THE SECRETS BEHIND THE COOP’S BIGGEST PRODUCE PARTNER

March 24, 2026

LANCASTER FARM FRESH CO-OP.

March 24, 2026

By Dan Bergsagel

Supplier Spotlight aims to showcase where the Coop's food comes from: like-minded organizations that value workers' rights and sustainable, ethical practices, and produce healthy, delicious and fairly priced products.

Many members start their shop in the Coop's overflowing produce aisle—jammed with laden U-boats and members inspecting fruit and vegetables. In the local growing season an incredible third of what you see on the shelves comes from one very trusted supplier: Lancaster Farm Fresh Co-op (LFF Co-op).

WHY SO MUCH FROM LANCASTER FARM FRESH?

A member chooses carrots from Lancaster Farm Fresh

A third of produce at any one time is obviously a significant proportion to be sourced from one supplier. “They are very important,” said John Horsman, a produce buyer at the Coop. “They are very consistent, and the quality is just amazing.” Even outside of the local growing season, Lancaster provides 5–10% of the Coop’s fresh produce, mainly carrots and other root vegetables.

“The number one requirement for the Coop is quality. After quality, we will look at pricing. LFF has very good prices and has extremely good quality,” Horsman explained.

This crucial mix of quality and price reflects in part the values of the communities that comprise the majority of farmers in the LFF Co-op—Amish and Mennonite. Their traditional agricultural and labor practices eschew modern technology, farm equip-

ment and chemical treatment, and instead adopt organic principles that ensure quality products and healthy soil. This traditional practice goes beyond complying with the minimum requirements of the USDA Certified Organic system.

The produce from Lancaster is comparatively local—less than 200 miles from the Coop, although not quite as local as Gotham Greens—which means it is very fresh.

“Their shelf life is just amazing,” said Horsman.

The geographical advantage can best be understood when you consider the shipping challenges for a large-scale farm in the growing regions of California.

A head of lettuce in California will be harvested and the cases will be packed in the field. They will then be stacked on pallets and collected every two hours to be placed in chilled storage.

“It maybe gets out in two days, is driven across the country in four days, and by the time it’s on the shelf it’s maybe five to seven days old,” Horsman said.

Because LFF Co-op is so close, you can hold a head of lettuce in Brooklyn on a Monday and be confident that it was picked on Saturday, or “worst-case Friday,” Horsman said.

“We go through thousands of cases a week of produce, and we look through them all and return stuff if it is not top quality,” he said. “It is a very rare day that we return anything to LFF. I can’t say that about anybody else.”

Often this high-quality traditional farming practice is associated with small farms, and this comes at a financial cost as they compete with larger organizations. “The smaller the farm, the higher the price,” noted Horsman.

However, the growers of LFF Co-op have overcome many of these financial barriers

by realizing the benefits of operating as a cooperative.

AN UNLIKELY START

LFF growing fields

LFF Co-op's alignment with the Coop's tagline "Good Food at Low Prices" reflects the unlikely alliance between Amish and Mennonite farmers and a self-confessed "punk rock skateboarder," Casey Spacht, a founder and the executive director of Lancaster Farm Fresh Co-op.

Spacht has a do-it-yourself ethos and a background in eco-activism, natural food coops and nonprofits. Spacht spoke with the *Gazette* soon after returning from his annual ice fishing trip, on which he caught 15 fish. "I'm a big proponent of clean, healthy foods," he said. "I don't eat any meat except for the fish I catch myself from the clean pristine lakes I find in the north woods of Maine. That stocks my freezer and I'm good for the year."

The farmers and Spacht came together to fill a shared need in their communities: “The farmers were not being taken care of,” said Spacht.

There were several neighboring certified organic farmers growing high-quality vegetables and competing in the same markets.

“They would be delivering to the same restaurant in Philadelphia, and they would see their neighbor’s car there.”

There was a clear opportunity to coordinate to share in costs and avoid duplication. So Spacht said, “Let’s reduce the work for ourselves so we can stay on the farm more and do what we do best: stay with our families, take care of the land and soil and farm these valued products for our community.”

GROWING A FARMING COOPERATIVE

Golden beets from LFF

Spacht and six other farmers first met in 2005 by kerosene lamp-light, sitting on straw bales in the basement of one of their barns, and outlined their visions for a farming cooperative. While the shared need was already there, the shared trust had to be built. “The Amish and Mennonite cultures really keep to themselves, and like anyone would, I had to prove myself to them,” said Spacht.

Since then, LFF Co-op has seen significant growth. Today, it encompasses around 120 farmers spread over more than 1,000 acres—approaching double the area of Prospect Park.

COOPERATING ORGANICALLY, MORE THAN JUST SALAD

LFF lettuce in the produce aisle

In the early days, Spacht took on multiple roles at LFF Co-op, but now the Co-op services are provided by five staff teams: quality, sales, warehousing, transportation and finance.

Spacht oversees the staff teams and in turn reports to a seven-member Board of Directors made up of member-farmers, who are themselves elected by the LFF Co-op members. “We’re not experts in anything; we’re just ordinary farmers filling a niche for our community,” said Spacht.

The cooperative is a community. It has big meetings for all the farmers and gives out awards for things like best quality and best food safety.

“We’re always helping educate our farmers, but it’s not a one-way street. We’ll have a meeting about who will grow what each year, and sit down in a room all day and plan this out for each crop,” said Spacht. These meetings are opportunities for intergenerational discussion and learning, with the age of LFF Co-op farmers stretching from their late 60s to their early 20s.”

“We have a very diverse and cultured group of farmers,” explained Spacht. This farming group has moved beyond traditional Amish farm staples—potato, cabbage, carrots—to meet requests for vegetables and newer varieties that they may not have grown, like red leeks, fennel and Asian vegetables. And more is going on behind the scenes. The Coop may request ten cases of dinosaur kale from LFF Co-op, but this may well be fulfilled by three different farms.

LFF Co-op does more than just produce; some of the eggs, dairy, honey, medicinal herbs, flour and even grains (think the pivotal Harrison Ford scene in Peter Weir’s 1985 film “Witness”) on the Coop’s shelves come from their fields, barns and apiaries.

TRADITIONAL AND COOPERATIVE PRACTICE MEETS THE MOMENT


LANCASTER
farm fresh co-op
grown & packed by
LIBERTY ACRES
ORANGE CARROTS
(loose)
Sustainably Minded.
Product of U.S.A.
lancasterfarmfresh.com
PHOTO BY ZACHARY SCHULMANN

“One of the founding principles for cooperatives is: coops supporting coops,” said Spacht, “and when that is invoked that is a powerful thing.”

Park Slope Food Coop has been with Lancaster since the very beginning, in 2006, sharing the first ever shipments it delivered to Brooklyn with other early adopters like the restaurateur Andrew Tarlow (of Diner and Roman’s).

“Without Andrew and the Coop, we wouldn’t have what we have,” Spacht said. The relationship goes both ways—during the recent blizzard, Lancaster offered to push forward deliveries to the Coop to ensure that stock disruption was minimal.

Spacht wanted to leave the *Gazette* with a note for our current times, when regulations that limit the harm of conventional agricultural practices are under threat.

Lancaster Farm Fresh Co-op is “not just organic, it is beyond organic,” he said. “We are at the highest echelon—not just a certificate—we really take the highest care of the soil.”

Dan Bergsagel is often mistaken for someone else.

THE BLACK FARMER WHO SHAPED AMERICA’S COOPERATIVE APPROACH TO FOOD

March 24, 2026


KER-GANN
WG
WALTER

February 10, 2026

By Femi Redwood

Coop members volunteer our time and pay up-front membership fees because we believe these shared investments make our food systems stronger. Also, this makes our produce cost less than at traditional grocery stores, and farmers earn more profit than they would selling to large chains.

