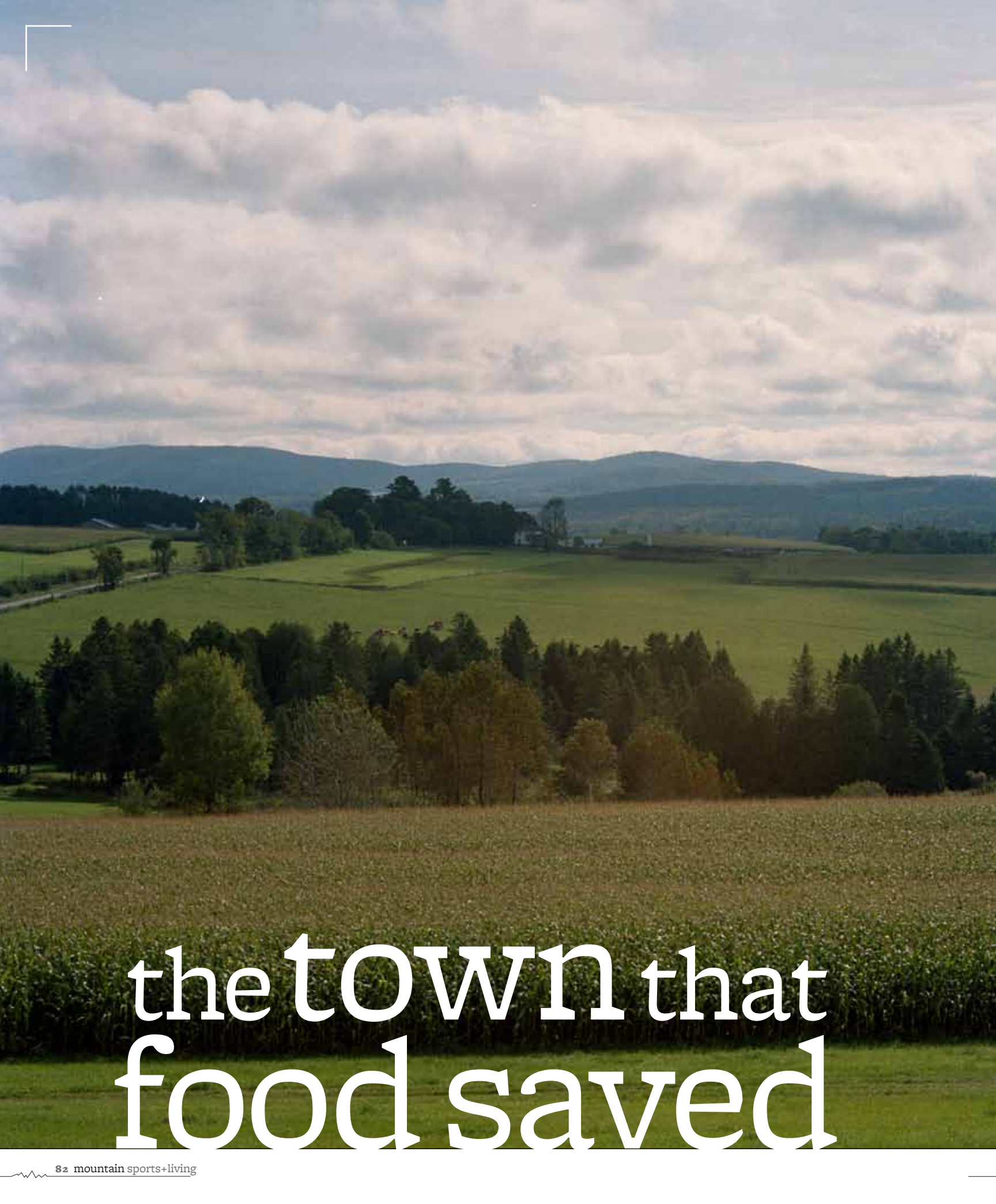


townie food





the town that food saved



How one rural community found **vitality in local food**.
An excerpt from the book of the same title
written by Ben Hewitt and published by Rodale.



photographs by
Richard Foulser

On a sun-washed Vermont hillside on a late July afternoon, my face tilted into the day's fading heat, I stood and listened to Tom Stearns as he expounded on the woes of modern agriculture. "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. Totally, completely broken." He sipped from 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."

