

Locally Grown

Farming in the 21st Century: More Than Riding a Tractor

by [Karin Ursula Edmondson](#), April 29, 2011



Farmers—the new black—appear everywhere today. They are in the field, on the tractor, on rooftops, at the market, hosting educational programs, staffing CSA locations in town and country, hosting pizza and movie nights, and partnering with social services agencies “to ensure equitable distribution to impoverished families,” as farmer Cheryl Rogowski does at [Rogowski Farm](#) in Pine Island. In the Hudson Valley and Catskill regions, fields formerly worked by taciturn wizened men in Deere caps, figures solitary and remote atop tractors, are now being cultivated by women, former city people, young hipsters, old hipsters, and assorted motley characters not to the land born.

Challey Comer, farm-to-market manager for [Pure Catskills](#), estimates that in her four years at Pure Catskills, 25 new farms have developed. “Every year in the *Pure Catskills Guide* we feature new farmers,” she says, “second-career farmers, dairy farmers diversifying or changing production methods, or farm apprentices who start their own businesses.”

Factors agricultural, social, civic, and educational have converged to transform what it means to farm and to be a farmer today. Agricultural: copious use of pesticides, chemicals, and herbicides and massive proliferation—sanctioned by the US government—of GMO seed and subsequent patent lawsuits by biochemical companies that target small and organic farms. Educational: general loss of public knowledge of farming and of food preservation such as canning, jarring and pickling. Civic: loss of community sustainability via centralization of food production. Social: deceptive pricing that belies the real cost of industrial food—obesity, diabetes, cancer, rising health care costs, environmental degradation. Farming in the 21st century encompasses agricultural duties but also addresses community social, civic and education needs. “It’s not enough to just ride a tractor today,” states Rogowski.

Progressive Farming Methods

Organic, Biodynamic, Natural Agriculture, Permaculture, Veganic, Ecological, Certified Natural, Nutrient Dense Farming, No-Till Farming, and the Eco Apple Program are some of the farming methods practiced in the region. Philosophies common among these methods: balance, respect for the soil, ecological replication, partnering with Nature, natural rhythms, companion planting, closed systems, growing food in harmony with Nature, sustainability, and holistic, interrelational balance with plants, soil, and animals. Technically, these farm practices are similar to pre-industrial farming—inputs of seeds, water, sun, soil, compost, and sweat, sunburn, and aching joints. Several modern implements—tractors, computers, websites, and social media—have improved the process. Sharp increases in fuel prices have prompted some farmers like Ken Greene and Doug Muller at the [Hudson Valley Seed Library](#) to return to broad forks and human brawn. Computers, social media, and a website allow HVSL to offer paper-free electronic catalog, altogether

eliminating paper resource use and waste. Josh Morgenthau, general manager at [Fishkill Farms](#), does “not idealize the farming of long ago. Lead arsenate, a double whammy of human poisons, was the number one weapon in the commercial fruit grower’s arsenal from the 1890s to midcentury.” At Fishkill, natural methods are implemented—and sometimes discovered: “Recently, we have begun grazing laying hens and our sheep under the trees in our orchard,” says Morgenthau. “Our hens find some of the insects that attack our apples, and we have already seen a reduction in insect damage where they have been. There is also evidence that their manure below the tree helps break the cycle of some of the worst apple diseases by hastening the decomposition of the leaves in which they overwinter.”



Crop diversification replaces monocultures for two reasons. From an ecological standpoint, crop diversification assists in soil health by preventing crop-specific pests from thriving. Adjunct to crop rotation is planting cover crops like clover, alfalfa, barley, and buckwheat to enrich soils that have been depleted from heavy feeders like cabbage, greens, beets, corn, tomatoes, and squash. Companion plantings of beneficial flowers—some to attract pollinators, others that repel pests—is another component of crop diversification. Economics support crop diversification. A farmer who offers heirlooms, unusual varieties, ethnic vegetables, and herbs in response to consumers’ evolving palate expands market opportunities and income. Rogowski Farms grows everything from “raspberries, Native American squash, freckled lettuce, dinosaur kale, black beans, 50 different types of chili, and 20 types of garlic, to Mexican herbs like pepicha, pallo, epazote, and cilantro.” Farmers Bob and Sandy Kiley of [RSK Farm in Prattsville](#) “try new seeds whenever they are available.” At [Fishkill Farms](#), in addition to 15 familiar apple varieties, Josh Morgenthau now plants varieties like Cox’s Orange Pippin and Esopus Spitzenberg, heirlooms that his grandfather once raised. Morgenthau relates that the same reasons that rendered certain apple varieties commercially unviable for a period—“funky flavors, low yields, strange shapes and colors”—accounts for their popularity today.

