

October 2015

They Care What You Eat: With Ingredients from the Classroom, Colbians are helping to shape a new Maine, on the Farm, in the Sea, at the Restaurant Table

Gerry Boyle

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/colbymagazine>



Part of the [Agriculture Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Boyle, Gerry (2015) "They Care What You Eat: With Ingredients from the Classroom, Colbians are helping to shape a new Maine, on the Farm, in the Sea, at the Restaurant Table," *Colby Magazine*: Vol. 104 : Iss. 2 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/colbymagazine/vol104/iss2/7>

This Features is brought to you for free and open access by the Colby College Archives at Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Magazine by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby.

They care what you eat

With ingredients from the classroom, Colbians are helping to shape a new Maine, on the farm, in the sea, at the restaurant table

By Gerry Boyle '78

Photography by Heather Perry '93



“

In terms of food movements, how can we get things into people's bellies that they didn't have options for before?”

—Rice grower Ben Rooney '10

Organic

rice, one farmer says, can provide double the yield of any other grain. Another farmer operates a thriving community-supported agriculture vegetable farm, supplying both members and low-income families. A trio is growing oysters in clear waters, supplying high-end restaurants and revitalizing what was once a polluted river. Another is creating a malting facility, making local beers truly local and giving traditional farmers a new crop.

With knowledge of biology and ecology, food systems and economics, rhetoric and religion Colbians are helping to change the face of Maine, joining—and in many cases leading—the national movement that has made food and nutrition a defining goal for a generation.

“Once you start thinking about food and where it’s coming from and where it’s going, the complexities of our diet, it does connect all of these things: social justice, environmental changes, global trade,” said Professor of Anthropology Mary Beth Mills, who is teaching a course on the subject.

On these pages, and online, are food practitioners from Maine and beyond, drawn to change the world by affecting what we eat. As food activist, *Diet For a Small Planet* author, and former Colby Mellon Environmental Studies Fellow Frances Moore Lappé put it, “It makes perfect sense to me that food is such a powerful avenue for people to make sense of the world, to find a place for themselves with meaning.”

Tucked into sprawling cornfields of the Kennebec Valley in Benton, Maine, is a series of rectangular troughs dug into the dense marine clay. The troughs, covering an acre, are filled with green grasses and irrigated with water from an adjacent manmade pond.

The grasses are rice—varieties with names like Hayayuki, Arpa Shali, Diamante. The ducks that paddle around the plants are for aeration and fertilization. The scene, like something from Southeast Asia, is the creation of Ben Rooney ’10, who is showing that rice can grow in northern New England just as it grows in northern Japan. “We want to figure out, is it worth it to do this excavation? Is it worth it to set up this system? What seeds work here? In terms of food movements, how can we get new things into people’s bellies that they didn’t have options for before?”

Wild Folk Farm is an experiment and three years in it’s proceeding according to plan. The only commercial scale rice-growing operation in northern New England is nearing its goal of producing 5,000 pounds of rice annually. Rooney is trying 25 varieties—from South Korea, Portugal, Chile, Russia, and Japan—gently improving the soil in the paddies and carefully monitoring the results. “What grows well here without us changing the soil a ton?” he asks.

The environmental studies major and ecologist traveled from Maine to Zimbabwe before a trip to visit family in the Philippines turned him on to “the beautiful paddy culture.”

His effort to transplant that culture to Maine has small-scale organic farmers and restaurateurs watching with interest as he carefully considers his slowly expanding operation. “It’s a steep learning curve,” he said, stepping into the water to open an irrigation valve. “A lot of it hasn’t been necessarily the specifics of what I learned at Colby, but the how.”

Never had Laura Neale '99 even heard the term “sustainable agriculture.” Until her first year at Colby, that is, when the reading for an anthropology course included Frances Moore Lappé’s landmark book *Food First: Beyond the Myth of Scarcity*. Neale still has the book, on a shelf at her farmhouse in Lyman, Maine. “It’s all trashed and underlined,” she said, “exclamation points for the provocative things.”

She’s living “sustainable agriculture” now as the owner of Black Kettle Farm, a CSA farm that supplies members and hunger-relief programs from Portland to Portsmouth, N.H. One day last summer she and her employees and apprentices were in full harvest mode on the farm’s 4.5 acres of vegetable fields—eggplant, potatoes, squash, garlic drying in the barn loft.

