

*Two brothers build new lives, start their own farm  
and make new friends far from home.*

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# ON THEIR OWN

Blanketing snow bleaches color from the land, a seemingly endless expanse of white starkly framing objects of color and movement—the red-roofed barn, the silver silos, the loping pair of dogs. Grey mountains loom through the icy fog in the distance. At this 1,600-acre farm just outside of Sayabec, Quebec, snow, biting wind and temperatures that sometimes dip below  $-20^{\circ}\text{C}$  can make outside work virtually impossible. >>



This patch of land, now known as Les Fermes Villeneuve, situated one kilometer from the nearest neighbor, possesses the kind of fiercely quiet isolation that seems to belong to another era. In January 2012, when Ismaël and Sébastien Villeneuve moved here, the brothers were on their own. The 600 kilometers between the siblings' new property and their family's pig farm in Lanoraie, Quebec, made the remoteness even more pronounced.

The northern Quebec farm's location made picking up parts and moving crops or animals a challenge, says Ismaël. Even replenishing the pantry and buying light bulbs and other household necessities were more difficult—the closest grocery store is in Sayabec, but the nearest general store is almost a 25-kilometer drive. "[The farm] is so far away from everything," says Ismaël. In the beginning, he continues, "We were in a region where we didn't know anybody."

#### NEW CHALLENGES

Ismaël, 27, and Sébastien, 24, spent most of their childhood working around their family's farm and those of their neighbors. But the brothers believe that experience wasn't apparent to their new community when they first moved here. They were "in a place ... where people didn't welcome [us] with open arms," says Ismaël. It was as if some of their new neighbors didn't take them seriously.

Time, however, adjusted their social isolation. In the past two-plus years, the brothers have made friends with farmers and others in the community. "When we first moved here, we were strangers," says Ismaël. "That's changed. They come to our place and give us advice. Sometimes we go to their places as well. We're closer than we were at the start."

#### RETURNING TO THE LAND

As is often the case, the family farm on which Ismaël and Sébastien grew up couldn't support the entirety of a new generation. With two other brothers already working the family's farm, Ismaël and Sébastien worked a combination of construction and mechanical jobs for several years.

Then, in 2011, their parents found a great deal on a foreclosed farm in Sayabec and offered to buy it for their two sons. If they did well, their parents would eventually sign over the deed to the land so each brother would own half.

Despite the distance away from their family and home, the move allowed Ismaël and Sébastien to do what they love—farm. "I missed agriculture, animals and the fields," says Ismaël. "Here, we're the ones choosing our hours; we're the ones in charge."

During winter Ismaël (foreground) and Sébastien house their sheep, as well as other farmers' cattle, in their newly renovated barns.

At first, most of their time went into cleaning and repair. "The biggest problem was the infrastructure. We had to fix the house and buildings up front," says Ismaël.

In addition to making minor repairs on the farmhouse, the farmland, too, needed work. Since the brothers arrived in January, they had to move quickly. "We [had to] start plowing soon after," says Ismaël. Because they hadn't been on the land for long, they were only able to level those parcels of land necessary for the first harvest. In their second year, they leveled additional acreage and began actively working to make sure the land stays in good condition.

On a combination of rented and purchased land, the Villeneuve brothers grow barley, oats, wheat, soybeans and hay—some of which is used for livestock feed, while the rest is sold on the open market. This year, they plan to try canola. "We're not sure if it will take here," Ismaël says.

Raising sheep for meat was an easy choice for the brothers. Ismaël worked with them growing up and likes how the animal is easy to handle. Moreover, one of their newly acquired farm buildings was already outfitted to house 825 ewes. The brothers also rent out space in their barns to house and help raise other farmers' cattle.

#### LONG ROAD AHEAD

Although only in their 20s, Ismaël and Sébastien have already started planning for the future of their farm. They've begun working toward expanding their enterprise, so it can

eventually support potential families of their own. "With the barn and business, there's enough potential here for the both of us," says Ismaël. "I think we can have two families living here just fine." The brothers hope to be able to pass the farm along to the next generation.

Within the next few years, the brothers plan to buy or lease at least 300 more acres of farmland, more than double their 210 head of ewes and raise more cattle. This eye on the future seems to be a family trait. Though the brothers' parents are still quite young, Ismaël says they are already making plans for their retirement. One brother, Jonathan, who remains on the original family farm, will likely take it over after the elder Villeneuve parents retire.

#### FARMING FUTURES

Ismaël believes the future of farming is generally solid. "There will always be a need in the world for grains and meat," he says. But, though the demand hasn't changed, agricultural technology and methodology have. In just the past decade or so, Ismaël says he's seen the development of GPS and the adoption of animal welfare practices.

Regardless of what technologies are developed, the brothers are excited about farming for a living. "We're the ones in charge here," says Ismaël. "[Our routine] is never the same. It changes every season.

"It was a lot of work, especially since there were only two of us." But, he adds, "It was a great start." As for the farm's isolation, well, he says, that's changed too. "We have friends here now." **FL**

## GREAT EQUIPMENT, 5-STAR SERVICE

**PERHAPS IT WAS PROVIDENCE** or just great luck. Whatever the reason, Ismaël Villeneuve now has two Massey Ferguson® tractors and a dependable dealership.

Ismaël had been shopping for another brand of tractor at a dealership close to the farm he works with his brother near Sayabec, Quebec. "I asked for prices and had to make a lot of phone calls," says Ismaël. "It took way too long. They didn't take us seriously because we were young and new to the region."

Then, destiny intervened. On the way home from the other dealership, Ismaël got lost and ended up at Machinerie J.N.G. Thériault, the Massey Ferguson dealer in Amqui, Quebec. And while the visit was happenstance, it was time well spent.

The very next day, the brothers received pricing for an MF5450. Two days later, a

representative from the dealership dropped off the tractor and demonstrated its use. Such a speedy response, says Ismaël, "really took me by surprise."

The MF5450 has since been their go-to for numerous and far-ranging tasks around the farm. From spreading herbicides and fertilizer on the fields to pressing and moving hay bales, its maneuverability and exceptional visibility from the cab make it indispensable for farm work, says Ismaël.

"The versatility is the biggest advantage of the 5450. For its size, it is very strong and very powerful." In addition, says Ismaël about Machinerie J.N.G. Thériault, "The service with these guys is five star."

With such a positive experience, the brothers have since purchased an MF7616. "For the work we have to do at this specific farm, it's perfect," says Ismaël of the 150-



Sébastien (right), with Ismaël and his girlfriend, Stéphanie Coutu.

engine HP tractor, which he and Sébastien use for sowing seeds, spreading manure and snowplowing. "Compared to other [tractors], the price is affordable and the fuel efficiency is better."