Community Supported Agriculture

[Community Supported Agriculture \(CSA\)](#) originated in Japan, Germany, and Switzerland in the 1960s—an initial response to food safety issues and the industrialization of food. Now, nearly every single new or revived organic or natural farm or orchard offers the CSA model, which allows members to buy a share, receiving a portion of the farm’s output each week for the length of the growing season. Fiscally, it provides the farmer with a guaranteed market and the monies to purchase seeds and hire labor. Inherent in CSA are consumer relations. CSA members and farmers meet at pick up locations. Prediversification and pre-CSA, Cheryl Rogowski recounts: “We sold 500 tons of onions every year and never met any of the people who bought them.” CSA helps farmers get to know their customers and the consumer associates a face with food. Jill Rubin, executive director of [Phillies Bridge Farm Project](#) states that “over 200 families come to the farm each week from June through November to pick up their produce, enjoy the farm, gardens, and nature trail and learn about how to eat seasonally.” Fishkill Farms offers a full farm share of both vegetables and fruits and the options of having just a fruit share, a simply vegetable share, or an all-apple share. Often, volunteer hours are an element of CSA, further linking consumer to farmer; commoditization of organic food evolves into a food partnership via CSA consumer participation.

Reeducation

The (lost) art of putting-up food—or preserving it via pickling, jamming, canning, or jarring—extends the farm season and offers opportunity to eat local during winter. Farmers now serve as sources of both preserved foods and information on preserving. Farmers Amoreen Armetta and Tierney Dearing Medick will offer canned and pickled items this summer and fall, and refer to value-added products like pickling as “little time capsules, the best gift you can give.” Rogowski Farm’s Black Dirt Gourmet offers classes, workshops, and demos. At Phillies Bridge Farm, over 1,000 school children visit on fields trips, gaining knowledge of where their food comes from via hands-on experiences like crop harvesting, meeting farm animals, and preparing a farm-fresh meal. Phillies Bridge also hosts over 100 children at summer camp in July and August.

The phrase “farm to table” often connotes the importance of uberlocalization, shortest possible distance between field and mouth. Several regional farmers connected their field to their table. Delaware County’s [Stone and Thistle Farm](#) debuted Fable, their on-farm dinner restaurant, in 2007. [Heather Ridge Farm](#) in Greene County opens the Bees Knees Café for lunch during the season. Rogowski Farm operates Black Dirt Gourmet, offering kitchen breakfasts every Saturday and Sunday from 9am to 2pm.

Farm Connections

[Nedefonedrag Farm’s](#) Tierney Dearing Medick “always wanted to farm. I always loved my family’s Arkansas farm and their way of life but I was unsure of how I could ever be a farmer. It seemed very difficult to get into.” Regionally, development pressure combined with assimilation of farmland into the protected New York City watershed greatly inflates land prices, prohibitive to purchasing land

for new farm start-ups. [Farm Catskills](#), a nonprofit conceived of farmers and concerned citizens with a mission of building sustainable communities in a working landscape will implement Catskill Farm Link this summer to unite “beginning farmers looking to connect with resources in the region and establish their business.”

Heart Farming

In the 21st century, people are choosing to farm. Care for the land, concern for community, and a personal call to shepherd seed to fruition distinguish current progressive regional farming. Farmer Tierney Dearing Medick says that “moving here was an easy decision. Growing here, I can live in a way that makes me feel truly happy. I feel that I have an ability to grow, there’s a need for that ability.” Desire to grow healthy food, respect for nature, and renewed interest in reviving sustainable communities suggest eventual restoration of “overall local sufficiency, productivity, well-being, and beneficial inter-dependence,” as Charlie Blumstein, contributor to the former *Olive Press*, wrote in a 2008 piece. Pre-1950s Catskill living “demonstrated a lifestyle and ethic that was rich in locally preserved food, hard work, high spirit, neighborly reciprocity, cooperative effort, and high level practical skills.” Perhaps the spirit that defines regional farming in the 21st century will reestablish these selfsame attributes. Eat seasonally. Buy local. Plant heirlooms. Who’s *your* farmer?

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