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# Greetings from Riverbank Farm

by Leah Fenster

At the beginning of the summer, Hana texted me to ask if I would write for the newsletter, even though I don't work here anymore. Maybe you read Helen's piece too! I am spending my summer working at a farm in western Connecticut, but every single day I am reminded of PVF. Riverbank Farm is fifteenish acres and has a big crew, complete with part time high school kids, the teenage

daughters of our bosses, and a bunch of other interesting artists and world travelers.

Working at different farms has its ups and downs (the first week is always a really big adjustment because you have to follow people around and learn where everything goes), but I do love having different farm bosses and memories in my head as I do the exact same work on different farms. When we began picking cucumbers in June and

my coworkers were having the yearly debate on what size to pick them, I remember once Hana sending me out to pick cukes saying "pick the ones that look like cucumbers!" No need to overthink it.

Hana's voice also pops into my head when I bag greens at market. She always says something like "after a couple bags, you should be able to know what half a pound feels like. If you have to weigh it every time you're not learning!" And sure enough, as I think that, my bags get closer and closer to half a pound on the first try.

I think about all the times Hana would say in morning meeting, "be methodical" when referring to how we pick chard or kale, and I really try to stick to that idea now, even though nobody says to. Or how I've watched Carrie pop the green tops off the scallions when they're too long for the crate—and now I almost instinctively started



doing that recently when my current boss mentioned the tops getting crushed.

Farm vocabulary also cracks me up too, because a lot of it makes sense only in the context of one particular farm. I'm tempted all the time to call the golf carts "golfies" even though people only say that at PVF, and as long as I live, I'll want to call the green buckets that tomatoes are picked in "ponies," like PVF does, but if I said that at this farm, nobody would know what on



photos courtesy of leah fenster

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# Recently Delicious with Maeve Derry

*This conversation occurred July 29, 2024. It has been edited and condensed for clarity. Enjoy! -Oscar*

*What is something you've enjoyed recently that was delicious?*

We've been eating a cucumber and tomato salad a lot, maybe two or three times a week for dinner the past few weeks. The Katrina Persian Cucumbers, Auntie Ruby Perfect Green heirloom tomatoes, feta cheese from George's Mill and torn basil. Feels peak season to me, so satisfying and delicious. Then I've been making a big pot of black beans, which gets mixed with squash, heirloom masa harina, and flour that Johnny mills for some Three Sisters Fritters.

*What vessel and oil are you frying your fritters in?*



Maeve picking blueberries with June strapped to her back.

One of the grain growers we buy grain from, the Shirks in Pennsylvania, grows camelina and presses it for oil; they swear by it for health and it has a high heat tolerance. Our cast iron skillet is not an heirloom; we're devastatingly terrible at keeping cast iron pans seasoned. A dark secret among farmers.

*Will you tell us about your work and on-farm life?*

I live and work at Moutoux Orchard, a whole-diet CSA, which shares a fence line with Potomac Vegetable Farms. When folks become members of the CSA, it's kind of like they're paying us to homestead for them. This requires trust, and with that trust, Rob and Mo [Moutoux, co-owners and operators] choose to grow delicious things that may be hard to sell at market, like the green tomatoes we're eating in our salad. It's taken some folks years to accept it, but now most of our CSA know these tomatoes are green, ripe and delicious! Animal work is largely managed by Rob; we do intensive rotational grazing, and that is above my paygrade. \*Maeve laughs\* The staff who work for the Moutoux do morning and evening chores: feeding, bedding, watering, cleaning, moving stuff, collecting eggs. The cows get milked daily, and as one of the milkers, I do that a couple of times a week.

I'm in my second season, and my husband, John, and our daughter, June, are here with me. John runs our on-farm wood-fired sourdough bakery, Meadow Bread. Our schedules are a mish-mash of work. Four days a week I'm doing vegetable and animal work, and one day a week I'm a caregiver at this childcare co-op we created with friends of ours. On the weekends, I contribute to the bakery's work by selling at local farmers markets.

