



# A YEAR AT MAGGIE'S FARM

## WINTER'S TALE

### BY KIM MOTYLEWSKI

In a corner of Maggie's barn known as the Creamery Room, about 40 chicks crowd in the corner of their nesting box, having fled as far as they could from the group of visitors that just entered. At five days old, the chicks are little more than downy feather puffs in tan, cream, brown and grey. The date is February 21st. The chicks arrived by mail, from a hatchery in Iowa, one day after birth. A large light hangs close above the tiny birds, warming them. The room is otherwise cold and houses crates of root crops, packed in sawdust and sand.

The stored apples, parsnips, squash, carrots and potatoes have been winter staples for the ten adult students enrolled here in The Farm School's Practical Farm Training Program. The program aims to equip student-farmers with the skills and hands-on experience they'll need to work on the land, or work for it.

Some of the novices recently graduated high school, others college. Still others are pursuing life changes at mid-career. They have been living at this 180-acre diversified farm in Athol, called Maggie's Farm since October last year. *Edible Boston* is chronicling their year of training.

A few weeks earlier, the apprentices built the chicks' nesting box – an exercise of the carpentry skills they've been learning over the winter. The box is fitted with a removable partition that allows their pied-a-terre to grow as they do.

Over the winter, knowledgeable staff also guided the students through installing a sink outside the lower barn; sharpening and oiling field tools; repairing the tine cultivator, replacing old light fixtures and crop planning. These skill-building lessons have all, in one way or another, pointed toward the arrival of spring: the housing of these chicks, the birthing of lambs and the start of a new growing season.

By April, the baby birds - Araucanas, Black Australorps and New Hampshire Reds – will grow into awkward adolescents, not nearly as cute as before, but big enough to occupy both "rooms" of the bird

box.

These chicks are destined to become one of two flocks of layers at the farm. Their eggs are sold commercially. A third flock provides eggs for the residents. It'll take about a year for the newborns to reach peak productivity. They'll produce reliably through their second year. Then in their third year, egg production will drop off. At that point the birds will be slaughtered. New birds will then be brought in to take their place.

In early January some of the student-farmers participated in the processing of mature layers. Others observed, and still others declined the task entirely. It was an experience that proved difficult for many, but meaningful for all.

The procedure followed at Maggie's is designed to be quick and humane, but still, if it's the first time you've inverted a chicken into a metal cone, guided its head through the opening at the bottom, then severed its jugular vein, the experience is intense. Next, you scald the carcass to loosen its feathers, pluck those feathers, eviscerate the bird you've been feeding and watering for months, remove its head and feet, then wash and chill it.

Patrick Farmer, an apprentice who seems headed for a teaching career, wrote this about chicken processing in his weekly, on-farm newsletter, *Ridgetop Runner*: "There are few moments more solemn on the farm than the taking of a life. In a sense of course, that's our business, the transfer of energy from plants and animals to humans in the form of food..... It struck me with the first spray of warm blood on my forearm that this is a sacred act...I found myself at the slaughter confronted by the inescapable reality of the life and death that are our common fate."

## Kitchen Wisdom

A week later, four of the students chop vegetables, singe pinfeathers and submerge the chicken carcasses in large soup pots. They are taking stock of their actions.

"I'd never seen anything like that before," says Bonnie Cherner of the slaughter. "It was not easy." But, she adds, "They were our birds... it feels good to be using what's left of them."

Large egg businesses might simply dispose of old layers, which don't make especially good eating. But at Maggie's, they are cooked down into stock, nourishing farm and farmers one last time.

The students have been reading and talking about the nation's food system, personal consumption choices, and eating as close to home as they can. Michael Pollan's, *The Omnivore's Dilemma* has been their main text, the fields outside these doors, their main food source.

All this has given Jennifer Sands, a vegetarian, new insight to the cycling of nutrients among plants, animals and people. It's caused her to soften her views on meat eating. She now realizes that many of the soy-based, protein replacements are heavily processed. That reality does not square well with intentions to eat locally grown, wholesome, simple foods.

"What would happen to these chickens if we weren't making stock?" she wonders. "It's great people want to eat them and take nourishment from them. It's not personally for me, but I don't see a problem with it." Still, she feels eating factory-farmed chicken is a different matter.

As the cooks talked, it became clear that many of winter's most memorable moments have involved the animals. Out tumbled stories, like the one about Rusty, a resident bovine, assumed to be a sterile steer, until the vet declared him "viable."

Another involved Fermin Hernandez, one of the apprentices, and a native of rural Panama. His girlfriend, Lisa Parsell, another of the students, explained: "We had to castrate one of the new calves. Then we had to vaccinate all the calves." One calf was not cooperating. "Someone said as a side comment, 'we could lasso him,'" continued Jennifer Core, the program coordinator. "So Lisa looks at Fermin, and Fermin looks at Lisa and she says 'would you lasso her'? Fermin agrees to this, and out comes the lasso."

Fermin had learned to handle a rope as a teenager. To everyone's surprise, he lassoed the calf on the first try.

"It was a thing of beauty," says Core.

A visit from a rented bull also made a big impression.

"Fabio", as the students affectionately dubbed him, had come to Maggie's for 45 days of breeding with their small herd of Hereford-Angus cows.

"He was mellow at first," recounts Core, but he grew increasingly feisty and ornery over time. When his handler arrived to collect him, Fabio did not want to go.

