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Notes From the Road

by Becky Crouse Durst and Carrie Nemec

From Carrie: I often race off the farm at 1:05 so I get to the house in Falls Church between 1:30 and 1:45. Route 7 is always a mess so I end up driving the long way to avoid cooking me and the vegetables while we sit on Route 7 waiting for something to happen. The kids at the house on W. Westmoreland Road like to help carry everything, which can be a little nerve wracking. Of course everyone wants to help put the eggs in the cooler.

Once I got caught in traffic and showed up to the house a few minutes later than I usually do. The kids were waiting on the porch to help unload the van. I apologized for my tardiness. FX (my buddy who is about 7 years old by now) starts taking bags out of the van and says "Could you call next time if you are going to be late?"

The next week Chris, the younger brother of FX, got stung by something on his finger. His mom wrapped it up for him so he would feel better. He decided the only thing he could do was help carry the bread but even that might be a challenge with his poor little bandaged finger. Once done with the bread he said, "When we are done unloading I am going back inside to lie down, my finger



needs a nap."

I don't have trouble understanding the kids but I could not figure out what FX was saying to me one day. "Make sure you get our extra rubbish out of the van." He kept asking me how many were on the list. We double counted everything on the porch that day and he seemed happy with everything. As I was pulling out it occurred to me. He was saying don't forget our Robust.

From Becky: My best story is delivering to Mia's porch at Westmoreland my first year here. But, the address was wrong in the directions I received, and I pulled up in front of a house that had a huge tree down in front, crushing two cars. I didn't know what to do, so I knocked on the door. A poor, frantic woman who was

actively talking on the phone with her insurance company in broken English, answered the door. She had NO idea what I wanted. Then, suddenly, she understood I was delivering vegetables. She very kindly pointed me to Mia's porch. I felt both terrible and so relieved at the same time.

This spring I was delivering in Arlington, when I saw an email saying that Hiu's car had broken down in DC. Yay, smartphones! I got in touch with Hana, who was arranging a rescue. She had me go pick up Hiu and the bags while she and Benjamin arranged to go pick up the car. I got to the break down spot, conveniently in a parking spot on Rhode Island Ave in NW DC. She was standing in the rain in the parking spot directly

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The Maryland Farm: Part Five in a Series

by Hana Newcomb

When Heinz Thomet arrived on the farm in Newburg, Maryland in the fall of 1999, he was not starting from scratch. The farm had been producing vegetables for over 20 years; it had a well and irrigation system, a house, greenhouse, several sheds, and rustic housing for workers. He had grown up on a farm in Switzerland and had been an apprentice for two years, working on an approved farm and had worked for about 15 years on a series of farms in the U.S.

By the time he got to Maryland, Heinz was ready to be his own farmer. He built a bigger and better greenhouse, he created a washing station with multiple stainless steel sinks on a concrete floor, and he purchased an outdoor wood-burning furnace that would heat the greenhouse and the house. Every year, he invested in new buildings and more equipment, always striving for efficiency and a higher quality product. Every winter, he cut mountains of firewood, stacking it up to dry.

With every improvement, Heinz did lots of research. He doesn't mind spending money but he always makes sure that the quality of the item justifies the price. Most often, the best stuff comes from Europe. Heinz keeps waiting for the U.S. to catch up with Europe.

This is an excellent philosophy for creating a farm that will last for decades. It is very hard to apply that philosophy to hiring farm workers, and Heinz struggled to find people who could meet his standards. He still struggles with this, 14 years later. Many seasons he has a crew of just two or three, and they continue to grow a diverse menu of organic vegetables on about 12 acres. It is a huge undertaking. He has tried to mechanize as much of the work as possible, but potatoes still need to be picked up by hand, people still need to work around the washing table as the tomatoes flow past, and someone needs to do all those miles of weeding.

