



Not Just For Garnish:

A Calgary Family's Homegrown Business Produces Sprouts And Microgreens

by JEFF WIEHLER photography by INGRID KUENZEL AND JEFF WIEHLER

In a garage in Briar Hill, Daniel McAllister knocks the sunflower seed shells off a new batch of sunflower shoots; they cover the floor and crunch beneath his feet. McAllister plants seeds in trays of organic soil and places the trays below grow lights, watering the plants and knocking off the shells every day, as they rise up with the shoots.



Sunflower shoots go from seed to harvest in just 12 days, and once they grow to the desired height, McAllister cuts the greens and packages them in bags, and then delivers them to restaurants and markets across the city and province.

McAllister and his wife, Jasmine, began to grow sprouts and greens in their home in 2009 to have nutritious produce for their family. Over the years, they have grown their hobby into their business 'Greenberry', while growing their family at the same time. "We have a family business, and our business exists within the context of our family," says McAllister.

Greenberry's produce is notable for its shelf life and crisp taste. They often harvest and sell the produce on the same day, and their customers love how long the sprouts and greens last in the fridge. Even though their produce is small, it is nothing short of flavourful. A self-described "mad scientist" with seeds, soil, light and water, McAllister says that the garlic and radish sprouts "exemplify the intensity of the flavour" compared to their fully-grown counterparts. "Chefs come to us and are shocked at the flavour and quality," adds Jasmine.

The McAllisters started to grow sprouts for their own use because of

the nutritional benefits; microgreens and sprouts contain more nutrients than the full-leaf kinds, and some have upwards of 40 times more nutrients. They decided to try selling their greens full time after McAllister was laid off from his job as a valet manager in 2013. Their risk paid off, and the McAllisters now grow for a variety of restaurants, such as The Coup, Vendome Café, Blue Star Diner, Midtown Kitchen and Bar, D'Vine Diner, as well as selling their produce at Hillhurst, Bridgeland, Marda Loop, Okotoks and Symons Valley Ranch farmers' markets. They still have time to spend with their three young children, as their business allows them to adapt their work schedule around their family, and while McAllister sometimes works during the day, he regularly works evenings and often late into the night. His schedule depends on his plants and clients' needs.

Greenberry has grown and evolved, but not without many obstacles. Amidst the busy season of markets last summer, the McAllister's vehicle broke down. They became adept at packing coolers and tents into a Car2Go, while for nearby restaurants, Jasmine dropped off sprouts while out for walks with her kids. They lasted nearly the entire summer without a vehicle.

In January, the family moved into a house just a block down the road from



the old one. The move sounds easy, but it was anything but. "On January 1 we were packing up the last stuff into the trailer with no place to move it to," says Jasmine.

She explains that they looked for a house for months, but no property worked out before they had to move. While packing the last boxes, a man walked by and asked where they were moving to, and McAllister told him that they had no place to go. Coincidentally, the man had recently purchased a property down the road, and while he was working with a property management agency to find a tenant, he said that he would be happy to rent them the house and forgo an agency.

"It was amazing," says Jasmine. Not only did they find a place for their belongings, they had three kids and their livelihood – live plants. Since the property would only become available a month after they moved out, the man offered them to stay in his basement in Briar Hill. In addition, he offered the use of his garage for their produce, where they still grow their pea and sunflower shoots, buckwheat greens, alfalfa sprouts, garlic sprouts, microgreens, radish sprouts and many other varieties.

As their business grows, they hope to "keep pushing core values," which include nutrition, family, and fairness to anyone that works with them, using their business to not only enrich their children but also their community. "We want to continue with a family-style business and support the people around us," says Jasmine.

Jeff Wiehler is a freelance writer living in Calgary, interested in connections with nature through food. You'll find him gardening, cooking and baking, and sharing the results with family and friends. He's on Twitter @jeffwiehler.