

INTRODUCTION

The Present

from *March Farm: Season by Season on a Connecticut Family Farm*

By Nancy McMillan with photos by Stuart Rabinowitz and Jack Huber

From my bedroom window at four o'clock on a calm summer morning, I can hear the clunky murmur of a tractor half a mile away. I recognize the sound. The farmers at March Farm are up and working.

Munger Lane winds through and around March Farm. I drive this road several times weekly, along the shaded straightaway that marks the eastern boundary. From here, under the row of tall arching maples, the orchards slope down the hill, then up the next, in varying shades of green. The view transports me out of my daily life.

Around the bend and down the hill sits the farm store, a low building sided barn-style with vertical planks stained brown. Brightly painted wooden signs of apples and blueberries and peaches decorate its front. Flower boxes filled with zinnias and marigolds in carnival colors stand on either side of the entrance. Hanging pots of nasturtiums brighten the narrow porch at the end of the building.

Inside is the cornucopia of midsummer: indigo blueberries in green cardboard cartons; plump peaches, giving slightly to thumb pressure; red globes of tomatoes piled next to bunches of fresh basil, smelling of salt and earth.

Driving by the farm releases some tension inside me, allowing me to inhale a little deeper. Driving by any farm anywhere makes me feel better. How does it inspire such comfort? What is so reassuring about the presence of the farm landscape? Is it because it signals to our primal hunter-gatherer that our food supply is safe, an issue that is becoming more critical today? Do the open fields surrounded by woods speak to some deep genetic need in us?

That is the theory of biophilia, put forth by E. O. Wilson, a Harvard entomologist. Wilson defines Biophilia as "our love of living things, our innate affinity with nature and tendency to focus on life and lifelike processes." A related field, ecopsychology, seeks to develop a "mature ecological ego which weaves a sense of ethical responsibility to the planet into the fabric of social relations and political decisions." Perhaps without realizing it, family farmers like the Marches practice a form of ecopsychology, stewarding the earth to produce food for the community at large. This family has survived for nearly one hundred years doing just that.

March Farm is a 150-acre fourth-generation family farm in northwest Connecticut. This book describes a year in the life of March Farm. Accompanying photos show the beauty and practical realities of farm life. Recipes using the farm's crops are also included, as well as informational sidebars.

I wrote this book because I fell in love with the farms in Bethlehem and became passionate about saving them. The loss of farmland is a problem in this state, as it is across the country. If we are to preserve our heritage and keep our food source safe, as well as support our communities, we need to both understand and cherish our farms.

Situated in southern Litchfield County, Bethlehem is a gateway to the Litchfield Hills and northwest Connecticut, an area known for its traditional New England scenery: small towns boasting village greens and historic homes surrounded by rolling countryside of woods and fields. The landscape of Bethlehem is still fifty percent forest and farmland, lending it a rural beauty that never ceases to elicit comments from visitors.

I know exactly what they mean. Every time I drive home from points south, my heart lifts at the sight of three hay fields, like golden pillows resting side by side in the summer light. They sit at the top of the long incline on Route 132, just before the ninety-degree bend that brings into view the Parmelee farm spread out below and beyond it, the blue hills filling the western horizon.

But I also know how many farms have been lost here, succumbing to the pressure of development and the economic realities of farming. In the 1950s, at least two dozen active dairy farms filled the town. They used to say there were more cows than people in Bethlehem. Over the years, dairy farmers have been squeezed out of business due to deteriorating market conditions. Now only a handful remain. The farms that are making it, like March Farm, have diversified.

The disappearance of farms is not confined to this corner of the state. Every year Connecticut loses between 7,000 and 9,000 acres of farmland. If this rate continues, there will be no farmland left to save by 2040. In 1978 the state's Farmland Preservation Program, administered by the Connecticut Department of Agriculture (CTDOA), was established with a goal of preserving 130,000 acres of the state's farmland. Thirty-four years later, only 38,078 acres have been preserved under this program, largely because the annual appropriation of funds in the state legislature has not matched the intent of the bill. Although 291 active farms have been preserved through the program, there is still a long waiting list.

The CTDOA preserves farmland by acquiring development rights to agricultural properties, giving farmers a realistic alternative to selling their farm for residential development. Participation in the program is voluntary. The farms remain in private ownership and continue to pay local property taxes. Farmers can reinvest proceeds from the sale of development rights back into the farm; they can also sell or lease the farm. A permanent restriction on nonagricultural uses is placed on these properties, no matter who owns or uses the land.

Loss of farmland is a nationwide epidemic. Every year since 1992, the United States has developed more than one million acres of farmland, which equates to roughly 3,000 acres per day. That is 1,562 square miles of land, a bit larger than the size of Rhode Island, lost yearly, never to be reclaimed.

The financial viability of smaller farms is also of concern. While small family farms like March Farm account for most of the nation's farmland and farm assets, large farms and nonfamily farms produce the largest share of agricultural output. As of 2004, small farms make up ninety percent of the farm assets while producing only twenty-five percent of farm production. Large farms account for fewer than eight percent of active farms while generating sixty percent of the production.

