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Women Find Their Place In the Field

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CHERYL ROGOWSKI planted her seeds of change in the black soil of Orange County, N.Y., in 1994. Her parents, first-generation Polish-Americans, built the W. Rogowski Farm, starting in the 1950's. Like most farmers in the area, they dedicated their land to the wholesale onion business. "We sold 500 tons of onions every year," Ms. Rogowski said, "and never met any of the people who bought them."

In 11 years, starting with a crop of chili peppers seeded in her bedroom and planted in a remote field, Ms. Rogowski has transformed Rogowski Farm, raising 250 varieties of produce and forming intimate connections to its customers and employees. For her innovations, she won a \$500,000 "genius award" last year from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the first given to a full-time farmer.

"What I know about farming is this: It's not enough to just drive the tractor anymore," she said.

Ms. Rogowski, 43, is one of thousands of women who have changed the face of American farming. Though American farms have steadily declined in jobs and capital for years, the number of farms operated by women has more than doubled since 1978, from just over 100,000 to almost 250,000 today, according to the United States Department of Agriculture.

Almost 15 percent of American farms are now run primarily by women -- a sea change from 1978, when the figure was 5 percent. On organic farms, according to the Organic Farming Research Foundation, the number is 22 percent.

The concentration is especially high in the Northeast, where a small farm near an urban area can now survive solely through farmers' markets, restaurants, farm memberships (in which customers pay in advance for a season's worth of produce) and other direct outlets.

"Farming has changed, and farmers now have to do things they are traditionally really bad at: marketing, educating consumers, collective action, communication," Ms. Rogowski said. "And it can't be a coincidence that women are traditionally good at those things."

To expand her farm's business and its reach in its community, Ms. Rogowski arranged for weekly deliveries of produce to centers for the elderly, mentored immigrant farmers from Mexico and Guatemala, started a catering business that uses local produce, sells vegetables at eight weekly farmers' markets and is an activist for land use reform.

"Women farmers aren't a special-interest group," she said. "Our issues are the same as all American farmers -- we all want to keep our farms, and we have to make money from them. But women have come up with a lot of the new ways of doing it."

Women's work has always been integral to American farming, but women were seldom considered farmers. Now, networks of female farmers are thriving in Vermont, Pennsylvania, Maine, Montana and Iowa. And a national conference for women in sustainable agriculture, the first of its kind, is scheduled for October in Burlington, Vt. At the Rodale Institute in Pennsylvania, an organic agricultural training center, all of this year's farm interns are women, which is also a first, said Jeff Moyer, the farm manager.

All of the women interviewed for this article said they had experienced little resistance from their male colleagues. "I can do every job on this farm that my dad or brother could do -- operate the forklift, bag onions, haul manure," Ms. Rogowski said. "And the farmers around here, not to mention the guys who work for me, all know that."

Annie Farrell, 54, was a single mother when she started farming in Bovina, N.Y., in the 1970's. "It was a man's world back then," she said. A longtime supplier to New York City chefs, she was one of the first local growers to produce organic vegetables of restaurant quality. "The kind of farming I wanted to do takes finesse and patience, and the men didn't seem too impressed."

The rise of small-scale "market farming" has brought many women back to farming. "Small tractors have become the fastest growing segment in the agricultural equipment industry," said Barry Nelson, a spokesman for John Deere. "We have more women buying tractors than ever before, and more small farms that need just one piece of heavy equipment. It's a lot easier to get started than it used to be."

Even so, according to the Department of Agriculture, women are far more likely than men to be farming on inherited land. **Betsey Ryder's** farm, in Brewster, N.Y., has been in her family since 1795.

Today, Ryder Farm's motto is: "Where the Ladies Drive the Tractors."

"When I was growing up, family farms didn't seem like they had a financial future," Ms. Ryder, 49, said.

She trained as a nurse but kept finding herself back in the fields, she said. Like many American farmers, she has found it necessary to keep working away from the farm, which produces vegetables, fruit and flowers on 12 acres.

"Love brought me to farming, but health insurance and common sense brought me back to nursing," she said. "Maybe women are more susceptible to the romance of farming, or to the idea of holding on to the homestead."

Nancy MacNamara, of Newburgh, N.Y., farms on the piece of land she grew up on; her father was a commercial farmer. "Women are finding our place in the field," she said. Ms. MacNamara, 57, farms on only two acres but sells her hand-raised greens to such chefs as Thomas Keller of Per Se and Wylie Dufresne of WD-50.

