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Farm Hands: With a fresh perspective, Colbians join farming's next generation

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Logan Perkins '01 at the farmland she and friends work in Turner, Maine.

A photograph of a person wearing a red beanie and a dark jacket, carrying a large, golden-brown bale of hay. They are standing in a field with bare trees in the background under a dramatic, cloudy sky. The image is the left half of a two-page spread.

Farm Hands

*With a fresh
perspective,
Colbians join
farming's next
generation*



A few Novembers ago, a Colby couple held an engagement party at an upscale Boston bar. While the other 20-some-things wore pricey heels and tailored suits, one guest arrived wearing Carhartt overalls and a John Deere cap, looking as if he'd just hopped down from a tractor. "I'm a farmer," said Ben Armiger '99, defending his get-up. "Farmers wear overalls."

Blue Heron Farm, where the 29-year-old lives and works, lies along Chesapeake Bay, far from the glittering cityscapes so many young college graduates today call home. Armiger chose a different path and heeded the age-old call to cultivate, to try making a living out of soil, water, and sunlight.

He isn't alone. From California to Maine, Colby grads are part of a growing network of young people trying to change the way America grows its food.

By Molly Pindell '99
Photos by Fred Field

"I agree that ranchers have destroyed land through unsustainable grazing, but cattle can also be used as a tool to heal the land."—SOREN PETERS '97



And the timing is good, experts say. Today, farmers over age 55 control more than half of all U.S. farmland. Since 1987 the number of entry-level farmers has declined by 30 percent. These statistics do not mean that farmland is going to disappear. But it is being consolidated into ever-larger parcels, which are increasingly coming under the control of large agribusiness companies. What was once a nation of small family farmers is becoming a nation of super-farms.

This trend is disheartening to many who value our country's agrarian past, but some see hope in the vanguard of young farmers. "Within the sustainable agriculture community, we are excited about this new upsurge in small, multifaceted farms," said Kathleen Merrigan, director of the Agriculture, Food, and Environment program at Tufts University.

Merrigan points out that while the total number of young farmers is still small, "This movement is significant in light of

the aging of the American farm population. As so many older farmers begin to retire, we have to ask ourselves not just who is going to grow our food, but also what is going to happen to all that land?" Some of it is being turned over to farming's next generation.

Many of these new farmers were not born into farming families but have come to the field on their own. Many are interested in farming in a more environmentally healthy manner. And the lessons they are



learning about the value of community and connection with the land are enlightening.

Amiger's 100-acre Blue Heron Farm is located along the Upper Chester River in Maryland, hard by Chesapeake Bay. He inherited it from his grandfather, who had lived on the property for many years, renting the land out to farmers to grow various crops, including a few years of tomatoes for Campbell's famous soup.

After graduating from Colby, Armiger journeyed to Alaska, drove trucks, and found his dog, Margaret. But the farm called him back. After a year he moved into a 19th-century granary on the farm property and rented the farmhouse to some friends.

The guy who came to the party looking like he had just climbed down from a tractor had done just that. Armiger found a 1962 tractor he could afford. The ancient Ferguson frequently broke down, and he learned that in order to become a farmer one must be a good mechanic as well. His mentor? A mechanically inclined neighbor who liked to hunt deer on Armiger's land.

Three thousand miles across the country, Laura Neale '99 runs Sol Food Farm, a one-acre organic vegetable farm in Sebastopol, California, a city of 7,800 about 50 miles north of San Francisco. Unlike Armiger, Neale lived agriculture for a few years before taking the plunge and starting a farm of her own.

The summer after her first year at Colby, she participated in the apprenticeship program at the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association (MOFGA), the oldest and largest state organic organization in the country. Neale chose a farm outside of Bath, and soon she was "hoeing and weeding and playing in the dirt." She was hooked.

