

# The Death of Farmbrain

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“When I die or retire, this is what it’s going to be like. Everything I own laid out in a field,” says Thor Oechsner, a 48-year-old grain farmer from Newfield, NY.

I want to refute his statement, but he’s right. He won’t live or farm forever, and where else would his stuff go? He doesn’t have kids, and thrift stores don’t sell tractors and combines. The grain bins and hay wagons on eBay are models and toys. A farm auction will be his way out of business.

For two hours, we’ve been driving past fields and towns, heading away from his farm, which is just outside of Ithaca. We passed a bicycle race, keeping pace with the fiercest bikers for a few seconds at 35 miles per hour. Now we are beyond Smyrna, a blip of a town with a post office and little else. We take a quick left and park with mostly pickup trucks on grass by the side of the road. Next to a corrugated metal building, the tools and equipment of a dairy that ran for 80 years are laid out in a field.

The contents of a storage unit spill onto a concrete pad, but we aren’t here for shoes, high chairs, or silverware. No one else touches the stuff, either, not even the shirts hung on hangers and displayed on a rolling rack.

About 75 people, mostly men, walk the rows of neatly organized objects: piles of electrical cords, boxes of light bulbs, five wheelbarrows, twenty shovels. Rusty chains hide in the grass. Chains for tires and chains for yanking, with thick, murderous hooks. A bunch of steel sheeting stacked in piles. Three oil dispensers that look like little ice cream carts with pumps on top. Four old grain trucks.

Thor wants one thing only, a Kverneland six-bottom plow.

“I’m going to take a number even before I see it,” Thor says. I don’t know much about his world, but still, his conviction that he’s going to get this plow surprises me.

Local eating is wildly popular across the U.S. these days. Figures on homesteaders, urban or rural, are hard to come by because the people keeping backyard hens don’t self-report,

but take a look at the DIY food and gardening titles at the bookstore and get a hint of how many people are at least curious about getting hands-on with their food.

Since achieving true self-sufficiency is close to impossible, these people are often customers at farmers' markets, farm stands, or other direct marketing outlets, where the USDA is keeping tally. Between 2011 and 2012, the number of farmers markets grew nearly 10 percent—this summer there were nearly 8,000 across the country. According to the 2007 Census of Agriculture, which is the latest to date, community-supported agriculture programs offer consumers the chance to buy shares in a season's produce, and nearly 13,000 U.S. farms use this model to sell vegetables, meats, eggs, and bread. "Local" is such a well-loved term that even giants like Walmart and McDonald's are trying to capitalize on its cachet.

Yet even as shoppers have a love affair with small-scale farms and farmers, grains are the last piece of the locavore puzzle. This is because we want our bread cheap as can be, and also because big, pricey equipment like this plow that Thor wants is worth \$10,000 used.

All farming needs infrastructure and markets, but if you're going to sell grains at top dollar, say to a distillery or a mill, you need the right tools for post-harvest handling, and bins for storage.

"You can't just buy a small tractor and a hoe and grow an acre of grain and have it pay," Thor says. The gross income-per-acre figure off a buckwheat field versus an acre of arugula is laughable. That's why he farms 600 to 800 acres a season. Next year, he'll be working 1,000 acres, planting rye, corn, buckwheat, oats, and other grains.

Where does he fit on the national scale? Wheat farms are big and small, some over 2,000 acres. Conventional grain farmers usually sell their crops to grain elevators or mills or even the government, and don't have anything to do with the end product of their labors. Their wheats disappear into the blends that big flour companies make, merging pan-American crops to make a product that performs predictably for the bakers at home and in commercial bakeries. Locally grown and milled grains can differ in flavor from their standardized counterparts as much as a Massachusetts heirloom tomato does from its Florida cousin.

Across the country, pockets of farmer-miller-baker partnerships are popping up as people get interested in the nutrition, ecology, ethics, and taste of local grains. I've been following this revival in the Northeast, and met Thor at an organic farming conference. We became friends because he is gregarious and happy to share his passion for growing grains with anyone, including my kids. Francis knows the global history of plants, and Felix is interested in gardening because his brother is. We came to Thor's farm for a field

day, to see how the wheat crop looked in the fields just before harvest. The farm auction was on our way home, so we tagged along.

