

PLOW TO PLATE FILM REVIEW: THE BIGGEST LITTLE FARM

May 21, 2024

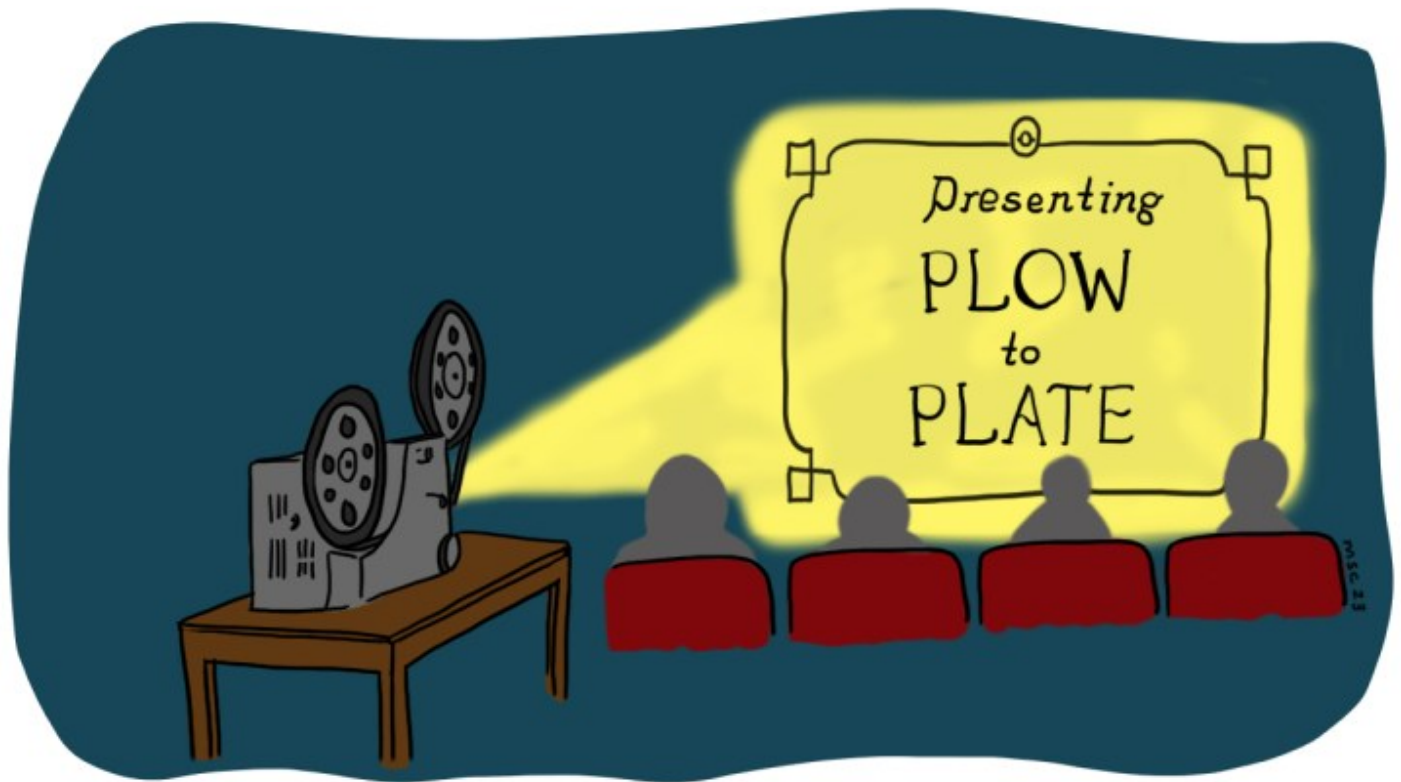


Illustration by Maggie Carson

By Adam Rabiner

Molly and John Chester were like many young people participating in the Back to the Land movement. She was a chef, he was a cameraman and a documentary filmmaker. They entertained an unrealized pastoral fantasy. Their dog Todd was a Los Angeles rescue pet with high anxiety and a tendency to bark incessantly when left alone—a deciding factor in the decision to raise funds to buy the two-hundred-plus acre Apricot Lane Farms in Moorpark, California.

