

# Gourmet

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## THE TOWN THAT FOOD SAVED

10.20.08

Hardwick's economic future was dim, until a chain of events turned it into one of the most important food towns in America.



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If you come into the town of Hardwick, Vermont, from the east, you'll come in on Route 15, weaving through a series of curves that begin as gentle sweeps and get progressively sharper. Route 15 becomes Main Street, and Main Street lasts for about a quarter mile before it hits the town's only traffic light, which consists of a single, flashing orb at the junctions of Routes 14 and 15. If you turn right, continuing on 15, you'll immediately pass the Amatuer [sic] Boxing Club (it's for sale), a garage, a gun shop, a pizza place, and a lumberyard, in that order. A bit farther out, there's a bank and a tractor-repair business. A Ford dealership. A gas station. If you go straight through the light onto 14 South, you'll pass two auto-parts stores, a school, a cemetery, and a series of residences, many of which are in disrepair. In either direction, you'll be through Hardwick in two minutes or less, pushing on the accelerator as the speed limit rises again to 50 and the road unfurls across the lush Vermont countryside, helping you forget about the forgettable small town you just left behind. In this way, Hardwick is not unlike scores of other small, hard-bitten towns scattered throughout the American landscape, still clinging to the vapors of whatever industry brought the population together in the first place. In Hardwick, it was granite (Hardwick granite is built into the Pennsylvania State Capitol and Chicago's City Hall). But the granite industry in Hardwick slowed decades ago, and the town of 3,000 languished. The village developed a reputation as little more than a gallery of rogues; the local drinking establishment, Benny's, was known throughout northeastern Vermont for its

cheap beer and frequent skirmishes. The town earned the nickname “Little Chicago.”

Hardwick softened over the years, as its affordable real estate and pastoral beauty (within town limits, there are 37 miles of paved road and 51-miles of dirt) lured a small clutch of white collar workers willing to brave the 30-mile commute to the state capital of Montpelier. But the economy still suffered: In 2003, the per capita income was a mere \$14,287, twenty-five percent below the state average; and last year, Hardwick’s unemployment rate was nearly 30 percent higher than the state average.

But something’s happening in Hardwick, and it’s happening because of food. It could have started with the Buffalo Mountain Food Co-op and Cafe, a small, earthy joint on Main Street that’s been active since 1975. The co-op serves the multitudes of left-leaning back-to-the-landers scattered through the surrounding hills and provides a market—a modest market, but a market—for the local farmers eking out a living from the land. Or maybe it started before that, with Hardwick’s topographical good fortune to be located in a region of ample, fertile farmland and a culture of working the soil. Perhaps it would have happened anyway, the only rational response to a global food system on the brink of crisis and a town desperately needing something on which to hang its future. While the beginning might be hard to identify, the present is not. That’s because, during the past two years, Hardwick has developed a local food infrastructure that is unlike anything to be found in North America. It is at once an amalgamation of a stunning number of food-based businesses in the region (Vermont Soy, Jasper Hill Farm, Pete’s Greens, Patchwork Farm & Bakery, Apple Cheek Farm, [Claire’s Restaurant and Bar](#), and Bonnieview Farm to name only a few) and the keen business savvy of the (mostly) youthful entrepreneurs who spend their days tending livestock, fields of lettuce, and racks of cloth-bound Cheddar. In the evenings, they convene to quaff beers and brainstorm the next step forward for this little settlement, which just might become one of the most important food towns in the United States.

Tom Stearns has a carnival huckster’s energy and a self-confidence that never seems to bleed into arrogance. He is of medium height, with wavy, dirty-blond hair and a long, angular face. He wears thin-rimmed glasses and has a habit of scrunching his nose, which flares his nostrils and makes him look momentarily unhinged. He laughs loudly and often. Thirteen years ago, when Stearns was 19, he started High Mowing Organic Seeds, an organic vegetable, flower, and herb seed company that’s now located in Wolcott, one town west of Hardwick. Today, the business has 30 employees and does between \$1.5 and \$2 million in annual sales. Because of his energy, charm, and drive, Stearns has become the de facto mouthpiece for Hardwick’s rapidly evolving food scene and the president of the recently formed, nonprofit Center for an Agricultural Based Economy, whose mission is to nurture and promote a sustainable local agricultural economy. I first met with him at a potluck dinner party at Heartbeat Lifesharing, a residential community for special-needs adults, who participate in all aspects of farm operations on the sloping 150 acres of field and forest. There was drumming and a bonfire and small children running across the sunlit lawn clutching rabbits to their chests. A herd of cows grazed on a pasture below the house. Stearns’s vision is to provide the world with a model food system that serves the local population while enriching its producers in ways that range from the cold, hard tangibility of cash to the less precise metrics of social improvement and regional pride. Stearns is not a dogmatic locavore; he believes it is economically and environmentally justifiable to ship products that are financially dense (a pound of liquid milk wholesales for about \$0.20; a pound of Jasper Hill’s Bayley Hazen Blue cheese wholesales for \$9.75). He sees Hardwick as an antidote to a global food system that’s teetering beneath the weight of energy prices and the capriciousness of nature. “Who’s the biggest user of energy? Agriculture! Who’s the biggest user of land? Agriculture! Who’s the biggest user of water? Agriculture! Who’s the biggest polluter? Agriculture!” He stabbed a finger in the air for emphasis. “All we have are models of broken plans to look at.” He sipped his beer and turned to face me squarely. “In five years, we will have people from all over the planet visiting Hardwick to see what a healthy food system looks like.”

