



Food and Society Policy Fellows

Old MacDonald Now Has a Book Contract

By Dana Bowen, Quotes David Mas Masumoto

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JOHN PETERSON is not your typical farmer. He is prone to wearing feather boas while driving his tractor and to putting on a bumblebee suit and breaking into interpretive dance between rows of organic vegetables. And while some farmers hunker down with seed catalogs in the off-season, Mr. Peterson takes a sabbatical from his farm, Angelic Organics, in Caledonia, Ill., and spends the winter in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, writing as often as he can. Over the years he has written plays, short stories, a cookbook and a newsletter that he sends to his customers.

While his sideline may seem unusual, it places Mr. Peterson smack in the middle of an emerging literary movement: farmers who write. Their work encompasses a wide range of styles, from the homespun, mimeographed zine *Farm News* (which Sean Whalen, a Vermont farmer, seems to bang out on a malfunctioning vintage typewriter) to the polished op-ed page pieces sent out from Wes Jackson's nonprofit advocacy group, the Land Institute.

Many of these writers say they are responding to the increased public appetite for food's back story. As they reveal their personalities, histories and insights, they bridge the distance between the people who grow food and the people who eat it. It's no coincidence that many of these writers operate small or midsize farms and sell directly to the public, either through farmers' markets or community-supported agriculture programs, or C.S.A.'s, in which customers purchase shares of a farm's harvest.

In a phone interview from his apartment in Mexico, Mr. Peterson said that the newsletters helped him nurture his relationship with the 1,300 families who buy his produce. After he lost much of his family's farm in Illinois, it was the members of the C.S.A. he formed years later who rose up to help restore it. (This story is told in a documentary, "The Real Dirt on Farmer John," which opens nationally on Friday.) But those newsletters also gave him a creative outlet, he said; a way of reconciling his artistic bent with his love of farming.

"For me, farming is drama," he said. "Writing about it is just another way to be in the agricultural experience."

Publishers have picked up on this trend. "We're in a farm phase," said Maria Guarnaschelli, an editor at



W. W. Norton. Given the success of recent books about the food chain like “The Omnivore’s Dilemma,” by [Michael Pollan](#), she said, it made sense that readers would go straight to the source and start reading the works of farmers.

Ms. Guarnaschelli is working on a book with Andy Griffin, a farmer in Watsonville, Calif., who wrote for The Santa Cruz Sentinel and now contributes to Edible San Francisco, one of 30 free magazines focused on local food scenes published by Edible Communities. The magazines have become the unofficial literary journals of the farmer-writer movement.

A few years ago, Mr. Griffin said, “it became clear that our customers wanted to know where their food was coming from.” So, once a week or so, he parks his truck near his fields and jots down some thoughts about the vegetables growing there.

One of his most popular pieces was written after the death of [George Harrison](#) in 2001. After describing how he once spotted the former Beatle in Salinas, California’s hub of commercial farming, Mr. Griffin managed to find a thematic thread linking his red carrots to the musician’s alternative world view.

Starting in 1999, Mr. Griffin sent e-mails of his writings — which blend humor, politics, history and cooking tips from his wife, Julia Wiley — to his customers, who often forwarded them to friends. The newsletter, known as The Ladybug Letter, was sent to about 7,000 subscribers before he abandoned e-mail in favor of a blog this year.

Last fall the chef Peter Hoffman was host of a dinner at Savoy, his restaurant in Manhattan, in which Mr. Griffin and three other farmers read from their work while ingredients they had grown were served. Tim Stark of Eckerton Hill Farm in Lenhartsville, Pa., who sells his sought-after heirloom tomatoes at the Union Square Greenmarket and is working on a memoir for Doubleday, spoke about foraging elderberries. Also in the lineup was Keith Stewart, another Union Square seller, who wrote “It’s a Long Road to a Tomato” (Marlowe, 2006). Note to harried urbanites thinking of taking up the simple life: read this unromantic tale before you give up your day job.

Mr. Hoffman said he differentiated the recent crop of farmers who write from those like Joel Salatin, who writes what Mr. Hoffman called how-tos and polemics about sustainable farming, and Wendell Berry, whose novels, poems and essays celebrate traditional agrarian values and the merits of rural living. The focus of this new group, Mr. Hoffman said, is less ambitious, is often directed at consumers, and largely concerns “the daily life of producing food.”

Their work has flourished in magazines. “It’s really important to me to give farmers a voice,” said [Ruth Reichl](#), the editor of Gourmet, who published a piece by Mr. Stark about his troubles with gophers after a chef at a Manhattan restaurant slipped her a draft of it one day at lunch.



But many farmers, used to selling directly to customers, have cut out the middlemen in their writing careers, too. Deborah Madison, the chef and cookbook author, said so many farmers were writing electronic newsletters that her inbox was often swamped. “When it comes to market day, of course, they’re all too busy to think, let alone talk,” she wrote in an e-mail message.

In “Blithe Tomato” (Great Valley, 2006), her brother, Mike Madison, writes about the farmers’ market in Davis, Calif., where he sells his produce and flowers. His short, sharp pieces draw readers into the psychological landscape of a small-scale farmer, but they also reflect his observations of his customers: the people who swoon at the scent of lilacs, a colorful character he calls the Old Basque, and a man with a faraway look and a jittery woman (who finally appear grounded after Mr. Madison notices them hand in hand).

Michael Ableman, who farms in British Columbia, believes that many farmers are hard-wired for storytelling. “A good writer is first and foremost a great observer,” said Mr. Ableman, the author, most recently, of “Fields of Plenty” (Chronicle, 2005), which describes a trip he took to visit farms he admired. “And that’s what makes a good agriculturalist, too.”

David Mas Masumoto, a third-generation peach and grape farmer in Del Rey, Calif., and the author of several books, agrees. “There’s a long tradition of writing on the farm,” he said, noting that farmers kept journals to remember what seeds they planted, when the rain came and what their fields looked like through the year.

“I’ve seen some that are very basic, with dates and numbers, and others are rather literary,” he said. The practice faded in recent decades as farming became more automated and less dependent on the senses. Even so, Mr. Masumoto keeps a notepad in his pocket when he is in the field and refers to it when he is writing in the evening.

Like many farmers who have taken up writing, Shannon Hayes is a prodigal child of agriculture, having left her parents’ farm near Cobleskill, N.Y., to sow her wild oats (and to earn a Ph.D. from Cornell in rural sociology). She took classes in fiction writing, but it was not until she turned to the topic of farming that she found her voice.

“I had to discover my victim niche,” she said. “I’m an upstate farm girl. And you know what they say: write what you know.”

Ms. Hayes said she started writing cookbooks because her customers, including some chefs, did not know how to cook the pasture-raised beef she and her parents produced at their Sap Bush Hollow Farm. Her books, “The Grassfed Gourmet Cookbook” (Eating Fresh, 2003) and “The Farmer and the Grill”



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(Left to Write Press, 2007), are authoritative and accessible, with stories about how farming methods affect flavor.

By no means is she the only writing farmer with a graduate degree. “At one point we had four M.F.A.’s on the farm,” said Scott Chaskey, a Long Island farmer whose book “This Common Ground” (Viking, 2005) is rich with the luminous, earthy details one expects from a man whose business card reads “farmer-poet.” He believes writing and farming are complementary vocations.

“I think it has something to do with the solitude, the magic, of the back field,” he said. “That’s what both a farmer and a writer cherish.”