We follow Thor to a folding table where a woman writes down his name, phone number, and info from a blank check. They give him a card with a magic marked number, 279. We walk to the plow Thor is coveting, which is over by the road in a line of tractors, one old one and the rest fancy and new. The last item is a John Deere combine that Thor bets will get \$40,000. The numbers seem surreal.

Thor studies the Norwegian plow intently, touching all its parts and naming them for my kids: shin, share, point, landside, trashboard, mouldboard, coulter, frog. I don't see any resemblance to frogs or legs. The thing is a beam about 20 feet long, with 6 curvy steel ovals propped to drop and cut into the ground. To me, the plow looks faded and kind of worn. I don't understand its value.

“Organic farmers, plowing is our gig,” he says. He wonders who else is going to bid. Depending on how badly his rivals want it, he could be priced out.

Next to the Kverneland, another plow is for sale, a John Deere. They look about the same to me, farmy, not shiny, not very old but not brand-new. Thor shows us the differences between the plows, how the pieces in the John Deere are crude, and not sculpted to carve the soil, just to dump it on itself.

We return to the better plow, whose mouldboards are gently curved to pick the soil up and turn it so that uprooted plant matter can breakdown organically. The plow is made from steel that lasts four times as long as anything made in America, and its design makes the tool use less fuel, too. The toes on the Kverneland can be replaced as they wear out, Thor says, showing how the long curving mouldboard holds the toe, the frog, and shin. He pulls on the joints, checking the sections for wear. Francis, my 14-year-old, repeats his inspection, pulling joints to and fro.

Thor quizzes Felix, my nine-year-old, on the parts. He gets everything right.

“I just bought one of these, a four-bottom, and paid \$6,000 for it,” Thor says. Each bottom is a plow blade, and plows are made up of any number of them.

The closest I've ever come to this kind of shopping is looking at used cars. I once was invited to a car auction, but the idea was terrifying so I said no thanks. The buyer said he'd call me from the auction, and tell me what he saw. The thought of buying a car that had only been eyeballed made me sick to my stomach. I didn't give him my number.

The stakes here are high. Thor wants this plow, and the drama of his want is crowding his affable self. He's still friendly, but quieter, and tense. This is a side of him I haven't seen, and the day's heat amplifies the intensity.

"Let's go see the bidding," Thor says, and we join the crowd moving slowly along the snake of stuff.

There are not many women here, but I am the only non-Amish woman wearing a skirt. Mennonite boys stare at Felix's clothes: He wears Crocs and shorts. The boys' straw hats can't hide their envy. They wear long pants, and lace up boots or Merrells. I couldn't find their ankles with a crow bar. I look at the biceps on farmwomen and want to fade like a mirage, afraid they might dare me to unload a hay wagon.

People talk a little, but not a lot. The loquacious farmer is few and far between. Working alone, under the sun and weather, farmers live by action more than words. Auctions are social occasions, Thor explains, but he is far from home and doesn't know many people at this one.

There are pairs and families, farmers of all ages. Kids trail their grandfathers and dads. One mom pushes a stroller. Most guys wear long pants and work boots despite the heat. All eyes are on the merchandise and prices. As the auctioneer's pickup truck moves along the aisles, the group follows, a big amorphous huddle that reminds me of cells slowed down on film, little units moving together toward a common goal.

The sky feels like a roof, painted the same soft, glimmering blue behind the Virgin Mary in backyard bathtub shrines. Puffs of cumulus sit nearly still, and a fat stripe of other white clouds cuts this magic blue in two. Green hills, more dramatic than the ones around me another two hours east, nestle against the huge bowl of this day. The hills are a fence.

The sun shines on everyone except the auctioneer and his helpers, who are in the back of a pickup, with speakers propped on the cab. The cap on the back looks like a concession stand, the kind that sets up to sell sausage and peppers at festivals and fairs.

The auctioneer sits on a stool and calls out prices, starting high and dropping till someone lifts a hand and the bidding starts. The auctioneer, hair and mustache white, trills bids into the microphone like a boozed-up scattin lounge singer, his voice on amphetamines but his body totally relaxed. That voice won't last the day, and another auctioneer will replace him soon.