*Sounds like you've woven together a livelihood. What's it like balancing those different facets? One day I'm alone for two hours milking cows, picking tomatoes and making yogurt, and then the next day it's me and four children under the age of three. It can feel shocking, and right now we're working to make them feel more integrated.*

*What do you think of cows? Did you grow up with animals?*

No, well, I mean: I had a dog. I have so much love, respect and gratitude for the animals who work at Moutoux. Those cows are working so hard, it's amazing! We recently came through that big drought. The pastures suffered, and the cows

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went back on hay, which reduced their capacity significantly. Milking cows is a tangible reminder of how we build our bodies with the food we eat. Nourishment matters. When the rains returned, and the cows were back on pasture, the milk production got golden. Milking cows validates my choice of farming as a lifestyle. I was a lactating person for a long time while milking those cows, and watching how important it was for the cows to be hydrated and well fed, eating seasonally delicious healthy pasture, just to me, was like “oh my gosh, I need to keep growing healthy beautiful produce so I can eat it and be this healthy productive life-giving mother.”

*Laughter from across the room leads us to an interlude to see what jokes June is enjoying with her toes, and in walks Johnny to pick up a blender. The four gallon bucket of fermented hot peppers he’s turning into hot sauce won’t get smooth with the immersion blender he tried first.*

*I’m curious about the origin stories of your motherhood and becoming a business co-owner.*

June and Meadow Bread are the same age. They’d both been in the works for some time, and then they both happened at the same time. It feels normal now, but I can see how people might not recommend having a baby and starting a business at the same time. \*June laughs, then Maeve laughs\* I feel like I knew her for a long time before she was ever born. Meadow Bread is a small, farmers market bakery making wood-fired sourdough bread out of grains grown in this region. Mostly small family farms growing Mid-Atlantic successful varieties, and every farm we work with is just the coolest. I wanted to work in farming, and Johnny wanted to work in food as closely related to and adjacent to and in harmony with agriculture as possible. He spent time in farm-to-table restaurants, and then found Seylou Bakery in DC, which is where he trained to bake. That felt like a clear way to be a food maker with direct relationships to farms. We’re trying to have our bakery be an expression of good agriculture and farming practices.

*Are y’all dreaming any dreams for your business?*

Well for the last three years, we’ve been selling at the Wheatland Spring Farmers Market, and that has been a magical beginning— selling food with our best friends and awesome mentors. It’s really cool to be around other small, couple-owned agriculture businesses. We get to live and talk with Rob and Mo all the time, and we celebrate this network of folks



photos courtesy of maeve derry

**Maeve with John and June.**

who are succeeding. We’d love to have four walls for our business. We’re in a tent outside right now. The luxury of indoors would be amazing. Going to a bigger market would be awesome. Time will tell. The goals for this season were to bake consistent product and to figure out the maximum capacity of a one-person show. Johnny mills, mixes, and bakes. There’s a precedent of bakers making livelihoods in this way: one person managing the week’s work and then selling at a well-attended farmers market. There are some great markets around here; this is an iconic food region.

*Would you like to be on the record saying anything else?*

Let it be known! \*Maeve laughs\* We grow fruit here, and we eat a lot of frozen blackberries, blueberries and peaches. We also make yogurt. So most mornings for breakfast we have a smoothie with all Moutoux ingredients. I think it’s possible to have a smoothie that is too sweet, and the remedy I’ve turned to is whole beets! Steamed in the Instant Pot, skinned and then added to the smoothie. So if anyone is trying to sneak more vegetables into their toddler, consider this.



# The Last Picture Show, Really

by Chip Planck

When we moved to Purcellville in 1979, the movie theatre was in a non-descript two story brick building located between Whitmore and Arnold's International tractor dealership and the vacant lot now occupied by the Giant supermarket. It was run by Mrs. Moorcones, and consisted of maybe 100 tiered seats reached by climbing a set of stairs entered from an unpaved parking lot at the back. No lobby, maybe a popcorn machine. There may have been a modest sign for what was showing, but marquee would be too grand a word for it.

The level of personal service is indicated by a story: at the end of the bicycle drama "Breaking Away", Mrs. Moorcones came quietly out of the projection room and said she'd noticed we arrived late. "Did we want her to run the first few minutes of the first reel again?" We did, she did, and we were customers

for life.

During this period, the novelist Larry McMurtry lived in nearby Waterford, and became a regular at the theatre. His first (and best) novel, "The Last Picture Show", set in a dying rural Texas town, had been made into a movie, and was chosen to run. By the time it was shown, I believe McMurtry had moved from the area. Whoever the audience, the film's full frontal nudity featuring Cybil Shephard, and perhaps its central theme of the affair between the kid football star and the coaches' lonely wife, were the breaking point for Mrs. Moorcones. She stated she could no longer rely on the appropriateness of the offerings available, and closed her theatre.

This tale can conclude with the ways people overlap in small towns. Mrs. Moorcones was an avid cook. Several times in her retirement, her daughter, Mary, brought her to the farm to buy canning tomatoes. Thus we got to offer something in return.

