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Approaching Peak Weight

by Becky Crouse Durst

There are signs on the farm that mark the change from spring to summer—the end of kale, lettuce, kohlrabi and cabbage; the switch to earlier start times for our work days, the first beans and tomatoes, and the change in weight of those CSA bags.

When CSA started in early June, I was 27 weeks pregnant—the last week of my second trimester. The baby was estimated to be about two pounds, and I was small enough that I wasn't in my own way. I could still lift things in front of myself. It was the honeymoon, high-energy period of pregnancy. CSA packing was easy! Those bags (and my belly) were filled with piles of beautiful greens like chard, bok choy, kale, lettuce and arugula. Sure, there were some heavier items (think kohlrabi, cabbage, and turnips), but we could lift six or eight of those bags at a time when loading the van or carrying them to

a porch on delivery. Am I farming while pregnant? I'm picking 150 heads of lettuce and then packing CSA! Yes, I'm farming while pregnant! Look at me go!

We are now nine weeks into the CSA season. Those signs of summer

have hit full force. You know, the beans and tomatoes, the swollen belly and ankles... I am 35 weeks pregnant. Much like the bags, my baby is now estimated to be about 5 ¼ lbs. Much like the bags, I'm bigger and heavier each week. Now

I need people to help me lift those beautiful crates of summer produce. Yes, I would love it if you would bring me that crate of cucumbers! You have squash? Well bring it to me! Can someone please get me more corn? Wait, wait, I need a snack! Much like our speed when delivering those heavy bags, I'm slowing down. Now that I can only handle two to four bags at a time, someone helps me on my CSA delivery. Sure, I can still harvest and then pack CSA. But then I need a nap. And a popsicle. I'd say I'm more on the farm while pregnant rather than farming.

There are five weeks until my due date. There are seven weeks left of Summer CSA. By the time this baby comes, we may once again be seeing hints of the impending change of season. And as we ease into autumn and the re-emergence of greens, the bags and I will once again feel lighter. I'm looking forward to both.



The Maryland Farm: Part Four in a Series

by Hana Newcomb

When Paul and Martha decided to sell the farm and move to Alabama, we found that we were not ready to let that farm leave the family forever. So in 1999, Mariette Hiu Newcomb, Lani Newcomb, Michael Lipsky and Hana Newcomb created Kama'aina LLC to buy the farm back. We didn't know what we were going to do with it, but now it was an organic vegetable farm that had been part of our lives for nearly 40 years. The possibilities were enchanting.

Hana imagined that it could solidify the PVF empire and we could dominate the farmers markets with three farms working together, if we could find a farmer to manage it. Lani thought about establishing a veterinary practice in Southern Maryland. Michael and Mariette were the biggest investors, willing to see what happened next.

We already knew an experienced and talented farmer who was looking for a place to put down some roots. Six years before, Mariette had worked for this farmer, Heinz Thomet, in New Jersey where Heinz was the grower at Genesis Farm.

Heinz was born in 1959, grew up on a farm in Switzerland, then went through a two year apprenticeship working with a Master Farmer, learning the European version of conventional agriculture (which is better than our American version of organic, in some ways). He was different from all the self-taught farmers we knew – he always talked about the 50 year plan.

We knew Heinz well because he had come to work at the Loudoun farm with Ellen in 1996, the summer that her son Aaron was born. In two seasons, Heinz embarked on one ambitious



Next Step Produce with their potato harvest, July 24, 2013.

project after another. He taught us to grow carrots, he built the first big deer fence, he constructed a concrete bridge that connected our farm together in a new and revolutionary way, he planted huge wind breaks, he advised us to purchase all kinds of new equipment (and we did). Heinz was not easy to work with – his energy and expectations generally exceeded our own, but we found a great friend in this demanding Swiss vegan.

