

# Staying on the Land by Working It

## Economic Vitality of Local Agriculture

Yes, but . . .

A couple of years back, on a visit to northern New Mexico, Alice Waters asked me whether the region could support itself agriculturally. We had just finished lunch with Deborah Madison at Harvey and Nancy Shapiro's place in El Guique. Harvey as much of you know runs Seeds of Change. The lunch was made with largely locally grown produce, including a tart Rose Mary made with raspberries and rhubarb. After gazing into the far horizon for a little too long, I answered Alice's question--"Can this area feed itself?"--with a somewhat hesitant "yes." Alice then had to rush off, and ever since then I have mentally been adding the "buts" to my yes.

Yes, we could feed everyone in Northern New Mexico, but. But would we? Do we?

Rose Mary and I, and many of the friends and neighbors who worked for us, spent twenty-five years feeding ourselves and a few other people off of the six or seven acres we farmed in Dixon. 1998 was our last full farm year--but since then our equipment, at least until last summer, was used by a CSA based right next door, and which we also helped with what you might call "technical advice." (I assume all of you know what a CSA is: the acronym means Community

Supported Agriculture. Usually member families buy a share, paying for their season's supply of produce in advance to help the grower cover costs in advance, thereby also sharing in the risks. Good year, you get lots of produce. Bad year, you get little.)

And last year Dixon took a small but important step in the direction of feeding itself: an afternoon farmers' market opened on the parking lot of the former Zeller's Store, now owned by the library, and quickly developed into an important community event. It ran from July well into October, with ten to twenty gardeners and farmers participating.

The steady growth of CSAs, the entrance of a younger generation in market-garden farming, the growth of the number of small market garden farms in the region over the past thirty years, the steady expansion of the farmers' market movement itself, the growth of organic production, the lowering cost and ready availability of technique to extend the growing season and conserve water--these are all the good signs, the positive signs, that suggest that small farms can be economically viable, particularly where a local customer base is receptive to and aware of the economic, social, and health benefits of locally produced food and some

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sense of, and sympathy for, the situation of the small-scale producer. This is all part of the "yes."

Yes, but. Patty Nielsen, who managed the Taos Farmers' Market until a couple of years ago, suggested to me a vow of poverty. It takes a lot of work and creativity, shall we say, for a local producer to overcome the price disadvantages he or she suffers when faced with the highly subsidized agribusiness competition that is on display in every produce counter. This situation will probably worsen as more agribusiness firms enter the organic market. As things now stand, we tend to leave it up to the individual farmer to solve this financial puzzle how to grow food in a society which has become addicted to paying far less than it costs to produce. We can't--or won't--subsidize the small farmer in this allegedly free market society, in which only the giant producers get the subsidies.

I'm going to list some of the barriers and hurdles that all small farmers now face--but also suggest some ways to overcome them. We still do have in this area still-viable acequias, and in the Española valley at least there still exists an infrastructure of agricultural production in the form of a feed store, but just one now, and a couple of used farm equipment outlets--which have vanished from many rural areas of the country, including to an extent, Taos.

The farmers and producers you buy your local produce from at the Taos Farmers' Market or from the local CSA are for the most part outside of the already fraying social safety net that middle-class Americans consider essential for their security: your small farm will probably never make enough money to cover health insurance for its owners, let alone its workers, or stash retirement money away in an IRA. CSA's have taken a step in the right direction in spreading the risks of farming out to include their customers, but only in a very limited way. Ideally, if you're paying \$500 for a season's worth of produce, you should add another \$150 or so to contribute to the farmer's IRA and health insurance. We could, but would we?

Farming is capital intensive--meaning that we have a generation of young market gardeners and farmers who can't afford to buy the land they're farming and into which they are pouring their sweat equity. They can't afford to buy the land in a culture of speculative land development, because of course they can't afford to charge the prices that would enable them to save or borrow the money to buy the land. Doubly offensive because agribusiness is able to externalize the environmental and social costs to its abusive practices on the backs of tax payers everywhere.

What to do? Sweat equity became a factor in the "Calico

Wars" of upstate New York in the 18th century, when tenant farmers revolted against their absentee landlords. In Costa Rica, when a property is sold, the farmers working it have a right to a share of the proceeds. Today, in society, we look at land property, and do not factor in, in the case of agricultural land, the time and labor that has gone into shaping it, rendering it productive. We don't recognize any property rights that actual use might bestow in the form of good stewardship. Anyone who has farmed a rented field for ten or twenty years is likely to know it far better than its titular owner--and feel a sense of ownership. I have.

Communities everywhere were once intensely focused in their agriculture: it was the source of livelihood for a majority of residents, either directly as producers, or as provisionary of supplies, livestock, distributors, brokers, and shippers. We have now raised a generation or two of children many of whom have no idea where their food comes from and who have never visited a producing farm or livestock operation. Ignorance of the basic activity essential to all civilization seems to me to be supremely dangerous.

Alice Waters herself has begun to rectify this situation in Berkeley through a program that puts vegetable gardens in school yards and local produce in the cafeterias of local schools--as funded by a local

bond issue. In a food-obsessed society, she is attempting to correct a stunning oversight in the way most of us think and act. Programs like hers are offshoots of innovative jail and prison gardens and farms and vegetable gardens for the homeless in the Bay Area.

One of the ironies of our time is that we are becoming a nation of gourmets: in a number of daily newspapers the food pages sometimes exceed the sports pages, at least four days a week. At the other end of the spectrum lie activities of groups like the Taos Land Trust, the Trust for Public Land, the American Farmland Trust, and other non-profit groups and public entities preserving open space. Land preservation is an important part of enabling farms and ranches, large and small, to remain productive enterprises. But it's only one part of the picture. Wendell Berry puts together everything that we have broken off into compartments: "Eating is an agricultural act." We should all be wearing lip rings engraved with those words.

Yes, I would say to Alice's question, "Can this area feed itself?" Yes, when young farmers can know that their labor and enthusiasm will not gradually transform itself into exhaustion and indebtedness over a life time; yes, when they can earn through their labor some equity in the land they rent and lease; yes, when there are financial agencies that can

help them capitalize their land and equipment; yes, when we as customers are willing to pay full cost of producing our food; yes, when there are enough farmers and ranchers again to provide reliable sources of food stuffs to the community fully aware of and supportive of their labors.

It will always appeal. It did to me, a thirty-year old 100-pound novelist, in 1969. I always felt good about farming, and now gardening, even when it hurt. In this era of complex and alluring industrial and technological dependencies--unsustainable dependencies at that--to plant a seed: here is something truly revolutionary.

