

The Natural Farmer

Special Supplement on Localization and Organic Agriculture It's Happening in Hardwick

by Beth Champagne

What's happening in Hardwick? Localization? Hard to imagine any place more local than Hardwick, VT after granite got done. Loggers and farmers wouldn't always have had cash enough to get out of town. Folks with jobs out of town would have had to spend a good deal of what they had just keeping a vehicle on the road. Hard to take the Hardwick jokes heard outside of town, too. Hard times, indeed, for a long time.

Longtime observers wonder whether what's going on today will finally turn things around for folks who've hung on, however precariously, through the years. What's undeniable is that all over the media, Hardwick is a blazing star. Tom Stearns, founder of High Mowing Organic Seeds, and co-chair of the NOFA-VT board, is also president of Hardwick's Center for an Agricultural Economy. This year, despite having delegated responsibilities in order to get out and share his vision for building healthy local food systems across America, Stearns has to turn down many invitations. "It's interesting," he acknowledges, "to see how much doing our [own] thing is resonating with other people."

Michael Pollan, who wrote "The Omnivore's Dilemma," and calls Vermont "30 years ahead" of the rest of the country in sustainable agriculture, sees in Hardwick "an important national test-case of the possibilities of relocating an economy."

Another well-travelled and well-informed observer, author and climate-change activist Bill McKibben, sees "deep and transformative things happening" in Hardwick, where "all of the pieces of a healthy food system [are] connected and ready to fall into place."

And a local observer, playwright and poet David Budbill, whose mythic "Judevine" brought the stubbornness, courage, hope and despair of people subsisting in rural poverty to audiences far from Hardwick, sees "how similar today's interest in reviving a sustainable agricultural economy is to what we all wished for, dreamed of, 40 years ago." What's new, he asserts, is how much "smarter, shrewder, better prepared" are this generation's ag entrepreneurs.

"In some ways, things are happening exponentially here," notes Tom Gilbert at Highfields Institute, a non-profit supporting farm and municipal composting programs, "—but it's been 30 years in the making, this watershed moment where it all seems to come together" for Jasper Hill Farm in Greensboro, Vermont Soy and Vermont Natural Coatings in Hardwick, Pete's Greens in Craftsbury, and High Mowing Seeds in Wolcott.

"It's the folks who started Buffalo Mountain Co-op in Hardwick, and Hunger Mountain Co-op in Montpelier," Gilbert said, on whose work today's entrepreneurs are "piggybacking!" Vermont has the most certified organic producers in the country, Gilbert pointed out, and leads the nation in per capita spending on locally grown foods as well (\$16



photo courtesy Pete's Greens

Pete Johnson cultivating leeks.

in Vermont vs. an average of \$2 nationally).

Highfields Institute, now in its 11th year, does research and education in its Hardwick headquarters. It also does frequent tours, runs special-topic workshops, and assists organizers of municipal composting "around the state and beyond," said Gilbert. While providing technical services for farmers on composting everything from manure to animal mortalities, Highfields Institute also takes the food scraps for the Hardwick region, and sells compost right off its site here.

The Center for an Agricultural Economy, with its storefront on Hardwick's Main Street, gets the word out about how communities can pull together to grow their food—and their well-being, encourages people to connect—with dirt, with everything alive, and especially with what they can do with their neighbors to build a healthy food system in their towns. Director Monty Fischer supports the efforts of Stearns, Meyer, Gilbert and the others to encourage other localities to replicate "the Hardwick model."

"Are we going to fix the national food system in Hardwick? Maybe not now," admits Andrew Meyer of Vermont Soy and Vermont Natural Coatings, answering his own question—but, he emphasizes, "We've seen interest from all over the country—all over the world!—in what we're trying to do. It's amazing!"

What's happening in Hardwick started when back-to-the-land hippies headed up Route 14 till they found cheap land, something that Montpelier didn't offer. They started homesteading, intent on growing their own, and grew a community and a food culture that survived and thrived, with its hub and gathering place at Buffalo Mountain Co-op on Hardwick's Main Street.

They farmed, worked to start a growers' co-op, a

farmers' market, and, of course, NOFA-VT—they hung on, and hung out, in community—up here in Hardwick where there were maybe more moose, deer and cows than people. The co-op grew to over 1,000 members, committed to its principles: People, not profits. In a town where making a living was tough, community thrived. Neighboring towns, where people came from away—some to stay, some just for the summer—tapped into the energy at the co-op, shopping and sharing expertise and weaving the fabric of community that the first back-to-the-landers had begun when, as 24-year veteran co-op staffer Annie Gaillard recalls, "If you wanted tofu, you had to go to Hardwick!"

