

taste



CANADIANS SPEND up to 12 calories of non-renewable energy to produce one calorie of food on our plate. In Cuba, the ratio is reversed.

Why don't we have gardens like this?

Canadians are just starting to think about eating locally. Cuba's been doing it for years.

BY JENNIFER COCKRALL-KING • Jorge Carmentate edges his stocky, mid-40s frame under the canopy of a neem tree and our small, pink-cheeked group follows suit. Even in the mid-morning, the heat in central Cuba is searing. Carmentate welcomes us to El Rabanito, a three-hectare market garden in a mixed commercial and residential neighbourhood in the city of Ciego de Ávila. He's thrilled that yet another group of Canadians and Americans have come to see what is one of the nation's top-producing *organopónicos*, the urban organic farm co-operatives that are the cornerstone of how Cuba manages to feed its 11.4 million citizens, using as little as five per cent of the energy that it takes its neighbours to the north.

El Rabanito is one stop on a 14-day food tour of Cuba, organized by Bowen Island, B.C.-based agronomist Wendy Holm. She coordinates sustainable agriculture exchanges between Cuban and Canadian farmers and organizes a yearly tour specifically designed for chefs and foodies curious about how Cuba has emerged as a world leader in community-based agriculture, urban farming, and organic food production. It's not a gourmet tour de force, rather a frank look at the reality of the Cuban food production and distribution system. Largely state-orchestrated with a few free market concessions, it's also state-supported. Farmers in Cuba are at the top tier of state salaries, some earning more than doctors and lawyers. And the state provides incredible resources to farmers. As such, it was the only country in the World Wildlife Fund's 2006 Living Planet report that even came close to meeting targets for sustainable living and development. In the same report, Canada had the fourth-heavi-

est per-capita ecological footprint.

Canadians spend up to 12 calories of non-renewable energy to produce one calorie of food on our dinner plate. In Cuba, the ratio is reversed. Welcome to "slow food," Cuban-style, born out of economic constraints rather than philosophical ideals: it was the Cuban economic crisis in the early '90s that forced the country to buckle down and grow over 80 per cent of the fresh produce it consumes. Cubans eat only what they grow within a reasonable proximity to where they live (fuel for transport is scarce); they eat only what's in season (energy to freeze and refrigerate is expensive and unreliable); and food is produced using labour-intensive organic farming methods (chemical inputs, which would be too expensive anyway, are unavailable, and the farms are located within the cities, so people don't want the pollution of chemical fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides).

"The public decides what we plant," says Carmentate, pointing out some 50 vegetables North American chefs would fall over themselves to get. Picture-perfect Chinese cabbages, tomatoes, lettuces, cucumbers, culinary herbs and medicinal flowers drip over beds raised less than a foot off a flat, rubble-covered lot. Sunflowers stand at the end of beds to attract pests away from the other plants; marigolds are interspersed to control unwanted bugs.

The leaves from the neem tree, soaked, macerated and mixed with lime, are sprayed as a homegrown biopesticide. A compost bin of California red wigglers turn decaying plant matter into nutrient-rich loamy soil.

This 13-farmer co-operative supplies local schools, hospitals and daycares as its "social contribution" quota, but the rest is sold, free-market-style, at a small kiosk at the entrance. With so many *organopónicos* (there are 31 in Ciego de Ávila alone), competition keeps quality high and prices reasonable. Last year, El Rabanito sold 227,000 pesos' worth of produce, leaving the co-op a profit of 97,000 pesos. Half the profits at El Rabanito are reinvested in infrastructure, the other half are split between the 13 workers. The land is rent-free courtesy of the state.

It's hard not to chuck our cellphones, grab a spade and join Cuba's "green revolution." The system attains ideals we are just beginning to wrestle with: lessening the ecological footprint of the food we consume and ensuring a secure food supply, one driven by nutritional needs, not profits for multinationals. But then Carmentate and the other farmers gratefully accept our seemingly odd tokens of appreciation for their time: bars of soap, disposable razors, pencils, pads of paper, deodorant, shampoo, and small household trinkets that will be shared with their families. Yes, there's good food on the table in Cuba these days, but other basic comforts, it seems, are few and far between in this workers' paradise. **M**



TODAY'S SPECIAL... A CORONARY-THEMED GRILL

Patrons who manage to stuff down one of the 8,000-calorie "quadruple bypass burgers" and "flatliner fries" are delivered to their cars in wheelchairs pushed by sexy waitresses dressed as nurses. In the ultimate in-your-face response to healthy eating, the Heart Attack Grill in Arizona serves up artery-clogging food with the slogan "taste worth dying for." Cigarettes and beer with your meal are not just permitted but encouraged.