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The New American Farmer

With the help of the Slow Money movement, a new generation is choosing to give up existing careers to work the land and feed their communities. But there are significant obstacles to creating a life—and a business—on the farm.

BY ROBYN PFORR RYAN

Soon after their first child was born, Amy Turnbull, a naturopathic physician, and her husband, Stephen J. Hueffed, a manager in the Catholic Archdiocese in Seattle, pursued their shared dream of becoming farmers. The couple bought a 146-acre farmstead in Willapa Hills on the banks of the Chehalis River in southwest Washington. Three months later their foundation flock of 60 dairy ewes arrived from Wisconsin. It took two years to establish their Grade A dairy and then another year to produce their first cheese in their newly licensed creamery, on July 4, 2008.

Breaking Into Farming

"It's a long haul. It's been a lot harder than we realized. By that I mean financially. And we're working 24/7," says Turnbull in an interview from Chicago, where the couple was attending the first Whole Foods Market Local Producer Loan Conference. Hueffed commuted for five years into Seattle—a 110-mile drive—to finance the unexpected length of time it took for them to get the creamery built and licensed.

"I joke that in the first year we learned to keep the sheep alive,
natural selections

the second year we built the milk parlor, and in the third we built the creamery and began making cheese. For a lot of good reasons we probably should have thrown in the towel years ago, but we’re more than a little stubborn I guess,” Turnbull adds, laughing.

Today the couple has 160 sheep and the farm sells its artisanal cream cheese spreads, natural cream cheese, fresh sheep milk cheese and blue cheeses, to retail stores primarily throughout the West. The company’s award-winning Willapa Hills natural-rind blue cheeses are also found in restaurants and cheese shops in New York. (The Willapa Hills Big Boy Blue won first place at the American Cheese Society in 2012.) In early 2014, they will launch a new hard cheese inspired by Pecorino Romano that is to be called Ewe Old Cow for its mixed foundation of sheep’s and cow’s milk.

Even though the journey has been challenging, the couple is committed to their efforts. “It’s worth it. We love what we’re doing. It’s purposeful,” explains Turnbull. “We want nothing more than to stay in farming and share the experience with our children and invite them to be involved. A core value for us is to include our kids in all we do. They see the seasons, the ewes lambing, the cycle of life. We love being outside.”

A New Model

Turnbull is part of a trend—some call it a movement—of growth in smaller and organic farms that some predict will change the business model of American farming. This wave, a small but perceivable one, is building on the increased interest in local foods. Since the 1970s, large farms with 500 acres or more have been swallowing up small and mid-size operations, producing more and more food, according to the USDA. But the last Agriculture Census in 2007 (the 2012 census is not yet published) found a 4 percent increase in the number of smaller farms, marking the first increase in the numbers of any farms since the Great Depression.

These statistics support what industry insiders are seeing—a rise in smaller, sustainable farms. One reason is that people are increasingly seeking out produce grown with fewer or no pesticides in their own communities and livestock and poultry raised without growth hormones and killed humanely. In 2012, the USDA tallied 7,864 farmers markets, a 9.6 percent increase from the previous year, and its most recent data estimated that direct-to-consumer sales exceed $7 billion annually.

The Influence of Slow Money

One of the biggest drivers in this movement is the Slow Money Alliance, founded in Boulder, Colo., in 2009 by Woody Tasch, a venture capitalist who was chairman for ten years of Investors Circle, a nonprofit network of investors and foundations dedicated to sustainability. Tasch is also the author of the book Inquiries into the Nature of Slow Money: Investing as if Food, Farms, and Fertility Mattered (Chelsea Green, 2010). Over the past several years, Tasch has crisscrossed the country on a book tour, sharing his ideas at conferences, universities, coop grocery stores, bookstores and even a grange hall.

Since 2009, Slow Money has helped channel $30 million to 210 food businesses nationwide, including farms, grain mills, local processing and distribution companies and farmers markets, says Jake Bornstein, a Slow Money senior associate. The national office is lean, as Tasch has spoken of purposefully wanting to foster strong regional chapters and keep the national office in a support role. The organization hosts annual national gatherings (the last one in April brought a crowd of 650 to Boulder) and initiates programs like the Earthworm Angels investment group and, later this fall, Gatheround, a new crowdfunding platform for food enterprises.

Around the country are 16 state chapters (plus one in France), each with its own regional approach and personality. Slow Money Northwest’s website is chock-full of innovative projects, such as its Farmer Reserve Fund that helps farmers receive microcredit. The Willapa Hills farmers received a $6,000 low-interest loan to buy equipment, including a 600-gallon vat, which enables them to make as much cheese in one day as they previously could in a week.