Come into Hardwick today, and you can walk out of the co-op with tofu made just across town. At Vermont Soy, co-owners Todd Pinkham and Andrew Meyer are working with local growers, to whom they'll pay premium prices for the white beans they need to make soy milk. They're also working to identify soybean varieties that can thrive in this corner of the Northeast, enlisting the expertise of a scientist at the University of Vermont. In barely two years, Vermont Soy's organic soy milks, plain and baked maple-ginger tofu blocks have reached the coolers in co-ops and natural food stores throughout the region; they are now shipped to Whole Foods northeast and mid-Atlantic stores also. Meyer, son of local dairy farmers, was the butt of jokes as he first let it be known he was milking soybeans—but, today, he's riding a wave of excitement about what he and half-a-dozen other 30-something ag entrepreneurs have got going here.

What these sustainable ag innovators—at High Mowing Seeds, Jasper Hill Farm, Pete's Greens, Highfield Institute, and now, Claire's, a community-supported restaurant—have pulled together is a way of working together, from the ground up, to strengthen the community by building on—and building up—its soils. High Mowing uses compost from Highfield Institute to grow the seeds that go to growers like Pete Johnson at Pete's Greens. Andy and Mateo Kehler from Jasper Hill provide a market for local organic milk, mentor farmers who want to make their own artisanal cheeses, and provide *affinage* in their state-of-the-art, seven-vault cave, to other cheesemakers, from the humblest beginners to the award-winning cheesemakers at nearby Cabot Creamery. Andrew Meyer uses whey—the cheesemaker's "waste"—as the essential protein in the "green" varnish produced by Vermont Natural Coatings.

Then there are the "second-tier" synergies. Jasper Hill offers *affinage* to other cheesemakers just to support their business, since the demands of aging cheese are the toughest challenge many would-be cheesemakers face. The Kehlrs are stepping up to encourage new people to make artisanal cheeses. At Pete's Greens this summer, employees harvested cucumbers in a High Mowing field, then made pickles in Pete's new commercial kitchen. Stearns and Johnson had seen the potential for pickling the early-ripening cukes without decreasing the later harvest of ripe cukes for seed at High Mowing.

Last year, knowing that Johnson had new equipment adequate to the challenge, Stearns arranged for UVM students to harvest his surplus butternut squash for Johnson to peel and puree. Students at Sterling College in Craftsbury, who study agriculture, forestry, conservation and ecology, mixed up pie filling and billed crusts—all made with donated ingredients—to bake 60 pies last November for the local food pantry.

More and more partners are getting involved with the Center and its mission—to ensure that farmers can earn a living, to ensure access to abundant, healthful food for all members of the community, and above all to take care of the soil so that the land can support all the people living here. A recognition that a success for one is a success for all—plus a readiness to share energy and ideas, equipment, even employees and capital—are at the heart of the Center's practice. Energy ebbs and flows in problem-solving, replicating the reciprocity and interdependence occurring in natural systems, whether on a microbial or an ecosystem level.

As Tom Stearns, who built a multi-million dollar enterprise out of his hobby of saving seeds, told a "Collaborative Management" class from UVM visiting the Center in July, "All signs point towards local, organic food. The credit crunch and the economic crash have done great things for 'Buy local—support your neighbors!' across the country. But, as people realize all these things, they don't have too many models to work with, like community-supported agriculture (CSA) farms, or food co-ops or farmers' markets. Here in Hardwick, for years already, things on this food system cycle were in place. We're trying to map it and understand it and see where the voids are. This is why people are coming from all over the country and all over the world. Hardwick and surrounding towns are what a lot of other places are needing to become like."

Last February, NOFA-VT offered a workshop on "the Hardwick ag revolution" at its winter conference, when a jam-packed workshop brought the story of Stearns, Meyer and their fellow ag entrepreneurs—and their collaborative approach to building a healthy food system in Hardwick and eight neighboring towns—to inspire them to strengthen their own communities' roots. Meyer, who grew up in Hardwick, returned home after working for Sen. James Jeffords, then advocating for the dairy compact as a lobbyist in Washington, D.C. Having seen, again and again, the "overpowering influence from commodity food processors" on farm bills that began "with great intentions," Meyer concluded, "I should just go home and do it! Instead of asking for change, we're going to prove the value of our way. Our biggest way of influencing [lawmakers] is going to be proving that this *can* succeed!"