Stearns’s ambition is shared by many in the community, including Andrew Meyer, who grew up on a dairy farm in Hardwick before leaving for Washington to work on ag policy with the now retired Senator Jim Jeffords. Meyer returned to Hardwick five years ago to open Vermont Soy and its sister company, Vermont Natural Coatings, which produces whey-based, low-toxicity finishes for furniture and floors. Meyer and Stearns are close friends, though Meyer is quieter, with an aw-shucks demeanor that belies his business savvy and on-the-fly resourcefulness. The launch of his business happened largely from the crest of a pile of topsoil on his brother’s farm; it was the only place he could get a cell signal. “We started to whisper about Hardwick as an ag center in 2004,” Meyer told me. We were in his “office,” a box of plywood walls built into the corner of the coatings factory. “Everyone laughed. Literally.” The laughter that recently echoed through Hardwick’s struggling economy has largely been silenced, and any last vestiges of ridicule should die a quick death in the coming months, with the arrival of the Vermont Food Venture Center, a food distribution (and packaging and development) center that’s to be built next to Vermont Soy. It will serve as a cooperative facility to local producers, enabling them to get their products to market with minimal investment. The recent opening of Claire’s Restaurant and Bar hasn’t hurt, either. Located in the space that once housed Benny’s, Claire’s is a “community supported restaurant.” Local believers purchased \$1,000 coupons that they can redeem in food over a four year period. Claire’s opened in May 2008, sourcing 70 percent of its ingredients from within a 15-mile radius; in the first two months, the restaurant had done 200 percent more business than even the most optimistic projections. The momentum in Hardwick is clearly building. “You can say a lot of things, set policy, et cetera, et cetera, but unless you have blood that’s been dripped, risks

taken—it's just not going to happen," said Meyer. His enthusiasm was beginning to show through his rural Vermont reticence, and he leaned his compact body forward. "It's happening now."

There is still much work to be done, though. In a way, Stearns is having to backtrack a bit: The rapid success and expansion of Hardwick's artisanal-food-based industry has gotten ahead of the sort of careful analysis that normally focuses such ventures. In order to create a true model, one that might be replicated and implemented in other towns, Stearns and his entrepreneurial farmer friends will need rigorous methodology. One goal is to establish a local-food baseline against which to measure their progress in feeding the community. "We need to measure what percentage of consumption in the region is being produced in the region," Stearns said. "Then we can say, 'Okay, we want to increase that by five percent a year, and here's how we're going to do it.'" Perhaps more crucially, they'll need the support of a blue-collar citizenry that wants for \$20-a-pound cheese and organic tofu like a swordfish wants for sunscreen. "One of the things that's most critical is that we're not perceived as outsiders doing something elitist." It's a delicate balancing act, both economically and socially: In order to fund their enterprises and create the jobs that might further spur Hardwick's renewal, the region's agricultural entrepreneurs are obliged, at least in part, to create products that their neighbors might not be able to afford. It's not such an unusual arrangement in 21st-century America, but it seems antithetical to the local-foods movement, and it's surely antithetical to the very goals Stearns laid out for me. Can the Hardwick food collaborative bridge this divide? Stearns thinks so; Andrew Meyer thinks so. As does Mateo Kehler, maker of said \$20 cheese. And Kristina Michelsen, one of the four partners of Claire's. But then, of course they do. They're not exactly unbiased. But they are persuasive. Imagine that their \$20 cheese being sold in Boston and New York can produce a lot of jobs in Hardwick; they're getting their margin from out-of-state markets and selling to locals at cost. Wouldn't that be a start? "I've heard it said," Roger Allbee, Vermont's secretary of agriculture, remarked, "that Vermont's way ahead of the curve regarding sustainable agriculture." The proof is mounting in Hardwick.

PHOTOGRAPH BY RICHARD FOULSER

**keywords** ben hewitt, organics market, nutrition/diet, farms + fish, culinary culture