“The food’s beautiful,” Neale said, leading the way through a tomato- and basil-filled greenhouse. “As much as I’ve been doing it a while, it’s really thrilling and awe inspiring.”

A native New Yorker, Neale began her journey in Colby anthropology, with subsequent stops as a Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association apprentice (she hires them now), work with a nonprofit in San Francisco, and farming in Santa Cruz, Sonoma County, Calif., Connecticut, and, for the past five years on her own land in Lyman, Maine. “I’d never said the word career,” Neale said, “I was just doing things that interested me.”

And nothing interests her like farming—the seasonal rhythms, the “mega” to-do lists, manual labor, the knowledge that she’s putting healthy food on people’s tables, the model of a CSA, capricious weather, the “constant humbling moments.”

“

I am a really dedicated CSA farmer. I love it when we have a really diverse, really gorgeous share for folks. That makes my heart sing.”

—Laura Neale '99





Dredging

had been underway for two hours as Jeff “Smokey” McKeen ’76 and Carter Newell ’77 crisscrossed their plot in the Damariscotta River one August morning, lifting hundreds of pounds of dripping, fresh oysters from the sparkling waters.

“It’s a good life,” Newell said, at the helm of the boat *Oyster Girl*. “Come out in December when it’s snowing.”

It is a good life for the partners in Pemaquid Oyster Co., whose oysters are in demand at high-end restaurants from Maine to New York City. (McKeen is featured in celebrity chef Mario Batali’s cookbook, *America Farm to Table*.) “At one point we were a hundred and fifty grand in the hole,” Newell said. “Now we’re running 30 percent profit.”

With Chris Davis ’78, the pair set out to reintroduce a species that had been killed off in Maine tidal rivers by pollution from upstream industry. Newell, a marine biologist with a master’s degree from the University of Maine and doctorate from the University of New Brunswick, brought a scientific approach to the problem that ultimately paid off.

Over nearly 30 years, McKeen explained, the oyster farmers learned to seed larger oysters to limit predation, to plant in a way to give each oyster sufficient space, and to hold their harvested oysters downriver in saltier waters before sending them to market.

Now demand for Pemaquid Oyster Co. oysters far outstrips supply, more oyster farmers have begun operations on the river, and stray oysters are surviving, reestablishing a wild population. “It takes you twenty years to figure it out and another ten to implement it,” Newell said. “Oysters have made it.”

“

The Colby experience in terms of writing grant proposals has been the best thing for me. You need to make a case. If you can’t communicate it by writing or public speaking, then you’re basically done.”

—Carter Newell ’77,
Pemaquid Oyster Co.



Seeds sown on Mayflower Hill bear fruit in far-flung places. Just ask Robyn Wardell '11. Wardell saw her time working in the Colby Organic Garden and volunteering in schools with Colby Cares About Kids combine to provide an epiphany:

“It was an awakening for me, seeing how food connects a lot of things I care about—social justice, the environment, health equity.”

The international studies and religious Studies major (her thesis considered food symbolism and ritual in Hinduism) found all of the above in FoodCorps, an AmeriCorps offshoot that launched as Wardell graduated. She joined the first FoodCorps class and soon was in Flint, Mich., schools. She helped build community gardens, integrated gardening into the curriculum, connected with food service staff, and gave disadvantaged kids their first experience with home-grown broccoli, green beans, and carrots. “Once they pulled it out of the ground themselves, they were not only excited to eat it themselves, but also encouraged the kids around them to try it.”

Food was a vehicle to address inequality that the students and their families faced every day, encouraging healthy diets, strengthening community organizations, and helping to empower both children and their families. “It’s more than having kids try a carrot,” Wardell said.

Her efforts got her featured in a national magazine story about food-centric activism titled “The Young Step Up.” She’s still stepping up, helping train new FoodCorps recruits and working with alumni of the program to provide them with ways to remain involved in the food cause.

Read more online, about:

Dairy farmer Andy Smith '11J and The Milkhouse creamery. Mentored by organic farmers Polly and Prentice Grassi '95 and Paige Tyson '77 and Spencer Aitel '77, Smith and his wife, Caitlin, are owners of a farm that has been preserved for agriculture in perpetuity.

Olivia Kefauver '12, who early on took the course Global Food Policy taught by Assistant Professor of Environmental Studies Travis Reynolds and decided to find the area where she would have the most impact. “Have you considered being a farmer?” Reynolds asked. She hadn’t but she did and soon was.