In 2001, Gabrielle La Joie came to work at Next Step Produce. In a very short time, it was clear to both of them that they had met

their match. Heinz and Gabrielle now have three lively daughters: Mikayla (b. 2002), Raphaelle (b. 2004) and Hazel (b. 2006) and the whole family is fully engaged in the farm. Like all farm kids, those girls know more about plants and food than people who are three times as old as they are.

After three growing seasons, selling at the Falls Church Farmers Market and the Dupont Circle market, Next Step Produce had a track record that enabled Heinz to get a bank loan to purchase the farm. At the markets, Next Step was recognized for its high quality organic produce and quickly became one of the biggest vegetable sellers. Heinz discovered that he was a born marketer, something he had never known before.

At that time, Maryland had a program that allowed landowners to sell the development rights on their property, so we did that before Heinz bought the farm, making it more affordable and ensuring that it would be open space forever.

This was his first experience with debt. For quite a while, this debt seemed to be a huge weight on him. He worked intensely, focused on paying the mortgage. While most of us are comfortable with the idea of a 30 year mortgage, Heinz was not. I think it took him about five growing seasons to finish paying the bank – paying interest irks him mightily. He wants nothing to do with the system.

Some of us thought that Heinz might relax a bit once the farm was paid off, but now we know that is not really in his nature. He is frustrated that he can't feed more people with all of that land and equipment. He says, "I had sufficient success to stick with it, but I am not a poster child for



Sorting potatoes, roughly 2005.

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Finding My Place (Behind the Stand)

By David Smyth

Went to the Vienna library to look for something to read. As I turned into the Finance aisle, a book fell from a shelf and landed at my feet. The title: The Collapse of Beers, Stein, Inc. It looked quite interesting, so I took it home and read it.

What intrigued me most was the story of one B/S money manager who had lost most of his capital and had resorted to raising and selling oysters for a living. Using his skills as a naked put option trader, he pre-sold the next season's harvest for up-front cash, then set about seeding and nurturing the required number of oyster shells and beds.

So, with visions of oyster dollars swimming around in my head, I did a web search of oyster farms in the Vienna area and only came up with one farm. It sold locally grown produce from a Route 7 stand and they were opening in a few days for the season. Wondering if the oyster pre-selling and subsequent delivery strategy could be applied to veggies, I decided to investigate.

I offered my services as an unemployable financial analyst who would trade weeding services for some leftover veggies and a few grocery bags of wood chips for my war on weeds back at the ranch. SOLD! Came the instant reply to my Bid, or was it my Offer? (Have lost a lot of money in the past getting those two confused). Whatever was the right one, it was



way too low.

To test my sorting skills, I was given a small mountain of plastic and paper egg and produce cartons to arrange, alphabetically by size and color. In about an hour I had finished my assignment with only a 4% error rate, due in part to fatigue and the fact I was partially color blind. Plus they kept watching me and taking copious notes.

We settled on a six month trial and they even offered to provide the paper grocery bags for the wood chips, but only after I had sorted these as well. On the way home after the unscheduled but grueling interview, I was haunted by thoughts of my two favorite movie characters: Ruby Finch, the poor scullery maid in the PBS series Upstairs and Downstairs, who endlessly washed pots and pans for the cook. And my hero, Dobby, the downtrodden house

elf in the Hairy Potter series whose attempts to clean house were constantly interrupted by demands for higher priority jobs.

En passant, and in a low voice, I was told that, prior to terminating my relationship with the farm, I would be expected to contribute an article to the newsletter. They muttered something about Old Ned, who had to work some forty years, as man and boy, because he constantly got writer's block and ghost writing was not allowed.

I am still working how best to sell my ever growing inventory of bags of wood chips. Maybe the county will give me a good price - if I deliver. My weeds are covered by about six inches of hard earned wood chips. And I have all but forgotten about the oysters.

From Harry Potter Wikipedia:

Dobby (27 June (year unknown), - "After a period of unemployment, Dobby went on to work at the Farm for which he was paid monthly a grocery bag each of Seconds and wood chips, and got one day off each week.