Tom and I were standing on the sprawling hillside lawn of Heartbeet Lifesharing, a residential farming community for special needs adults located in the rural, blue-collar town of Hardwick, Vermont. There was drumming and a bonfire and children running across the sunlit lawn clutching rabbits to their chests. A small herd of cows grazed on pasture below the house, casting long shadows in the late afternoon light. Earlier in the day, there'd been a collective effort to construct a wood-fired stone-and-clay oven, which now sat drying. If one were looking for an inspiring setting in which to discuss localized agriculture, with all its ancillary benefits of social good and pastoral beauty, one couldn't have imagined a better stage.

Over the past months and years, there have been a lot of these discussions in Hardwick. And Tom Stearns, the owner of an organic seed company called High Mowing Organic Seeds, located in neighboring Wolcott, has found himself thrust (or was he thrusting himself?) into the spotlight before ever-larger audiences. He talked about America's industrial food system, how it had become frayed and vulnerable, how it sucked the sweet life out of our nation's towns and cities and out of the bodies and minds of the people. He spoke of the social good that would arise from a seismic shift in how we feed ourselves. But mostly, he talked about this little town that was embarking on an ambitious quest to define itself as the community that would show America what a healthy, functioning and, OK, maybe even sustainable food system might look like.

On that summer afternoon standing in the center of a lush, fertile greenness that permeated everything, I listened as he unfolded his vision. A vision I could see laid out before me: the cows nuzzling for tufts of ripe grass; the wholesome-looking neighbors gathered to share wholesome-looking dishes comprised of local ingredients; the emotionally and behaviorally-challenged men and women who were finding purpose in this agrarian landscape; and the day-in, day-out demands of running a farm. There was nothing to argue with here. There was only health and bounty and promise. This was what a food system should look like. Of course the world would take notice of Hardwick; of course people would come from all its corners to see this wonderful thing being created in this wonderful little town. Who could resist?

I snapped myself out of my reverie. Stearns had dropped into a rare moment of silence, fiddling with the frilly elastic hair band around his neck (he has two young daughters, who were frolicking on the lawn below us). How? I asked. How do you create this thing? How do you take this—I swept my arm across our view—and export it, scale it? How do you make it something that's not just for foodies, for the affluent and aware?

Stearns, in what I would come to recognize as his preferred oratory style, spoke in the flourished language of a politician running for office. "We can export a lot of things, but I think our main gift will be inspiration." He flared his nostrils and adjusted the hair band. "We're going to be exporting a lot of inspiration." It sounded nice, though it wasn't a terribly satisfying answer. But by then, I'd finished my second beer, and someone had dropped a pie onto the picnic table. The drums were beating a nice groove. I wasn't in the mood to press the issue. We strolled toward the pie.



Stearns talked about **America's industrial food system**, how it had become frayed and vulnerable, how it sucked the sweet life out of our nation's towns and cities.

right: Tom Stearns, owner, High Mowing Seeds.





We need to rethink our entire food supply chain, for reasons of economic security, health security, **and even social security.**

Hardwick, Vermont sits in a shallow hollow in the north central part of the state. The town and its 3,200 residents live in the shadow cast by Buffalo Mountain, which rises to nearly 3,000 feet on the southwest corner of town. Over the past three years, this little hard luck burg, with a median income that runs 25 percent below the state average, and an unemployment rate nearly 40 percent higher, has embarked on a quest to create the most comprehensive, functional, and downright vibrant local food system in North America. In the process, Hardwick just might prove what advocates of decentralized food have been saying for years: That a healthy agriculture system can be the basis of communal strength, economic vitality, food security, and general resilience in uncertain times.

The sudden growth in Hardwick's agricultural infrastructure has been nothing short of explosive, as numerous food-based businesses and organizations have settled in the region. Vermont Soy. High Mowing Organic Seeds. Jasper Hill Farm's cheese. True Yogurt. Claire's Restaurant and Bar. Pete's Greens. Vermont Food Venture Center. Vermont Milk Company. The Center for an Agricultural Economy. The Highfields Institute. Honey Gardens Winery and Caledonia Spirits. While a few of these enterprises have been quietly operating and growing for the past five to 10 years, most of them have arrived in the past 36 months, bringing nearly 100 jobs to a region that very much needed 100 jobs. And in the process Hardwick has become what just might be the most important food town in the United States.