So when we were looking for a farm manager for the Maryland farm, we really only had one farmer in mind. We called Heinz and lured him back. He hadn't found his heart's desire at the farms where he worked after leaving PVF, so he was intrigued. He liked the idea of farming in a climate that could grow figs and kiwis. Heinz moved to the Maryland farm in November of 1999. He had planned to arrive on November 1, but he was a day late. He sometimes says that he has been behind schedule ever since.

For a while, we worked on a plan to link together the Maryland farm with the Vienna farm and the Purcellville farm as one big business run by Hiu and Hana and Ellen and Heinz. But after a winter of meetings, Ellen bravely spoke her mind: she did not see that the four of us would really be a

harmonious team of equals. And eventually, we saw that she was right. Hana's plans for a grand PVF empire were dashed, but Heinz would still be an integral part of our farm economy and community.

The new deal was that Heinz would pay rent to Kama'aina equal to the mortgage payments and the property taxes on the farm, earning money by selling vegetables to PVF and also at the Dupont Circle farmers market. He would gradually build himself a credit history and hope that he would be able to borrow money to buy the farm some day.

Unlike most other 40 year old men in the United States, Heinz had never owned a motor vehicle in his life. He owned tractors and implements, he owned a bicycle (he pedaled from coast to coast one winter between farm seasons), but he had never purchased a car. When he became a market farmer, he needed a vehicle to get his vegetables to Dupont Circle. This was the first step down the slippery slope of environmental degradation, maintenance issues and governmental interference and Heinz did not take any of it lightly.

The learning curve was steep, even though Heinz was an experienced farmer. As he says,

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Farming on My Own Terms

By David Giusti

I'm as risk-averse as any farmer. So even though I've made my money from farming in various ways for the last eight years, I have been wary of committing to the farming life long-term. I'm only 27 and there are many other doors, other opportunities, I might want to explore "when I grow up." Musician? Academic? Grad school for something else? Closing those off indefinitely by going whole-hog into farming felt quite risky.

There are many, many, many things to love about farming, which is precisely why I continue to come back to it year after year. But it's also important to me to not let farming preclude space for playing music, spending time with friends, generally having a life outside of farming and not working flat-out six or seven days a week. The Plancks, my first employers and then landlords at Wheatland Vegetable Farms, ran a ship-shape farm and worked every day. My first year on my own I copied them, since it was what I knew, and worked just about as much. That year went well but was far more hectic than I'd have liked. How much of that resulted from the newness of managing the farm-side and business-side and everything in between – and how much of that whirlwind is inherent to farming? Obviously farming is a lot of work, and to hope for otherwise might be a little foolish.

Then the Plancks retired, sold their farm, and I worked for the person who bought part of it. I figured if I only managed the growing, and he did everything else, I could be free of a large portion of the work – and risk – of running a farm business. I was out at the farm a few days a week, with a part-time employee, and felt surprisingly on top of things: proof to me that it is completely possible to have a life and farm. Moreover, I'd moved near PVF, near the city. Living at Wheatland had been essential when I ran my own farm there, but over the winter I wondered why I was driving back out to Loudoun Co. when everything I did outside my house was around DC.

It's quite a self-imposed restriction to try to farm in Fairfax Co., but I'm willing to give it a shot. This year I'm renting some ground from a farmer-friend near Dulles. After having seen many farms, tried out many things and learned from many mistakes, this season the point is to minimize the qualities that are less appealing and maximize the aspects that I enjoy most: a trial year to see what is possible, farming in my own way. I figured I'd simply not grow the time-consuming, labor-intensive crops. No tall indeterminate tomatoes, only short early ones, so

no staking, stringing, or mulching – or potato-beetle picking. Peppers and eggplant got ditched along with most other fruit crops, in favor of small vegetable crops like beets, lettuce, turnips, and greens.

I designed and built equipment for a tiny, cheap, old cultivating tractor so it does just what I want, raising beds, killing weeds in various ways, and minimizing the need for a bigger tractor. Growing systems designed to reduce hand-work as much as possible, especially weeding, allow me not to spend much money producing a crop until it's harvested for sale. Planting larger amounts of a smaller variety of crops brings greater efficiency, and also means my farm is geared toward wholesale sales only. Of course wholesale comes with lower prices compared to retail, but also larger volumes and greater simplicity. And I save an entire day of work by not going to market, while having weekends free if I want.