This is the same idea behind Community Supported Agriculture, commonly known as CSAs.

You might think CSAs started in the 1980s in affluent Northeast communities, but they were actually started by a Black horticulturist, Booker T. Whatley, who pushed this model decades earlier to help small farms. His vision continues to empower communities to make grocery shopping affordable, while also investing in local farmers.

Born in 1915 in Anniston, Alabama, a predominantly Black community, Whatley and his 11 younger siblings were raised on their family farm. “My granddaddy made all the syrup that came out of his community, castrated all the hogs, shoed the horses, built the doorsteps …he was one of those guys who could do everything,” he told *Mother Earth News* in 1982.

That early education in farming and self-sufficiency helped shape the rest of his life.

> AT TUSKEGEE, BOOKER T. WHATLEY DEVELOPED 15 VARIETIES OF MUSCADINE GRAPES, NAMING ONE “FOXXY LOTTIE” AFTER HIS WIFE.

After earning a B.S. in agriculture from Alabama A&M University, a historically Black college and university (HBCU), he was drafted into the army and served in the Korean

War, where he worked on a hydroponic farm. The scientist he worked under urged him to earn a Ph.D. in horticulture from Rutgers University, which he did in 1957. He then became the chairman of the horticulture department at Southern University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Later, in 1969, he was offered a professorship at Tuskegee Institute (now Tuskegee University).

At Tuskegee, Whatley developed 15 varieties of muscadine grapes, naming one "Foxxy Lottie" after his wife. He also worked on sweet potato breeding, developing five varieties, and advocated that Southern farmers grow sweet potatoes to help them compete with the growing corporatization of agriculture.

"With sweet potatoes, Alabama could compete with the Midwest in carbohydrate production," he told *Neighbors* Magazine.

Throughout his life, he noticed that family farms were being replaced by large companies, and Black farms were declining. According to a collaborative report by the National Black Farmers Association and other organizations, 14 percent of all US farmers were Black in 1920. By 1964, less than 6 percent were Black.

> WHATLEY CREATED A PLAN AS EARLY AS THE 1960S THAT HE BELIEVED WOULD ALLOW FARMERS TO MAKE MORE MONEY WHILE USING FEWER RESOURCES.

One issue Black farmers faced was unfair treatment from the federal government. A 1965 report from the Commission on Civil Rights (PDF) found that the USDA discriminated against Black farmers when providing loans and conservation payments.

This impacted the financial stability of Black farmers and contributed to land loss. As a solution to this, and the increased competition from corporate-owned agriculture, Whatley created a plan as early as the 1960s that he believed would allow farmers to make more money while using fewer resources. A significant component of his plan

was a shopping model similar to contemporary CSAs, what he called Clientele Membership Clubs.

Members would pay an upfront fee for a season of produce. He suggested fees should be due at the beginning of the year, which is often a farmer's slow season. Families would pick their own produce. These clubs would guarantee that farmers would have income and that families would save 40 percent on food prices.

Clientele Membership Clubs wouldn't be limited to produce; some might have places for families to catch their own fish or buy slaughtered livestock.

WHATLEY BELIEVED SMALL FARMS COULDN'T COMPETE WITH LARGE ONES ON THINGS LIKE CORN AND POTATOES, BUT THEY COULD COMPETE IN OTHER WAYS, LIKE HAVING MEMBERSHIP CLUBS.

In 1982, he told reporters that his plan could make farmers $100,000 per year, and he later published a book detailing it. "The clientele membership club is the lifeblood of the whole setup. It enables the farmer to plan production, anticipate demand, and, of course, have a guaranteed market," he originally told *Mother Earth News* in a 1982 interview.

Whatley believed small farms couldn't compete with large ones on things like corn and potatoes, but they could compete in other ways, like having membership clubs. "You got to have a farmer who likes people and who has the knack of making that membership feel like his farm is their farm," he told *The Morning Call*.

He didn't believe farmers' markets would be competition because they were too expensive for most families. At both farmers' markets and grocery stores, the cost of picking and delivering produce is built into the prices. But with his membership clubs, cutting out the middleman saves everyone money. "The farmer now gets such a

small share of the housewife's food dollar. Under this plan, he gets it all," he told the paper.

Some farmers believed his plan would turn off potential members, because it would feel like farmwork. Whatley understood that not all farmers would embrace his ideas. "I'm not trying to change the spots on a leopard. I'm not wasting my time," he detailed in that interview.

But one person who didn't doubt his plan was Thomas Monaghan, the founder of Domino's Pizza and owner of the Detroit Tigers.

In 1984, *The Wall Street Journal* wrote an article about Whatley (PDF), introducing readers to another Alabama farmer who was using his methods with success. According to published reports, Whatley received a call that same day from Monaghan, who loved his ideas and wanted to begin a partnership to build a farm that would provide toppings for some Domino's franchises and also allow Domino's employees to join its Clientele Membership Club.

In addition to offering produce, the pair planned a catch-and-own fish pond, a place where members could also buy freshly slaughtered lamb, Christmas trees and more.

> OVER THE YEARS, WHATLEY REMAINED A SOUGHT-AFTER SPEAKER BECAUSE HE OFFERED A MORE HOPEFUL OUTLOOK THAN OTHER ACADEMICIANS AND POLITICIANS.

According to *Mother Earth News,* the Booker T. Whatley Farm at Domino's Farm opened in 1987. They planned it in phases and hoped their efforts would save 100,000 of America's small farms by 2000. Unfortunately, their complete vision never came to fruition because Monagah sold his stake in the farm, and its operations shifted from the original plan.

Over the years, Whatley remained a sought-after speaker because he offered a more hopeful outlook than other academicians and politicians, who believed there was no commercial success for small farmers. Whatley, who died in 2005, disagreed, arguing that, while the government favored large farms that grow soybeans, cotton and nuts, it could solve the problem by subsidizing small farms that grow more niche crops, like purple cabbage.

“The research money has gone to those money crops,” he told the *Washington Post.* “We all think for anything to be good it’s got to be big.”

The next time you buy produce at the Coop, please remember Whatley, whose legacy continues through the many CSAs feeding our neighbors.

Femi Redwood is a Murrow Award-winning journalist. For over a decade, she has worked in prestigious newsrooms including VICE News and CBS Newspath, holding a range of roles from on-air correspondent to department manager. She lives in Crown Heights with her wife, Julie, and their cat, Leo.

HOW EQUAL EXCHANGE CONNECTS FARMER COOPS TO OUR COOP

March 24, 2026

ILLUSTRATION BY STEPHEN SAVAGE

July 15, 2025

By Dan Bergsagel

Coop members can learn about the source of their food from labels or from the produce and bulk information on the Coop website. However, we only occasionally hear about intermediaries—the distributors who buy food from farms and sell it to the Coop. They come to our attention when something new happens, such as the expansion of Field Day products on our shelves, or when something goes wrong, including the June 2025 cyberattack on UNFI, which led to temporary shortages on the Coop's shelves, as UNFI accounts for 32 percent of the Coop's purchasing.

ILLUSTRATION BY STEPHEN SAVAGE

Intermediaries are the unsung heroes of the Coop's supply chain. They make it possible for the Coop to sell a wide range of produce. "Distributors are extremely important," said Britt Henriksson, one of two receiving coordinators and buyers for bulk and specialty foods at the Coop. "Working directly with suppliers is not common, as each supplier has an invoice and the paperwork can quickly add up to take a lot of a buyer's time. More distributors also means more deliveries to be coordinated."