In 2001 Neale and her passion moved to California. Her agricultural resumé: an organic farm in Mendocino, an urban gardening program for youth in Oakland, and a six-month ecological horticulture apprenticeship at University of California Santa Cruz.

In 2004 a friend from the Santa Cruz program made Neale a tantalizing offer. He had found a three-acre parcel for rent in Sonoma and he wanted her to farm it with him and another friend. Eager to apply the skills she had honed as an apprentice, Neale joined her friends as they began what would become Sol Food.

When the trio arrived, they found little more than a house surrounded by three

acres of lawn. But with the landlord's tractor, they disc-plowed and rototilled an acre of the lawn and sowed a winter cover crop to enrich the soil. Through the first rainy winter, Neale and her partners, Andy Szymanowicz and Leo Goldsmith, spent long hours sitting at the kitchen table poring over seed catalogues, budgeting, and brainstorming exactly what they would grow and when. They built a hoop house for starting seedlings—not out of the ordinary plastic PVC piping, but from more sustainable materials like salvaged wood for tables and local redwood.

In the springtime they began the hard work of mowing down the cover crop, working it into the soil with compost and lime, and digging more than 40 100-foot seedbeds by hand. They transplanted seedlings from the hoop house and, by June, Sol Food Farm's first vegetables were ready for harvest.

About 1,200 miles to the southeast, Soren Peters '97 has taken the bull by the horns, quite literally, on his 1,500-acre Rancho Los Ciruelos, just north of Santa Fe, New Mexico. Instead of the more traditional beef operation, Peters runs a herd of Corriente cattle, raising tough, wily calves for rodeos.

A lanky, weathered Santa Fe native, Peters has been working on the family land for 15 years, starting a vegetable farm with his sister and spending a summer with friends, building a cabin with Corbett Bishop '93 and a greenhouse with Scott Monteith '97. Four years ago Peters was ready for a new project, so he bought 30 pregnant Corriente heifers and began building his herd.

Peters now manages about 70 breeding heifers and sells approximately 50 calves a year. The calves, born throughout February and March, graze for a year on the range before selling for about \$500 apiece. Unlike beef calves, which can gain up to 700 pounds in their first year, Corrientes are bred to be short and lean. "Half the weight and twice as tough," said Peters.

While this may seem to have little to do

U.S. Farm Statistics

Number of farms

1950: 5.4 million

2002: 2.1 million

Land in farms

1950: 1.2 billion acres

2002: 938 million acres

Average farm size

1950: 216 acres

2002: 441 acres

Number of farmers by age in 2002

Under 25: 10,443

25-34: 59,950

65 or older: 400,054

*Source: U.S. Farm Census, 1950 and 2002;
United States Department of Agriculture*

with organic vegetables, Peters is applying one of the principles of the new farmers—find a niche that works. His sister, Erica, has found an agricultural niche as well, running a 20-acre organic vegetable farm on the ranch. It produces raspberries, vegetables, lettuces, and herbs, and the ranch's namesake, ciruelos—Spanish for plums.



Crisscross the country one more time to find the Winter Cache Project in Portland, Maine. The brainchild of three Colby alumnae and an alumnus, the Winter Cache Project is a farming venture that addresses the challenge of eating local fare in the winter in the Northeast.

During the summer and fall, New England is lush with fresh produce—from the first tender pea shoots in late spring to the tangy apples of October. But come winter, most New Englanders turn to supermarket produce flown in from warmer climes. In January 2004, Logan Perkins '01, Maia Campoamor '03, Jacob Mentlik '02, and Emily Posner '04 decided to change this pat-

tern and create a local vegetable distribution network during Maine's chilliest months.

Urban dwellers just out of college, Perkins and her partners lacked both land and capital, so the first challenge was to find a spot to grow produce. They began calling local organic farms to inquire about exchanging labor for land and very quickly found Betty Weir. At 84 Weir had been farming organically for 40 years in Cumberland Center, north of Portland, and was delighted by the idea of providing land for the Winter Cache Project. With Weir's backing things began moving rapidly. "We made a seed order, planted onions, and then we were off," Perkins said.

