

A man and his bike

Gerald Kara, owner of Kara's Smart Foods, has a passion beyond fresh food — he loves to take long, solo motorcycle trips, without a plan and only a destination in mind





TOP AND OPPOSITE: A few summers ago, Gerald Kara, owner of Kara's Smart Foods, rode his gear-laden motorcycle all the way to Goose Bay, Labrador.



"I like to take the trip less travelled and with very minimal planning."

GERALD KARA

BY BOB RITTINGER

Gerald Kara is a man with many passions. In particular, he loves food, fresh food.

"Working with nature, it brings me joy," he says. "I'm a big advocate of local farmers. I was one of the first there in St. Jacobs to watch the farmers' market burn."

His business is based on that passion. Kara buys fresh produce wholesale and, within the next few days, while it's still fresh, he sells it to the public. "Just produce, everything from Mother Nature."

Fresh produce is a treacherous business. It begins with buying and transporting the produce to his store and often involves long, difficult hours. "Work can be 12-hour days," he says. He gets up at 2 a.m. to buy his fresh produce two or three times a week, and sometimes more in the summer.

It's not only the hours that are difficult. Sometimes the people can be too. "You meet all the characters at the Ontario Food Terminal," he says.

Once the fresh produce is on display at Kara's Smart Foods, his shop at 25 Bruce

St. in Kitchener, difficult days follow as his staff work to get the produce into customer shopping bags while it's still fresh. A bit of wilt can make a leafy green unsaleable and fruit that over-ripens can affect the bottom line.

"In 30 years, I've never sold anything that I wouldn't feed my family," Kara says. "I can't believe I still do this on such thin margins."

Another major passion in Kara's life is his family. Even during a conversation about his other interests, they aren't far from his thoughts. Bess, his wife of 25 years, and his two children are the most important people in his life and he wouldn't have it any other way. Of course, his son and daughter are teenagers so they are a bit rebellious. That's nothing unexpected, but it does weigh on Kara a bit.

Then there's his motorcycle. Or rather, there are the long-distance road trips that his motorcycle represents. "I'm very self-sufficient" on these adventures, he says. "I don't like to have a destination. I don't book hotels. I don't book ferries."



Kara is a solo traveller, a man who likes to put in hours a day on his motorcycle, watching the landscape flow by. "It came out of not being able to find someone to do it with," he says. His wife wasn't interested but knew he needed a way to forget the stress of work. "She respects me. She's very nervous when I do these things."

Kara particularly likes to ride with a single destination in mind and barely a plan on how to get there. "I like to take the trip less travelled and with very minimal planning."

These journeys are about picking a distant spot where the roads come to an end and simply heading in that direction.

"I have this notion of taking just the one photograph at the end," he says.

Kara has completed two of these solo adventures and is contemplating a third. One recent summer, he rode his huge motorcycle all the way to Goose Bay, Labrador. The next summer it was Deadhorse, Alaska.

For Kara, hitting the road is all about the days spent in the saddle, not the chance to visit some tourist trap at the

end of the journey.

But it's not all fun and games. He has to be careful, too.

"It's easy to look at a map, but when you're in it, especially in Ontario, the threat of animals — moose, deer — is constant," he says.

And the prairies have their own special wildlife hazards.

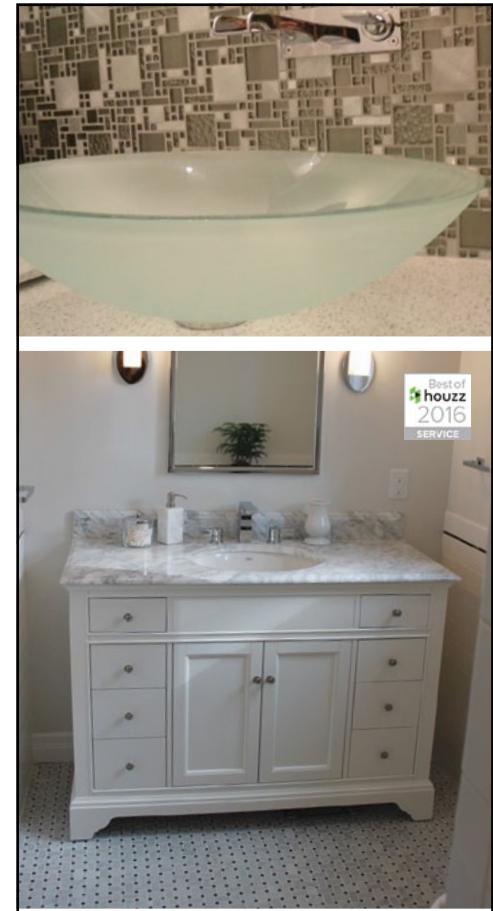
"The buffalo are an animal to come to terms with. Sometimes you just see a massive red patch (blood) on the road because they refuse to move."

In fact, he felt in more danger from the wildlife on the prairies than the frightening beasts that Alaska is known for. "I camped up there," he says. "It was better with the bears."

Still, the challenges of prairie travel are worth it, Kara says.

"You get caught up in the prairies," he says. "There's a saying that if your dog runs away, you can see it for days, but you don't understand it till you get out there."