I most like to watch the other men in the cab, the men who stand and catch bids.

"Yup."

"Yup."

“Yup,” they say, little chirps between the rolling numbers. I can’t see these men’s heads, only their hands and arms, poking out a code to acknowledge each bidder. The rhythm of their motion is quick, each chop swift and significant.

On the field, people enter a sale by raising an arm, but from then on, it’s all tiny nods and noes. The movements are very, very small. The slightest dip of a baseball cap, a lift of the chin, a subtle side to side when the price goes too high. The sun is baking and glazing us, but the ringmen don’t miss a bid, calling out “hep” when bids overlap.

“All in and all done boys,” the auctioneer says, and I think the bid is over, but the pause is just for effect. He adds some money to the price, and his helpers spy more bids. Or they don’t, and the item is sold. The bidder holds up his number, and a man in the cab writes it on a list. Another man in the field marks this number with a Sharpie on small things. He uses a thick fluorescent paint marker for larger things: the rusty tongue of a trailer or the top piece of a pile of steel.

How the men in the cab work with each other and the buyers, I don’t know. Like any intricate job, the choreography seems impossible. Do they have telepathy? Do they train at fake auctions, like public defenders train at mock trials? Once in a while there is a fumble, and the auctioneer has to stop and straighten out who has what bid. But mostly the sales go fast and seamless, and I stare at the understated movements the men make in the field—mostly men are bidding. They are barely moving, just barely, but somehow the men in the truck see and register the motion, call out “Yup!” I love to watch the men chopping the air. This physical music means nothing anywhere else, and everything here. Absolutely everything.

The day is long, and Thor keeps returning to the Kverneland, checking the parts and joints, adding up what the worn pieces might cost to replace.

We take a break and join the line for food, which stretches a dozen people long. This is where the women are, under a tent serving lunch from lots of crackpots. Pulled pork, kielbasa, and kraut, sausage, and peppers. Chili, baked beans, hamburgers, and hot dogs. Sodas, water, and chips. Donuts, Danishes, slices of pie. The women work fast; they are tired but not slowing.

We sit on folding chairs and drink A&W root beer, eat hot sandwiches, the pork, and kielbasa, on big buns. It feels great to get out of the sun, and we eat slowly, dulled by the haze. Thor finishes first.

“I want to see how the prices are going,” he says, heading back to the auction, which is getting into bigger items. The grain trucks are all sold.

A little while later, we join Thor at a grain dryer. The price it takes will show what kind of competition he might have for the plows. The dryer's been beat to shit, Thor says. But it still fetches almost two grand, an amount that makes him worried.

Why so much? I ask.

"The cost of anything new is so high that even stuff that's just about ruined is valuable," he explains.

Hay wagons. Grain boxes. The bidding moves quickly now that we're past the shovels and wheelbarrows. Older tractors first. One of the auction helpers gets in the cab of the first and starts up the engine, runs it for the duration of the bid.

The John Deere plow is before the Kverneland. It goes for \$1,500.

Now the Kverneland. Thor moves to the front. The auctioneer starts at \$4,000, but drops to \$1,500 before anyone joins the bid. Thor doesn't jump in immediately and I'm confused. I know nothing of this game. At \$3,000 he raises his hand, not way up high like a kid begging for a teacher's attention, just a little bit. These teachers are seeking his interest.

Two other guys are bidding with him, but once it gets to \$5,000, one of them drops out. Thor drops out at \$6,500, shaking his head no. He is still in a lock-look with the auctioneer, though, and jumps back in at \$7,500. The price climbs. Thor's gaze is aimed at that truck. The microphone is a snake charmer's flute, and Thor and the other man bidding are cobras, stunned but ready to strike. Beneath his baseball cap, Thor is smiling tight and staring. I can't see the other guy, let alone his face, but Thor's concentration at this moment is impressive. Think of heads of state, battling for territory. Aerospace engineers leaning over their monitors, watching a launch. Politicians viewing election counts in private, far from the camera's eye. Fate is about to be decided.

