No Farmer Is an Island

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“I used to be a faceless producer,” David Rowley says, leaning down in a greenhouse to cut a handful of arugula. He shares this food as he shares the story of his life with plants, Adam’s apple bobbing over his British accent. Rowley’s last job in conventional agriculture was in Pennsylvania. “We grew two to three tons of tomatoes a week, starting in February. There were six people, no weeds, and no pests,” he says.

Out of the greenhouse: David Rowley and Santiago Pinat at Monkshood Nursery. Photo by Amy Halloran.

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 greenhouses from $15,000 a month to $45,000 a month. A change of management occurred, and most significantly, Rowley got sick from 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 2-year-old daughter.

He and his family had moved to Kinderhook and joined a CSA. 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," David says, recalling the distance he kept between his livelihood and his living. That gap has been closing ever since.

David Rowley started Monkshood Nursery in 2001 with his former wife Melinda in Stuyvesant. From scratch, they were certified organic, and they grew only herbs. Wholesale was not the name of this new game; direct marketing was. Longtime fans of Monkshood may remember being wowed by rows and rows of beautiful plants on their tables in the early days of the Troy Waterfront Farmers Market. Now Rowley is growing vegetables and herbs in 10 greenhouses and a number of fields, still in Stuyvesant, near the Hudson River. The produce makes its way to markets in New York City and Troy. In 2011 Monkshood also ran a CSA with the help of Just Food, an organization that, among other food justice projects, helps upstate farmers coordinate logistics to run CSAs in New York City.

Last fall's incredible rains shaved the final seven weeks of delivery from those CSA members. Tropical Storm Lee dumped 20 inches of rain, and the farm lost six acres of produce and two greenhouses full of food over the course of 10 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 had to figure out how to meet the bills that kept coming, even though the vegetables were all gone. He also had to retool the farm's infrastructure and figure out how to pay for that investment.

"It took me eight years to build four greenhouses, and it took them eight weeks to build six," David notes. The them in question was a construction crew that came, leveled land, built a washroom and irrigation pond, as well as six greenhouses kitted out to fit a tractor and all its attachments.

This September, these new greenhouses offer a walking tour that illustrates each stage of growth in the six-week cycle of Monkshood's salad greens, from the first, where weeds are grown to be killed with a flame thrower, to the newly tined rows of freshly planted beds. Other greenhouses in the group are dotted with tiny

shoots poking up from the dirt. Another has small plants, just ready to be cut, and the next has larger plants, almost ready for their last harvest.

A short drive away, the four original greenhouses grow cherry tomatoes trellised 12-feet high, an array of sprouts in trays, and more parsley, dill, cilantro, and other herbs than you can count.

Rowley started young, potting up plants at the local nursery when he was 12. Still in England, he got a degree in commercial horticulture and worked in greenhouses and at an herb farm. When he came to the states, he first worked at a ball-and-burlap tree nursery in Granville.

He has 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,” David 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 handmade visible, and then edible.

The popularity of this marketing method is evident in the explosion of farmers markets. U.S. Department of Agriculture counted fewer than 2,000 in 1994, and this year, there are almost 8,000 nationally. This so-called new way of selling mirrors old-fashioned public markets and produce carts that went door-to-door delivering vegetables and other foods. Think of Freihofer’s breads and the cards people put in their windows to ask for delivery of pies and cakes. Think of the people following that cart around, scooping up fresh horse manure from the street to put on their backyard gardens. 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 on a farm, to 20-, 30- and 40-somethings dancing under a blue moon.

This last scene happened the last night of August at Monkshood. Severine von Tscharner Fleming helped Rowley with outreach this summer, ending with a big

party that landed bands and 80 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, who loved having so many people having a good time at the farm. He wants to get more people involved in the farm, on many levels. He sees the value of getting consumers on farm, and seeing how food grows. He wants more farmers on the farm, and is working with Hudson Valley Agribusiness Development Corporation to come up with formal plans to create mentorship opportunities to lend young farmers the experience they need between apprenticeships and starting their own enterprises.

