Buddhist figure and a poster with the quotation:

“Thoughts become words / Words become actions / Actions become habits / Habits become character / Watch your character / For it becomes your destiny.”

A collector of favourite quotations since he was a teen, he’s now writing his second

book with his reflections inspired by those sayings.

He quotes Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu, considered the founder of Taoism, in his email signature: “The way to do is to be.”

It’s that philosophy that helped drive his two-year effort to gain a B Corporation Certification for his company, a recent designation that notes his restaurants’ high social and environmental performance, accountability and transparency.

The certification, from a non-profit organization, has been given to only three other Canadian restaurants and to 13 restaurants worldwide.

“We’re the largest restaurant group in the world to have B Certification,” he says.

The restaurants have converted to “carbon neutral” – by heating water with solar panels and using “carbon offsets” (offsetting carbon emissions by funding activities that improve the environment); and by composting food waste and using green power sources such as Bullfrog Power.

Vegetable waste is stored in freezers and picked up by a pork producer.

The Neighbourhood Group of Companies also provides benefits to all employees, a rare thing in the restaurant business, Desautels says. In addition, the restaurants take part in community projects such as sponsoring music series at concert halls in Guelph and Kitchener, raising money for the Grand River Conservation Foundation and partnering to plant thousands of trees. He and his young granddaughters have helped in the plantings.

“We’ve raised \$150,000 for river work since 1993. Now we (give) about \$20,000 a year to Grand River Conservation Foundation,” he says, adding that the aim is to help build the new Guelph Lake Nature Centre Complex.

His goal is to help children help the environment, he says.

“I don’t have any faith in my generation as the boomer generation,” says Desautels, who is 63. “I think they morphed into the ‘me generation’ and became the establishment.

“I’d rather focus on children.”

His guiding philosophy is reflected on the company website where he quotes sources as diverse as Chief Seattle, an ancestral leader of the Suquamish tribe born in 1786, and the rock band the Moody Blues.

Chief Seattle said: “We do not inherit the Earth from our parents; we borrow it from our children,” Desautels points out. He identifies with a Moody Blues album title: “To Our Children’s Children’s Children.”

“Acting locally with environmentally sustainable business practices is really for our Children’s Children’s Children from whom we are borrowing this earth,” he writes on the website.

In 1983, Desautels became a founding member of the Green Party of Canada.

The year before, he and his Australian-born wife, Sue, “thought we didn’t really embrace the ‘me generation’ and consumer society” and were considering a change. Their children, Emily and Court, were three and five.

“We thought: wouldn’t it be fun to raise the children in a nice, quaint place and not be overwhelmed with advertising and buy, buy, buy.” The couple did their research and chose the Falkland Islands as a place with a similar society and values.

“Before we could do anything, in six months there was the Falkland War and the island was covered with landmines.”

After the Green Party convention, “we decided to stay here and express our values. I wanted to express our values through work.”

Sue, who met Desautels when he was a university student and they were both serving in a Muskoka hotel restaurant, describes her husband as “patient and tolerant.

“I know what he goes through with staff and project proposals. He just seems to work through it.”

In turn, he describes Sue, who retired six years ago from university administration, as “exuding joy. I want to be around people like that because the people you’re

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“We have a term at the restaurants – ‘no skunking’ – because the moods affect everyone by osmosis.”

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Desautels opened his first restaurant, La Maison, in Guelph in 1985, and sold it almost three years later. He was teaching at the university at the same time and managing both was “too much.”

In 1991, he resigned from the university. He found a business partner in longtime friend Jean-Pierre Schoch, bought back La Maison and turned it into “the Woolly” with craft beers and local game meats. Desautels found investors and opened five pub properties – in Guelph, Peterborough, Ottawa, Toronto and Kingston.

From 2000 to 2006, he sold all of them except for the Woolwich Arrow where he put his focus. He started Borealis in Guelph in 2008, another Borealis in Kitchener in

2011 and Mijidaa café and bistro in 2015.

The fare at Mijidaa, which is Ojibwa for “let’s eat,” he says, “is a fusion as much as possible with three cuisines, mainly French, English and indigenous influences and putting it in a modern context.”

“We give a nod to the Vikings and Norsemen and Portuguese” who visited Canada before the early explorers. The menu includes hay-smoked Arctic Char, herb bannock, elk and smoked brie burger, wild salmon and Prince Edward Island mussels.

Despite the challenges, he stayed committed to local food and the environment.

“It’s hard because local food costs more than imported food in many, many cases and it costs money upfront to put in solar panels,” Desautels says.

Schoch, a fellow golfer and wine aficionado, respects his friend’s easygoing way

with people, keen business sense and his superior golf game. “He’s not motivated by money and I think we have that in common,” Schoch says. “I think he’s sort of a philosopher businessman and he’s a good businessman.”

Desautels says 2015 was the best ever in profitability. “This year, we seem to be even getting better.”

“You have more people carrying the torch,” says Desautels’ son, Court Desautels, group leader and chief operating officer of the Neighbourhood Group of Companies.

Court, who started working in his father’s restaurants when he was 11, returned from Australia where he was working in fine dining restaurants and bars to help his father open Borealis in Guelph.

Canadians’ dedication to eating local food doesn’t yet match that of Australians, he says. After a typhoon destroyed many banana plantations in Australia, people

lined up to buy bananas at \$12 a kilo “just to say ‘We support our banana farmers.’”

Court, 38, says it can be difficult sourcing and serving local food, but “learning hard lessons and sticking with it becomes imbedded in your DNA.”

“My father is relentless in his pursuit of what’s good,” he says.

Once this summer, a supplier dropped off carrots from Israel. “We sent them back.”

His father found top-notch beef at Y U Ranch, a farm in Tillsonburg that raises grass-fed Texas Longhorn cattle.

Court recently took a group of employees to the ranch to show them why its beef is superior.

“Would we be proud of every item here (at the restaurants)? I say we are.”

But it wasn’t easy during the first couple of years at Borealis in Guelph, Court says. “We needed to cut costs and my father says, ‘no, stick with it. . . . We have to

keep pushing the envelope.’ Year three was profitable and Borealis in Kitchener was profitable from the beginning.”

Bryan Gilvesy, owner of Y U Ranch, praises Desautels for being an “unassuming leader.”

“If you follow the conversation about the great environmentalists in Canada, I think Bob always gets overlooked,” Gilvesy says. “He’s a humble fellow and he took a different approach. Instead of grabbing a microphone, he chose to teach by doing, or by example.”

“I don’t think I ever saw him waver for a second.”

Today, Desautels and Sue are travelling more; a commitment he made after recovering from prostate cancer surgery in April. They buy carbon offsets for their travel. He works about half-time, he says, and values the expertise and hard work of Court as well as Louise McMullen, the “administra-

tive glue,” and other employees, that gives him more freedom.

He wants to do more writing and he has a “Locavores Digest” blog where he celebrates restaurants and producers of local foods and drink in places he visits. He’s writing a children’s book with his granddaughter.

The cancer experience “made me not live with abandon, but to be even more frank in expressing my values.”

Awards recognizing his dedication to locally sourced food and environmental passion include the 2012 Ontario Hostelry Institute’s Gold Award and the 2013 Green Leadership Award from the Canadian Foodservice and Hospitality magazine.

Grand River Conservation Authority gave the Neighbourhood Group of Companies its 2016 Watershed Award.

“He’s a global thinker,” Gilvesy says. “He changes the world in front of him and I think that’s kind of cool.”



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