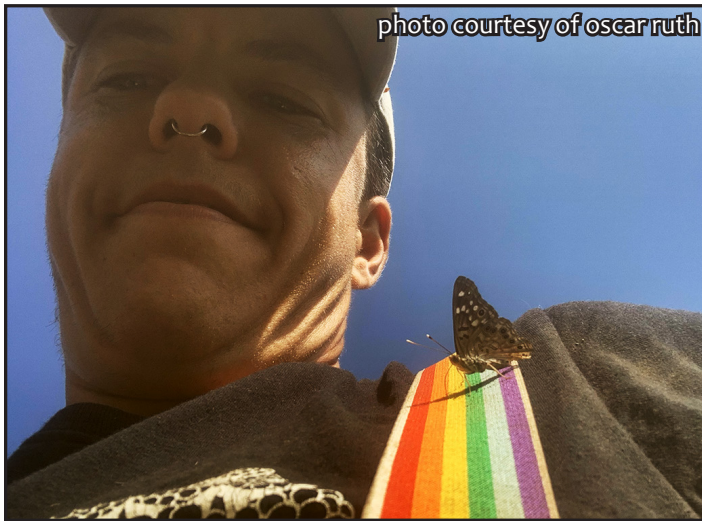


photo courtesy of oscar ruth

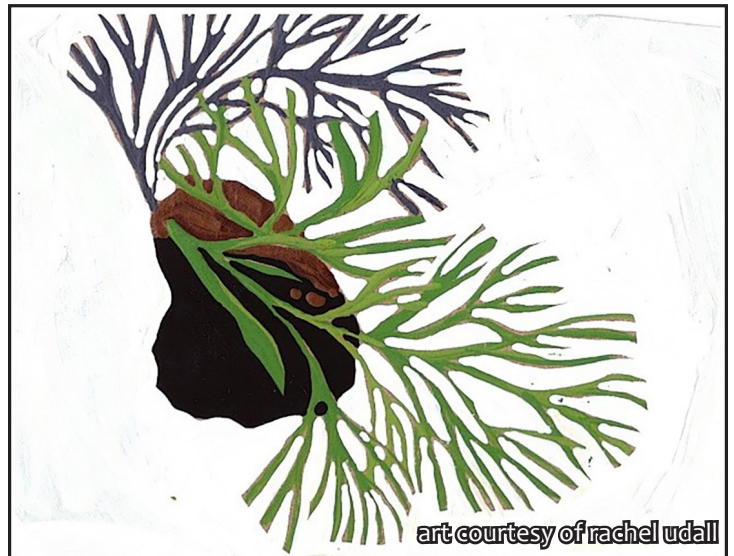
Oscar with a winged friend.

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earth I was talking about. Green buckets it is. Different farms also have different names for their seconds tomatoes: PVF famously calls them "tomatoes with issues", the farm I worked at last summer called them "smugly" (small and ugly), and at Riverbank we have "sauce tomatoes", and "splooge" (although splooge is really the oozy compost-bound tomatoes. For example, we always bring a splooge bucket to market in case we encounter some unfortunate

tomatoes while setting up).

Sometimes, when a farm's choices differ from how PVF would do it, I feel like they're doing it wrong. (Eek don't tell my bosses!!). I was just thinking about how Carrie once said "summer feels like the sun on your back when you're picking beans," and finding myself missing all the bean picking that is done at PVF. Summer means beans! This summer we only grew 3 beds of beans at Riverbank, and we were done picking them by mid July.



art courtesy of rachel udall

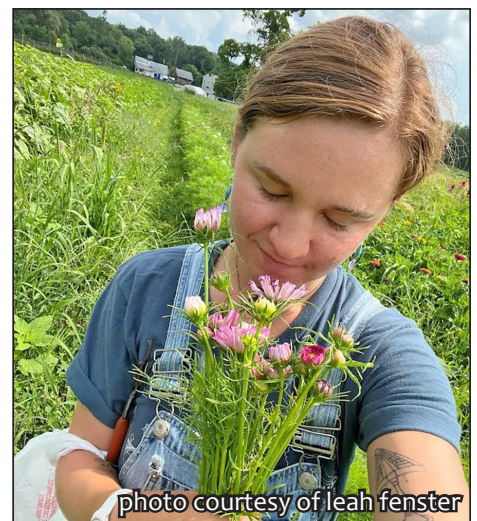


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