“It’s a hard leap of faith to invest in new farmers,” David says. He’s envisioning some kind of model to help people build their own resource base under the umbrella of Monkshood that will help investors take that leap.

Severine is the muscle behind a lot of beginning farmer projects, including the documentary *The Greenhorns*. You can find her working on the National Young Farmers’ Coalition and Farm Hack, which is hosting a grassroots design charette aimed to hack tools for small grain processing in Ithaca in October.

“The tendency for many next-generation farmers to take configurations of sharing from the world of new media, different ways of sharing information and resources through digital platforms and bringing that flexibility into more analog context, into the real world,” says Severine.

If traditional farmers are stereotyped as few of words, the prototype of the mod young farmer is one of a million words, chatted, Tweeted, and Facebooked, either directly or on their behalf. As farming evolves, Severine sees a danger in the desire to avatarize any and every experience. How about the value of stories told across a barn as farmers gather and share know-how and pitfalls? Or the simple tool of the telephone?

Ted Dobson of Equinox Farm in Sheffield, Mass., runs a small empire of salad with the phone. He built his customer base, which is mostly chefs, going door to door with his vegetables in the early 1980s, way before there were enough farmers markets in the United States for government agencies to count.

“My major tool is the telephone,” says Dobson, standing outside the washing shed, on the edge of his fields where he cultivates half an acre at a time to yield 2,700 pounds of greens a week. “Produce is very old-fashioned. They (chefs) don’t know how much business they’ll do. They can call me the same morning and change their order.”

Dobson grew up in suburban New Jersey, where his imagination was captured by the remnants of a once-thriving market-garden economy. He saw people selling tomatoes or peaches in the midst of developments, and his grandfather helped him understand how agriculture used to live where people did.
While he's content to stick with socializing for his business on a single party line, rather than working the crowd on Facebook or elsewhere, his farm is a model of the ways that unconventional agriculture relies on interpersonal relationships.
Ted Dobson's neighbor moved right onto his land this season, leasing his greenhouses to grow her tomatoes. Laura Meister of Farm Girl Farm has been growing in the area since 2005. She backed into farming, having trained as an art historian and worked in video at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. Summers during college she worked at Farm and Wilderness, a camp in Vermont, and fell in love with farming.

"This is like film," she says of following that love and leaving Boston. She is helping another woman roll up the sides of the greenhouse after a few cold nights and before a few warm ones, to regulate the temperature for her tomatoes.

"Farming was everything I loved," Meister says. "Deadline oriented. People oriented. Full of stress. It engaged everything in me."

This work is very social. She loves collaborating with her crew and with other farmers, learning from Ted's son Ben as he helped her prep the beds in the greenhouses this spring, or helping Ted with administrative work for Equinox. Five or six people work with her throughout the growing season, mostly women. The crews develop relationships with each other and with Laura that last beyond the summers.

As for screentime, she sells a lot of produce over e-mail, and a lot of her customers are also Ted's, so she can relay information she gets from them to him. Ted really helped her build her business by sharing his restaurant connections. Other farmers in the Berkshires, she notes, get glued to customers through the print and live social networking efforts of Berkshire Grown, an organization that links farmers and the community.

So, are any of these farmers completely different from what you might consider the traditional, taciturn farmer who wholesales vegetables or grows commodity crops? Chatty people are everywhere and in every line of work, but if you're growing hundreds or thousands of acres, chances are you're not going to interface much with your customers. And if you talk to anyone other than your spouse during busy times, it might be the parts department at John Deere, not your neighbor.

Socialization has always been a part of farming. Think of barn raisings 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 like David, Severine, Ted, and Laura experiment with ways to reincorporate people into agriculture, and help us live a dreamable future.

“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?” asks Severine. “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.”