



# Building Aboriginal Economies

## *Bleuet Mistassini*

# The Travelling Blueberries

by Hélène Katz

**J**ean-Marie Fortin had been buying and selling blueberries for almost 30 years when his client in Maine said he might not be buying from him the following year. "So I talked to my kids and we decided we needed to do something about it," recalls Jean-Marie, a member of the Innu Nation. In 1989, Jean-Marie and his family founded Les Bleuets Mistassini Ltée in Dolbeau-Mistassini, Quebec.

The company buys, processes and resells wild and organic blueberries. With annual sales of about \$20 million, Bleuets Mistassini exports 95 percent of its production. "They are being exported to 17 countries, as far away as Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Hong Kong and Europe," the company president says.

In 1997, this family business received ISO-9002 certification. The certification "gives buyers lots of confidence in our products and reassures them on the quality of the product," Jean-Marie says.

The blueberries are gathered from private producers and from the wild. About four million pounds a year come from Bleuets Mistassini's own blueberry patch.



Jean-Marie Fortin's blueberry company, Bleuets Mistassini, averages \$20 million in annual sales.

After being shipped to the processing plant, berries are individually quick-frozen to preserve their taste and nutritional value. The plant employs 80 to 100 people year-round.

Bleuets Mistassini markets its products by attending international food shows and working with Canadian exporters, like Dobexco, and importers from other countries. Dobexco has shares in Bleuets Mistassini and handles nearly half of its exports. "We can't do everything well, so it's better to work with someone who can handle exports," Jean-Marie says.

The export market was a natural choice. "We don't have the population in Canada," Jean-Marie says. So they developed contacts

continued on page 2

May 2002 – Number 2

## In this issue:

<b>Bleuets Mistassini</b> (Quebec)	1
<b>Chef Arnold Olson</b> (National Capital Region)	2
<b>Aliments Toka Foods</b> (Quebec)	3
<b>Kitikmeot Foods Ltd. and Kitikmeot Hunters and Trappers Association</b> (Nunavut)	4
<b>Garry Albert</b> (Saskatchewan)	5
<b>Kitasoo Aquafarms</b> (B.C.)	6
<b>Kivalliq Arctic Foods and Kitsaki Meats Ltd.</b> (Nunavut and Saskatchewan)	7
<b>Rolling River First Nation</b> (Manitoba)	8



## Agriculture and Food

This issue of *Building Aboriginal Economies* profiles First Nations and Inuit entrepreneurs who are cultivating success in the agriculture and food sectors.

Visit our Aboriginal success stories database at [www.ainc-inac.gc.ca](http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca) (Click on "News Room").

*Chef Arnold Olson*

# Putting Aboriginal Cuisine on the World Stage

by Edwinna von Baeyer

Talking to Chef Arnold Olson is a mouth-watering experience as he describes one of his favourite menus — Three Sisters soup, venison with a juniper glaze, wildflower salad, bannock and blueberry pie.

Arnold, who is from northern Saskatchewan and a member of the Cree Nation, has been perfecting his culinary skills for over 20 years, winning prizes and praise along the way. However, he did not begin as a chef specializing in Aboriginal cuisine. He paid his dues in restaurants from Saskatoon to Toronto, learning his craft and dreaming of making a solid career doing what he loves most — creating and cooking great meals.

In 1991, he was asked to join a team of Aboriginal chefs who were competing in the 1992 World Culinary Olympics, held in Frankfurt, Germany. "Training for a year

with the team really paid off in an amazing number of medals," he notes "We won seven gold, two silver and one bronze." Arnold himself won one gold and one bronze medal.

He went on to cater a luncheon of Aboriginal foods for the heads of state participating in the Halifax G7 Summit in 1995. He also worked in the Parliamentary Restaurant on Parliament Hill before establishing his catering business — Aboriginal Catering Services — in 1997. Since then, Arnold has been cooking for a growing list of private and public sector clients.

Although he continues to cook delicious Aboriginal cuisine for his clients, his career is taking another interesting turn. He is becoming a respected consultant for restaurants and hotels who need help creating interesting menus based on Aboriginal cuisine. And now, he observes,

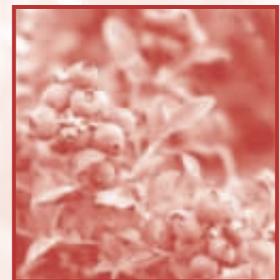
"I'm participating more and more in international food shows all over the world." In these shows, Arnold takes particular delight in raising awareness about Aboriginal foods, expanding the tastes of his audience, promoting Aboriginal food companies' products, showing how to properly cook these foods and, in general, having a great time with the participants. Soon he will be off to take part in international food exhibitions in Chile, New York and South Africa.

While it's a very rewarding career for Arnold, he says it is probably not for everyone. "You have to love what you're doing, because it takes a lot of discipline, a lot of observation to learn the basics and a lot of dedication." He knew from an early age that this would be his career path. When he was 14 years old, he guided tourists to fishing spots in his community and helped them set up camp. "The best part of the job was building the fire and cooking lunch for everyone!"

For more information, call (819) 682-1330 or send an e-mail to [arnoldolson@videotron.ca](mailto:arnoldolson@videotron.ca) \*



Chef Arnold Olson brings Aboriginal cuisine to the world.



**"Bleuets Mistassini"**

continued from page 1

with export companies. Exporting isn't as tough as it used to be. "With the Internet, the planet isn't that big," he says.

They also continue to market locally. Right now, they're negotiating to distribute their blueberries through a large grocery chain.

Attention to quality control helps Bleuets Mistassini stand out. "The fact that we have all the food certifications, gives us an advantage over other companies," Jean-Marie says.