The Plow to Plate film series has portrayed the reality that farming is difficult—long days of hard physical labor, often unprofitable and beholden to the whims of the elements. Yet somehow, many remain drawn to the idea, if not the reality, of working their bones and muscles in the great outdoors, surrounded by greenery and natural beauty, caring for and communing with the farm animals, even while they prepare them for slaughter.

The Biggest Little Farm, more than any other documentary *Plow to Plate* has screened chronicling farming life, lays bare the myth of this portrayal and disabuses one very quickly of the romantic idea city folk may have of running a small farm. The film walks the viewer through several years in the life of Apricot Lane Farms, at first a dusty and derelict patch of dead soil to an eventual lush and verdant oasis and hive of life. The film is the story of that transformation and what it took in time, energy, commitment, luck, perseverance and skill. Molly and John had a clear vision and dream, but in the beginning, they lacked practical experience and skills. They wanted to create a holistic organic farm and grow fruits and vegetables without chemicals. They desired a physically beautiful farm that would retain water, restore the health of the soil, and produce an abundance of things, unlike a nearby defunct operation called Egg City that had once housed 3.5 million chickens producing 2 million eggs a day. They envisioned an ecosystem and a virtuous cycle.



"MOTHER NATURE
has never been more INSPIRING!"
- Alice Waters

the Biggest little Farm



MEON PRESENTS, IN ASSOCIATION WITH LD ENTERTAINMENT IMPACT PARTNERS AND ARTEMIS RISING FOUNDATION, A FABULOUS FILMS PRODUCTION "THE BIGGEST LITTLE FARM" IN ASSOCIATION WITH CHESTER FILMS AND DIAMOND JONES
A FILM BY JOHN CHESTER ***JEFF BEAL*** AND AMY OVERBECK ***JOHN CHESTER AND MARK MONROE*** LAUREL DANTO AND ERICA MESSER ***PALLI GUTINAS AND JESSICA GUTINAS*** JOHN CHESTER AND SANDRA MARR



COMING SOON

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Their neighboring farmers thought they were crazy. To realize this type of farm they hired a consultant, Alan York, a leader in the biodynamic viticulture movement. Blowing the first year's budget in six months, Alan immediately put his shared principles into play, insisting on constructing a state-of-the-art worm composting facility, ripping up fifty-five acres of old trees, restoring an old pond, and fixing over five miles of irrigation pipes.

In addition to the worms whose poop was brewed into compost tea to feed the soil, Alan added catfish to the pond and new trees and cover crops and culverts to prevent run-off, then chicken coops. Before year one ended they had one hundred baby ducks, a bull, livestock-guarding dogs, sheep and a pig named Emma. The goal was to create the highest level of biodiversity possible as each animal had a purpose and unique contribution. His mantra was “diversify, diversify, diversify.”

In year two, Alan complicated things further by insisting on planting seventy-five varieties of stone fruit trees—plums, peaches, nectarines, cherries and apricots. Soon they were farming over two hundred different things. Alan kept promising that diversity would eventually lead to simplicity. He likened their project to building a self-perpetuating and self-regulating flywheel with everything integrated and working in harmony. But Molly, and John especially, who was becoming quite the farmer, had doubts.

Though wildlife was returning to the land, a positive sign that it was healing, the promised balance was elusive. In a modern-day version of the Ten Plagues of Egypt, coyotes kept killing their chickens and ducks, Emma came down with a sickness that threatened her life, flocks of ravenous birds and insects ravaged seventy percent of the fruits, gophers were killing their trees and snails bred exponentially until they covered everything, even the sheep. The farm suffered from drought, then flooding and brutal windstorms, the pond underwent a toxic algae bloom and a California wildfire threatened everything. In their moment of most dire need, Alan was not returning their calls.

But he had taught John and Molly to observe, and the important lesson that each animal and insect has a role to play. Soon they put owls to work and Todd lent a helping paw, as did the gophers, the snails and coyotes.

The Biggest Little Farm, June 11, 2024 @ 7:00 p.m.

Screening link: <https://plowtoplatefilms.weebly.com/upcoming-events.html>

To be added to our mailing list for future screening announcements, please email a request to plowtoplate@gmail.com.

Adam Rabiner lives in Ditmas Park with his wife, Dina, and child Ana.