That first summer she and her partners drummed up a hardy group of volunteers to help grow and harvest about half an acre of onions, potatoes, beets, cabbage, carrots, and winter squash. A basement in Portland was converted into a root cellar to store the harvest.

With winter came distribution. Every two weeks from December through March, the Winter Cache Project delivered vegetables to 15 households and to all volunteers who had helped on the farm the previous summer. In addition it initiated an educational component, holding workshops on canning, preserving, and seed-saving and sponsoring lectures and events.

Encouraged, Perkins and her partners added new crops the second year: rutabagas, turnips, parsnips, green beans, and tomatoes for canning, and leeks for freezing and drying. They also established regular weekly work parties on Sunday afternoons, at times managing as many as 30 volunteers at once.



Though Armiger's grandfather did not farm commercially, he did grow a large organic vegetable garden for his own use. Out of respect for this ahead-of-its-time commitment to growing things without pesticides and herbicides, Armiger decided early on that he would go through the process of having his farm certified organic.

Unlike Neale and Peters, who farm in relatively progressive pockets of the country, Armiger was an anomaly in his small community when he decided to go organic. He is surrounded by large conventional farms run by men well into their 60s who have been farming the same way for the past 40 years.

"In Maryland you've got good sun and good moisture," Armiger said, "so you simply put your crop in, spray it for pests and weeds, and watch it grow. It's not necessarily that these guys disagree with organic on principle, but they are old and set in their way of doing things."

Undeterred, he paid a visit to the Maryland Farm Service Agency and a few weeks later about 800 pages of paperwork arrived at the farm. One lackadaisical inspection, he says, \$400, and three years later, Blue Heron Farm was officially organic. Armiger also has 18 acres of farmland along the Chester River enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program, a government program that pays farmers not to grow crops in environmentally sensitive areas.

Neale's experience with the organic certification process was as complicated by bureaucratic paperwork as Armiger's, but ultimately worthwhile. "It's not necessarily very well-enforced or hugely meaningful," Neale said, "but it gives us that little sticker that customers want to see."

Rodeo customers don't tend to look for an organic sticker, but that doesn't mean Peters isn't committed to sustainability. The reason he chose the Corriente breed was because it is best-suited for his high, arid land.

Over the past four years Peters has become an advocate of sustainable grazing practices, befriending one of the most well-known experts in the field, Alan Savory. "Ranching has been demonized by so many," said Peters. "I agree that ranchers have destroyed land through unsustainable grazing, but cattle can also be used as a tool to heal the land."

He rotates his animals through different areas, allowing his grass a generous re-

A Farm's Many Lives

By Jane Brox '78

A working farm with its house, barns, fields, and pasture may appear to be a constant in the landscape, but for a farm to survive through the years, the capacity to change and change again with the times is as essential as the quality of soil and luck with the weather.

On my family's farm in the Merrimack Valley of Massachusetts, there have been many different farms during the century it's been ours. My grandfather, who purchased the place in 1901, assumed the life of those who'd owned it before him. The deed had granted him not only the buildings and land, but also the dairy herd, the hens and chickens, the milk pung and plows, the blind horse, plus feed for the blind horse. He'd sell his milk to bottlers in the city of Lawrence, six miles to our west, the same as most of his neighbors.

On our stretch of road one dairy farm adjoined the next and the next all the way to the horizon, each one sending 40 or 60 or 75 quarts of milk a day to the cities, year in, year out, as the first airplane flew overhead, as the 1918 flu cut through, even as the 1920 census showed that, for the first time, the number of urban and suburban dwellers in the United States had surpassed those living on farms.