Nine thousand is as far as the other bidder goes. Ninety-one hundred, the auctioneer says, naming Thor's price, and he takes it. The air itself seems to exhale. I don't think I've been breathing. The whole thing took three minutes? Four?

The big glitzy tractors are next and we follow. The weight of that want is gone, even though it wasn't my own. I walk light, almost fly. I'm up there in the roof of the sky, looking down at people hooking hay wagons up to their trucks, taking them home. A line of people stands behind a trailer, ready to pay. Only the diehards remain, mostly watching, not bidding, on two big tractors, plus the combine.

“Under two hundred hours on this John Deere,” the auctioneer says. The tractor goes for \$72,000. The next one has more sweet stuff in the cab, better air conditioning and filters, a DVD player, and a fancier screen on the GPS. It goes for \$98,000. The combine sells for \$36,000. And with that, everything from the dairy is sold.

The line behind the trailer is long, so we look at his purchase. A guy comes up, offers to drive it wherever Thor needs it to go. They exchange phone numbers on scraps of paper. Thor gets a tape measure, debates whether he can get his hired man to drive it back to the farm. Even partially folded, the plow is too long to fit on his trailer.

The kids are hungry again, so they line up for food and we get in line to pay for the plow. Most of the crockpots are empty, Francis reports, but there’s pizza. I look back and see the women serving slices from a stack of boxes.

Behind the folding table, two women sit in nice office chairs, recording transactions in ledgers and writing receipts. Thor fills in his check, and the woman asks if his phone number is on file. He tells her yes and asks how long he has to get the plow.

“You’ve got seven days to get it home,” she tells him.

Back in the field, all of these farm pieces fan out to other farms. Tractors go on trailers. Wheelbarrows and shovels are tied onto a stack of other equipment on a flatbed. I think of all these tools, useful where they were, being useful where they are going. What an efficient distribution of parts. Almost like an organ transplant. The farm and farmers are dead, but the heart, lungs, and kidneys will be stitched to another operation.

Those of us who don’t grow food have no clue about farming. The more I see of fields and machines, the more farmers let me in on their vernaculars, each language specific to each type of farming, the more I know we eaters don’t understand. How will we close the gap between our mouths and the people who feed us?

Not that everyone who eats should get sunburnt at an auction. And farmers have too much to do to be tour guides. But when supermarket clerks can’t identify vegetables like fennel, or even grapefruit, well, we as a culture need to know more about food.

We know how Olympians train. How Ponzi schemes bilk us. How American Idol makes a star. How come we don’t know the first thing about the flour that makes our bread? Whole villages used to leave their tasks to harvest wheat. I don’t think everyone should learn how to handle a scythe, but we have more prison inmates than farmers, and those farmers are aging out. Some young people are starting to see farming as a good career, but we need social supports to help them pursue this dream realistically—programs to help transition farmland from retiring farmers to beginners, national health care to tend

the bodies that do tough physical work on a daily basis, and subsidies for fruit and vegetable production rather than corn that can feed the biofuel industry.

My kids got farmbrain because I ran a farmers market and my husband gardened the yard. We have no lawn, but plenty of chickens. Yet there are other ways to stitch kids to food. Writer and activist Mark Winne suggests a [food competency](#) for high school graduates: they should know how to make 10 dishes from scratch, and understand something about gardening and food advertising.

At the auction, my boys finish their pizza, and use the port-a-potties one last time. Families load into trucks. Will those kids be farmers, or will their parents' tools be laid out in some field in another 30 years? Will Francis grow up to be a seed breeder? Will Felix be a grain farmer?

Thor gets in his Subaru wagon, and we get in our van, aiming for our very different homes. Passing farms and fields, then getting on the Thruway, I keep looking at the sky, thinking what it would be like to work under it, instead of in my office, which is just 15 feet from my bed.

As I write this, I look at my ceiling. Writing is an uncertain game, but I don't gamble as much as farmers. A bad day at the desk won't keep me from paying my mortgage, and it would take a lot of environmental disruptions to make the plaster over my head fracture and rain.

The sky, though, is a farmer's boss. A crop can go fast, under water, under pests and blight, or even under too much sun. I have the luxury of calling this ambiguity beautiful, and hoping my sons will pursue such beauty.