

Local man turns health crisis into agricultural success story

BY JAIME MYSLIK

ROCKWOOD – Sometimes the best answer to a conflict is to figure it out for yourself.

That's exactly what Jamie Draves did during his journey to develop Quinta Quinoa. It didn't happen easily and there were twists and turns along the way.

Now the Georgetown resident has a Canadian-grown quinoa business with a product that has almost twice the amount of protein as standard quinoa, plus twice the fibre and four times the iron, calcium and zinc.

Draves' journey began over 10 years ago when he was diagnosed with idiopathic pancreatitis, which has no known cure, cause or treatment. He said it was painful and he couldn't eat without feeling nauseous, fatigued and ill.

It took about one year, and the removal of a third of his pancreas, for his medical team to say there was nothing they could do to help him, Draves said.

"I had two young boys at the time, I was not ready to leave this world quite yet," he said.

That's when quinoa changed his life. Draves was working in the pharmaceutical industry and assembled a team of health professionals to help develop a plan.

"We together built a health plan that focused on an extremely restricted diet," Draves explained.

"And quinoa was the staple in that diet and once I started eating quinoa that's the point at which I stopped losing weight and that was the beginning of my pathway for an improved health.

"I'm 10 years on that plan. I still have five pounds to gain to get back to my original weight but I will get there this year."

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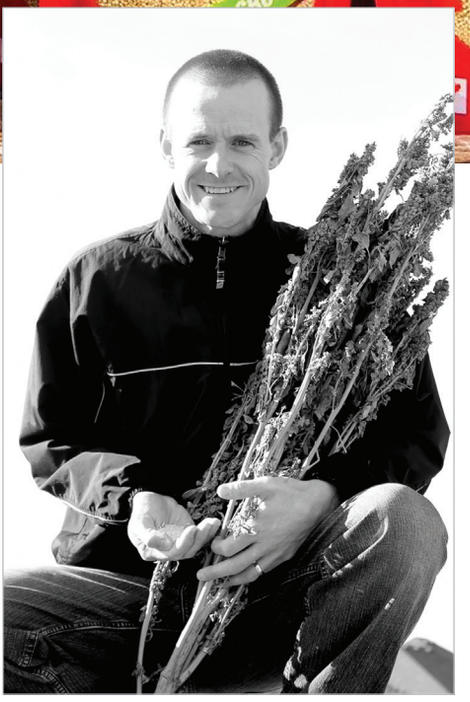
>
> - JAMIE DRAVES, PRESIDENT OF QUINTA QUINOA

The experience triggered Draves' desire work with quinoa.

What began as a mission to produce quinoa salad and other recipes that aided in his recovery turned into the development of a quinoa seed that could be grown in Ontario.



JAMIE DRAVES

When he was producing products with imported quinoa Draves said the quality was inconsistent and he was dependent on suppliers who were going out of businesses themselves.

"At that point ... I kind of looked at it and thought how long this was going take, how difficult a journey this was going to be to do this," he said.

"So I pivoted and decided to focus on quinoa itself, realizing it was ... the most complete protein in the plant kingdom; it had high fibre, had complete protein, a high protein, and it was pretty good in minerals.

"So the concept then was born ... to produce the super of the superfoods here in Ontario and then develop products and byproducts from those plants."

That decision was made in 2011.

Draves and his company Quinta Quinoa then conducted trials with the Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association and the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs to see if quinoa could be

grown in Ontario.

"I wouldn't say it was a success but it was enough for me to continue to move forward and since then I've been working on the breeding, the production, working with farmers on how to get a business model that makes it commercially viable," Draves said.

"We did achieve the higher protein, which is what we were seeking."

He said the company now has 12 to 15 farmers throughout Canada growing Quinta Quinoa's seed and all the product is processed in a facility in Rockwood.

The idea was that soils are better in Ontario and there are better agronomic practices, so superfoods should be successful.

Draves' quinoa has almost twice the protein as standard quinoa, as well as twice the fibre and four times the iron, calcium and zinc. Quinta Quinoa also has more iron than liver and more calcium than cow's milk.

"If you look at those six components and you compare them against all other animal and vegan wholefoods, we end up number one in some categories, top five in most, top 10 in another category, which when you put them all together ... we're the most nutritious whole food you can buy," Draves said.

He added there is a lot of interest among farmers to grow the seed.

"We look for specific situations, and conditions where it's set up for success," Draves said.

"So we have learned over many years how to set up that relationship so it's successful."

As far as Draves knows, his is the only company growing quinoa in Ontario.

"I contract out to farmers who partner with us and I work with them so they take our seeds, or we have a contract with them, we use our seeds, they grow it and then we buy it back from them," he explained.

"We grow it from northern Ontario all the way down to southwestern Ontario and we've now expanded into Alberta and this year we're expanding into Saskatchewan and Quebec."

During this country-wide expansion Draves said it is likely he'll create new varieties for the different growing conditions and locations.

"We continue to not only develop different seeds but continue to develop seeds that in the future we believe will have even higher protein and higher minerals," he said.

Part of the Quinta Quinoa seed development was creating a variety with consistent quality.

"Every year our yield goes up and ... because of the different environmental conditions your quality becomes variable but overall it continues to always meet the standards of what people want," Draves said.

"And actually we get a lot of people that comment that the flavour of our quinoa is slightly nutty and they prefer that over other quinoa.

"So we're in a great position where the organoleptic properties - meaning the taste, texture, cooking - are actually considered to be better than in other parts of the market and our nutritional profile blows them away."

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Draves also explained that due to the nature of the business, the company is continuously developing and expanding at the Rockwood facility.

"It's a changing, growing, evolving two steps forward one step back type of process," he said. "So a lot of trial and error."

The company builds equipment in order to expand the business, but then it must push through the sales, dynamics and volumes until more equipment and farmers are required.

"You take incredible risks all the time and you're always future hedge-risking on everything you do as you scale up in this type of industry," Draves said. "You can't sell what you don't have and you can't have what you don't sell.

"So you're always risk-hedging forward and it's a crop, so there's still that variability of what you get back in that crop."

The quinoa is sold online at amazon.ca as well as at local retailers including: Harrington Lane Farms in Puslinch, Goodfellows Field to Fork in Rockwood, Dar's Country Market in Elora, The Sustainable Market – Guelph Kortright Presbyterian Church in Guelph, MacMillan's in Guelph, Metro in Guelph and Landman Gardens in Grand Valley.

For a full list of retailers selling the quinoa visit quinta.ca.

In the future Draves said the company will continue expanding across Canaada and replicating the quinoa model with other superfoods.

"I want to be able to produce things to help others with their illness or their health, that provision and ... now I'm helping individuals and that group's starting to grow, but you know there's almost an onus on me right now to just continue to do that and see ... how many people we can help with this," Draves said.

"Because I continually research health ... and all those dynamics and there's so much more we can do and to me that becomes a burden of things that I need to do.

"So that will just continue to happen until ... hopefully I get to a point where I'm at a point of satisfaction and there isn't that burden continued to try to create, innovate and provide."

Having started from the bottom and built his business, Draves has some advice for new entrepreneurs.

"You're going to fail a million times over," he said.

"The best you can do is continually assess your risk/rewards to minimize your losses through those failures because they're necessary and it's necessary for you to go down so that you have the experience and knowledge when you get to a point where the resources, the product and the timing is right to be successful.

"Then you'll have all of that background and skills and experience and expertise to make it happen and to me I think that's what entrepreneurism is."

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