The experience of being on the road for



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Lobster traps sit near the shore in Goose Bay, Labrador, where Kara visited one recent summer.

weeks at a time is nothing like his normal day-to-day existence. In fact, hitting the road is a chance to leave that busy life behind and enjoy living in the moment as the kilometres — thousands of them — roll by under his two tires.

"You meet the nicest people, especially in Alaska, they are so free-spirited," Kara says.

"In Newfoundland, I would stop on the side of the road to relieve myself and every car would stop."

He doesn't plan much and has few ideas about where he'll spend the night. When he hits a water barrier, he doesn't know exactly when the ferries run. A six-hour wait for a ferry doesn't bother him as there is bound to be something of interest to explore in the area.

Or maybe there will be someone to talk to.

"My deepest conversation was with a fisherman," he says of his trip to Labrador. "I had six hours to burn and afterwards I understood a bit of their life. They go on an adventure every time they go out to sea.

"It's perspective, and I come back

enriched and knowing that my life is not so bad."

For a man who enjoys travelling so much, Kara doesn't have a lot of souvenirs to remind him of his journeys, apart from a single bumper sticker from Alaska.

Of course, he does take a few photographs, but he admits that after a few days, he mostly forgets to stop and shoot. Partly that's due to the scenery, particularly on the long haul to Alaska.

"You follow a diminishing landscape," he says. "This is the last spruce tree, then it's shrubs, then it's just moss. At that point, you are hard-pressed to find a blade of grass. It's all just gravel."

"That was as close as I have come to understand living in outer space. There's no life there."

The relatively few photos might also be partly due to his big beast of a motorcycle, made heavier with his camping gear. "I've had motorcycles almost all my life. This (new, bigger motorcycle) was a challenge in itself. It's so heavy I have to unload it to

stand it up," he says.

"Eventually, I grew into it. I think you grow into it faster when you do Alaska."

Kara travels with a first-aid kit and GPS, which allows him to wander the back roads. "I occasionally looked at a map," he says.

He has a cellphone to keep his family up-to-date with his location and his general well-being. "I really know I'm on an adventure when I lose cell service."

Most of the people he met on his trip to Alaska were long-haul truckers. "They say, 'Oh, you don't have a satellite phone?' And then they look behind you" to see if there might be someone with you who is a bit more up-to-date.

"I sat with one trucker. We ate and talked and he called me crazy. He was not happy; he was just in it for the money."

Sharing the road with all those truckers is another serious hazard on gravel roads, since they kick up dust and stones.

"Trucks, you can't hear them. They just appear. So you pull over and make sure your visor is down," he says.

"The big beasts of burden — the oil tanks and the truckers — they own the road. I learned to put my visor down and hunker down."

There are other, less obvious hazards.

"When you are in Alaska you can ride for hours because the darkness doesn't come on. I really had to be careful of my hours on the bike. I'm sure I spent like eight or 10 hours on the bike, but it's gravel so you are not going too fast."

There is so little commercial activity along Alaska's highways that the locals really don't have to advertise.

If a single sign appears that reads "coffee shop," well, you know you are going to be pulling over.

"As for truckers, you realize what a lonely life it is," he says. "I literally had to break away from one trucker. He said, 'Let's meet at the next stop.'"

After he's left the populated area of the country behind, Kara sleeps in a one-man

pup tent. "Once you get off the bike that takes out the thrill of it, you know, finding a motel," he says.

"When it comes to camping, I try to pick out the best spot and don't eat any fish or anything smelly." He doesn't want to attract any wildlife.

Meanwhile, his meal preparation devolves to heating up a one-pot camping stew over a single-burner cook stove. Those roughing-it camper meals are the antithesis of his passion for fresh produce. "I'm an outdoorsman," he said.

Every single aspect of his solo expeditions helps take his mind away from his business problems.

Even the bugs.

"In Labrador, the black flies were amazing. I thought about the big things that would hinder me, but I never thought of this army of insects. I had to put my helmet back on and my visor down to put up my tent. My

face swelled up. That was my introduction to black flies."

Even with all the challenges, Kara finds that a complete break from the pressures of business is a perfect way to refresh his mind and reinvigorate his drive.

Not surprisingly, the long-haul travel has its own issues.

"One of the things I had to fight is boredom," Kara says. He sang along with his iPod as if he were auditioning for "Canada's Got Talent."

In the end, he returns home with a heart full of love for his family. "They know I have this thing and I come alive after I've achieved it," he says.

He returns to work with a new desire to immerse himself once again in the mind-boggling intensity of marketing fresh produce to the public. To Kara, there is no life like it and he is tremendously happy to get back to it.

"When I started, a salad bar was a novel concept" in the region, he says. "Juicing, too."

Yet the ends of the Earth still beckon and he's thinking about Baja California in northwest Mexico. If you want to ride your motorcycle as far as you can, and you have already been to Labrador and Alaska, then heading for Baja seems like the next logical choice.

"I have many a trip I'd like to do — the highest motorable road in India and Nepal, Baja, the Grand Canyon.

"You've got to do it on a bike. In some way, you connect to the land and the people. I think somehow they see how vulnerable you are."

Maybe when the pressures of work become too much, he'll set out on another grand journey.

Kara hasn't really made any plans to do that yet, but that doesn't mean he's not going. G

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