Many of these important distributors are fellow travelers—cooperative organizations themselves with clear mission statements, guiding principles and a parallel trajectory which complements the Coop's. Equal Exchange is one of the most important and closely aligned with the Coop.

You may recognize Equal Exchange's logo—two red arrows joined together—on labels on your bananas or bulk coffee. What does not fit on their label is their mission statement:

"…to build long-term trade partnerships that are economically just and environmentally sound, to foster mutually beneficial relationships between farmers and consumers

and to demonstrate, through our success, the contribution of worker co-operatives and Fair Trade to a more equitable, democratic and sustainable world."

Equal Exchange was founded in Massachusetts in 1986, importing coffee from Nicaragua in defiance of a Reagan administration trade embargo. Equal Exchange later expanded to sourcing coffee from farmer groups across Latin America and Africa, and tea from India, Sri Lanka and South Africa. Today, it distributes chocolate, bananas, nuts, dried fruits and olive oils, all sourced from small farmer cooperatives.

The groups and cooperatives all view themselves as democratically organized.

Leah Madsen, sales manager at Equal Exchange, explained: "We have set up governance and capital structures to mitigate some of the most oppressive forces of capitalism. We're trying to feed people, support people who produce food and support ourselves. We prioritize people over profit."

Equal Exchange and the Coop go back a long way. "Back in the 1980s, we were excited about the founding of Equal Exchange. I am certain that we were buying their products in their first year," said Joe Holtz, one of the founding members of the Coop, who just stepped down as general manager.

Since then, Equal Exchange has grown to become one of the Coop's most important distributors. Madsen said the Coop is equally important to Equal Exchange. "PSFC is our largest single-store revenue partner for bulk coffee. Coffee represents more than half of our sales and an even higher percentage of our gross margin," she remarked.

According to Madsen, over the past year the Coop sold 44,879 pounds of Equal Exchange coffee. (This is equivalent to covering the entire ground floor of the Coop with coffee beans two inches deep). The second largest mover of bulk coffee for Equal Exchange was a six-store chain that purchased 41,690 pounds of coffee. After that chain, the next largest single store sold less than half of the Coop's annual volume.

This relationship holds sway beyond the hard numbers. “I love working with Park Slope,” Madsen said. “At an organizational level, the food coops we sell to are very important for Equal Exchange, and the Park Slope Food Coop is an important leader within the national food coop scene. PSFC is the only member labor cooperative still going, and it is a valuable example of anti-capitalism. It is valuable to have an ideological and philosophical partner.”

Equal Exchange and the Coop can have a real impact on small-scale farmers’ livelihoods. The bulk coffee bought by Coop members in the last year is approximately equivalent to the total coffee output of 22 family farms. The 729,520 bananas that Coop members purchased in 2024 paid $125,660 directly to small-scale banana farmers in Ecuador and Peru.

There are also other, less tangible effects, Madsen explained. “There is so much global upheaval—state violence, militias, civil war, genocide—that we can support farmers operating in these areas to have some economic and social platform through trade and solidarity by bringing them resources. Money flows in, but the organizational impact of allied neighbors as part of civil society is also important.”

ILLUSTRATION BY STEPHEN SAVAGE

“Coops can be more of a positive organizational force than the state in some cases and have been a vehicle for peasant farmers to build political power,” she added. “Farmer cooperatives can use the dollars earned through fair trade premiums. The money we spend with our growers is used to build things like roads and health clinics. We provide access to capital that helps them avoid predatory interest rates.”

In 1994, Equal Exchange became a worker-owned cooperative. Today, each of the 110 to 120 worker-owners has an equal voting share and equal profit share, whether they work in senior management or at entry-level.

While the worker-owners can vote equally, not all decisions are voted on. Madsen explained that “much of the governance and general decision-making is delegated to management or different working groups and committees. Worker-owner votes primarily focus on board elections, bylaw changes, charitable contributions and major changes to operations.”

Equal Exchange initially focused on promoting fair trade in the global south through coffee, and the mission and guiding principles were easily interpreted. In many cases, this trade supports the transition from a commodities trade rooted in colonial histories, and seeks to increase solidarity and transparency when connecting producers and consumers.

Fair trade does not encompass products sourced from the U.S., yet conventional agricultural trade practices here can also be problematic, and small-scale farmers that implement best-practice growing procedures, such as almond farmers in California, need support.

As a result, Equal Exchange management now says that its mission is supporting “fair trade in the global south, and alternative trade in the global north.”

Decisions are not always universally popular. Equal Exchange went through a period of selling single-serve coffee pods (like the ubiquitous K-cup). There was debate among worker-owners about the quality and environmental impact, yet the decision was made by one of the sales teams to proceed. The team had autonomy to make that decision within the guiding principles, on the basis that if people insist on drinking single-serve coffee, then it would be best to drink fair trade higher-quality single-serve coffee.

While the guiding principles of Equal Exchange are often motivated to mitigate the impacts of broader societal challenges, the procurement strategy is much more granular and individualized. Equal Exchange visits its growers, building its network by vetting a farm’s structure and ability to reduce the negative impact of agriculture on the planet.

Equal Exchange sources olive oil from the Palestinian Agricultural Relief Committee (PARC) in the West Bank and from Sindyanna of Galilee in Northern Israel. The suppliers of these oils were chosen not based on their political geography but for their alignment with democratic fair trade practices.

PARC promotes the sustainable economic development of 41 farmer cooperatives, improves water supply and critical infrastructure and provides social services for women, children and families in the West Bank. Sindyanna of Galilee is “a female-led nonprofit that actively promotes the concepts of ‘business for peace’ and fair trade in Israel. The organization sells olive oil from Arab small farmers and then channels all of the profits back into Arab women’s education and other economic activities.” Both olive oils are sold at the Coop.

Closer to home, the Coop has sold pecans from New Communities Inc., a Black-owned small farmer collective in southern Georgia that operates a land trust which developed from the Civil Rights movement. Yet Coop members don’t always buy these high-quality products from mission-aligned organizations.

“We love their story and what they’re about,” recalled Receiving Coordinator Henriksson. “The problem here at the Coop is shelf space, and member dollar spends really dominate that. I loved the product, but the members weren’t buying enough of them.”

This suggests an information gap. “I wish members knew more about what is going on behind the scenes at this lovely grocery store,” Henriksson said. That may be the next challenge: offering the Coop’s buyers a way to share the motivating stories of where the food comes from with members in the aisles.

Dan Bergsagel is a structural engineer from London. He likes to talk about the unexpected things hiding in plain sight.