Rebuilding essential infrastructure would permit Vermont villages to reclaim the ability they once had to feed themselves, says Pete Johnson, who grew up in Greensboro from age 12 and runs Pete's Greens, farming 40 acres in Craftsbury. He is excited about this season's purchase, a tractor-trailer-sized freezer, 8' x 48', that will permit him to eliminate runs back and forth to Williston, about 50 miles away. He's just begun raising meat animals on grass—"Grass grows really well around here!" But the big thing this year has been working on "just farming really well," said Johnson, "doing it right!"

"That's been really fun for me," he noted, after so much growth in recent years, ramping up production from 10 to 40 acres.

"I don't think this is a deprived way of life. I think it's a rich life," says Pete Johnson. Hands in the soil, eating what he's grown, connecting with customers who trust him to raise their food, and working closely with people who share his pleasure in working the land—knowing that he's strengthening his community as he toils—all this rootedness is richness for his life.

Is it reinventing the wheel for folks to collaborate in building an "ag-based" economy? Not exactly—but it does mean creating a "food hub." As envisioned at the Center, the food hub would serve Hardwick

and eight surrounding towns—about 8,000 people—supplying locally produced foods—from meat, cheese, beans, tofu, grains and flour to vegetables and fruits—and ensuring access to healthful diets to all residents of the nine towns. The goal is to reconnect all elements, from soils and seeds through farms, processors, and distributors, to consumers and composters, in a functional regional food system that ensures access to healthful, affordable locally grown foods for everyone in the region.

"It's funny," mused Annie Gaillard, who met the love of her life, Louis Pulver of Surfing Veggie Farm here (and has since grown tons and tons of organic carrots with him) "that the vision we had in the '60s and '70s—and it kind of stalled for a while—has come to fruition" in this decade in Hardwick, as her own focus has shifted into more social activism.

As grocery buyer at Buffalo Mountain (and member of the board of the Center for an Agricultural Economy), Annie is at the hub of a very stable and committed group that understands food as the basis of community. But her awareness of what community requires has led her to work with others to bring Hardwick and neighboring towns into the Transition Towns movement. Hardwick joins Montpelier—about 25 miles south—in bringing neighbors together to reallocate, developing strategies to "power down," decrease dependence on oil, and build local resilience.

"Reskilling," which often entails learning from elders, is at the heart of the Transition agenda. And it resonates with Pete Johnson's focus on bringing back village infrastructure and acquiring, or renewing, skills. Integrating "appropriate" 21st century technologies may offer opportunities to address questions that the earlier round of back-to-the-land people didn't adequately address: In the words of David Budbill, "Do the people who shop at Price Chopper also patronize the Farmers' Markets? And if not, why not? How is the sustainable agriculture movement going to get good, *affordable* food to all Vermonters, rich and poor alike?"

For Stearns, a key challenge has been to find a way to retain ownership and control of his business, even as its growth has accelerated, in order for him to continue to pursue its mission: "To support the rebuilding of healthy, locally-based food systems." As Stearns said, speaking for himself and his fellow entrepreneurs, "As we have money, we like doing cool things with it. None of us are planning to get rich."

Slow Money, a national organization of 300 socially responsible investors, defines its mission as restoring and preserving soil fertility, catalyzing increased mission-related investing and foundation grant-making to support sustainable agriculture, strengthening local economies and—perhaps most important of all—to integrate principles of respect and stewardship of the land into socially responsible investment strategies: Care of the commons, sense of place, carrying capacity of the land, and non-violence. It adds up, in the mind of Slow Money President Woody Tasch, to ushering in "the age of restorative economics."

Tasch, Stearns said, has realized that food and agriculture companies are different: The soil can only yield so much. "Part of the reason we've got a broken food system," Stearns asserts, "is how we've used money over the last 100 years. Ask for too high a return on investment, and you're going to destroy your food system."

Food and agriculture companies are also place-based and mission-based, Stearns noted, so the exit strategy is to keep those things intact: "We've got a feasibility study going on right now that looks at investing \$100 million in sustainable agriculture in Vermont: One-third of that in land, another third in companies, and the rest in conservation."

Tday, The Center for an Agricultural Economy is the major Slow Money partner in Vermont, but there are dozens of farmers, business owners and others partnering with Slow Money here, said Stearns, who coordinates the activities of Slow Money Vermont.

For High Mowing, Stearns said, putting together "a creative investment approach," ensuring investors of an exit strategy, "without us having to make an exit," succeeded: "People were excited...they could pull their money out...There are investors out there who are looking for things like that. Even angel investors are sometimes looking for just as much of a return as venture capitalists, they are just open to flexible arrangements." Stearns told UVM's collaborative management class at the Center in July.