Visit the company's website at [www.bleuets-mistassini.com](http://www.bleuets-mistassini.com) \*

# Wild Edibles for Wild Taste Buds

by Hélène Katz

While Henri Picard watched anxiously, a CNN reporter stood in front of his company's booth at the New York Fancy Food Show and stopped people to have them taste Aliments Toka Foods' balsam fir jelly. "I was down on my knees praying people would like it," the company president says with a laugh. His prayers were answered — the jelly was a big hit.

Founded in Wendake, Quebec, in March 2000, the company produces and sells *Wild Edibles* — a line of 31 products made from wild produce harvested across Canada. Some 75 people — about half of whom are Aboriginal — supply Toka Foods with wild ingredients from across the country.

Items include Saskatoon berries, wild mountain cranberries, choke cherries, cattail hearts, ox-eye-daisy capers (the bud of the daisy is picked before it flowers and is then pickled) and fiddlehead greens. Toka turns these ingredients into jellies, chutneys, vinegars, mustards, ketchup and oils in their federally-approved kitchen.

"We're testing all the time," says Henri, a member of the Huron Nation in Wendake, who notes there are about 350 wild edible plants in Canada.

Last year they experimented with spruce tips, which add a strong taste to food. The chef of a Toronto restaurant tasted the product at a food show and immediately ordered all 30 cases the company had produced. "It wasn't until later that we found out his restaurant was called *Spruce*," Henri says. "I'm anxious to see if he re-orders."

The wild foods needed to make the products are harvested by hand, not by machine. They're a little more expensive, but Henri says it's worth it. "If you want to respect wild products and respect the people who pick them, there's a cost," he says.



Henri Picard and Aliments Toka Foods transform wild produce into delicacies.



In Quebec, the products are available in Kahnawake, at Montreal's Botanical Gardens, the Biodome, the Oka monastery and the Huron Village in Quebec City. In an effort to sell both in Canada and internationally, Henri and his wife, Danielle Bellange, teamed up with Gerald Le Gal, who was already producing balsam fir and cedar jellies made from wild products. He markets within Quebec under his own label, *Gourmet sauvage*, while Toka concentrates on exporting the *Wild Edibles* line of products. "When you are in a small company, you can't sell locally and go around the world," Henri explains.

Toka showcased their products at SIAL, the largest food show in the world, in Paris in March 2000 and in Montreal the following year. They have a distributor

in France and another in the United States. Henri looks for distributors around the world who specialize in fancy foods and gourmet shops.

The company has also begun offering catering services using *Wild Edibles* products, under the direction of award-winning chef Laurent Tremblay. The unusual nature of their wild appetizers attracts a lot of interest. "We have not yet advertised for Toka Catering. All of our publicity so far is done through word-of-mouth," Henri says. "Our catering is so different that whenever we do anything, we get people calling us."

Toka Foods can be reached by e-mail at [toka@sympatico.ca](mailto:toka@sympatico.ca) \*

# Muskox Makes for Culinary Treat, and More

by Raymond Lawrence

**M**uskox, a massive member of the goat family, is finding its way into fine dining establishments and other interesting locales.

Though it's best known for its Arctic char, Kitikmeot Foods Ltd. — in Nunavut's Cambridge Bay — has been cultivating the public's taste for muskox for more than a decade.

While many diners sample muskox for the novelty, the meat offers more than a distinct taste. Similar to prime beef in appearance, it has five percent more moisture and many say it is more tender. Compared to beef, muskox has 44 percent less fat; 22 percent fewer calories; and six percent more protein.

Kitikmeot Foods meets Canadian standards to ensure the quality of its products is top-rate. Having an inspector on-site also allows the company to market their product to the U.S. and certain non-European Union countries. "Since our products are quite expensive, we sell to wholesalers who then sell it to high-end restaurants. Primarily we do strip loin and tenderloin cuts," explains Kitikmeot Foods general manager Calvin Schindel. These cuts run for about \$40 per kg at the wholesale level, while ground meat goes for about \$10 per kg.

Muskox jerky is another popular item — in fact, it's "out of this world." When Canadian astronaut Chris Hatfield toured the North, he was so impressed with Kitikmeot Food's muskox jerky that he brought some on board the Space Station!

Closer to home, the muskox harvests take place in the spring and fall. The two-week long seasons involve up to 29 workers in various phases of the operation, from the hunt to the slaughterhouse.



Muskox is roaming into new territories as its meat and high-quality wool find new markets.

During the harvest, about 40 animals are selected each day. A dressed-out muskox averages between 127-132 kg. The field workers begin turning a profit at about 350 animals with an average of 400 muskox selected for harvest each year.

Muskox, however, have more to offer than just meat — *qivuit*, the dense insulating fur beneath the long, outer guard hairs of a muskox, produces one of the world's finest wools. Best known for its incredible heat-retention, muskox wool can bring in hundreds of dollars per pound.

In 1999, the Kitikmeot Hunters and Trappers Association formed an incorporated business arm of the same name. This business began buying muskox hides from its hunters and, through a partnership with Mini Mills Ltd. of P.E.I., now produces muskox wool. Mini Mills handles the marketing and has developed a spinning mill that can handle the dense fibre

and produce a grade of wool appropriate for the *qivuit*. In Nunavut and the Northwest Territories, several thousand muskox are taken annually through a sustainable harvest which provides a large supply of hides. It's hoped that, eventually, a spinning operation for the wool will be set up in the North.

For sales information about Kitikmeot Foods Ltd., please call (867) 669-9999. To contact Kitikmeot Hunters and Trappers Association, call Agnes Egotak at (867) 982-4201. As well, *qivuit* can be ordered from Mini Mills through their website at [www.minimills.net/qiviut.htm](http://www.minimills.net/qiviut.htm) or by calling 1-800-827-3397. \*

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