WHAT NEW TRUMP TARIFFS WOULD MEAN FOR THE COOP

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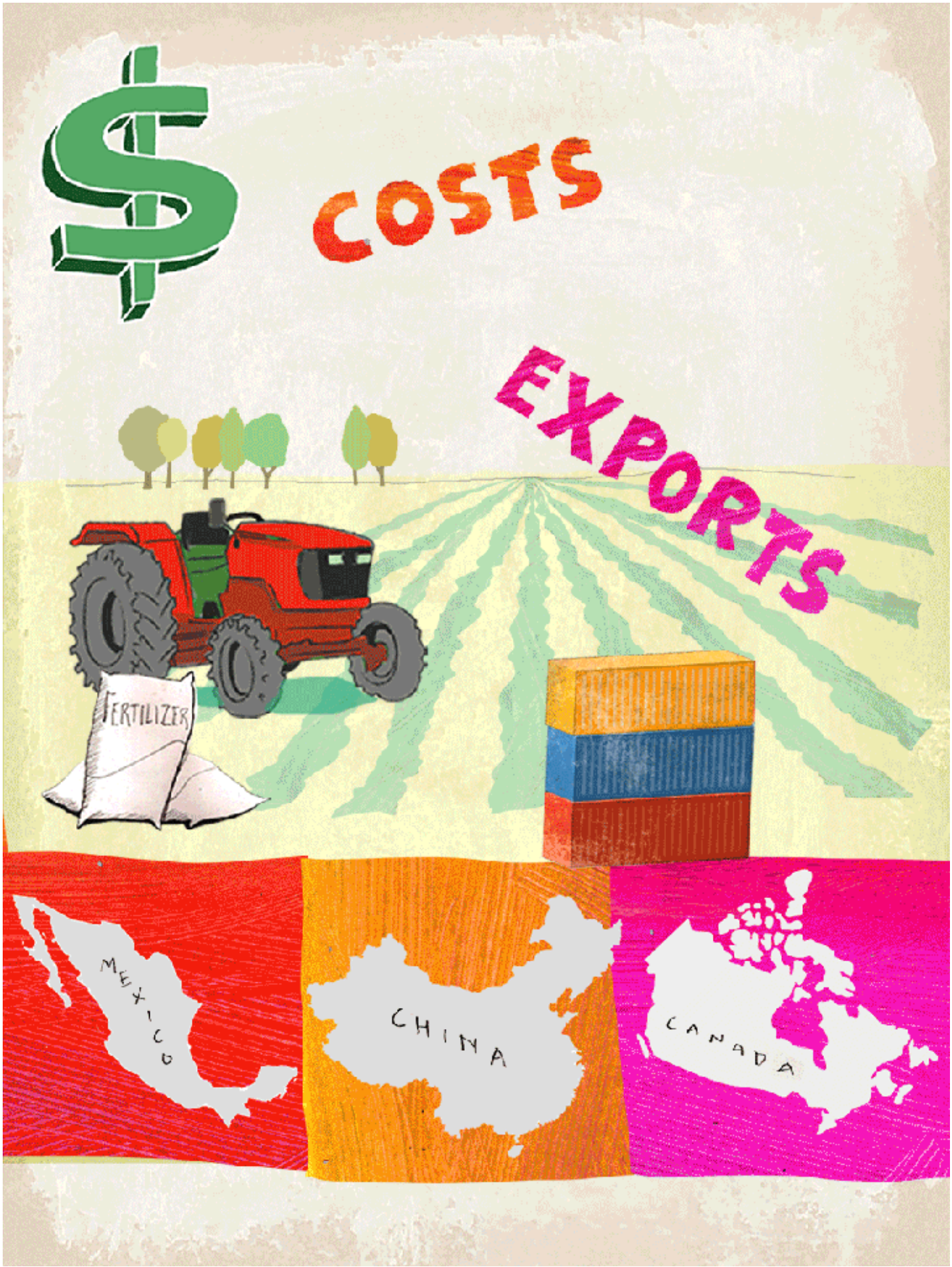

COSTS
EXPORTS
FERTILIZER
MEXICO
CHINA
CANADA

By Leila Darabi

December 17, 2024

“Tariffs are the greatest thing ever invented,’’ Donald Trump said on the campaign trail as a presidential candidate.

In various speeches over the past year, he claimed that once back in office, he would introduce up to a 60% tariff on all goods imported from China and a 10–20% tariff on goods imported from all other countries. He also threatened a 200% tariff specifically on John Deere products, an attempt to bully the farm equipment company into reversing plans to move a share of its production from the Midwest to Mexico.

On November 27, 2024, now President-elect Trump announced that the rollout of these tariffs would begin on the first day of his presidency, starting with a 25% tariff on goods from Mexico and Canada, and an additional 10% tariff on goods from China. He cited a crackdown on illegal immigration and drug trafficking as the justification for targeting the United States’ three largest trade allies, which account for 40% of all international imports.

While the desire to institute these tariffs comprised one of the most specific policy messages of the Trump campaign, his plan to implement them remains unclear. As Trump himself recently stated: “The vision is there, but the game plan is not.”

> “THE PROBLEM WITH BROAD TARIFFS IN TODAY’S CONCENTRATED MARKET IS THAT ALL GOODS WIND UP COSTING MORE, NOT JUST THOSE THAT ARE IMPORTED.”
>
> JOE MAXWELL, CHIEF STRATEGY OFFICER AND COFOUNDER OF FARM ACTION

HOW TARIFFS WORK

The nonprofit advocacy group Farm Action and their lobbying arm, Farm Action Fund, have produced a number of helpful explainers on tariffs. Their fact sheet, “What Would More Trump Tariffs Mean for Food and Farmers,” summarizes:

Tariffs are a tax on imported goods that can be used to strategically discourage imports or defend against unfair imports and open more market opportunity for domestic producers. The US buyer (a retailer or manufacturer) pays these taxes and may pass that cost on to US consumers. This can often be the case with broad, across-the-board tariffs—especially when they are not paired with strategies to help boost domestic production.

“The problem with broad tariffs in today’s concentrated market is that all goods wind up costing more, not just those that are imported,” Joe Maxwell, the chief strategy officer and cofounder of Farm Action, told the *Linewaiters’ Gazette*. “The U.S. company or buyer tends to pass that tax onto the consumer as part of the cost of goods.”

Once in place, experts agree, tariffs are difficult to remove.

Broad tariffs have two effects, according to Brian Kuehl, the executive director of the advocacy group Farmers for Free Trade. As Kuehl explained to the *Gazette*, tariffs “increase the cost of imported goods … and then countries retaliate against us and they’ll put increased cost on our exports.” This means farmers are unable to “export food products or export as competitively. So American farmers get squeezed both with increased import costs and decreased costs at which they can sell their products.”

Joe Maxwell, from Farm Action, shared a similar assessment. In addition to his advocacy work, Maxwell runs a farm in Missouri where he raises sheep and hogs, as well as row crops like corn and soybeans.

IN 2018 AND 2019, CHINA PUT TARIFFS ON U.S. EXPORTS INCLUDING WINE, SOY BEANS, CORN AND PORK, WHILE INDIA PUT TARIFFS ON APPLES, PULSE CROPS, ALMONDS AND WALNUTS.

"In U.S. agriculture, a large segment of us depend on export markets. So that puts extra pressure on the farmer because now they're having to pay higher for the goods they need, whether that's consumer goods or business goods. And now they can't sell their stuff, so they get squeezed on both ends," Maxwell explained.

WHY FARMERS ARE WORRIED ABOUT TRADE WARS

U.S. farmers have real cause for concern based on their experiences during the first Trump Administration, according to Kuehl. "Pretty much every country that we put tariffs on in 2018 and 2019 retaliated against food and agriculture," he said. "It really turns on what the country is importing." For example, in 2018 and 2019, China put tariffs on U.S. exports including wine, soy beans, corn and pork, while India put tariffs on apples, pulse crops, almonds and walnuts.

Maxwell worries that the economic shock of renewed tariffs would have an outsized impact on U.S. farmers. "Because we don't have a lot of domestic production, much of our food, much of our farm equipment, is controlled by very few domestic corporations," he said. When tariffs increase the cost of international goods, "it's easy for [these corporations] to also raise their prices, because there's not any competitor or nobody emerging in the market that would do it for less."

Potash fertilizers are a prime example, he said. "Two companies control all the potash in the United States. If we import potash at 20%, those two companies aren't going to say, 'Oh, we'll keep ours at the domestic price'. They're gonna say, 'No competition? We'll tack [higher prices] on, too.'"

IN RESPONSE TO TRUMP'S ANNOUNCEMENT THAT HIS NEW TARIFFS WOULD START WITH MEXICO, MEXICAN PRESIDENT CLAUDIA SHEINBAUM RESPONDED THAT MEXICO WOULD RETALIATE WITH TARIFFS, A MOVE SHE ESTIMATED COULD COST 400,000 U.S. JOBS.

