Putting Culture Back in Agriculture
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"I used to be a faceless producer," David Rowley said of his last job in conventional agriculture. "We grew two to three tons of tomatoes a week, starting in February. There were six people, no weeds, and no pests."

At the end of 2000, three things happened that led this farmer from old school ag back to the older school of ag, and into organics and direct marketing. Fuel prices went through the roof, pushing energy costs for the Pennsylvania greenhouses from $15,000 a month to $45,000 a month. A change of management occurred, and most significantly, Rowley got ill and attributed it to pesticides.

As he repaired his health and revised his career, the idea of looking the customer right in the eye and saying the food he grew was clean became imperative. His illness was making him physically understand the importance of nontoxic production. Mentally, he understood organics through a very clever interpreter: his two-year old daughter.

Watching his child, who would not eat supermarket strawberries, devour strawberries from the CSA at home and in the field was another arrow toward this other way of farming. The transparency of the relationship between the farmer, the land, and the consumer was critical as he considered how he would live and work.

"When I was working for other people I had a job. It was a business," Rowley says, recalling the distance he kept between his livelihood and his living. That gap has been closing ever since.

Monkshood Nursery started in New York's Hudson Valley in 2001. From scratch, the operation was certified organic, and grew only herbs, selling them directly to the consumer at farmers markets. Now David is growing vegetables and herbs in 10 greenhouses and a number of fields in Stuyvesant, near the Hudson River. The produce makes its way to markets in New York City and Troy.

Last fall's incredible rains dumped twenty inches of rain and the farm lost six acres of produce and two greenhouses full of food over the course of ten days. The crops yellowed and went moldy, suffocating the plants.

Rebuilding the business after such a massive blow was nothing he could do alone. Luckily, Rowley was already undertaking a restructuring of the farm with the help of some broad community shoulders–Columbia Land Conservancy, Scenic Hudson, and the Hudson Valley Agribusiness

Development Corporation. These groups and his neighbors helped secure development rights for more than 150 acres. The Phillips' family sold the farm they'd leased to Monkshood for years, and Kieran Goodwin and Catherine Rocco donated an easement on adjacent land to keep this parcel of land in agricultural production.

After the rains, Rowley also had to retool the farm's infrastructure. With more help from his neighbors, he had six greenhouses built, kitted out to fit a tractor and all its attachments.

Rowley's been in greenhouses much of his career, and a lot of the food he grows is still under cover. However, he and his crew also work in the open fields, and this shift can be seen as a metaphor for the gradual and continuing opening of his work and life.

Until recently, he thought of the work at the farm as very separate from the connections he made at the farmers market. He is a very affable fellow, and loves the connections he makes with people.

"I used to think on the farm, it's just me, and at the market I'm hanging out," Rowley says. Hanging out being shorthand for the juicy human intersections that make direct marketing such an effective selling point.

Anyone who's shopped at a farmers market knows you're not just buying beets, you are buying a particular vendor's beets, or carrots, or bacon. That food becomes an emblem of attachment, the relationship between the ground and the harvester's hand made visible, and then edible.

The popularity of this marketing method is evident in the explosion of farmers markets. USDA counted fewer than 2000 in 1994, and this year, there are almost 8000 nationally. This so-called new way of selling mirrors old-fashioned public markets and produce carts that went door-to-door delivering vegetables, breads and other foods.

People used to have a lot of intersections with food, and the future of farming depends on increasing those intersections, from first graders planting onion sets, to twenty, thirty and forty-somethings dancing under a blue moon.

Blue moon dancing happened the last night of August at Monkshood. Severine von Tscharner Fleming of The Greenhorns helped Rowley with outreach this summer, ending with a big party that landed bands and eighty people on the farm for a big cookout on the blue moon.

"Severine helped me see that people should be in all parts of the farm," says Rowley. He wants more farmers on the farm, too, and is working to

create opportunities for young farmers to build their own resource base under the umbrella of Monkshood.

Fleming is the muscle behind a lot of beginning farmer projects, including the documentary The Greenhorns and Farm Hack, which is hosting a grassroots charetteaimed at tools for small grain processing in Ithaca in October.

As farming evolves, she sees a danger in the desire to avatarize any and every experience. If traditional farmers are stereotyped in a few words, the prototype of the mod young farmer is one of a million words, chatted, tweeted, and Facebooked, either directly or on their behalf.

But are these farmers so different from what you might consider the traditional, taciturn farmer who wholesales vegetables or grows commodity crops? Chatty people are everywhere, but if you're growing hundreds or thousands of acres, chances are you're not going to interface much with your customers.

Socialization has always been a part of farming. Think of barnraising, and entire villages scything the wheat harvest. Food used to be too big a job to not have the community involved. Social media might not be the goose that lays the golden egg for food production, but it does help us inch forward as people experiment with ways to reincorporate humanity into agriculture.

"What I want to figure out in terms of social media business is how do we bring back the core ideas of the grange, stewardship and ethics and banding together and cooperative spirit?" asked Fleming. "What would be the techno futurist or community-utopia online version of that? Because I feel like that there's a social technology that's due for revival."

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