Saving the Family Farm

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Thomas Jefferson wrote to John Jay that “Cultivators of the earth are the most valuable citizens. They are the most vigorous, the most independent, the most virtuous, and they are tied to their country and wedded to its liberty and interests by the most lasting bonds.”

At America’s founding, we were a nation of farmers—over 90 percent of the country’s inhabitants lived directly on and from the farm. But today, that number has dwindled to barely two percent. From 2007 to 2012—just five years—the U.S. experienced a net loss of 90,000 farms.

In addition to the sheer number of farms being lost, we must note the sort of farms that have been dying out: namely, the small to midsize family farms. The average farmer is 58 years old. These aging farmers and ranchers are reaching retirement age, without any familial successor to take their place, thus resulting in the dismantling of multi-generation family ranches and farms. The American Farmland Trust estimates that an acre of U.S. farmland goes into development every two minutes.

Meanwhile, the corporate farms—those that grow commodity crops such as corn or soybeans—are doing quite well. Indeed, together, corn and soybeans make up almost half of U.S. crop revenues, with corn

1. Available at http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/let32.asp.
coming in at about $64 billion a year. These monoculture crops increasingly dominate our agrarian landscape, and the farmers who run them procure the lion’s share of government subsidies and crop insurance.

It makes sense, then, that an increasing number of family farms are feeling pressure to corporatize. Though many of today’s farms are “family-run” in name, this definition includes fewer and fewer small-to-mid-scale generational farms, and more and more industrialized operations.

Yet traditional family farms tend the land and community in ways that corporate enterprises cannot. The decline of family farming, then, would not just bode ill for agricultural enterprise: it would take a tremendous toll on land and animal, community and family—even on our culture as a whole.

Family farmers have historically represented a vital facet of the home economy. The family farmer makes his home his sphere of work—and thus must steward both equally in order to flourish. He relies on his family for support and help, and transforms a desire for mere profit into a more holistic desire for the long-term flourishing of his home and place. Thus, his model of agriculture is often more humane, sustainable, and local. Unlike the consumerist approach of many modern farmers, who steadily deplete the health of soil and land through overwork and under-nourishment, the family farmer seeks the long-term flourishing of his farm, even if it means less profit in the short term—because he is not just seeking his own interests or profit. He is thinking about his sons.

As Ronald Jager writes in his excellent book on family farming,

On [the] family farm, commitments and even objects themselves, flocks and fields and tools, had a scale that was comprehensible, humanly manageable . . . Every farmer knew his own land intimately, knew its quirks, its strengths and weak spots; and to a very large extent it was the produce of that land that was brought into his own table. And he knew his neighbors, and worked with them, and in


harvest time exchanged work with them, each lending a hand to the other. Community, farm, ecosystem, family—together, they shaped a coherent system, a total community of life. Consequently, farm families would find therein a kind of intangible harmony, such as is hard to find or create within a one-dimensional twenty-first-century commodity farm.  

The decline of this model is deeply rooted in the rise of a big and corporate agriculture, supported heavily by the federal government. This cronyist relationship between Big Ag and big government puts a heavy financial and regulatory burden on America’s family farmers. Many farm-raised children turn away from their familial vocation, having grown up watching their parents stress over bills and scrape by from season to season. They have come to the conclusion that farming, while important work, just isn’t financially viable.

**An Alternative Vision**

But it doesn’t have to be this way. Family farmers do not have to corporatize to stay alive. The children of family farmers needn’t fear a lifetime of backbreaking toil with little to no pay. A new farming movement that is small, local, sustainable, and family-centric is returning to America.

One such story of family farming success comes from Forrest Pritchard, an eighth-generation family farmer and author of *Gaining Ground*. He presents a different face to the sustainable farming movement. Smith Meadows Farm has been in Pritchard’s family for seven generations, but was steadily losing money. In 1996, Pritchard returned home from college to his family’s farm and, in his words, “found it in complete shambles. My parents had given up on ever making a profit from farming, and had taken jobs in the city to make ends meet. . . . The land didn’t generate enough profit for us to even buy our own food. Our family farm, just like thousands of others across the country, was


Pritchard’s story is one of renewal, of bringing a dying family farm back to life. He took on the farm, and by emulating and learning from the work of sustainable farmers, he began to revitalize his land. He sold the farm’s industrial equipment and thus saved money on maintenance expenses. He began raising grass-fed beef, poultry, and pigs. He tapped into local farmers’ markets and built a loyal customer base. In the past 19 years, Pritchard has met with resounding success: his farm is not only profitable—the land is healthy and flourishing once again.

