The New Farmers

Meet the youthful future of American agriculture

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SPRING IS THE TIME of year when Deena Miller, owner and operator of Sweet Roots Farm in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada, thinks of quitting. Her body hurts, money is tight, and just enough of her organic, love-sown seeds have sprouted from the ground that she can see her failures: wimpy leaves, frost-stunted sprouts, roots chewed through by beetles. It’s the fourth season that thirty-year-old Miller and her partner, Robbie Martin, have farmed three and a half acres on a slight slope in the fertile Grass Valley, north of Sacramento. And yet despite the challenges, each year has proven better than the last as they learn the particulars of the region’s microclimates and their farm’s soil—what grows best where, just how long to wait to plant the heat-loving tomatoes and cucumbers.

“This time of year is always really tough, but it gets easier,” Miller says, adjusting her cap. She sports a tool belt and well-padded iPhone, allowing her to simultaneously work the fields, answer e-mail, and receive business calls. “I’ve been weeding carrots for the last hour, so I’m a little grumpy,” she says with a smile. She snaps off a lingering asparagus stalk—its brethren were harvested last week and sold to the local co-op—and hands it to me. We chomp our snack, and I admire the farm. To my untrained eye, it looks handsome and bountiful with its rows of green cascading down the hill, not a disappointment in sight.

Growing up a few hours away in Lake Tahoe, Miller wanted to work in the environmental movement but never expected to be a farmer. She was nineteen before she even met one. “I wanted to work outside, and I wanted to better the environment, but I just didn’t know how to engage,” she says. “There aren’t many jobs out there, and a lot of the messaging felt kind of negative: ‘Don’t do this, and don’t do that.’” While studying at the University of Santa Cruz, she enrolled in agriculture classes with the thought of becoming a school garden teacher. “But the more I learned about agriculture, the more I saw it as a tool for change,” she explains. “I realized that, to me, the difference between the environmental movement and growing food is that growing food is really positive. You’re saying yes, instead of asking people to stop something.” She met Martin at a farm education program in Santa Cruz, and the two relocated to this plot of family land to try their hand at cultivating organic vegetables, fruits, and flowers.

Miller and Martin are part of a growing demographic of young, beginning farmers—farmers by choice, not by heritage—who have committed themselves to small-scale agriculture. Often with strong educational
backgrounds and urban or suburban upbringings, these young people have chosen their vocation over many other options available to them, and, like Miller, they’ve done it largely out of a deep environmental ethic.

Miller looks out onto her farm. The diminishing daylight suffuses everything with a saffron glow: young apple trees not yet bearing fruit, her husband running the tractor, a shaggy llama, like a gangly guardian, standing attention at the fence. “Here I’m building something,” she says. “And I like that. I like that we’re stewards of this land, that we’re building the soil and taking care of the pollinators, the bees, the birds—it’s just so positive.”

She thinks for a moment. “What’s hard is when you’re so tired, and your body hurts so much, and you’re so poor. We finally figured out we make less than five dollars an hour. How much do you sacrifice for this vision?

“But when I get down, I think about a conversation with my mom that really helped me,” she reflects. “She asked, ‘If everyone was doing what you’re doing, would the world be a better place?’ And the answer is, of course, yes. Yes, it would. And that’s why I do it.”

She perks up and listens for a moment. “Oh man,” she says. “I hear a gopher.” She turns and inspects the ground behind her. I’m sure she’s joking. The wind rustles through the leaves, the adjacent stream gurgles and Martin turns the tractor in the fields behind us. It should be impossible to hear anything so small over all this ambient noise. But she knows these three and a half acres so well that she can hear a gopher, that tiny subterranean threat to all she’s built, burrowing underfoot.

IN THE SUMMER of 2004, I fell in love with a boy who lived down the road from the tumbledown house I rented with friends in central Vermont. He was home for the summer from college, and one of his jobs was to paint his sister’s barn. She was a goat farmer who, at the age of twenty-three, had started Blue Ledge Farm, along with her husband. I’d drive to Blue Ledge in the still-warm evenings to find my new boyfriend packing up the ladder while his sister, Hannah, and her husband, Greg, let the goats out to pasture. Their two-year-old daughter assisted, tugging at their pant legs and chasing the goats into the field. The couple met at Bates College; starting a farm had been their collective dream, one that at first surprised their friends and family. They borrowed and scrambled to purchase land in Leicester, Vermont, along with milk equipment and goats and got to work on what is now, ten years later, a successful small farm.