According to research conducted and published by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, retaliatory tariffs from Canada, China, the European Union, India, Mexico and Turkey totaled more than $27 billion from 2018 through the end of 2019, or more than $13 billion per year during the years when the first generation of Trump tariffs went into effect. China accounted for more than 90% of these costs, further indication of the U.S.' dependence on imports from China.

In response to Trump's November 27 announcement that his new tariffs would start with Mexico, Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum responded that Mexico would retaliate with tariffs, a move she estimated could cost 400,000 U.S. jobs.

HOW COOP SHOPPERS WOULD FEEL TARIFFS

As the Kamala Harris campaign stated repeatedly on the campaign trail—and which Vice President Harris reiterated during the Harris–Trump Presidential debate—tariffs at the rates Trump has proposed (including a 60% tariff on China) would be the equivalent of a nearly $4,000 tax increase for the average American family.

COOP PRODUCE ITEMS CURRENTLY SOURCED FROM MEXICO COULD SPIKE IN PRICE OR FORCE COOP BUYERS TO SEEK OUT ALTERNATIVE SUPPLIERS.

During the first Trump Administration, the Coop saw increased food prices—notably on imports like European cheeses—that rose in 2018 and 2019 and have never fallen.

While other factors have contributed to rising food costs in the U.S., additional tariffs would transfer additional costs to shoppers.

If the newly-threatened trade war with Mexico were to go into effect, Coop produce items currently sourced from Mexico could spike in price or force Coop buyers to seek out alternative suppliers. Current produce offerings imported from Mexico include avocados, blueberries, blackberries, broccolini, Persian cucumbers, garlic, lemons, limes, mangoes, peppers, scallions and certain tomatoes.

WAITING FOR THE ROLLOUT

How and when new tariffs will take effect remains unclear, especially as we don't yet know if the President-elect will be able to pass broad tariffs at the rates he boasted of during his campaign.

"We don't know how Trump's going to roll out new tariffs, but the worst case scenario is it happens fast and it happens broad[ly]," Kuehl said. "There's certainly one scenario where in January he announces he's doing tariffs around everybody. That's sort of how he did his tariffs in 2018." Kuehl added, "He didn't start his Administration that way, but when he did them, he did steel and aluminum tariffs on all countries globally. And it was a pretty big shock to the system."

The trade war sparked by the 2018 and 2019 Trump tariffs led to a spike in farm bankruptcies, which increased by 20% in 2019, even after a massive bailout from the Trump administration to prevent such an outcome.

"The farmer bailout did not have a noticeable difference in food prices. It was received by the farmers after the fact," Maxwell explained. "Farmers are price takers and not price makers."

US FARMERS HAVE TWO OTHER MAJOR WORRIES UNDER THE TRUMP ADMINISTRA-

TION: IMMIGRATION POLICY AND THE APPOINTMENT OF ROBERT F. KENNEDY, JR. TO LEAD THE U.S. FOOD AND DRUG ADMINISTRATION.

BEYOND TARIFFS

Beyond tariffs, U.S. farmers have two other major worries under the Trump Administration, said Kuehl: immigration policy and the appointment of Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. to lead the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

“Parts of the agricultural economy are very immigrant dependent,” he said. “Those would include produce, meat packing and dairy. You could see disruptions in U.S. food production if we see mass deportations and disrupt labor in those pieces of the farm economy.”

Such a disruption could lead not only to increased prices if farmers aren’t able to produce enough food to meet demand, but also food waste and culling of herds. During COVID-19 disruptions in food production, dairy farmers had to dump milk and farmers raising animals for meat had to cull herds, both possible scenarios if mass deportation lead to a farm labor shortage.

CALLS TO ACTION

Both Farmers for Free Trade, Kuehl’s organization, and Farm Action, Maxwell’s organization, are focused on raising awareness around the dangers of broad-based tariffs and the specific impact on food production in the U.S.

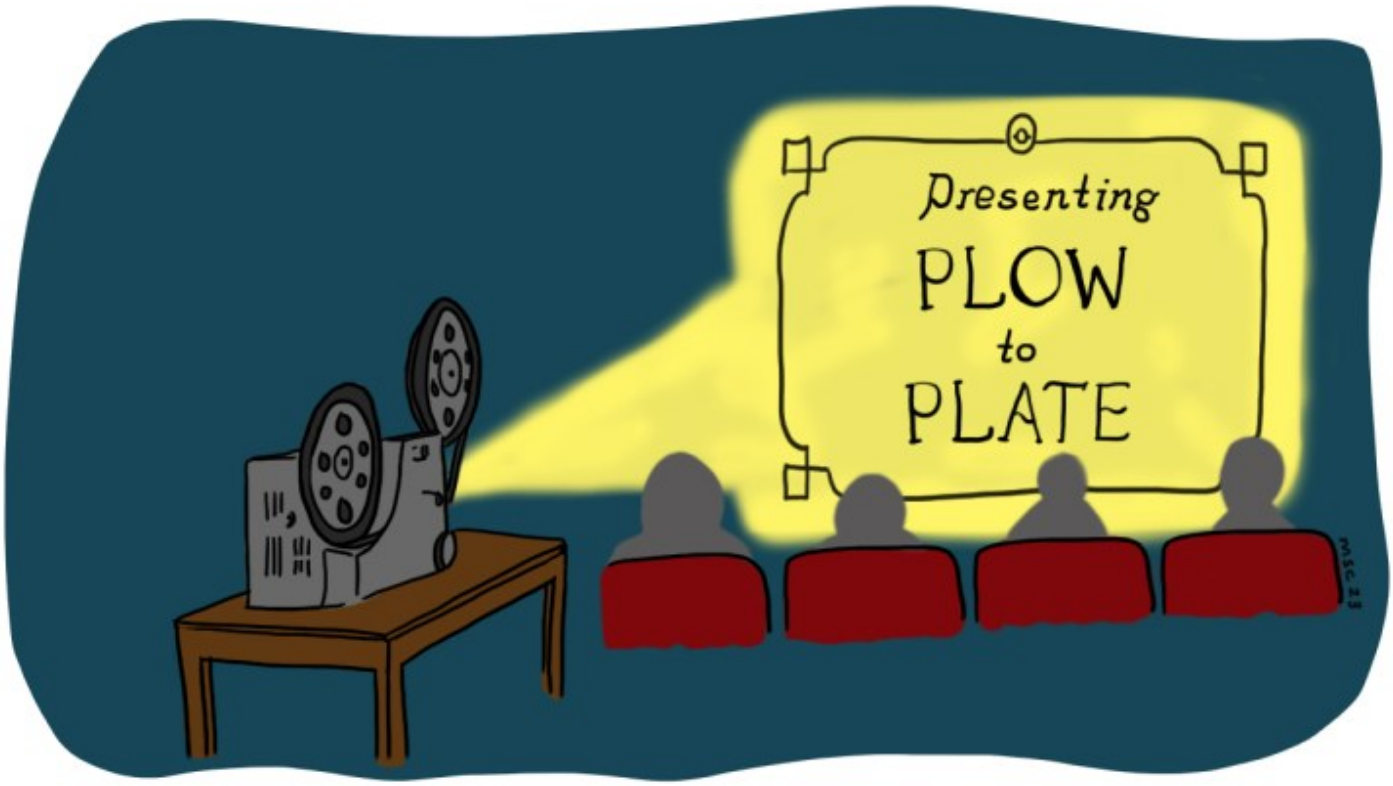
New Yorkers, Maxwell noted, can potentially call on Senator Chuck Schumer, the current majority leader and soon-to-be minority leader in the Senate, to encourage policymakers on both sides of the aisle to oppose broad-based tariffs.