To know why this is so, one need only consider the woes befalling America's food system, which over the past century has become increasingly industrialized and centralized. It's an economy of scale that's served us well, at least in strictly economic terms. In 1930, the average American family spent 24.2 percent of its income on food. That number has declined every single

top left: Buffalo Mountain Food Co-op. top right: Claire's Restaurant



decade since. By 2007, it had fallen to 9.8 percent. Of course, there are hidden costs in the form of health problems wrought by processed foods and an agriculture industry that has become heavily reliant on subsidies paid out of our taxes. But until very recently, our food has never been cheaper. It has also never been more corrosive to our health and environment.

There are other problems with our centralized food system. Most critically, it's vulnerable to energy supply disruptions, terrorist attacks, large outbreaks of food-borne illness, the cost of fuel, and any unforeseen emergency that might disrupt the constant flow of trains and trailers. And recent events suggest that it simply might not be able to keep up with a population that's growing at the rate of 3,000,000 mouths annually. Consider: In 2001, the U.S. had a \$14.3 billion agricultural surplus. By 2005, that surplus had shrunk to \$3.8 billion.

In the face of these growing and merging threats, a groundswell consensus is emerging: We need to rethink our entire food supply chain, for reasons of economic security, health security, and even social security. We need to reinvent how we grow and distribute food; we need to re-scale and decentralize. This is all easy enough to say. What's hard is actually doing it. What we need are maps and models, ideas and inspiration. If Tom Stearns is right, Hardwick will show us the way.

To understand how Hardwick has gotten to this place it is necessary to understand where it has been. Over a period of three decades, spanning the late 1800s to the early 1920s, nearly 300 granite companies operated in the Hardwick area, mining the veins of rock that run like spider webs throughout the surrounding hills. By 1918, the largest of these outfits, the Woodbury Granite Company, was the biggest granite operation in the world. They supplied the stone for the state capitols of Pennsylvania and Wisconsin, as well as Chicago's City Hall and Cook County Courthouse.

In the early 1920s, the granite business tanked with alarming speed, the victim of shifting architectural tastes and advances in reinforced concrete and facing stones that significantly reduced building costs and eliminated the challenge of shipping 80,000-pound blocks of stone. But even as Hardwick's economy entered a period of decline, scores of French-Canadians began settling on Hardwick's fertile farmland. Bellevance, LeCours, Demers, Fontaine, Broucheaux. The town's farms were bought up by dairy farmers for \$10 and \$20 an acre. The northerners had large families—eight, 10, even 15 children—and worked relentlessly hard: milking, haying, sugaring, logging. Spring, summer, fall, winter, seven days per week. Eventually, however, Hardwick's dairy farmers reached the age where 14-hour workdays had become untenable. Their bodies rebelled against the day-in, day-out labor of running a dairy farm, and their children turned their backs on the farming life. They had little choice but to sell.

The spate of farm dissolution coincided with the anti-establishment, back-to-the-land movement of the late 60s and 70s. Hardwick, with its remoteness, pastoral beauty, and agreeably priced farmland, became something of a hippie beacon. To many, the little town in the mountains had become a place to get away from it all, to find a few acres and build a little house out of salvaged lumber and windows, and create a life that was quieter and more connected to the natural world than the one they'd left behind. They'd grow some carrots. Potatoes. Kale. Maybe keep a few goats, or a flock of chickens. In 1975, the Buffalo Mountain Food Cooperative opened in town. Like all good food cooperatives, it was small and funky, but it served the critical purpose of providing Hardwick's new generation of farmers with a market for their produce and goat cheese.

My interest in the story of Hardwick was multi-faceted. I'd grown up in the region. I'd shopped at the Buffalo Mountain co-op with my mother back in the late 70s and early 80s, not long after we'd moved from the rural northwestern reaches of Vermont, to Maple Corner. Up north, we'd lived in a two-room cabin perched at the upper edge of a sloping field, part of the 160-acres my father had

bought in the late 60s for \$15,000. My parents were of that back-to-the-land generation. Homesteaders and hippies, they'd kept chickens, and a garden, and a cabin that featured neither electricity nor running water. My dad was a poet, my mom milked cows at a farm down the road, and like all good hippie children I spent my days naked and dirty.

My agricultural roots run deeper than the rocky gardens my parents tended, or the two pigs they raised one summer, or the flock of laying hens I only recall for the sight of my father sprinting, naked, .22 rifle in hand, to the coop in hopes of defending the family fowl against a hungry raccoon. My mother had been raised on a farm in southeastern Iowa, on 300-acres of fertile bottomland devoted to corn, soybeans, and beef cattle. I visited that farm as an impressionable youth.