While many farmers feel pressure to specialize and industrialize in order to turn a profit, Pritchard takes a longer view, noting that, at his current size and productivity levels, he has built a successful customer base, is garnering a profit, and is still keeping his land healthy. His consideration of limits and scale represent the stewardship ethos central to family farming, and also the philosophy of a man who hopes to pass on the farm to his son someday.

Another story of success comes from Joel Salatin: a second-generation family farmer, owner of Polyface Farms in Southern Virginia, and star in Michael Pollan’s *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*. Salatin works with all political stripes to bring back a local and sustainable agriculture. In 1961, his parents bought the family farm—acres of soil-eroded, nutrient-deficient land. But Polyface is now a $2 million-a-year enterprise, and Salatin’s polyculture methods have resulted in a wealth of lush soil and healthy produce. He and his sons use a symbiotic, crop and animal-rotating production model that yields far more per acre than industrial models. Salatin’s message is clear: you can be a farmer, and make a living at it, while using sustainable and family-friendly practices.⁹

But the fate of farmers such as Salatin and Pritchard are still heavily reliant upon us, the consumers. Over the past century, Americans learned to value quantity over quality, the cheap over the sustainable, the large over the local. We turned to big box stores and searched for the cheapest

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⁹. Personal interview with Joel Salatin.
price tags, oblivious to the hidden costs—ecological, cultural, and animal—to our buying practices. Yet Americans are growing more aware of these costs, and have demonstrated an increasing desire for the organic and local. From 1997 to 2007, direct agricultural sales increased by 105 percent. The number of U.S. farmers’ markets rose from 1,700 in 1994 to over 6,000 by 2010.

The passion of the locavore movement transcends political party, ideology, religion, and lifestyle: liberals, libertarians, and conservatives all support it. It is filled increasingly not just with city-dwellers in Brooklyn or Dupont Circle, but with rural residents of Berryville, Virginia, or food-desert communities in Baltimore, Maryland.

But one of the biggest policy battles that Salatin and other locavores fight is for farmers’ ability to sell directly to consumers, without having to undergo the egregious litany of inspections, licensing, certification, permitting, packaging, and labeling requirements set in place by the federal government. While it is easy for large agribusinesses to meet these specifications and still make a profit, it is much harder for the small family farmer, who has fewer resources and less manpower and legal leverage at his disposal. Local food freedom, as Joel Salatin and others define it, would empower farmers to sell to consumers by exempting them from such regulations when performing local transactions with informed consumers. Not only would this cut costs for the farmers, but it would, by extension, lower the price for the consumer. Wyoming just passed a Food Freedom Law, and Connecticut has a similar piece of legislation in the works right now. Such practical policy measures could offer local farmers great opportunity to grow their customer base and flourish economically.

As the locavore movement has spread across America, consumers are increasingly realizing this model’s benefits, which transcend price. Consumers have developed relationships with local farmers and their families. They have seen and tasted the superior quality of the food. They have discovered the community they can build around local agriculture, the societal and personal benefits it brings. They are learning that there

is more we as consumers should consider than the cheapness of a thing: because everything has a hidden cost.

Consumers should be conservers: informed citizens who know what they’re buying, and why. As Wendell Berry puts it, “eating . . . is inescapably an agricultural act… [and] how we eat determines, to a considerable extent, how the world is used.”11

There are few (if any) trades in the U.S. as historically, societally, or environmentally important to our wellbeing as farming. It undergirds our culture, commerce, health, and landscape. How it flourishes in the future is undeniably influenced by the way we buy and consume food today. Its future is inextricably tied to the fate of farmers like Salatin and Pritchard, whose return to traditional family farming has opened up a way for other farmers to follow suit. By making agriculture into a science and an industry, rather than a home-centered economy, we have lost an appreciation for its holistic flourishing. But the work of sustainable family farmers can—and hopefully will—reverse this trend.

As Berry writes, “The soil has living creatures in it. It has live roots in it, perennial roots if it is lucky. If it is the soil of the right kind of farm, it has a farm family growing out of it.”12

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