It's working out as I hoped! Especially in this first year, trying out new equipment and new growing systems, I expected to have to take a hiatus from friends, music, and non-farm life during the summer. But that hasn't been the case. Some weeks, yes, but mostly not. To be honest this is partially because some crops didn't come in as well as I'd hoped, but it's clear to me that this year is surely a proof of concept. Some missteps here and there, but broadly, the systems work. I'm enjoying my work immensely, having designed a farm that packs my days with only the work I like most.

I look forward to remaining near DC and to farming becoming more and more awesome! I'm happy to close other potential career doors for my life. For a long time I've thought that each farm is a reflection of how the farmer thinks about farming. So I imagine that as I continue to bring my practices more in line with my ideal, farming will only become even more enjoyable and fulfilling.



Notes from the Field

Volunteer Gleaners Pick Beans for Food Banks

by Mariette Hiu Newcomb

Twice this month, groups of young folks have come out to PVF East to pick more than 400 pounds of green beans that might otherwise have been turned under to feed the soil microbes. We had already picked that first very productive patch a couple of times and had moved on to our second planting.

We knew there were several organizations that could alert volunteers who would come out and glean or pick vegetables that were still in good condition but which we didn't need for our markets. The Society of St. Andrew has for the past thirty years organized groups of gleaners from their national headquarters in Bedford County in central Virginia. Their office told us that the Arlington Food Assistance Center (AFAC) operated the closest Food Bank to us.

I called them on a

Thursday, and two days later, three young professionals from the Kiwanis Club showed up at 8:30 Saturday morning. I had been told that there might be 12 of them, but when only three showed up, I took half of the 25 baskets off my cart. I underestimated them as they filled up the baskets in less than two hours. They had all either grown up on a farm or visited their grandparents' farm as children and chose this volunteer opportunity to do community service as a break from their office jobs in D.C.

A big colorful truck driven by a cheerful and grateful man named Bernard came out Monday afternoon to take the beans back to Arlington. He said that on Wednesday, volunteers would bag those beans and distribute them along with other donated foods (mostly boxed, processed staples) to families who regularly go to the Food Bank.

There were still lots of beans in the patch



and the next weekend another group came out. These were 15 young college and graduate students from Ireland who were in Washington for a two-month Leadership Training program. The previous weekend, the fields were soggy and muddy after a big rain. This weekend, the Irish students came on one of our hottest, muggiest days. Despite having spent their young lives in a totally different climate and way of life, those students picked 250 pounds of beans, chattering and laughing in the heat. Before leaving, they gladly and generously did a little real farm work for a few

minutes, collecting up onions that had been harvested and left drying in the field – something our weekend crew would have had trouble finishing on a busy Saturday. Some of the girls picked zinnias to take home, and all enjoyed a cold melon before climbing back into their cars.

We'll be calling on AFAC to send another group out this coming weekend. And if they can't find willing volunteers, we can call the Capital Area Food Bank in D.C. It is awesome to have such good help getting vegetables to families who don't normally have access to fresh farm produce.

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"200 years of tobacco growing does not leave fertile land. How long does it take to restore the soil after so many years of one-sided farming?" Heinz says the first five years were like putting the farm on life support – he made compost and put in cover crops and rotated the crops as he tried to address

the soil deficiencies. And that was the easy part.

He planted almost 15 acres of vegetables. In his first season he had two Mexican workers and one Mennonite worker – the caliber of his labor force seemed promising, even if the group was small. But on Labor Day weekend, he woke up to find a note announcing that they had all moved on. Heinz

remembers that he called me and then he went back to bed, unable to think of what to do next. And I remember that I sent help and he got through the season.

In Heinz's second year on the farm, Gabrielle La Joie came to work. This was a fortuitous event, changing the course of history for Next Step Produce and Heinz Thomet.