"Dobby was often ostracized for having no "proper shame" about being constantly out of work. Dobby was generally pleased to be free, although he did enjoy working (as more of a hobby than a career). He was ecstatic to be out of the abusive hands (of Wall Street) but equally pleased to join the Farm staff, where he could come and go as he liked, didn't have many tasks, and those he did have were fairly simple."

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behind her, saving it for me. We off-loaded her car into my van and set out to make our deliveries. In the meantime, Hana sent an email to our Bethesda members

letting them know we were running a little bit late. Hiu and I went to our first DC location, no problem. We were a sight—the pregnant lady and the farm matriarch, both soaking wet to the

skin, pulling up to drop off the vegetable shares at these lovely office buildings. We pressed north to Bethesda, where we encountered a tree across the road on Clara Barton Parkway. We

made a u-turn, re-routed ourselves and wound our way into Bethesda. Yay GPS! We made our final delivery around 3:40 or so, and then headed back to the farm, wet, tired and victorious.

Notes from the Field

What Will Farming Look Like in the Future?

by Stacey Carlberg

I've only been at this for a short time compared to some of my farming co-workers and mentors here at PVF, but it already seems like things are changing. I first stepped on a farm in 2006 and everything was brand new to me. I hardly paid attention to pests or diseases, I was just trying to learn how to pick squash the correct size and tomatoes at the correct ripeness.

Now in 2013, as a farm manager, I am often thinking about pests and diseases. I regularly patrol the fields to see if anything looks strange and encourage our workers to point out anything odd. When Casey and I gather with other farmers, we often talk about the latest scourge of this or that. Currently, I am thinking about the fate of our basil.

In 2007, a strain of downy mildew first appeared on basil in the US in southern FL. At first, it was hard to identify, because it was so new and unknown. The tops of infected leaves look yellow like the plant has a nutrient deficiency, but the bottom is covered in black spores. When the leaves become wet, the basil turns black and is, thus, unmarketable. The disease has moved up the east coast from FL, and has been reported in several states each year since its first outbreak. Our basil patch,

unfortunately, has succumbed to this disease each year that I have been at PVF right around this time of year.

The disease favors damp and humid conditions. WELCOME TO VIRGINIA! We've had dew on our fields most every morning in July and now August until 11 AM or so. Spores can be killed by several hot, dry days in a row. So, I, perhaps unlike you, am hoping for a heat wave.

But, what fascinates and challenges me, is HOW DID IT GET HERE? Prior to the recent outbreaks, this disease had only been reported in Uganda in 1933. The disease is both seed-borne and air-borne. Due to the newness of (and subsequent lack of awareness about) this disease, it is possible that seeds from contaminated plants became available on the seed market. Or, since basil is available in grocery stores year-round, it is possible that it was introduced by basil imports from other countries that didn't show symptoms at time of shipment. An estimated 20% of basil sold in the US is imported. The strain that appeared in Florida in 2007 matched a strain in Switzerland. Now, the disease is considered endemic all over Europe. (A good point to say, thank you for buying local!)

Some varieties show a little resistance (like Lemon and Purple



Basil) while our classic Italian Genovese types just can't put up a fight. So, WHAT CAN WE DO? Stop growing basil? Maybe. Spray everything with fungicide? I think not. That doesn't mesh with my growing philosophy. Acquire a taste for Purple or Lemon Basil Pesto? Most likely!

In a world of constant international trade and ever-changing climates, I'm certain new things will be headed our way and we will have to change crop choices and growing methods. It can be scary and frustrating to think about it all. But, I also wouldn't mind growing some avocados...

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success."

As he looks into the future, knowing that his body cannot endure 80 hours of physical labor every week, he is learning to grow organic

grains. He can imagine doing this with almost no outside help, as it is a highly mechanized process. In the last few years, Next Step has become a grower of wheat and rye and barley

and rice. This year they purchased a big flour mill so they can try to make their way into the organic flour market, along with their whole grains.

Heinz is always looking ahead, trying to find

the sustainable path for his farm and his family. They are "committed to excellence in harmony with nature." It is not so easy, but they keep working at it.