Like many of today's female farmers, Ms. MacNamara came of age during the 1970's, when she left her parents' farm "to roam the world and be a wild hippie," she said. But the turbulence of the 1970's eventually ebbed, depositing her back on the land with her two children. "We had the rise of feminism at the same time as the rise of organic agriculture and the 'back to the land' movement," she said. "People -- especially mothers -- started to want to know where their food is coming from."

Ms. MacNamara started feeding New Yorkers by selling fruit off a truck in the East Village. "We were maverick direct marketers," she said. "A lot of those people had never had a ripe peach before."

In the 1980's, as Americans grew more sophisticated about food, Ms. MacNamara started to experiment with growing fruit for flavor rather than for size or appearance. Like many small farmers, she worked to make the most of the land she had. She used the research of William Albrecht, a pioneering soil scientist. "He said that if you feed the soil, then the soil will feed the plant and the fruit will taste the way it should," she said.

"My father thought I was crazy to produce so few berries," she added. "But he could never have imagined how much chefs would pay for them."

Paulette Satur of Satur Farms imagined exactly that. Married to Eberhard Muller, the executive chef at Bayard's and formerly at Lutece, she built a half-acre weekend garden into a 200-acre farm in about four years. Satur Farms employs about 50 people on its work crew, and supplies many of New York City's top restaurants and gourmet shops with lacinated kale, wild arugula, baby carrots and other vegetables.

Ms. Satur, 49, says her ability to communicate with chefs and the Spanish-language skills that let her communicate with her work crew are her most important farming skills. "Paulette is the farmer, even though she doesn't drive the tractor," Mr. Muller said.

Ms. Satur was raised on a dairy farm. "I use a different skill set than my parents did on the farm, but growing up there made it possible for me to imagine myself as a farmer," she said. "For women farmers, that is a huge first step."

Eve Kaplan-Walbrecht, 32, whose first child is due on Friday, came of age a generation after many of her female colleagues. Ideas about sustainability, feminism and community-supported agriculture had already taken root in American agriculture, she said, and the idea of a female farmer was not new. She majored in environmental science at Harvard, has a master's degree in conservation biology and sustainable agriculture, and started a small organic farm, Garden of Eve, on Long Island, in 2001.

She farms with her husband, Chris, who grew up on a dairy farm. She says that farm work includes traditionally male and traditionally female skills, and that a farm needs both. "Like a baby," she said, "a farm needs as much nurturing as it can get. I can't imagine being a single parent to a farm."

To her surprise, Ms. Kaplan-Walbrecht said, she and her husband usually divide the farming duties along traditional gender lines. "I hate to traffic in these stereotypes," she said, "but it's true that Chris is the one out on the tractor in freezing weather with bleeding fingers, and I am the one feeding the chickens."

"But," she added, "I am usually also the one reading the spreadsheets."

Where Their Produce Goes

FARMERS in the accompanying article have stands, go to farmers' markets or sell at stores:

Eve Kaplan-Walbrecht (631)680-1699; farm stand at Sound Avenue and Northville Turnpike, Aquebogue, N.Y.; farmers' market at McCarren Park, Greenpoint, Brooklyn, on Saturdays. Annie Farrell Bedford Hills, N.Y., call for availability, (914)234-2197.

Nancy MacNamara (845)561-7309; farm stand, 7 Morris Drive, Newburgh, N.Y.; farmers' market at Mount Kisco on Saturdays.

Betsey Ryder (845)279-4161; farm stand, 400 Starr Ridge Road, Brewster, N.Y.; farmers' markets at Union Square Greenmarket on Saturdays; Brewster on Wednesdays.

Cheryl Rogowski (845)258-4574; farm stand, 327 Glenwood Road, Pine Island, N.Y.; farmers' markets at the New York Botanical Garden, the Bronx, on Wednesdays; Florida, N.Y., on Tuesdays; Poughkeepsie, N.Y., on Fridays; Warwick, N.Y., on Sundays. On Saturdays: East New York, Brooklyn; Red Hook, Brooklyn; Audubon Terrace, Manhattan; and Suffern, N.Y.

Paulette Saturproduce is sold at Agata & Valentina, Balducci's, Dean & DeLuca, Hay Day, King Kullen and www.freshdirect.com.

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