Members interested in tracking these policy issues can look out for updates at the General Meeting—and reported in the *Gazette*—from the International Trade Educa-

tion Squad.

PLOW TO PLATE FILM REVIEW: THE BIGGEST LITTLE FARM

March 24, 2026



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 ele-

ments. 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.


OFFICIAL SELECTION SUNDANCE FILM FESTIVAL
WINNER BOULDER INT'L FILM FESTIVAL
OFFICIAL SELECTION TORONTO INT'L FILM FESTIVAL
WINNER HAMPTONS INT'L FILM FESTIVAL
OFFICIAL SELECTION TELLURIDE FILM FESTIVAL
"MOTHER NATURE has never been more INSPIRING."
– Alice Waters
the Biggest little Farm
COMING SOON

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.

FARM.ONE SPRINGS UP ON BERGEN STREET

March 24, 2026

By Hayley Gorenberg

After an overwhelming sensation of saltiness, my mouth buzzes like it's filled with Pop Rocks candy. I'm chewing a nubby, bright yellow bud of the *Acmella oleracea* flower, which is popularly called the toothache plant—and sometimes dubbed the "electric daisy."

I crunch on the flower courtesy of a botanical tasting tour of the local urban hydroponic gardens that constitute Farm.One, located within walking distance of Barclays Center. The vibrant tour also featured a superhot mustard green that made my eyes water, as well as other tamer but ultra-flavorful—and frankly gorgeous—edible petals and microgreens.

FARM.ONE RECIRCULATES 700 GALLONS OF FILTERED CITY TAP WATER TO CULTI-

VATE ABOUT 150 VARIETIES OF HERBS, LEAFY GREENS AND EDIBLE FLOWERS AT A TIME.

Several times each week, the Prospect Heights facility welcomes groups of visitors to don blue shoe coverings and hairnets for a look at—and a taste of—myriad plants grown year-round indoors, using a water-based nutrient solution rather than soil.

The tours give participants a close-up of the hydroponics facility, which bristles with full-spectrum LEDs above 3,000 feet of growing space. Farm.One uses inert “grow media” and recirculates 700 gallons of filtered city tap water to cultivate about 150 varieties of herbs, leafy greens and edible flowers at a time.

After beginning as a membership-driven, subscription-based system, Farm.One converted to a direct retail approach. Neighbors can buy boxes of greens, herbs, flowers and other products online or at the farm, either as single purchases or on a recurring schedule. Farm.One is open 3–8 p.m. most days, and customers can purchase and sip on botanical beverages in the front room, alongside rows of growing plants.

Inside Farm.One's hydroponic gardens. Photo by Caroline Mardok.

Farm.One boasts hard-to-beat freshness, tempting individual customers to purchase just-harvested greens and flowers in sturdy, reusable containers, barcoded and requiring a deposit to incentivize return. Bri Fronczak, an experience guide at Farm.One, tied freshness to maximizing health benefits, remarking that harvested plants lose nutritional value over time. "Once you cut a plant, it wants to decompose," Fronczak said. Farm.One buyers are practically grazing when they visit. "If you look and say, 'I want that plant!' we will go and cut it for you," she said.

In addition to working with seed outfits to select hundreds of different plants at a time, Farm.One also maintains relationships with bug dealers. The facility purchases ladybugs and assassin bugs to release within the building, naturally combating pests like aphids. Even with a biosecure space, pests get in—especially when relatively warm winters don't kill them off. Staff clean the space regularly and preventively, and they wear designated clothing and shoes that don't leave the building.

A bicycle delivery service ferries orders from Farm.One—located at 625 Bergen Street, only a few minutes' walk from the Coop—to restaurants and bars within a four-mile radius. Farm.One advertises that they have "supplied the best restaurants in New York with edible flowers, rare herbs, micro and salad greens," since 2016, and offers a "sample drop," visit or discussion about products to any restaurateur looking to connect.

For business accounts, "everything is grown to order," which means "there's very little waste," according to Farm.One's Front of House Manager, Francesca Santos-Vargas. Local establishments order perhaps three or four weeks in advance, in "continuous conversation" with Farm.One, she said. "We're thoughtfully growing—not just growing random stuff that's going to get tossed."

A worker holds an edible flower. Photo by Caroline Mardok.

Renato Poliafito, owner of the café Ciao, Gloria, at 550 Vanderbilt Avenue, delights customers by spreading toasts with avocado, hummus and ricotta, then topping them

off with Farm.One microgreens. “They’re very peppery, bright, citrusy,” he said. “Not only do they taste interesting, with a dynamic flavor profile, they’re also really beautiful and colorful. When presenting the toasts and dishes, you’ll get a lot of ‘oohs’ and ‘ahs.’”

Poliafito, who also caters some events at Farm.One, feels the two ventures share similar philosophies. Farm.One advertises that the farm was built “to be sustainable to the highest standard, equitable in employment, beneficial to the community, and, most importantly, *delightful*.” Poliafito echoed these sentiments when describing Ciao, Gloria. “We’re a daytime café, we’re trying to use fresh, local when possible, and I can’t imagine it getting any more local than around the corner,” he said. “It’s a great match for us. We have the same outlook on business, trying to support community and be well-received.”

WORKING THE FARM

In the course of maintaining an indoor, vertical farming facility that grows food with “zero pesticides,” Farm.One professes an ethos of hiring for “long-term careers, not ‘gigs’… with health insurance, dental, vision, life insurance and other benefits” and advertises “a unique experience for people looking to start a career in urban indoor agriculture.”

> PART OF ADDRESSING FOOD AND CLIMATE NEEDS WITH HYDROPONICS INCLUDES TAKING ADVANTAGE OF URBAN SPACES THAT CUT THE DELIVERY MILES AND CARBON FOOTPRINT FOR FOOD.

The farm’s employees have often previously worked on outdoor farms, and share a keen interest in sustainability. Farm.One’s Kate Ginna grew up in New York and “had no relationship to where [her] food was coming from.” Her background now includes having worked on a saffron farm in France.

Fronczak, who has experience with a community supported agriculture (CSA) operation that works with family farms, wanted to work “in a climate-positive, forward-thinking job.” She acknowledged that climate news can be “devastatingly sad,” but also opined: “It doesn’t have to be that way!”

Part of addressing food and climate needs with hydroponics includes taking advantage of urban spaces that cut the delivery miles and carbon footprint for food. Indoor urban hydroponic gardening also allows more food growth year-round, since, as Francesca Santos-Vargas, Farm.One’s front of house manager, said, “Weather doesn’t really exist here.”

A worker at Farm.One. Photo by Caroline Mardok.

Hydroponics and other alternatives to soil-based farming often spur debates about commitment to soil health. Santos-Vargas, who has experience in environmental engineering, suggested that a facility on Bergen Street avoided such tensions, though, since “there was never going to be dirt on this plot of land.”

Santos-Vargas arrived at Farm.One after “a decade working in, and opening, some of New York City’s premier cocktail bars and restaurants.” Farm.One heralded her arrival as an employee whose “love of all things sustainable started in the New Jersey highlands, back when [she] was an engineering student, volunteering as a beekeeper and growing [her] own plants and wildflowers for the first time.”

FARM.ONE’S HYDROPONICS SETUP HAS ATTRACTED VISITORS FROM AROUND THE COUNTRY, INCLUDING ONE FROM THE MIDWEST INTERESTED IN FARMING INDOORS ABOVE A BASEMENT COMPUTER FACILITY.

Santos-Vargas maintains the experience “opened [her] eyes to the importance of biodiversity and supporting the development of more thoughtful farming practices in order to help mitigate global problems, like climate change and food security.”

