LIVINGSTON, September 22, 2018 — It’s a dreamy evening on Old Mud Creek Farm when the fields are still radiating their sun-warm fragrance, but, at dusk, there’s also a refreshing coolness that rolls in. We’re sipping glasses of cold-pressed hemp juice doctored with pineapple, cucumber, lemon juice, and mint; we’re nibbling hors d’oeuvres—sausage in hemp leaves and cauliflower fritters with CBD. It’s the Autumn Equinox, and the night holds a pagan—or, at least, celestial—sense of celebration. There is palpable change in the air.

We’re here to learn about Hudson Hemp, an agricultural, manufacturing, and marketing company largely funded by Abby Rockefeller. This entity is spearheading the effort to promote hemp as a New York State crop and there are excellent ecological, agricultural, economic, and social benefits to doing this. Still, it feels illicit: Commercial hemp cultivation had been illegal in the U.S. for decades. But tonight’s frisson of danger may also come from the fact that every guest at this elegant event, the pretty white farmhouse, and at least two whole fields are enveloped by a fogbank of unmistakable cannabis scent so intensely weedy, it’s virtually green.

Onchiota Adornetto is the chief science officer at Hudson Hemp. She oversees much of the chemistry on Old Mud Creek Farm, 390 acres with a particularly sordid history. The land had been used by both Ciba-Geigy and Syngenta for agrichemical experimentation. In 2015, Scenic Hudson and the Columbia Land Conservancy partnered with Abby Rockefeller to ensure this property’s permanent availability for agricultural use. Rockefeller’s intention at Old Mud Creek Farm was to restore the land by using regenerative agriculture. With careful soil analysis, resting, and crop rotation, fields at Old Mud Creek Farm are by now so improved that Hudson Hemp’s CBD products are certified organic. Says Adornetto, “One of the reasons that we introduced hemp into our rotation is that hemp is a really good soil remediator. It pulls things out of the ground that you don’t necessarily want there.” Things like heavy metals introduced by pesticides.

Not only is cannabis a bio-accumulator of heavy metals, but, as Adornetto explains, during the process of extracting CBD or THC isolates from cannabis flowers, those metals are removed from the consumable product. This means that, with careful lab practices, hemp can clear land of man-made poisons while simultaneously yielding a safe, highly valuable commodity that farmers can sell.

How valuable? Ben Banks-Dobson is CEO of Hudson Hemp, which he co-founded with Abby Rockefeller in 2017. He’s a Columbia County guy: a lifelong farmer born on the living room floor of Earthborn Farm in Hillsdale. His involvement in this project began when he joined Old Mud Creek Farm in 2013 as general manager. Banks-Dobson is betting that, in five years, cannabis will be the most valuable crop in the Hudson Valley.

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Best Buds.
Dana Eudy (of Field Apothecary in Germantown) talks hemp with Edwin Dobson, a Massachusetts cannabis grower, at Old Mud Creek Farm. Edwin Dobson is Melany Dobson’s and Ben Banks-Dobson’s father.

PHOTOS: THIS PAGE LAWRENCE BRAUN; OPPOSITE PAGE PETER CROSBY
Regenerator Rex.
Ben Banks-Dobson, CEO of Hudson Hemp, anticipates that cannabis agriculture will revolutionize the lives of farmers in the Hudson Valley.

Cannabis
Hemp
Marijuana
What’s the Difference?

Cannabis A genus of flowering plants with three main species (Cannabis sativa, Cannabis indica, and Cannabis ruderalis) that fall into many strains that contain varying concentrations of different cannabinoids. Hemp and marijuana are both cannabis.

Cannabinoid One of 113 recognized chemicals naturally occurring in cannabis, these include the psychoactive tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) and non-psychoactive cannabidiol (CBD).

Hemp Cannabis with low (less than 0.3%) THC. Historically valued for its strong fibers; currently grown for CBD supplements and body care products, hemp oil, hemp seeds, building materials and insulation, and as a regenerative cover crop.

Marijuana Cannabis with high (15%–40%) concentrations of THC, a psychoactive cannabinoid. Grown for recreational and medicinal use.
In 2018, 20 acres of our hemp accounted for 2% of Columbia County’s value for agricultural output. And this is a county where we have 30,000 acres of agricultural production. That means that, at Hudson Hemp, we have less than 7 hundredths of a percent of the county’s acreage yielding 2% of last year’s agricultural economy. Consider that those numbers only reflect hemp grown for CBD—and CBD can’t get you high. As Banks-Dobson observes, “This is the greatest opportunity that New York State agriculture has seen in a long time.”

Like Banks-Dobson, John Gilstrap did time as a farmer (his family owned land in Columbia County); he also advised Governor Cuomo’s New York State Small Farmer Task Force as executive vice president of business development. In the private sector, Gilstrap has held executive positions at Chase Bank UK and Time Warner Music Group; he’s founder of a New York City–based property management business. He’s uniquely qualified to navigate state and federal ag policy with an eye towards business. Gilstrap is on the front line of creating policy for the recreational-use market in NYS: He’s also Hudson Hemp’s vice president of business development.