I found myself being drawn to farming, or to something like it. I married a girl who'd left the Rochester Institute of Technology one semester short of a photography degree so she could work on a farm. She'd been reared in the New Jersey suburbs and wanted to dig in the dirt. And with that girl, I bought 40-acres in the town of Cabot, Vermont, a property we chose because it was the only

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thing we could find in our price range that offered enough open land to keep some animals and turn over a garden or two. Today, I can look up from my work to see our five cows grazing the remnants of summer grass through a thin skim of snow. I can see our 100 blueberry bushes, which this past August became so thick with fruit we lost a few branches to the weight.

We don't make our living as farmers; in a typical year, we might sell a side or two of beef, a few hundred quarts of blueberries, and a couple of pigs. It doesn't amount to much, maybe a couple thousand dollars a year, which, once expenses are deducted, nets us a gross profit of maybe a hundred bucks. I say "maybe" because I really don't know; we don't track our farm-related finances with anything but the most rudimentary, back-of-napkin calculations. And we don't account for our labor, in part because it doesn't feel like labor to us, but also because the harsh truth of how much we're actually getting paid to haul hay, shovel shit, and chase marauding pigs through the woods might convince us to do something rational. Which would surely mean the end of our little farm-based enterprise.

Our neighbor, who's milked cows his entire life and currently keeps about 60 head with his eldest son, calls us "wannabe farmers." This is not said unkindly and although I used to find it vaguely offensive, I've come to accept it as the truth. And also as nothing to be ashamed of. What could be wrong with wanting to farm? What could be wrong with wanting it enough that not even reason can dissuade you?

Farming in the absence of fiscal logic works fine for my wife and I, but developing a working decentralized food system is something else entirely. To help understand how such a system might work for both producers and consumers, I coerced Tom Stearns to join me for a beer or three. Tom had emerged as the face and voice of Hardwick's ag movement. "The New York Times," "Gourmet," "Dan Rather Reports," the "Emeril Green" show on cable: It seemed that everywhere I turned, there was Stearns' angular face, exuberantly telling the tale of this humble little town and how it would reshape our nation's food future.

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According to Stearns, there are four legs to the economic stability table. "Part one is the potential for these businesses to become the Google of Hardwick," says Stearns. He calls this the "outside angel fixes the community model," by which the region's ag-based enterprises become so profitable that they are essentially able to shower the town with philanthropy.

I was somewhat alarmed by this particular vision, which I didn't view as a very healthy example of how a decentralized food system might benefit its region, so I was relieved when Stearns continued, "I don't see this as a very good model. It's disempowering. It's like driving to the top of a mountain in Honduras and dropping off 50 typewriters and calling home to brag about how you're teaching literacy."

Part two of Stearns's local-ag-as-economic-driver model charges these businesses with the responsibility of educating employees on the critical importance of keeping their paychecks in the community. "I'm putting \$25,000 to \$30,000 into people's pockets every two weeks," he said. He was talking about the payroll at High Mowing Seeds. "If we're doing things right as a business, they are making choices to eat at Claire's [the locally owned restaurant that features local fare], shop at the co-op, and buy gas at the station in town. If you can show people that spending money locally has a positive effect, it has much greater impact than telling them that shopping at Walmart is bad. Maybe it's sexier to fight against things, but in the long

term, it doesn't work as well. If you work at a dollar store selling crap from China, is supporting your local economy going to be drilled into your head? Probably not. But if you work at High Mowing Seeds, or Vermont Soy, or Pete's Greens, you can be damn sure it is."

The third of Tom Stearns's agriculture business edicts is the development of key metrics by which to measure success (or the lack thereof). The specific components of these metrics have yet to be determined, but they might include: the percentage of total jobs in the region that are ag-based; the percentage of locally-produced product that stays in the region; the percentage of wages paid that remains in the region; the amount of waste generated and what percentage of that waste is reclaimed; the percentage of local land that's available for agricultural purposes; the availability of loans and other forms of capital for ag-related endeavors; and the level of social awareness. For instance, how many people in the region believe that implementing and supporting a local food system is a worthy endeavor?

Leg four of Stearns' table involves what he terms strategic products. "There are certain ag-based products that, if you run through all the scenarios—\$50 per barrel oil, \$200 per barrel oil, a crashing economy, a booming economy—will always make sense," explained Stearns. "One key metric is the shipping cost relative to the value; that number has to be under 10 percent." In other words, according to Stearns, if it costs \$10 to ship \$80 worth of product, you've got problems. "Seeds win

on all accounts. When people feel rich, they garden for leisure. When they feel poor, they garden for economics. My shipping costs to value ratio is about four percent, which means I've got a lot of wiggle room to absorb rising shipping costs. And damn it, I just feel good about selling them!" He took a long pull from his pint; a few bubbles of beer foam stuck to his beard.