In general, hydroponic systems with indoor grow rooms allow for precise control of temperature, humidity, light and other environmental factors. Growers who optimize these conditions can promote faster growth and higher yields. With sensors to monitor factors like pH, nutrient levels and temperature, hydroponics facilities aim to provide a stable, optimized growing environment.

Farm.One’s hydroponics setup has attracted visitors from around the country, including one from the Midwest interested in farming indoors above a basement computer facility. The envisaged aquaponics facility there would, ideally, use heat generated by the computing machinery, averting energy waste.

LEARNING AT THE FARM

Mizuna, sweet alyssum flower and other edible plants. Photos by Caroline Mardok.

Farm.One also hosts workshops and events on-site. A free Music for Plants event recently offered “ambient and luxurious music in a welcoming space surrounded by plants” and non-alcoholic botanical drinks to sample. A “plant-cutting swap” invited New Yorkers to bring their “rare and unusual plants to swap” and featured Farm.One plants. The Farm.One free “holiday mart” in December boasted bud vase arranging, card making with pressed flowers and other craft activities, as well as mini-tours.

A two-hour introduction to hydroponics class covers principles of hydroponics and hydroponic systems, climate and nutrients, overall management of the crop from seed to harvest, addressing pests without pesticides, and best practices for pruning and harvesting. A dozen participants at any level of experience can learn about growing herbs, greens and flowers indoors in a controlled environment with artificial light. “This introduction to the high-tech world of indoor growing will open your eyes to the possibilities of year-round, pesticide-free, high-quality, high-yield agriculture suitable for any size,” the course description suggests.

The small class offers hands-on experience “from seed to harvest,” guided by Farm.One’s director of farming, Kate Lodvikov, who is also an instructor at the New York Botanical Garden. It’s next offered on January 25 at 6:30 p.m., for $150, luring participants with descriptions of how their “entire class will be actually inside the hydroponic farm—there is no other hydroponic learning space like this!”

Farm.One offers wheelchair-accessible, small-group tours each week, tempting visitors to “taste herbs [they] guarantee you’ve never, ever tried before” and learn about leading hydroponic technology. The farm’s street-level pavilion also serves as a showroom and event space for receptions or discussions, a non-alcoholic bar class and brew lab, a site for kids’ cooking classes, and offers a view through “a glass garage bay door so people walking by can see the beautiful space.”

Hayley Gorenberg has worked in environmental justice and trained this spring with the Climate Reality Project.

SAFE FOOD COMMITTEE REPORT

March 24, 2026

PLOW TO PLATE PRESENTS: *THIS ORGANIC LIFE—HAWTHORNE VALLEY FARM*

By Adam Rabiner

This Organic Life is a television series found on HUDSY, a community-inspired app and media platform with a mission to bring the Hudson Valley "closer together online and in-person, fostering connection in innovative, collaborative and unique ways." Episode one, hosted by Wen-Jay Ying, owner and founder of Local Roots NYC, focuses on Hawthorne Valley Farm in Ghent, New York. In the course of Wen-Jay's visit to the farm, she talks to Executive Director Martin Ping, Field Vegetable and CSA Manager Todd Newlin, Dairy Herd Manager Jess Brobst and Creamery Manager Jeremy Shapiro. These conversations show that Hawthorne Valley Farm similarly fosters connection, community and innovation through its biodynamic and regenerative farming, farm store, Waldorf school and educational programs.

Ping, who oversees the whole operation, provides the big picture: a farm striving to create a balance between the land, animals, plants and people—all the more challenging due to climate change and COVID. He explains the need for imagination to at-

tempt this balance. The farm seeks to foster connections among co-workers, consumers, producers and members of the community, near and far. Like our own Food Coop, Ping sees the exchange of goods and services as being about relationships, not simply transactions. When you personally know the farmers who produce your food, the nourishment you receive from a meal exceeds its nutritional value. Ping rejects the market-based paradigms of industrial agriculture focused exclusively on balance sheets and profitability, and looks beyond them to determine the farm's return on investment. Admiring the beautiful Berkshire mountains in the distance, he points to his favorite peak, spreads his arms and pronounces that he is among the one-tenth of one percent—one of the wealthiest men on the planet.

THE CYCLE OF LIFE ON A FARM

Todd Newlin explains how the farm makes compost, laying piles of food waste and other organic matter in covered windrows. The compost is not for direct use on any vegetable crop but for cover crops which will eventually be plowed into the earth in preparation for the subsequent vegetables. The cover crop's purpose is not simply to strengthen the soil and hold the land in place, but also to enrich the soil by adding organic matter like nitrogen. Newlin is harking back to the farming practices of the original Native American stewards of the land, who respected and replicated the natural systems, which resemble a self-feeding circle. He concedes that it is tough but worth it: when achieved, the land is more resilient and the vegetables, with roots deep in the rich soil, taste better.

Wen-Jay was fortunate to visit Jess Brobst on the very morning that Bertha gave birth to a baby bull. Jess explains that the act of giving birth turned Bertha into a cow. Before that, she was actually a heifer. Bertha, who still has her placenta attached, is part of the B line. Her baby's name will start with B to better track its lineage. The placenta, which is nutritionally rich, will be left for Bertha to eat if she desires. Jess hypothesizes that some cows do this instinctually, to clean up the birth site and keep predators away. If not eaten, it will be added to the compost heap. Jess points out a lame bull lying nearby who may be put down if he cannot recover. She then points at

the newborn (perhaps to be named Billie) and says these two animals are a great example of the cycle of life on a farm.

THE HUDSON VALLEY IS A MAJOR SUPPLIER OF OUR COOP

Jeremy Shapiro demonstrates how Hawthorne Valley milks its cows, with a mechanical suction device attached to the teats on the udder. Each cow can give anywhere from five to ten gallons a day, more or less, depending on the soil and grass or particular cow. He explains that smaller dairy farmers have a hard time competing with larger operations due to the cost structures and lack of economies of scale. He observes that the dairy industry as a whole is suffering from less demand due to changing dietary habits and the belief that cows contribute disproportionately to methane production and global warming.

One can only look forward to future episodes featuring Gopal, Kinderhook and Deep Roots farms. We are fortunate that the Hudson Valley is a major supplier of our Coop.

This Organic Life—Hawthorne Valley Farm, coming up on Tuesday, January 10, 2023, at 7 p.m.

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

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THE VIEW FROM HEPWORTH FARMS

March 24, 2026

Nearly end-of-season cherry tomatoes (and some heirloom tomatoes) from Hepworth Farms for sale on the shopping floor at PS-FC.

COOP PROVIDERS REFLECT ON A RAPIDLY CHANGING MARKET

By Frank Haberle

We are just a few years away from the 50th anniversary of the Park Slope Food Coop (PSFC). For almost as many years, the Coop has relied on Hepworth Farms, a 500-acre Hudson Valley agricultural farm that stood with us for decades, and continues to-day as our largest single farm partner. Through times of prosperity and economic downturn—and through climate crises like Superstorm Sandy and recent flood-ing—Hepworth Farms and PSFC have worked together to ensure that fresh, organic produce at affordable prices remains a privilege available to PSFC's working mem-bers. In planning their growing season each year, Hepworth Farms' "tell-us-what-y-ou-want-and-we'll-grow-it-for you" relationship with PSFC has ensured that an amaz-ing assortment of fresh tomatoes, zucchinis, lettuce and other produce—grown local-

ly, organically, and lovingly—can be served to our families on our dinner tables, in some cases on the same day they were picked from the vine.

Stacks of Honeycrisp apples from Hepworth Farms, in the walk-in at the PSFC.