Of course, the new community-supported restaurant on Main Street, Claire's, came up with another creative strategy. Stearns quickly pointed out—a strategy that offered people who invested \$1,000 to "eat" their investment, receiving \$25 off each dinner they ordered at Claire's. The restaurant, which has barely been open a year, and has won national acclaim, sources almost three-quarters of the food it serves locally.

There was no Claire's, not even a co-op, when Larry Karp moved to Greensboro in 1969. He and his wife "wanted to grow our own food—you never knew what would happen next, or what they'd put in food"—and they wanted to start a family. Karp jumped into rural life, starting with bees and beehives—organizing an informal beef CSA (without the acronym), even trying to jump-start a farmers' market.

Neither the market nor the marriage prospered. Karp completed a Ph.D. and now works in Hardwick as a counselor. In his spare time he helps with his son's bees, and orchard, in Greensboro. He shops, he noted, "almost exclusively" at food co-ops. "I try and buy *local* organic," he stated. "Local supports individuals trying to provide for our local needs. Local has less of a carbon footprint." Buying from local growers, Karp notes, "You know what's going into" your food.

And, he exults, "It's just really gratifying to see the next generation coming up even more into it. My son is able to take things to the next level even more than I was!"

Dave Rogers, who works closely with longtime director Enid Wonnacott at NOFA-VT, taught agricultural policy for 20 years at the University of Vermont. Today, he marvels, "Look at the incredible advancements and changes that have taken place! Over the years I was there, organic agriculture took off, and sustainable practices developed credibility"—at a land-grant university that, Rogers notes, was "carrying water for agribusiness" when he arrived there in the '80s.

"I sort of take a longer view. You see that there's incredible momentum in a positive direction. Hardwick is right in the heart of that!" Rogers said. "People are learning more...caring more about their food. Vote with your food dollars! That's probably the way it's going to have to change."

"This is going to be a long, unglamorous slog," Rogers acknowledged. Getting Congress to protect small, farmers' ability to do business, for example, is a major challenge this year. This Congress did pass a farm bill with "some really significant bumps in funding" for organic agriculture, he noted. "There's no cabal" out to sink small, independent, organic producers; "they just don't know about small farmers and small markets." The biggest problem with getting this year's food safety bill repaired, he asserted, "is to demonstrate to people [in Washington, D.C.] that there is this alternative food system [that] needs to be not damaged by" the bill that addresses problems belonging to corporate agribusiness.

"It takes courage," Rogers stressed, "to continue to work...and put your heart into something that may not bear fruit even during your lifetime."

Hardwick Town Manager Rob Lewis grew up in Derby, VT, on the Quebec border, fishing and hunting and working on small farms before heading off to college. Returning in 2007, after a "40-plus-year hiatus," to "a state I no longer recognized," Lewis brought back to Vermont skills in public accounting and economic development as well as a



Tom Stearns, founder & president of High Mowing Organic Seeds, and Andrew Meyer, founder & co-owner of Vermont Soy at Claire's Restaurant in Hardwick, Vermont.

recognition of what a transformation had occurred during his time away.

"I shed a tear," he admitted. But back then, Lewis noted, "there were no jobs...except in agriculture." (Today, 60% of the state's farm laborers are Mexicans.) And, calling the Hardwick of 50 years ago "hardscrabble" doesn't begin to acknowledge the plight of Vermonters struggling along without access to dental care, decent paying jobs, quality day care or affordable, accessible college education. So, when Rob Lewis met with Tom Stearns, and found out about the \$12-an-hour jobs he and his partners at the Center were bringing into town, Lewis listened to what Stearns had to say.

Now in his third year in the job, Lewis says, "I told the governor (Gov. Jim Douglas) that we appear to have our own stimulus package going on here—and in the region—primarily generated by a group of young entrepreneurs who have a marvelous concept called sustainable agriculture. It has generated a significant amount of interest. I've had phone calls from the Northwest, from British Columbia, from North and South Carolina!" Lewis is proud that Hardwick is no longer the butt of jokes, but, instead, the focus of so much excited attention that "now, everyone's jealous of us!"

Mid-summer, Lewis accepted a check for \$650,000 from Gov. Douglas, representing a Community Development Block Grant to Hardwick to support the relocation of the Vermont Food Venture Center from Fairfax, about 40 miles away, to Hardwick. Sen. Patrick Leahy, Lewis added, has promised to provide the final \$100,000 needed to break ground on a new 13,000-square-foot building that will provide state-licensed kitchens to novice specialty food producers.

