

YOUNG FARMERS »

The advocate who learned to farm from a pig named Annie

How Jessica Piccinin went from oil-field worker to small-farm champion—and why her fight for markets, butchers, and regional food systems matters more than ever.

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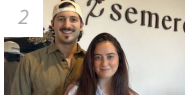
Jessica Piccinin with Annie, the Berkshire sow she credits with teaching her the patience, respect, and craft that shaped her years as a small-scale farmer.


By **Samantha McLeod**


On a small farm outside Creston, a black-and-white Berkshire sow once slept beneath a children’s swing-set like a family pet. Her name was Annie. She lived to 16, kept her bed tidy, roamed the yard with dignity, and


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“She taught me everything I know about animals,” says farmer-turned-advocate Jessica Piccinin. “Because of Annie, I can’t look at a piece of meat without thinking about where it came from.”

Piccinin grew up in Creston, in a valley that still calls itself a breadbasket. Like many small-town young adults, she left home to work in the northern oil fields for years before she felt the urge to return home.

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“I moved back, and I had no idea what I was going to do,” she recalls. “Someone at Kootenay Career Development Society asked what I liked. I said, ‘I like going to the farmers’ market.’ And they said, ‘Perfect. Start a farm.’”

It was with equal parts courage, naïveté, and faith that she started her farm, Root and Vine Acres. She began with tomatoes and cucumbers grown alongside her grandmother, but quickly expanded into a full market garden. Then came Annie the pig, followed by piglets and breeding stock, and eventually a partnership with a master sausage maker.

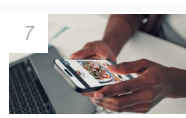
Soon she was elbows-deep in the old-world craft of charcuterie, producing dry-cured salami and fresh sausages fit for a Parisian deli.

But small-scale meat production in B.C. comes with hurdles built for mega stores.

To sell meat legally, Piccinin’s hogs had to pass through a provincially approved abattoir and a licensed butcher. Feed, packaging, and fuel costs rose steeply. When she began, piglets cost about \$60; by the end she was selling them for nearly \$200.

“Margins are so slim, you are basically farming on faith,” she says.

Behind her personal story simmers a provincial crisis in the disappearance of skilled butchers.



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Canadian meat processors say they cannot find skilled staff. In the Interior where many small farms depend on local processors the shortage is acute.

“We cannot have small-scale meat without small-scale butchers,” Piccinin says. “And right now that entire trade is in trouble.”

Burned out after years of farming, raising two young children, and hauling products across the Kootenays, Piccinin stepped back from the markets last year. But she didn’t step away from feeding people.

When the executive director role at the Creston Valley Chamber of Commerce opened, she saw a chance to advocate for the community.

“The first job is advocacy,” she says. “I speak on behalf of more than a hundred member businesses... many of them farmers or food producers.”

Her clearest impact came this past summer, when the City of Nelson abruptly moved its long-running Wednesday farmers’ market off busy Baker Street. The fallout was immediate with an average 63% drop in sales for Creston vendors, and some even reported zero sales on certain days.

“For a farmer working on razor-thin margins, that kind of hit is devastating,” Piccinin says.

Because she had sold at that market for 11 seasons and delivered food into Nelson for six more, she could articulate precisely what that meant: fewer vendors, fewer products for Kootenay Co-op, fewer customers, and a weakened regional food chain.

She wrote a letter, rallied vendors, used every relationship she had with media and government until the city reversed course. The Wednesday market returned downtown.

Piccinin’s own path touches nearly every initiative that keeps small-scale agriculture alive in the Kootenays:

- **Community Futures Self Employment Program**, which helped her turn a love of markets into a viable business.
- **Young Agrarians**, whose land-matching system now allows young farmers to lease six acres of her land and build the financial track record needed for future mortgages.
- **The B.C. Farmers’ Market Nutrition Coupon Program**, which gives low-income families weekly

glean and process surplus backyard fruit and move it into food banks, community meals, and social enterprise products.

• **The Basin Food Summit & Buyers Expo (FABx)**, funded by Columbia Basin Trust, which connects farmers directly with grocery chains, caterers, and restaurants across the region.

In 2023, the **BC Association of Farmers' Markets** reported:

- **\$155.3 million** in direct annual sales at BC markets
- **4.95 million** market visits
- **\$118.5 million** additional spending at nearby businesses
- A total economic impact of **\$232.9 million**

Farmers' markets are not quaint, they are honest to goodness economic engines.

Piccinin is now developing an idea for a documentary about farmers' markets and their hidden networks from their community backbone to their butterfly effect.

“People see a cheerful stall and think, ‘Isn’t this lovely,’” she says. “They don’t see the abattoir hours away, the butcher searching for apprentices, the farmer filling out grant applications at midnight, the volunteers gleaning fruit, or the agency handing out coupons so low-income families can be there too.”

“And yet, even with all that,” she said, “I still believe it’s worth it. Because this is how communities feed themselves.”

Rising land prices and climate shifts have made farming tougher than ever—but B.C.’s young farmers are rising to the challenge. The Young Farmers Series highlights the people behind the food on our tables. This feature is part of the Young Farmers Series, made possible by a partnership between OMG and BC Dairy (bcdairy.ca)

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