The vibrant North Carolina chapter has helped channel $750,000 in small loans to some 80 food businesses, including funding for Massey Creek Farms, north of Greensboro, to expand its sustainably grown and grass-fed livestock. Slow Money Maine has channeled about $3.6 million in loans and donations to food enterprises; $450,000 went to Maine Farmland Trust to fund a bridge loan protecting Rokes Egg Farm in Camden. And its No Small
Potatoes Investment Club—with 20 members investing $5,000 each—has deployed $50,000 in loans so far. “Tasch’s ideas took off like wildfire,” says Derek Denckla, co-founder and chair of Slow Money NYC. “The model has been that investors invest at the level of agribusiness: $250,000 has been the minimum investment, 1,000 acres the minimum amount of land needed to attract investors. We are trying to change that paradigm. We’re hoping we’re the head of a spear, that we will eventually change the marketplace.”

**Banding Together in Food Hubs**

Denckla points to Jim Hyland’s work in New York’s Hudson Valley as an example of the momentum toward sustainability of new, smaller farms that is developing at the grassroots level. Hyland, owner of Winter Sun Farms, which flash-freezes fresh produce to sell as frozen food and processes other value-added products, formed a partnership with a distributor, Hudson Valley Harvest, that is now growing into a vibrant food hub in the region. The two companies work with more than 60 farms ranging in size from a 4-acre mixed-greens plot to the 1,200-acre Gill Farms—and 45 private-label food companies. More than 2 million pounds of produce and meat went through its facility in 2012. With the help of the nonprofit Hudson Valley AgriBusiness Development Corporation and the New World Project, the companies were able to secure $775,000 in a state matching grant and additional private investment to increase the hub’s freezer and cold storage space, buy additional equipment and retrofit a second location closer to New York City to serve as a satellite cold storage and distribution facility.

“There are a lot of spokes in the hub. It’s opening up different markets for these farmers,” says Hyland, who moved with his wife and their three young children to New Paltz, N.Y., after working for eight years as an equity trader.

“With hubs, farmers bring their produce in and there’s aggregation and a new market to sell into. The value is added here and the distribution starts from here,” Hyland explains. The efforts of Hyland and his food hub partner Paul Alward have helped boost the bottom line and provide a more dependable 12-month stream of income for dozens of small producers. By joining together, many small farms are now able to sell to larger institutional clients, like colleges and hospitals, which require a steady high volume of good produce and meat.

**Size Is a Factor—Even in Smaller Farms**

Whether it’s a corporate enterprise or a family venture, a farmer’s ability to make a living rests on the elements of land, weather, labor and capital. At one end of the scale, American farming includes many large Midwestern farms with several thousand acres of wheat, corn and soybeans, harvested using combines as wide as a house. Potato farms east of the Cascades in the Pacific Northwest can involve concentric circles of potato crops as far as the eye can see that are cultivated with an irrigation/soil-monitoring system managed by computer satellite imaging. Oregon State University has begun researching the use of unmanned aerial vehicles, or drones, in what is known as precision agriculture.

At the other end are new farmers like Michael Libsch, who grows about 40 types of vegetables, including greens, root crops, tomatoes, peppers, onions, eggplants, okra, squash, sunflowers and zinnias, on 1.5 acres of land in Hillsdale, N.Y. Like many of the newer entrants to farming, this is Libsch’s second career; he studied ecology in college and graduate school and, for a number of years, conducted research on the behaviors of rainforest birds in Central

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and South America. “I still enjoy being outside every day, and it is gratifying to grow healthy food for people,” he says.

But even with the kind of passion that Libsch and others have for their new careers, it is a long row to hoe. “The bottom line is that it’s hard work,” says Justin Leszcz, owner of Yellow Tree Farm in Fenton, Mo., who began farming to find something more purposeful after working for years selling cars. “I know people who are putting their whole life into their farms and barely making $20,000 a year. You have to grow your farm to be able to sustain yourself.”

Leszcz began by creating a fully sustainable working farm with rabbits, earthworms, bees, vegetables and flowers in his yard just outside of downtown St. Louis. Then Yellow Tree Farm got a $6,000 loan at 2 percent interest to help expand the urban farm to rural pastureland. For his first planting, Leszcz began leasing several acres on a large, century-old, family-owned farm; his first CSA sold out in 24 hours. He now sells large crops of popcorn and sweet potatoes and a range of vegetables, flowers and fruits to seven St. Louis chefs, one who built his tasting menu for a new restaurant around Yellow Tree Farm’s Japanese white sweet potatoes. The farm also sells to 35 CSA families, and to several grocery stores for their CSAs.

“I’m farming on a scale that I never imagined I would, and now I feel like I’m hustling every day,” Leszcz says. “I’d like to slow down and get back to my roots and be more connected with the land again.”

Building Momentum

Even with all the challenges for the small farmer, Errol Schweizer, global grocery coordinator at Whole Foods Market, says the growth of small farms and interest in food’s origin and quality marks a serious course change. With more than 350 stores, Whole Foods has been a powerful driver in the growing movement toward smaller and more local farms.

