

# FINANCIAL POST

## FP ENTREPRENEUR

# Riding the boom of foraging is a challenge for 18-year-old Forbes Wild Foods

[Peter Kuitenbrouwer](#) | May 20, 2016 1:30 PM ET



**Laura Pedersen / National Post** *Dyson Forbes, left, and his father Jonathan Forbes. The pair don't see eye-to-eye on how to grow the company Jonathon founded.*

The Indian Maiden sails hourly from Cedar Point, 160 kilometres north of Toronto, and ferries passengers 20 minutes to Christian Island, an expanse of beaches and forests in Georgian Bay. The Beausoleil First Nation, an Ojibway community of 500 people, calls this island home.



**Tyler Anderson / National Post**  
*Randy King picks wild leeks for shipment to Toronto on Beausoleil First Nation on Christian Island on Georgian Bay. The King family are native entrepreneurs and, in spring, foragers. In two days they pick 370 pounds of leeks, which travel by ferry and van to Forbes Wild Foods in Toronto.*

A May morning on the island finds Lyla and Randy King standing deep in a maple forest. “Jesus saved me,” sings Lyla, who raised six children here and boasts 25 grandchildren. She pushes her shovel blade into the leafy earth and pulls out a clump of wild leeks. She shakes off soil, lays them in a milk carton and finishes the verse: “and I love my Lord.” A woodpecker joins her Christian hymn. A carpet of leeks and trillium spreads to the horizon. The King family are native entrepreneurs and, in spring, foragers. In two days they pick 370 pounds of leeks, which travel by ferry and van to Forbes Wild Foods in Toronto.

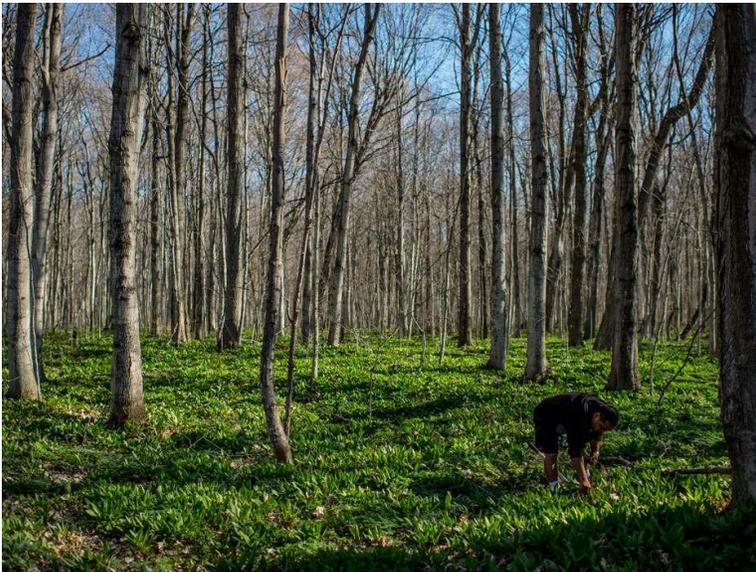
Forbes buys and sells foraged foods, including spruce tips, fiddle heads, pineapple weed and wild garlic. The company preserves wild food for sale year-round, such as organic maple syrup, birch syrup, cedar jelly, juniper berries, Saskatchewan wild rose petal syrup and pickled milkweed pods.

It’s a challenge to get wild food from the forest to the table. Forbes, in business 18 years, struggles to manage cash flow and succession. Even so, business is booming: there is plenty of wild food in Canada — and people want it. Tim Brigham of Royal Rhodes

University in Victoria, who has researched wild foods, puts the market value of “non-timber forest products” at “hundreds of millions of dollars across Canada.”



**Tyler Anderson / National Post**  
*Lyla King picks wild leeks  
for shipment to Toronto*



**Tyler Anderson / National Post**  
*A carpet of leeks and  
trillium spreads to the  
horizon.*

Wild food depends on a wide network of gatherers, such as the Kings, who make wood carvings in winter and net herring in the bay in summer; in spring, they pick leeks.