Hannah and Greg were the first people I’d known who’d chosen farming rather than inherited it. My mom grew up on a farm in California’s Capay Valley, about two hours north of San Francisco, where her family grazed cattle and harvested almonds. She and her six siblings spent summers picking tomatoes; in high school she was teased for wearing second-hand clothes. She left for college at sixteen and went straight to Berkeley, ready for city life and big ideas, bidding the Capay Valley goodbye forever. My grandfather also fled farm life. He grew up a dirt-poor farmer’s son near the Chesapeake Bay, but trained his eyes on a future at Harvard University. Although I’d been raised to respect farming, I’d also understood that it was something you inherited and, often, left behind.
Now, ten years after meeting Hannah and Greg, I have more than a dozen friends around the country who have started successful commercial farms. While I feel unreasonable pride in my two backyard tomato plants and my teeming pot of mint (three varieties!), these friends post pictures of their tractors and kale fields on Facebook and Instagram, send mass e-mails advertising their CSA (community supported agriculture) share and fashion adorable, hand-drawn logos to brand their goods—their lives and livelihoods a combination of hip and nostalgic. One friend calls it the “farmster” movement. Just flip through the pages of Modern Farmer magazine to see how the aesthetic and identity have become almost sexy and chic.

For many of its participants, the movement stems from a sense of social and environmental responsibility. “My decision to become a farmer had to do with my feeling very strongly that farming is a nexus for social, ecological, and political change,” explains Matthew Shapero, owner and operator of Buckeye Ranch, a lamb and garlic operation down the road from Sweet Roots Farm. A dashing 2006 graduate of Columbia University with a BA in Eastern religions, Shapero is equal parts rancher and Brooklyn-hip. Like many of the new farmers, he came of age during a time of economic hardship, climate change, and general disenchantment with business as usual. “Becoming a farmer felt like the most radical vocation I could choose,” he says.

Today’s green movement is considered by some Millennials and Gen Xers to be an equivalent to the Civil Rights struggle—the organizing principal propelling young people into action. Recent decades have seen unprecedented environmental demonstration in Washington, as well as committed political activism from the likes of 350.org, which is staffed almost entirely by Millennials. Yet during this same era, the movement has nevertheless suffered major blows due to legislative decision-making (or lack thereof). As a result, disbelief in government as a driver of meaningful change seems to be growing, as well as turning some young, would-be activists, like Miller and Shapero, toward small-scale farming.

One young farmer, Trish Jenkins, who co-owns and operates Cycle Farm in the Black Hills of South Dakota, told me that the connotation of what it means to be an environmentalist is changing. “To me, twenty years ago, it meant people who saved the rainforest,” she said. “But we’re making a difference on our own land. We’re storing food, we’re sequestering carbon, we’re using our bicycles to take our crops to market. People still need to write letters, and lobby, and wear their ‘Save the Whales’ t-shirts. But they need to do the hands-on work, too.”

It helps that on a farm one can see the results of that work every day. As Severine von Tscharner Fleming, a young farmer and activist, explains, “I think for a lot of people, the economy of the farm is comfortable and manageable. It represents a level of complexity that’s compatible with the human spirit and capacity for change.” In addition to growing food, von Tscharner Fleming stewards an almost impossible list of other projects, including Greenhorns, a resource-sharing and networking platform for beginning farmers. “The farm can be a refuge,” she says, a place removed from the tiresome systems of degradation, a chance to reshape the scale and nature of economic and ecological transactions.
THE SURGE OF NEW INTEREST in agriculture comes at a good time. According to Jill Auburn of the U. Department of Agriculture, “The American farmer on average has gotten a little older, and we need replacement farmers.” Today’s average farmer is fifty-eight, and the question looms: what will become of U.S. farmland in years to come? Congress tried to tackle that question this year when it authorized $100 million in grant funds for new farmer initiatives (up from $75 million in 2012). And the number of new farmers is certainly growing. The most recent agricultural census shows that, between 2007 and 2012, the number of young, beginning farmers increased nearly 12 percent. Though small farms remain on the decline nationwide, they are very much on the rise in states like Vermont, with farms earning up to $50,000 in sales showing the most growth—meaning that it’s small farms like Blue Ledge making such a noticeable comeback.

These new farms look very different from the large-scale agriculture that defines much of rural America. California’s Central Valley, for example, is a landscape that feeds millions of people in part by forsaking its own. Although Fresno County gleans more agricultural profit than any other county in the U.S., it has some of the most atrocious air quality rankings, highest pesticide poisoning rates, and worst labor exploitation statistics (largely of undocumented Latino workers) in the country. Spend enough time in these pummeled places and one can feel the ecological and spiritual burn of industrial-scale food production. Some also hear quiet call to arms, the urge to start a venture of one’s own—to do something more than just spend dollars at the farmers’ market.

Severine von Tscharner Fleming explains that we have for a long time needed “a compromise between humanity’s needs and ecology’s needs, a kind of peace path that is the very opposite of top-down.” Environmentalism, she says, has often been associated with a top-down, regulatory approach: “some white guys getting some tax benefits for some nature preservation for some polar bears. But the small farming movement is a populist approach to this problem.”

Small farms tend toward ecologically intelligent practices, like the use of organic fertilizers, crop rotation, renewable energy, composting, and local distribution. Though the market for food grown with these practices represented only 4 percent of total national sales in 2012, organic sales are up 183 percent since 2007. And the number of farms that have moved beyond the “certified organic” stamp and integrated other sustainable practices, such as renewable energy production, into their operations and culture has more than doubled since 2007.