“Two of our core values are: support the environment and the community. We find suppliers who share our mission and values. We haven’t had to convince them. They are passionate about what they do,” says Schweizer. “We have a contingent of millennials who are in tune with this stuff and committed to eating healthier food.”

Whole Foods’ Local Producer Loan Program has given out $8.94 million in low-interest loans to 140 suppliers with funding to grow their business. Whole Foods provided $500,000 to three Georgia producers, including Harris Family Heritage Beef at White Oak Pastures, which was able to complete an on-farm facility designed to process beef according to rigorous humane animal treatment standards and minimize environmental impact.

Schweizer also works with suppliers to help find organic or non-GMO ingredients for the products they sell, including non-GMO feed for Lancaster, Pa.’s Nature Fed cage-free chickens laying Non-GMO Project verified eggs. Whole Foods has committed to providing GMO labeling for its entire inventory by 2018.

“This is going to last. This is a sea change,” Schweizer says. “For the last 14 quarters, the growth of the non-GMO sector has grown at three times the overall store growth rate. At the end of every aisle we have signs telling customers how many products are local, how many products are non-GMO. We wear it like a badge of pride.”

One of Slow Money’s founding members—of which there are 80 in total, each donating $1,000 or more, usually annually—is Jack Acree, who was inspired to get involved when he heard Tasch speak at the Summer Fancy Food Show in 2009. Earlier in his career at Alexia Foods, Acree worked with commodity farmers growing potatoes on farms spanning 1,000 acres or more. Today, Acree is executive vice president of Saffron Road Foods, the packaged food brand of American Halal Co., and his interest in farming continues. One of the company’s core values is to work with smaller suppliers to source all-natural ingredients, including antibiotic-free chicken from certified humane growers and processors. In January, Saffron Road launched the first Non-GMO Project verified frozen entree in the U.S., featuring organic chickpeas and spinach mildly spiced and sauteed with Indian herbs, served on a bed of cumin rice.

“I think it’s generational. This is the first generation growing up with having natural and organic foods their whole life. There are more food consumers who care about what they put into their bodies,” says Acree, who lives in a converted dairy barn in Ulster County, N.Y. “We’re capitalists. We don’t want to dismantle—just to bring in more of a balance. We hope that we have done our small part, and have helped move the needle a little bit.”

Slow Money’s Jake Bornstein, part of the millennial group at 26, believes that for his generation, the dialogue shifted permanently with the 2008 economy crash. Bornstein studied public policy at Princeton, and then spent three years working for a hedge fund before leaving to find something more meaningful, he says. When he heard Tasch at the New York Greenfest, he knew he had found his next chapter.

“I don’t think with Slow Money that we are offering the answers, but we are creating a dialogue about doing things in a different way. More people in my generation are asking ourselves what form do we want our communities to take,” says Bornstein, who grew up in Seattle as a city kid who made his way out to the woods as much as possible. “What shape do we want our lives to take? How do we want to organize our communities? What do we want our relationship to be with our farms and the food we eat?”

Robyn Pforr Ryan is a regular contributor to Specialty Food Magazine and Specialty Food News.
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What is your favorite holiday food indulgence?

MEET THE CONTRIBUTOR

ROBYN PFORR RYAN
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Robyn Pforr Ryan has worked as a lawyer, ice cream scooper and house painter, and currently is in the final laps for her first novel. She lives with her husband and their three funny and strong-willed children in a 1934 brick house outside of Albany, N.Y.

What’s one of your favorite articles you’ve written recently? The new Wegmans-Cornell partnership to grow the New York state artisanal cheese industry is an exciting initiative. The folks involved are super smart and dedicated to great craftsmanship and creating a sustainable blueprint.

Share your fondest food memory. When I was about 13, my family visited with friends who lived on a tiny island off the coast of Maine. I woke to the smell of homemade oatmeal bread, and then we helped gather the eggs for our breakfast. The dinner was artichokes with a fabulous Hollandaise sauce and a steak.

What’s the strangest food/meal you’ve ever had? How was it? Do you mean other than spam? I might mention a few Jello-mold salads that I ate at holiday meals from my youth.

What are some of your non-gastronomic hobbies/interests? A few years back, I ran my first triathlon, an experience that I loved, except for the part that I didn’t love: starting to panic during the swimming portion. I’m an avid swimmer and do yoga and run. I’m also a pretty besotted gardener and have been known to serve dinner very late if I’m in the middle of replanting.

Eat out or stay in? Depends on who’s paying. As the primary kitchen person for our family of five for some 16-plus years, I can get skipping happy at the prospect of being taken out to a restaurant for a really good meal that I didn’t envision, shop for or prepare. But I also love spending time with family and friends around a table at home for the laughter and talk and memories that can grow.