



Ideal Setting

Like-minded
food visionaries
see opportunity
in a rough-hewn corner
of the Kingdom

IN VERMONT'S NORTHEAST KINGDOM, A CELL phone signal can be as hard to find as a handyman during deer season. Back roads are main roads and winter driving is a reality half the year.

The craggy and rugged landscape has kept the Kingdom out of the mainstream in many ways. Forty years ago, the remote location (and cheap real estate) drew the back-to-the-landers. Today, a second generation of idealists has arrived, and they also see opportunity where others see obstacles.

Like the hippies who preceded them, they view the region as the perfect laboratory for their experiment in living off the land. There's one big difference, however. This group isn't here to drop out.

They're here
to do business.

Second Wave

Forty years after the back-to-the-land movement, a second wave of idealists has settled into the Northeast Kingdom. Last spring, they created the not-for-profit Center for an Agricultural Economy:

- Goals: economic revival of the area through agriculture
- Key members: Tom Stearns of High Mowing Organic Seeds, Andrew Meyer of Vermont Soy, Pete Johnson of Pete's Greens and Andy Kehler of Jasper Hill Farm, among others
- Looking ahead: plan to create an agribusiness incubator, year-round farmers' market, community garden on 15 acres purchased last year
- 21st century twist: "We don't need to compete. We can benefit from the snowball effect of it all," says June Van Houten, director of marketing and development at Highfields Institute.

By LESLIE WRIGHT
Photographed by JIM WESTPHALEN



Tom Stearns

wick area food system. Despite economic uncertainty — or perhaps because of it — the center has gained momentum. More than 200 donors, supporters and businesses are now associated with it. According to Stearns, now more than ever people want food security: They want to know where their food is coming from and are keenly aware of the importance of supporting a local economy.

Since its inception, the center has raised a total of \$250,000 from private donors and grants, including about \$114,000 from the Vermont Housing & Conservation Board. In August, it purchased 15 acres in Hardwick, and plans call for an agribusiness incubator, year-round farmers' market and community garden.

"We are decades ahead of the rest of the country in our little corner of Vermont, as far as what we have in place and how quickly we are moving to a healthy food system," says Stearns. "We've got entrepreneurs. We've got affordable land. We've got a dedicated local population interested in supporting it."

The timing may be right for this type of collaborative

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— Tom Stearns, president of The Center for an Agricultural Economy

Last spring, these entrepreneurs launched a nonprofit with the goal of having local farms and agribusinesses feed the community, keep the land open, provide jobs and make money.

The idea for The Center for an Agricultural Economy evolved out of a socially minded business group that meets once a month to share advice and even loan each other money as they navigate the ups and downs of small business. The group includes Andrew Meyer of Vermont Soy, Pete Johnson of Pete's Greens and Andy Kehler of Jasper Hill Farm — all owners of what have become staple brands in natural foods stores and cooperatives throughout the region.

The more the group met, the more they realized they all had much more in mind than simply making money, says Tom Stearns, president of High Mowing Organic Seeds, an organic seed company in Wolcott, and president of the center.

"We began to realize that the mission behind what we all are doing was very much a shared mission. It's the economic revival of this area through agriculture, and we each have our different angle on that," says Stearns. "Every time we'd meet, we'd say 'We need a not-for-profit to advance this mission we all share.'"

Officially started in 2004 by Vermont Soy's Meyer as The Center for a Bio-Based Economy, last spring the name was changed and the focus narrowed to the Hard-

wick area food system, says Enid Wonnacott, executive director of the Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont.

"We have the resource base to really produce a lot of our own food, which many states don't have. They are challenged by water or other resources. You have this incredible consumer interest. We are No. 1 in the 50 states for consumers who buy food direct from farmers," Wonnacott says.

That this happens in Hardwick, a hardscrabble town with a population of about 3,000, is not surprising, says June Van Houten, director of marketing and development at Highfields Institute, a nonprofit based in Hardwick that helps farmers, businesses and schools compost waste. Environmental and social activism has a legacy here, thanks to the back-to-the-landers.

"I see us as this next generation building upon what the baby boomers started in the area. They made this fertile ground for the next generation to take it to the next level," Van Houten says.

It's also not surprising that this crop of entrepreneurs is working together to achieve broader goals, she says.

"We don't need to compete. We can benefit from the snowball effect of it all," Van Houten says. "It's really indicative of this next generation. It's the Internet, e-mail, open source sharing philosophy. That's very different from my parents' generation." 🌱



Left to right: Mateo Kehler, Pete Johnson, Tom Stearns and Andy Kehler enjoy a meal served by Claire's co-owner Kristina Michelsen.

An Idea that is Growing

The idea of creating sustainable community food systems is catching on across the country. What does it entail? Farmers, consumers and communities partner to create a more locally based, self-reliant food economy. One of the most important aspects of sustainable community food system projects is that they increase resident participation to achieve the following goals:

- A stable base of family farms that uses sustainable production practices and emphasizes local inputs;
- Marketing and processing practices that create more direct links between farmers and consumers;
- Improved access by all community members to an adequate, affordable, nutritious diet;
- Food and agriculture-related businesses that create jobs and recirculate financial capital within the community;
- Improved living and working conditions for farm and food system labor;
- Creation of food and agriculture policies that promote local or sustainable food production, processing and consumption, and
- Adoption of dietary behaviors that reflect concern about individual, environmental and community health.

Source: UC Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program, www.sarep.ucdavis.edu/CDPP