“I’m always hustling,” Randy says. “I can’t stop. It’s a way of life for me. We’re at the lower end of the stick. We don’t make a lot. We get some gas money. We’d probably have to be at the retail end to make any money off it.”

Elizabeth Elson, an Ojibway native who lives by the ferry dock on the mainland, drives the leeks to Toronto. Forbes says it pays her more than \$5 a pound for wild leeks; she pays the Kings. Forbes sells leeks for \$9 to \$14 a pound, which sounds like a decent markup. For example, Forbes sold 10 lbs. of Christian Island leeks for \$12 a pound to Toronto’s Royal York Hotel, and 60 lbs. to a purveyor in Halifax.

Still, Dyson Forbes, 36, who runs Forbes Wild Foods with his father Jonathan Forbes, 72, says the company needs better cash flow. “We don’t have enough money to buffer the buying season,” explains Dyson, energetic and casually dressed, sitting among bins of mushrooms and shelves of syrups and jellies in his crammed storefront facility.

Foragers expect cash on delivery, but some customers take more than 30 days to pay. “A supplier will say, ‘Do you want more morels, or fiddle heads, or nettles?’ and we’re like, ‘What restaurant can we harass to get some money?’ ”

The company’s ownership complicates decision-making. Jonathan owns 51 per cent; a group of 29 shareholders own 30 per cent; Dyson owns “some” of the rest. The family would like to buy out the shareholders, but Jonathan will not borrow money to do so.

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“My dad is a bit of a hippie,” Dyson says. “He grew up with stories of when a business borrows from the bank and then struggles, and then the bank comes in and ruins Christmas. It’s a constant battle between Jonathan and I. With my marketing background, I say you have to spend money to make money.”

To compound the tension, “Jonathan raised me to be anti-authoritarian my whole life and now he’s my boss. So we have that conflict.”

Jonathan suffered a heart attack last month and lost his driver’s license for 30 days; Dyson must do the pickups and deliveries. The firm needs more space, but they can’t afford it.

“I am hoping to start making a living wage this year,” he says. “I had to move in with my mom a couple of years ago. I am passionate and I do see that this company could become

a much bigger national entity. I don't see myself selling food. I see myself selling Canadian cultures.”

Foraging is a hot trend, one many associate with Forbes Wild Foods.” Anthony Bourdin did an episode at Noma in Copenhagen with René Redzepi — the Nordic chef du jour — and put caribou lichen on the menu,” Dyson recalls. “The next day we get calls from five chefs in Toronto for this stuff.” The Toronto Distillery Co. Ltd. uses Forbes's juniper berries to distil gin.

Magazines, television and newspapers have showered Forbes Wild Foods with accolades. “Business is thriving,” Jonathan Forbes says. “Sales are up 25 per cent over last year. If you could imagine a company with enough working capital to have adequate space, inventory and sales staff, we could probably double sales in a year. Ideally, someone will come along with \$500,000, buy out those 29 shareholders and invest \$200,000 in the company.”

Brad Cherniak at Sapien Capital Partners in Toronto, which helps private companies with strategy and succession, says Dyson — “steeped in the business, motivated, intelligent” — appears a good candidate to take over the family business. Father and son should hammer out the path to how the son takes control and earns a living wage and the father moves to a chairman role. They could then propose the plan to shareholders with a request that they up their investment. “They need to start taking steps before it becomes a crisis,” Cherniak says.

Dyson, a careful steward of supply, insists pickers take only 10 per cent of leeks; Quebec banned commercial wild leek harvests 20 years ago. On Christian Island the leeks appear plentiful. “I don't know why they grow so well over here,” Randy King says. “There's well over a mile of leeks. They grow all over the place. Everyone is trying to find a new way to live with nature, but there isn't. The old way is the new way, just like 300 years ago. Don't overwork the land. Those leeks were picked cleanly out here by native people who respect the earth. There's a lot of pride in what we do.”