With others, Gilstrap is working to build social equity into NYS cannabis law. During the War on Drugs, African American communities were disproportionately hurt by zero-tolerance marijuana sentencing. If cannabis laws don’t integrate social equity now, the tax revenue generated by cannabis might go to repair bridges—it could also go toward policing (and recriminalizing) the same populations devastated by the War on Drugs. But cannabis taxes could fund educational grants and workforce programs in those communities.

“And this is what’s holding up the current bill now, because there is no strong language in it about how communities that have been disproportionately impacted by the War on Drugs are going to be made whole or be allowed to participate in cannabis in a fair and just way,” says Gilstrap. There are programs

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The New Look of Hudson Valley Industry. Plant People, an NYC-based manufacturer of CBD products, sources raw material from Hudson Hemp. Here, Plant People founders Gabe Kennedy and Hudson Gaines-Ross pose among the plants at Old Mud Creek Farm.

“This is the greatest opportunity that New York State agriculture has seen in a long time.”

—BEN BANKS-DOBSON
Gloved Up. This Hudson Hemp worker can shed her coat and gloves, but those in the fields can’t. Their clothes, skin, and hair become so saturated with sticky, fragrant cannabis resins that, to prevent arrest, they carry documents certifying their employment on a legal hemp farm.

Hemp, History, and Race(ism)

Hemp and the U.S.A. go back. The first American hemp law was passed by the Virginia Assembly in 1619: This law stipulated that every household must grow hemp. Not only was hemp a commodity that colonists could profitably trade with Europe, but hemp was necessary to the very ships that carried out that trade. Its strong fibers made up sails and rigging; also, hemp is the primary ingredient in the oakum used to caulk the ships’ wooden hulls. Hemp was raised by both George Washington and Thomas Jefferson—who struggled to make wine in Virginia, never realizing that cannabis could get them high—although later, during the Golden Age of patent medicines (when you could buy cocaine like aspirin), marijuana appeared in concoctions to treat migraines, insomnia, and rheumatism.

According to Eric Schlosser, in his book *Reefer Madness*, the stigma surrounding cannabis crept into the U.S. with the Mexican Revolution of 1910. That’s when a wave of Mexican immigrants fleeing to the American Southwest triggered the American propensity for prejudice. This new population brought its traditional intoxicant, cannabis, which grew freely on American soil. More than beer, whiskey, or even laudanum (tincture of opium, which, like cocaine, was OTC until 1914), marijuana was associated with people of color. With that came all the evils that Americans have historically attributed to black and brown people.

Harry J. Anslinger—who headed the Federal Bureau of Narcotics from its inception in 1930 until 1962—solidified the link between race and cannabis. He perpetuated the idea that marijuana hypersexualized and criminalized its users and that they were coming for our daughters. Anslinger once testified that “There are 100,000 total marijuana smokers in the U.S., and most are Negroes, Hispanics, Filipinos, and entertainers. Their satanic music, jazz and swing, results from marijuana use. This marijuana causes white women to seek sexual relations with Negroes, entertainers, and any others.”

By 1931, marijuana was banned in 29 states, but the momentum to outlaw was fueled by anti-immigrant sentiment during the Great Depression. When the Marijuana Tax Act passed in 1937, possession of marijuana was criminalized throughout the United States.
being proposed that would retrain people formerly incarcerated on cannabis-related charges to become growers, budtenders, and dispensary owners.

Then there is the idea that no one wants the history of pre-vs.-post-Prohibition distilling to be repeated with the legalization of recreational cannabis. In 1920, 2,000 regional distillers across the U.S. disappeared, but, in 1933, at Repeal, a few giant, centralized corporations dominated the industry. There is pressure on New York State to prohibit major players from hogging the cannabis field. Says Gilstrap, “The big joke is that ‘Monsanto is gonna grow it all, Nabisco is gonna produce it all, and Amazon is gonna distribute it all.’”

Gilstrap is aware of what he’s doing and with whom. “I told Abby when we first started, ‘How ironic is it that you guys made all this money in oil, and here we are back to refining oil again?’” Though largely remembered today for his large philanthropic foundation, John D. Rockefeller was once the richest man in the country—he owned U.S. Standard Oil. After its monopoly of the oil industry was challenged under anti-trust laws, Standard Oil was broken into Mobil, Amoco, Chevron, Exxon, and Texaco—companies whose petroleum products poisoned (and to continue to poison) the earth’s atmosphere with carbon dioxide emissions.

Gilstrap acknowledges 1973 NYS laws mandating the most extreme drug sentences in the country, known as the Rockefeller Drug Laws. “That’s her uncle, Governor Nelson Rockefeller, and that was a devastating period for the community.” He pauses. “But, to be honest, what the subsequent generations, Abby and her siblings, are trying to do is make amends. They’re doing this by investing in regenerative agriculture. You know, putting the carbon that petroleum released into the air back into the ground to create good soil so that we can grow healthy plants without synthetic pesticide. And finding ways to heal damaged communities outside of Big Pharma—with hemp.”