It sounds like a well-thought out model that could be applied by forward-thinking mountain towns around the country. But Stearns will be the first to admit that he didn't do much strategizing when he launched High Mowing Seeds; the business simply grew out of his love of seeds. For my part, I couldn't help but wonder if the consumer's appetite for \$20 per pound blue cheese and heirloom tomato seeds can hold up to the deepest recession in a generation. And it occurred to me that while the notion that local food systems are more resilient to economic hardship is compelling, it remains largely untested. "I certainly would like it to be the case," said Shermain Hardesty, the Cooperative Extension Economist in the Department of Agriculture and Resource Economics at UC Davis. "But I can't unequivocally say it's true." Hardesty is currently conducting two studies that should help define the economic resilience of local food systems, but she says it's simply too early to draw any definitive conclusions, and that the ultimate verdict will be rendered by the consumer deciding to vote with their dollars.

For nearly a century, Americans have lived in an era of increasingly industrialized, centralized, and corporatized agriculture that has proven remarkably adept at driving food prices lower even as it pulls a curtain over the costs of environmental degradation and diet-related disease. Clearly, there has been a food and agricultural awakening in recent years but we're still in the early hours of that awakening. There are many questions to be answered; perhaps most vexing is determining how to get healthy, locally produced food into the hands of actual locals, at a price they can afford.

Not long after I began writing a book on the town's food system, I received a long e-mail from my friend Steve Gorelick, who lives on a small, 40-acre farm in neighboring Walden. Steve's e-mail

read, in part: What I see is a group of entrepreneurs capitalizing on the wave of interest in local food. Nothing wrong with that, more power to them, but please don't give them credit for creating that wave or pushing it substantially forward. You'll notice they didn't have the temerity to call their organization the Center for a Local Food Economy. Their emphasis on "value-added" products is implicitly related to exporting food out of the local region, with the Vermont name as part of the value that's been added. Doing that means undermining local food production elsewhere—the same old model of shipping food to where it gets the highest price. Can't blame them: You can't get rich selling local food to local people, and I think these guys are largely motivated by the desire to make a lot of money.

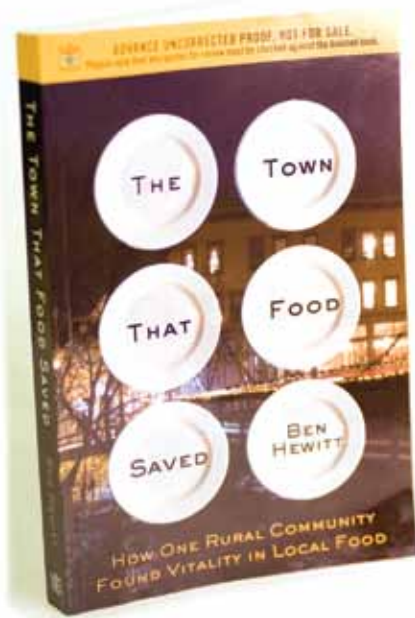
I never expected to become embroiled in the moral complications of local food (hell, I never even considered that there could be moral complications in local food). But then, no one's ever accused me of being a sage. But the simple fact that tension was building in the little town of Hardwick over a subject so seemingly benign as local food is perhaps indicative of just how much work remains to be done. "I don't know what the final answer is," Stearns told me that night over beers at Claire's. "I just know that the industrial food system isn't working, and that it's not working in ways that are truly dangerous. I feel a tremendous sense of urgency to seek alternatives."

And that might just be the important lesson of Hardwick. Whether the place turns out to be nothing more than an exporter of outlandishly priced "strategic products" for the Urban Foodie generation or it lives up to its potential as a true

localized agrarian society, is anybody's guess. But either way, what's happening in this small, blue-collar rural mountain town is a critically important step in a different direction. Here, at least, the conversation is beginning. Questions are asked; the status quo is challenged.

I remembered what Stearns had told me on that sweet summer afternoon over pie and beer: "In five years, we will have people from all over the planet visiting Hardwick to see what a healthy food system looks like." In September, agricultural ministers and secretaries from Australia, Austria, Germany, Japan, and Kenya (to name but a few) toured the Hardwick region.

On this account, he had been wrong. It hadn't taken five years; it had taken less than five months. 



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