

GROWERTALKS

Under an Acre

6/27/2014

Local Food All Year Round

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Operating a four-season farm may seem like a strange career choice for a chef and graphic designer, but for the Browsers, it was the perfect fit.

“Farming requires people to be so many things. It’s not just one career,” said Mary Brower. “You don’t have to only know about how to grow food and grow it well, but you also have to market it. So we bring our sensibilities in as cooks, graphic designers, business people, community organizers and farmers.

This field is a really worthy occupation that has

endless opportunities for growth.”

Pictured: Mary and Aaron Brower, shown here with their young son Peter, own and operate Blue Stem Farm—a four-season operation that offers 30 varieties of vegetables in the warmer season and 20 varieties in the winter. The farm is also home to pasture-raised chickens and pigs and 60 fruit and nut trees.

Mary and Aaron Brower spent their 20s and half of their 30s following a somewhat nomadic lifestyle, travelling and working in farms across the globe from Russia to Northern England. It was during this time that they not only learned about farming itself, but the possibility of having locally grown food in cold climates. Most of the Browsers apprenticeship work on farms was in colder climates; in fact, Mary met Aaron at a farm in Juneau, Alaska.

These opportunities not only taught the Browsers about farming, but also opened their eyes to the possibility of having year-round local food in cooler climates. In rural Russia, Mary said that local farming is not a trend, but an essential aspect of survival.

“The system of food distribution in rural places in Russia is so broken and dysfunctional that people need to rely on what they grow themselves to a large extent,” said Mary. She described the Russian citizens as extraordinarily self-reliant, with most using storage crops to feed themselves throughout the winter months.

After the birth of their first child, Peter, Mary and Aaron decided to purchase a farm—now Blue Stem Farm—in Northern Michigan, close to Aaron’s parents. With this farm purchase, they brought their belief that local food should be available during all four seasons.

“We believe that’s really important, especially in a place like northern Lower Michigan where it can be winter six months out of the year easily,” said Mary. “That a place like this can and should do more to be able to feed itself through the winter, not just in the glorious summers.” Blue Stem Farm is a diversified farm offering more than 30 varieties of vegetables in the warmer season (June to November) and 20 varieties in the winter. Soon to be a certified organic farm, the winter produce includes beets, carrots, spinach and hardy greens. These vegetables are heated in two (soon to be three) passive hoop houses whose primary heat source is solar. The winter is where the Browsers strongly believe in the importance of integrating storage crops and protein from their animals. The farm is also home to pasture-raised chickens and pigs and 60 fruit and nut trees.

The animals not only serve as a food source, but also help with both pest and crop management. The chickens are used to forage what will become next year’s garden, which Mary says break up the life cycles of common pests and leaves behind fertile soil. After the squash and corn harvest, the pigs are put directly in the field to harvest the leftovers, which helps to prepare the ground for a late fall cover crop.

“We use crop rotation and integrated pest management to control pests. It’s a very diversified farm; it’s not like we’re growing just corn and that corn has to make it,” said Mary. “So if the tomatoes get wiped out with blight because we decided not to spray copper on them, then that’s sad, but that probably also means that we had a good cucumber year.”

Part of their decision to restrain from chemical use was for the health of their own children. The farm is not only the family’s livelihood, but also an opportunity to connect their children with the life cycle. Both children—Peter, age 3, and Nora, 6 months—are involved in the entire process, from attending farmers markets to observing their parents farm.

“They’re very much integrated into all this,” said Mary. “It is a big part of our decision to do this as a life. We wanted to be with our kids; we wanted to have them by our sides, learning with us.”

At the young age of 3, Peter is not only able to catch a moving chicken, but able to identify when plants, such as beans, are ready to harvest.

Connecting with community

Their CSA members have become an essential part of this process, so they receive special benefits from vegetables not available at the farmers markets to CSA appreciation parties. Passionate about food preservations, the Browsers divide their bumper crops amongst their CSA members, where they receive instructions (either through demonstrations or written material) on how to preserve them.

In addition to the farm, Mary is a writer for the local food magazine, Edible Grande Traverse, where she offers both recipes and an insider look into Blue Stem Farm. The Browsers continue to foster their farming education through the local organization, Institute for Sustainable Living, Art and Natural Design. Here, Mary has taken classes on how to plant berries, learned about growing Shitake mushrooms and even about raising bees. Mary also acts as their communications coordinator, writing press releases, website copy and filling up the event calendar.

One of their recent ventures was becoming part of the charitable initiative, Hoophouses for Health. Funded by the Michigan Farmers Association, Blue Stem Farm receives a loan to construct a hoop house that is paid back by donating the produce grown to families in need. These families also receive the nutritional education on how to prepare what may be unfamiliar produce, something that Mary hopes to become a part of.

“In choosing to make a life out of farming, Aaron and I picked the one trade we felt we had the most to learn from,” said Mary. “Farming has a way of ever offering us something new to study and the endless potential for building strength through community. We can’t think of a more wonderful life to provide a growing family.” **GT**

Anne-Marie Hardie is a freelance writer/speaker from Barrie, Ontario, and part of the third generation of the family-owned garden center/wholesale business Bradford Greenhouses in Barrie/Bradford, Ontario.