Despite these efforts and a growing food consciousness, changing the agricultural industry remains challenging. Matthew Shapero, from Buckeye Ranch, had decidedly high hopes when he got into this radical affair of sustainable meat production five years ago, but now there’s a bit of jadedness setting in. As he puts it, a small-scale farmer is “still very much strapped and inured by the current food market and by the practices of industrial agriculture.”

Another barrier to change is financial. New farmers need money to get going, and most enter the profession thanks to access to land or capital. There’s also the added cost of equipment, a huge upfront investment. All
of which skews the demographic of new farmers toward those who’ve got money or access to it. Matthew Shapero teamed up with a friend whose family owns land to kick-start his lamb operation. Deena Miller and Robbie Martin also farm family land. Blue Ledge Farm borrowed family funds to get started.

THE CYNIC MIGHT wonder if they’ve seen this before, a modern version of the back-to-the-land movement. Today, that movement—which saw thousands of flower children, some from privileged backgrounds, retreat to the woods to set up self-sustaining co-operatives and communes—is often regarded a cliché of failed idealism.

When asked how the current small-farm revival is different than the back-to-the-land movement, von Tscharner Fleming says, “Oh, I’ve only been asked that question a thousand times.” She points out that the back-to-the-landers had cheap land. “And we don’t. But we do have a marketplace that’s craving what we’re producing, and the back-to-the-landers had to build that from scratch. Also, we have the internet.”

The internet allows farmers to share resources and best practices so that newcomers can easily solve problems, such as how to stave off aphids or mitigate late-season frosts. It can also link farmers to lower-priced land and equipment. Customers are easier to find, too, especially given the rise of CSAs, which provide a reliable market and source of capital in advance of the growing season. And then there’s the new ubiquity of agriculture: it’s happening everywhere, including in cities and suburbs. All of this amounts to a web of relationships—an emerging connective tissue among farmers and consumers—allowing more small-scale goods to be sold.

That emerging connective tissue is likely to be an important factor in new farmers’ long-term success. It’s the antidote to what author Novella Carpenter calls “the isolation problem”—to the disconnect, and ensuing loneliness, of life away from civilization—which was a crux of the back-to-the-landers’ short-lived experiment. After too much time on a farm with too few people, many of them retreated from the woods and fled back to cities and towns. But the new generation is building a culture of connectedness and solidarity, supported by initiatives like Greenhorns, which might be regarded as isolation inoculations. On the days when farmers feel like quitting, days that overwhelm, days when they can’t take a break from the sun or hide their disappointment that their high-hopes garlic is blighted, it’s possible to remember all the others around the world who, just like them, are engaged in a common struggle.

“The thing about farming—it’s like one of the more fragile and tragedy-trafficked and heartbreaking pursuits you could choose,” says von Tscharner Fleming. “Being part of a community, you get used to overcoming setbacks. I find when I am around farmers, people don’t complain about ‘I can’t’—they just figure out how to get it done.”

Will the Farmsters and the Greenhorns, the Millers, Martins, and Shaperos stick around? Or will they meet the fate of the back-to-the-landers, look for easier lives, urban or suburban comforts? Or, worse, will they ultimately crumble under the weight of the agricultural system, massive and heartbreaking, that they’re trying so mightily to change by their own hands?
Surely some will quit, move on, make a change. This summer, Shapero is selling off his yearlings and harvesting the last of his garlic, at least for a while, and getting ready to enter a master’s program in range management at University of California, Berkeley. He wants to improve the environmental practices of farmers—his own or those of others, he’s still not sure. Miller and Martin don’t have plans to leave, but if they ever do, they say that they’ll take their farm experience and the ethic with them. And if the current trend continues, each year will bring thousands of new, young farmers who could take their place.

I’D LAST ABOUT THREE DAYS as a farmer, this I know. But as I drive out of Sweet Roots Farm, biddin, Miller and her guardian llama goodbye, past the farm’s trickling brook and into the emerald foothills of my state, I feel both the import and the appeal of farm life. I see how interacting with small-scale agriculture—a consumer, visitor, or farmer—is healthy for us all.

I remember an overcast day ten years ago at Blue Ledge Farm in Vermont, when Hannah and Greg’s two-year-old daughter, the farm’s tiny blond empress, came upon a dead goat out in the pasture. It was splayed on the grass, stiff and unmoving, ready for burial. She gave the creature two nudges with her rain boot. “Dead,” she proclaimed. Then we turned toward her family’s plentiful farm where her mom was planting peas, her father was setting newly poured wheels of cheese on shelves, and newborn goat kids were scrambling frantically around their pens in search of their mothers’ udders. She ran to join the parade.

This child understood much more than I did about the mysterious workings of the earth. But will she one day take over her parents’ farm? Or will she, like some children of the back-to-the-landers, sit in an urban apartment, poking fun at the naïve experiment of the previous generation? It almost doesn’t matter. She’ll be better fit for the perils of the changing world than so many of us, I remember thinking, as I trudged toward the barn for milking.

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