Eventually, competition from larger herds on more land to the west and the efficiency of long-distance transport made a small, local herd less lucrative. Sometime in the '40s my father, who'd assumed responsibility for the farm, began to grow corn, tomatoes, peppers, beans, and apples for the corner stores in the cities. By the time I was born, in the 1950s, the herd was gone and the barn had burned down. The far pastures had reverted to pine woods, while some of the near ones were planted with apple trees—McIntosh mostly—the '50s was the era for bright, red September apples.

Though the road had long since been paved, it was still quiet enough for my sister to turn cartwheels down its cen-

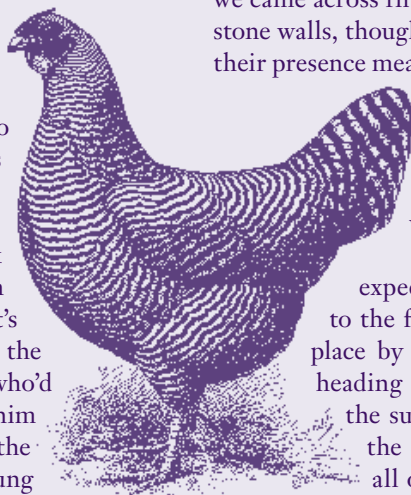
ter. When my cousins and siblings and I played in the woods, we came across rhubarb, cellar holes, lilacs, and labyrinths of stone walls, though we were far too young to care about what their presence meant. The farms that disappeared while I was

young didn't collapse in on themselves and turn wild. They were converted to housing tracts. Few of my friends were children of farmers, and I was taught, as was everyone else, to desire to go away.

Which I did, though beyond anyone's expectation—especially mine—I returned again to the farm in my early 30s. It was a much busier place by then. The sound of morning commuters heading into Boston woke me before the birds. As the suburbs had grown up around the property, the world came to the farm—we sold almost all our produce on a large roadside stand. We still grew corn, tomatoes, peppers, and beans, though the McIntosh were becoming a liability. People had begun to prefer Macouns, Braeburns, Granny Smiths. When apples from Washington state, then apples from China flooded the market, it was hard to make the orchard pay.

A working farm in that part of the valley had become a rarity; everyone was more conscious of the particular—sometimes romanticized—place our farm held in the community.

When my father died, 10 years ago, we decided to lease the farm to someone who'd worked for him in the past. I moved from the farm again in June of 2004 and have been away for more than a year and half, though late last fall, when some of the McIntosh trees were cut down to make way for greenhouses, it stung. Now I get most of my fruits and vegetables at the farmer's market in Brunswick, Maine. I always feel consoled just walking among the old trucks. The scale of the operations reminds me of our own farm before the road was busy; the talk about the frost, the cold, the drought reminds me of the way my own father talked. I don't really feel strange at all until I step up to pay for my chard or beans, and then a little what?—guilt?—creeps through as I wonder: Is this all I have to do?



growth period after each grazing season. If grasses are given time to recover, the nutrient stores in their roots are recharged and the plants can be grazed again without negative consequences. So far, so good on Rancho Los Ciruelos, says Peters. "There's a lot more grass out there now than there was when I started."

The Winter Cache Project considers itself "beyond organic," a term that has become popular in small-farming circles. Although there is no official definition, "beyond organic" usually means adhering to even stricter environmental practices than the federal National Organic Program (NOP) dictates, but without official certification. Some growers see the "beyond organic" label as a protest against the NOP standards, which many believe are not stringent enough. Others use the term simply because the organic certification process is expensive.

For Perkins and her partners, it is a bit of both. While the cost of organic certification is prohibitive for them, they also don't feel it is necessary. "The people who are eating our produce are not looking for an organic label," Perkins said. "Because our system is so local and we give people the opportunity to actually come out and see what we're doing, they trust us."