There is good news, though. People are now paying closer attention to how their food is produced and are more concerned about saving the farms that are left. There is a growing awareness that, as the bumper sticker on my car reads, "No Farms, No Food." In magazines, on the radio, in newspapers, and especially on the Internet, food and farms are topics of regular discussion. The farm bill is usually passed every five years or so without much attention from the average citizen. The latest bill, formally called the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008, garnered intense focus from activist groups across the country. When this usually ho-hum legislation becomes worthy of a *New York Times* op-ed by Michael Pollan, awareness is changing. A new movement has arisen focused on the connection between food production and the health of consumers, communities, and the environment.

This movement, like good farming, is diversified. It has found spokespeople in Michael Pollan (*The Omnivore's Dilemma, In Defense of Food*), Alice Waters (*The Art of Simple Food*), Barbara Kingsolver (*Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*), Bill McKibben (*Deep Economy*), and Paul Roberts (*The End of Food*), and continues to draw upon the wisdom of Kentucky farmer and philosopher Wendell Berry, who wrote, "Eating is an agricultural act." This quote has become the starting and ending point of the national conversation on food and farming.

Local food has become desirable food. Approximately twenty-five percent of today's consumers seek out food locally grown by family farmers like the Marches. The growth of farmers markets nationally is a testament to this: a 114 percent increase from 2000 to 2010. In Connecticut, home to over 100 farmers markets, the number increased by 50 percent from 2005 to 2008, with more than half of that increase occurring between 2007 and 2008. Community-supported agriculture (CSA) farms, in which consumers purchase shares for the season and in turn receive a weekly harvest of produce, have waiting lists. Some here in Connecticut have even closed their waiting lists.

Programs linking local food and institutions are springing up. Plow to Plate is a regional grassroots initiative supported by New Milford Hospital, which is setting an example by committing to changing its in-house food service sourcing to local sustainable foods. Since 2003 the Yale Sustainable Food Project has offered an organic menu sourced locally whenever possible at the cafeterias on campus. The project was initiated with the help of chef Alice Waters and has spread, through student envy, to the eleven cafeterias on campus as well as to other schools in the state, such as the University of Connecticut, Trinity College in Hartford, and The Unquowa School in Fairfield. People and institutions are looking for ways to connect to their daily sustenance.

In *Deep Economy*, Bill McKibben writes, "A tomato from the small farmer at the end of your suburban road takes less fuel to transport, and a tomato from the farmer at the end of your suburban road tastes better. But it's more than that — it's better because it comes from a ... farmer down at the end of your suburban road. Getting that tomato — from his farm stand, from a farmer's market, from your CSA share, even from a bin at an enlightened supermarket — requires you to live with a stronger sense of community in mind."

Michael Pollan reminds us of the layers of meaning inherent in what we eat in *In Defense of Food*: "We forget that, historically, people have eaten for a great many reasons other than biological necessity. Food is also about pleasure, about our community, about family and spirituality, about our relationship to the natural world, and about expressing our identity. As long as humans have been taking meals together, eating has been as much about culture as it has about biology."

The authors of *The Cluetrain Manifesto: The End of Business as Usual* contend that twenty-first-century consumers who grew up using the Internet are accustomed to having a conversation about everything and are interested in having relationships as part of their buying experience. So when they participate in a CSA, purchase from a farmers market, or frequent a pick-your-own (PYO) farm, they are building a relationship as well as purchasing a food product.

March Farm is benefiting from and responding to this trend. The Marches currently participate in the Litchfield Hills Farm-Fresh Market held on Saturday mornings for most of the year, and were involved in the formation of the market. More PYO crops such as strawberries and cherries have been added to their orchards; their farm store has been expanded. Over the past several years, from July through October, the crowds at the farm have grown markedly.

The March family has developed the agritourism element of the farm by making it a destination for families. A hay bale playground with picnic tables under a pavilion, a small pond-side barnyard, a corn maze, farm hike, and hayrides all are recent additions to the farm. An autumn apple festival provides additional agricultural experiences. The steady stream of customers comes for more than the blueberries, peaches, apples, corn, and tomatoes. They come to experience the peace and beauty of the farm and to interact with the farmers.

In the process of writing this book, I have become more conscious of where my food comes from and the costs associated with growing it: the cost to me, to the farmer, to the environment. The pleasure of using fresh local ingredients in my kitchen matters to me now. My appreciation of the seasonal cycle

of local foods has deepened. The fragrant juice of a summer peach sheets my paring knife; a blueberry right off the bush bursts with flavor; an autumn apple from the tree delivers a crisp crunch; the picked-that-morning corn in late summer is sweet and tender. Connecting with the food March Farm produces gives me roots in my community, and roots in the seasonal cycles of my own life.

My hope is that this book will move the reader to pay more attention to the journey of his or her daily nourishment from seed to table. Reconnecting with this basic human need can reap surprising pleasures and add joy and meaning to everyday life. Cherishing and preserving our farms is important to all of us, as communities, states, regions, and a nation. Small family farms are iconic symbols of values held deep in our cultural psyche, as well as protectors of our food supply. They need us for their survival, as we need them for our own.