Paul Dobbins '87, whose company Ocean Approved has brought kelp farming to Maine. Kelp production in the United States, Dobbins says, could be the solution to many of the world’s looming food production problems.




 A man in a plaid shirt and glasses is operating a yellow Hyster forklift in a large industrial warehouse. The warehouse has a high ceiling with exposed beams, pipes, and a large ceiling fan. In the background, there are stacks of large sheets of oriented strand board (OSB) and other industrial materials. The lighting is bright, coming from overhead industrial lights.

I consider myself an ecologist. It's a systems science. You're looking at broad patterns, impacts, how things interconnect."

—Blue Ox Malthouse founder Joel Alex '08

Serious professional building blocks—

environmental studies and international studies double major, GIS courses, economics, work in conservation policy, graduate courses in strategic sustainable development at an institute in Sweden. For Joel Alex '08 it all led to acceptance to a prestigious graduate program at Yale.

Which he turned down.

Instead, Alex created Blue Ox Malthouse, a company that produces malt, the main ingredient in beer, which, until now, has been controlled by a handful of massive companies in Canada and the Midwest. "One-hundred percent of all the ingredients of local beer, except for water, comes from outside the state," he said.

From a space in a small industrial park in Lisbon Falls, Maine, near Lewiston, Alex intends to rectify that, turning barley into the germinated seed called malt. It isn't just the beer, he said. In a state that leads the nation in craft brewers, a successful organic malting operation in Maine would provide Aroostook County farmers with an alternative crop to potatoes and boost the economy in that part of Maine.

To make his idea reality, Alex tapped the extensive support system for entrepreneurs, landing multiple grants that helped him refine his business plan. Along the way he was joined by mentor-turned-investor Steve Culver '78, a former Hannaford exec who looked at Alex's plan and liked what he saw, both on the bottom line and in his younger partner. "He can learn anything," Culver said.

Alex describes himself as "a catalyst," a brain-picker who isn't afraid to ask questions.

"I consider myself an ecologist," he said, beside stainless steel vats in the Lisbon malthouse. "It's a systems science. You're looking at broad patterns, impacts, how things interconnect."

Creative

writing and literature were Mike Wiley '08's passions at Colby.

Wiley studied with Ira Sadoff, Elizabeth Sagaser, and Elisa Narin van Court—but then he studied cooking at a private hunting and fishing lodge in Colorado and at Le Bosquet in Crested Butte. No surprise that his thesis in a master's program at University of Colorado Boulder was on the aesthetic rhetoric in *The French Laundry Cookbook* by the chef/owner of the renowned Napa Valley restaurant of the same name.

When he found himself preparing wildly ambitious snacks for grad school get-togethers, Wiley knew it was time to “go back and work in a kitchen.”

He did, at the Black Cat farm-to-table bistro in Boulder, where his writing skills were enlisted to write menus, and later at Hugo's in Portland, Maine, where he rose quickly to sous chef and was asked by chef/owner Rob Evans (Wiley's English major credential again) to proof an ad offering the restaurant for sale.

Wiley proofed the ad and then he and his partners bought Hugo's, and quickly opened sister restaurant Eventide Oyster Co., a raw bar that has garnered national raves and down-the-block crowds. “We said, ‘Well, if we get beautiful little plates, commit ourselves to getting the freshest, most local stuff we can, we can have a great lineup of oysters and have fun with the food.’”

Deflecting praise, Wiley says the timing was perfect, that Eventide opened as oysters became very hip, and “we just have an awesome group of farmers and purveyors that we work with.”

The trio of restaurants (The Honey Paw noodle restaurant completed the set) buys whole animals for its meat dishes, fresh fish (and Pemaquid Oyster Co. oysters) from a local supplier, and veggies and mushrooms and plants from area farmers and foragers (including milk from The Milkhouse creamery).

“It's so funny when people get committed to things like making food beautiful and delicious,” Wiley said. “It just so happens that what's beautiful, in keeping with our politics, is also the most delicious.”

““

It just so happens that what's beautiful, in keeping with our politics, is also the most delicious.”

—Mike Wiley '03, chef/restaurateur





Ben Rooney '10
Wild Folk Farm

Joel Alex '08
Blue Ox Malthouse



Jeff "Smokey" McKeen '76
Pemaquid Oyster Co.



Laura Neale '99
Black Kettle Farm



Mike Wiley '03
Hugo's
Eventide Oyster Co.
The Honey Paw