Another business is slated to break ground this fall, and have its new building up before winter in Hardwick. Todd Hardie, proprietor of Honey Gardens Apiaries in Ferrisburgh, is building a distillery and moving his mead production to

Hardwick. So Claire's will be able to offer a local wine: Mead is a wine made by fermenting honey.

"I think what's most important," Lewis summed up, "is that these [ag] enterprises provide opportunities for local people to obtain jobs. This renaissance will...attract support business...[so], if you don't get on the bandwagon, you're still going to reap the benefit. As a base 'niche' economy, it's a pretty good start!" As he pointed out, the area's new ag entrepreneurs have already brought almost 100 new jobs into the area. When the Food Venture Center opens, Lewis asserted, it will be obligated, under the

terms of its funding, to hire low-to-moderate-income people for "up to a third" of its job openings.

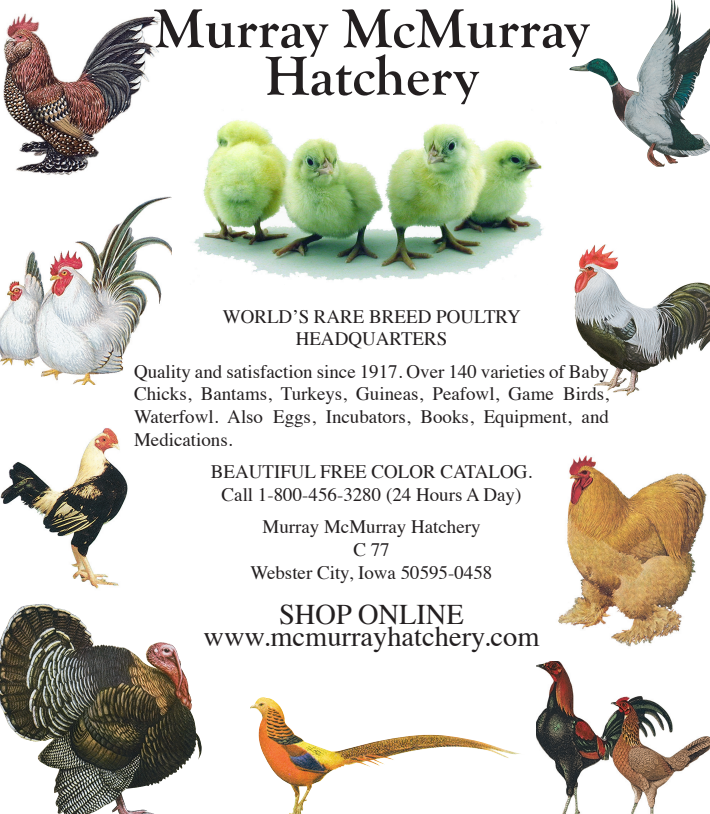
At the Hardwick Gazette office, facing the co-op across Main Street, longtime editor Ross Connolly offers another perspective on the Center: "To a large extent, it breaks the mold, not maximizing profits for shareholders but [working for] substantive results that benefit their business and the larger community."

"The land has offered many opportunities over the centuries," Connolly said; [these new] businesses are not competing...so there's the ability to cooperate. It's in the best interests of the Food Venture Center to move here. There's a community of interest."

Then, there's the surge of interest in what's happening here from so many other communities. "This resurgence," Buddill noted, "has been noticed by the powers that be...This summer in *Newsweek's* recommended summer reading list, Wendell Berry's *The Unsettling of America* -- first published in 1977! -- was 11th on a list of 50."

As Stearns told the UVM class, "A producer for *The Rolling Stone* told us, 'I've been depressed... you guys give me hope. I'm gonna come up and take you all out to dinner.' This [the Center's] vision is connecting with people in all sorts of interesting ways. We're just doing our best to raise enough money to keep the lights on!"

The CENTER FOR AN AGRICULTURAL ECONOMY operating in Hardwick and surrounding communities is a Vermont regional food hub whose purpose is to ensure that consumers have access to healthy, secure, and affordable locally-grown food, and farmers and agricultural entrepreneurs have reliable and efficient access to local and regional markets. The Center works to fill gaps identified in the regional food system and makes community connections so that food pantries, schools, restaurants, and social service agencies are able to count on a year-round supply of local food. P.O. Box 451 41 South Main Street, Hardwick, Vermont 05843



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