In just one short year, Sol Food Farm has established itself as one of the must-visit stands in two different farmer's markets, Occidental and Sebastopol. Perhaps it has to do with Neale's quirky, outgoing personality or the meticulous care that she and her partners put into arranging their wares. But Neale likes to think it's the food itself. "People comment on how vibrant our food looks and how our stand puts out such a positive vibe. It's nuts. I've sold produce before and never in my life have I received so much praise. I think it's because all of our produce is so insanely fresh, harvested literally hours before."

Their offerings have been such a hit that supporters are demanding a Sol Food com-

munity-supported agriculture venture (CSA) this year. For a prepaid seasonal fee, members will receive weekly baskets of produce, brimming with juicy dry-farmed tomatoes, fragrant herbs, broccoli, kale, and beets.

Marketing in rural Maryland isn't nearly as dreamy. In his first organic season Armiger grew a crop of soybeans. He worked tirelessly, battling weeds and pests through the spring and summer months, only to come up against an even bigger obstacle: finding a buyer for his sizeable crop.

After much research, Armiger thought he'd found the answer in White Wave Foods, makers of Silk soymilk. The company was interested, but there was a glitch. White Wave wanted Armiger to get the soybeans all the way to Texas. Lacking a combine of his own, Armiger said "The cost of harvest and transportation was too high for me to have made much of a profit. So I ended up just plowing it all into the ground. But that's what it's all about, learning as you go and making mistakes."

This year Armiger plans to sharecrop 60 acres of grain with another farmer who has more experience and better equipment. This arrangement will not only be valuable as a learning experience for a young farmer but also a way to share some of the risk.


The Winter Cache Project is not a profit-driven enterprise. For Perkins and her partners, farming is more about sharing their ideals than about making money. "From the very beginning," Perkins said, "our intent was to empower people to have access to year-round, locally, and sustainably grown foods regardless of their economic situation."

Instead of seeking cash to cover expenses, the project relies on the age-old practice of barter. With Weir and with other local farmers, Perkins and her volunteers trade their labor for use of land and access to surplus harvest. "Almost all of the organic growers up here are in need of labor, so they are very open to building these relationships," said Perkins.



Despite their surface differences, each of these Colby farmers has discovered the same invaluable connection to his or her community. Armiger, Neale, Peters, and Perkins all understand that they could not live as farmers without the give-and-take relationship they have established with neighbors and friends.

"Something supercool about our farm," Neale said, "is the total outpouring of support that we have received from our community. The previous owner, Eddie, passed away a few years ago and he was a huge gardener, not as a profession, but as a



"Our intent was to empower people to have access to locally and sustainably grown foods regardless of their economic situation."—LOGAN PERKINS '01

passion. When we dig, it's pretty apparent in the make-up of the soil where Eddie has been. So many neighbors fondly remember him. They stop when they are walking by and just give us their blessings and say how wonderful and beautiful our work is."

Peters, too, even on his vast expanse, notes the importance of the Santa Fe farmer's market to his and his sister's ranching and farming. Everyone in town knows the pair, two local kids making good on their attempt to give back to the community that raised them. For Peters, part of the allure of ranching is the ability to share his

land and knowledge. "There is an open-door policy at Rancho Los Ciruelos for any wandering Colbian who finds him or herself in Santa Fe."

That welcoming spirit is just as evident in the Winter Cache Project, far from New Mexico's wide open spaces. Although Perkins and her partners live an urban life in Portland, they have infused their project with an ethos more commonly found in rural areas. For instance, in November they held an end-of-season supper and storytelling event to celebrate the harvest. Part fund raiser and part feast, the evening featured

story sharing and performances by local farmers and an elaborate dinner made entirely of Maine-grown products. "We even had Maine sea salt!" Perkins said.

It's a simpler life, with what some may see as meager rewards. Not the Colby farmers.

Like many who work the land, Armiger cobbles together a living: income from the farm and rental properties, gigs with his bluegrass band, Chester River Runoff, and coaching sailing. But like his kindred spirits, he is fulfilled. "My lifestyle is very independent," he said. "Even though I have no cash, I feel rich."