In the past 18 months, this balanced, mutually supportive partnership has been tested by the onset of the COVID-19 crisis which, for the first time in our history, severely limited our members' access to our shopping aisles and decreased demand for fresh

products. The same limitations were felt on the supply side, by every farm and business that brings products into PSFC. For Hepworth Farms, the challenges of the 18--month slowdown demanded that they quickly pivot to meet changing needs, supply shortages and a more limited market at PSFC and elsewhere, while also facing the urgent need to protect the health and safety of their workers. Much like PSFC, which is still struggling to get our members back in the habit of shopping in our aisles, Hepworth Farms faces a new business landscape that has shifted considerably. They have adapted to meet changing trends in the organic food market, the supply chain, the workforce, and the economy. However, like every other part of the food chain, they face a shifting market and an uncertain future.

Six 1/2-bushel boxes of Devoe Pears and one case of Cape Gooseberries, all from Hepworth Farms, in a walk-in at the PSFC.

COVID has taken a toll on both PSFC and Hepworth Farms, challenging both organizations to shift and adapt. “For years, PSFC has been a huge success,” Gail Hepworth, one of three co-operators of Hepworth Farms (along with Gerry Greco and Gail’s twin sister, Amy), observed. “Then, suddenly, the model was disrupted. The impact of COVID-19 was felt very deeply. Suddenly PSFC wasn’t able to cycle its members in like it used to. There were long lines and people didn’t want to wait in lines, and the member work shifts were suspended. Suddenly people were changing their habits and shopping elsewhere. PSFC needs to come back. It may need to make changes to be more appealing to a shifting market, but PSFC needs to come back and, again, serve as a robust success model for the whole world.”

A RELENTLESS COMMITMENT TO SUSTAINABLE FARMING PRACTICES

A seventh-generation farm that was first established in Milton, New York in 1818, Hepworth Farms transitioned in 1982 from traditional farming to dechemicalization and wholly-organic farming, under Amy’s guidance. Hepworth Farm’s methods are constantly evolving to ensure that the best practices in organic and sustainable farming are applied in each step of the food cycle. “For 40 years we have been building our understanding of what being a sustainable farm really means,” Amy said. “We’ve always been committed to a whole-farm-alive systems approach. This has only become more intensified in recent years with our commitment to biological farming [the creation of a sustainable soil system]. Today, biological agriculture teaches us to introduce microbes to improve the soil. It’s a steady, time intensive process to influence biology. It’s a complex dynamic that you have to navigate in the dark. You can’t see what’s going on in the soil beneath each plant, but you can see it in the health of the plant itself. Biological farming is going to take another decade to fully understand. For example, we’re now taking steps to introduce parasitic neomodes [tiny worms into our soil that attack beetles that harm produce. We’re introducing things into the soil to make it more balanced.”

> “THE PARK SLOPE FOOD COOP MAY NEED TO MAKE CHANGES TO BE MORE APPEALING TO A SHIFTING MARKET, BUT IT NEEDS TO COME BACK AND, AGAIN, SERVE AS A ROBUST SUCCESS MODEL FOR THE WHOLE WORLD.”

As Amy put it, “This work is about the acknowledgement and respect of the life force and the interconnected reality of life itself.” Gail adds that “Amy’s practices are putting things into the soil that prevent disease, that create healthy soils and build protective colonies around roots that allow our plants to be as healthy as they can be. Our practices keep evolving alongside the latest science, so that we can deliver the healthiest produce while taking care of and nurturing the soil. It’s more expensive and time intensive to grow plants this way, but it’s the right thing to do. We are committed to continuing the mission of organic farming: better soil means better food, which means healthier people. We still have a lot to learn about the evolving biology of farming this way. The more we learn about the soil the more we realize we don’t yet know.”

Devoe and Asian pears for sale at the PSFC.

NEW CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Fewer members shopping at PSFC has meant lower revenues for the Coop and for Hepworth Farms alike. Hepworth Farms has had to face a range of challenges in order to survive the COVID-19 crisis, and now faces numerous questions on how to move forward in a new market and a changed world. For the first time in its history Hepworth Farms faced a labor shortage, in part reflecting—as Gail pointed out—the general devaluing of work in our society. “Through this pandemic, people should have become more aware of the amazing work that goes into their food systems, and the essential role that farm workers play in their food systems. But farm workers are still extremely undervalued in our society. As farmers we are now paying a living wage to our workers, but people still can’t live decently and fully independently on these wages. There’s been a big culture shift in the last couple of years where real work, the practice of working hard, is being undervalued. People should be more aware of

where their food comes from and they should buy their food from places where workers are valued and supported. The relationship is important but people don't seem to value it."

Amy adds that the people who do come to work at Hepworth Farms—who can number up to 200 during the busiest seasons—quickly learn to appreciate the work and the role it plays in others' well-being. "The best part of my day is getting to work with the beautiful people who work here. I am so thankful for them. We all share a collective mindset of doing good work for others. The workers here know that they are really a part of something special. I think it's really important for people to understand where their food comes from, and it's just as important for them to understand that the people who plant, grow, pick, pack, and deliver their food love doing this work for them."

> "ALL FARMERS ARE TRYING TO SURVIVE. WHEN YOU'RE IN SURVIVAL MODE, OTHER PEOPLE MIGHT DO FUNNY THINGS. BUT WE'RE NOT COMPROMISING WHEN IT COMES TO AMY'S PRACTICES."

The economics of an independent farm are always challenging, especially during a pandemic. Amy said, "[PSFC General Coordinator] Joe Holtz once told me that 'from seed to sale, you are the creditors of the food system. You bring us the food, we sell it, and then we pay you.' We don't get paid until food is in the consumer's stomach. From seed to sale, we are creditors of food system." Added Gail, "We begin working on producing the food in March. We plan what we're planting and when. Then we plant the seeds. Then we grow the product, pick it, and deliver it. But we don't get paid until 30 to 60 days after someone has eaten it."

Inflation and supply chain concerns that have impacted all levels of the economy have hit family-run farms like Hepworth Farms especially hard. "The cartons we needed for our cherry tomatoes, we could not get in time to sell them," Gail said, "When we need parts for a tractor that breaks down, it takes longer to find them." Inflation is

creeping up, without changing the prices the farm can charge for its products. “Everything we have to purchase,” Gail adds, “is more expensive. But the price of food we sell does not match this rise. The increased pricing is still not filtering back to farmers.”

Amy added that “the worst thing this year was when we couldn’t afford to glean for the food bank—everything became so financially stressful. We have felt so good about harvesting and giving food away in the past. We have to do what we can, but this was the most internally disruptive thing that happened on the farm this year.”

“Right now, all farmers are trying to survive,” Gail said. “When you’re in survival mode other people might do funny things. But we’re not compromising when it comes to Amy’s practices, and our commitment to producing the healthiest produce possible. Three years ago we thought this was sustainable. But sustainability is expensive.”

REFORGING CONNECTIONS

As the Coop continues its efforts to bounce back fully and resume our success as a model of cooperative partnerships, local farmers are eager to see members recommit to shopping and working here. “The great thing about our relationship with PSFC,” Gail said, “has always been that people had the opportunity to know who their farmers are, and where their food has come from. This relationship has been such an anchor for our farm, but the pandemic has separated us from you, and you from us. We want to partner with you, to reconnect with your mission, to have you reconnect with our mission. Be connected to our mission—you have a profile population that’s perfect. We need to reestablish relationship. Amy has taken our farm through many generations of changes. Tell us what you want us to grow and we’ll grow it!”

To learn more about Hepworth Farms and the work Gail and Amy Hepworth are doing in the Hudson Valley, please visit www.hepworthfarms.com.