Core often speaks of "being in relation with the animals" on the farm, and "creating trust with them." She offered to help round up the bull with the group's usual technique of coaxing and luring. "But Fabio was not into it," she says. He got agitated and jumped right over a fence.

"It was amazing," remembers Sands. "He was very agile. But as he was doing that, he kicked laterally," and struck a cow with a glancing blow. "That cow would have been hurt if she'd been closer." Sands realized they were all vulnerable. This was one strong animal.

At the direction of the handler, the students took up fence posts and attempted to pressure the bull toward the truck. In the end it took brute strength, and some brutish behavior to get him loaded.

"It was just intense to be there with all the energy of the bull," remembers Sands.

In retrospect, Core says the group realized that "Fabio was not one of us, and it became clear in that moment. Oh right, he has his own

set of rules. We're not really in relation with him."

## Italian Lessons

All of this excitement came before the big February fieldtrip. "Benvenuto!" proclaimed the headline on Patrick Farmer's February 17th newsletter. The apprentices had arrived at Tenuta di Spannocchia, an 1,100-acre agricultural estate in the hills of Tuscany.

For each of the last four Februarys, the students at Maggie's Farm have been invited to spend three weeks on this land just outside Siena, now a nature preserve, artists' retreat and a sustainable farm.

For 800 years or more, Italian sharecroppers worked this land. Now operated by the American heirs of its last Italian owner, the estate is the centerpiece of a non-profit foundation with a mission to "encourage global dialogue about sustaining cultural landscapes."

"Driving up through the rolling hills, dotted with pastures and vineyards, the sandy stone tower of the medieval castle is bathed in golden sunlight," writes Farmer. He is overwhelmed by the beauty and history of the place.

The experience at Spannocchia is meant as part of the broad agricultural education offered to the student-farmers. And frankly, preparing beds, stacking wood and building fences in Tuscany sure beats February in Central Massachusetts.

Back home, the group had visited a number of farm businesses - a suburban vegetable operation, a regional yogurt maker, and a diversified farm and craft center powered by adults with special needs. They'd also networked at an organic farming conference.

This Italian expedition offered what Core calls "an opportunity to see food and farming in a more intact food culture," among people who prize traditional ways of growing, preparing and consuming foods more than most Americans.

The Tenuta di Spannocchia produces several regional specialties: olive oil, a sweet wine called Vin Santo and salumi - a category of salt-cured meats - from their heritage pigs, the Cinta Senese. The Slow Food organization describes Cinta Senese as "the only Tuscan native pig breed to avoid extinction. The Cinta Senese has a long snout and a black coat with a white band around the chest - hence the name, cinta meaning 'sash' in Italian."

These pigs are apparently ill suited for modern feedlot conditions. At Spannocchia they roam freely in the large wooded acreage, feeding on chestnuts and other delicacies.

The visiting apprentices were on hand for the "transformation" of a few of these pigs. In his March 3rd newsletter Farmer reported:

"Four of the heritage pigs we have been caring for here at Spannocchia suddenly disappeared in the dead of the night... 'Don't worry,' Riccio, the farm manager, assured us. 'The pigs have gone to slaughter, but they'll be back by noon...'"

Later that morning, a delivery truck pulled up to the farm: "It was a shock to see the dead animal still intact from bristly snout to curly tail. Italian slaughterhouses leave all the butchering to the customer, so our object for the week would be literally to transform every last bit of these animals into meat.

First came the crude butchering and the prosciutto. Mike and Meredith helped Riccio cut away the back legs of each carcass to be buried in salt for three weeks and then hung to age for a year or more. The rest of their day was spent chopping furiously to divide the whole carcasses into smaller parts that would be needed to make the other products.

Tuesday, Jennifer and Bonnie helped make sausage and salami, which meant grinding up lots of meat and squeezing it into casings to hang and age. Both of them were up to their arms in a huge pile of ground meat and fat, kneading it all together to make a uniform product under the watchful eyes of Riccio and the butcher.

On the last day, Bill and Patrick were in charge of making lard and

head cheese. For headcheese, the bits of meat too small to be cut are boiled out of the head, ears, tails, and kidneys. While this was cooking away, the fat was ground and boiled in another pot to produce liquid lard and little bacon bits called *ciccioli*. I was skeptical when Riccio salted these cracklings and offered them to us as a Transformation Room snack, but after one heavenly handful I was sold.

As a celebration of these animals, we ate a lot of pork products that week. Even when some tastes were unfamiliar, it felt pretty satisfying to be nourished by animals we had nurtured ourselves.”

**Seedlings** Back in Athol, field manager Nate Frigard, and Dan Greene – a second year apprentice and staff member – began the greenhouse seed sowing routine that will, over the next four months, transform barren, winter fields into bountiful, summer ones.

They hauled hundreds of seed trays, 1,500 pounds of bagged potting mix, several heating mats and a few hand tools from Maggie’s barn to a rented greenhouse, about three miles up the road. They set up 12 pallet-topped tables, a giant trough and a hose system for watering. Above them, a blower inflates the space between two layers of thick plastic that form the skin of this solar-heated oasis. As the apprentices began their final week in Tuscany, Frigard and Greene planted over 100 flats of onions and shallots.

Since then, Mondays have become greenhouse day. Every week through June, teams of two or three students will fill flats with soil, sow seeds, write-up labels and water. The challenge of greenhouse work, remarks Frigard, is attention to detail – noticing temperature and humidity changes and watering just enough, but not too much to account for those. His job is to convey those observation skills, and the subtle responses he calls “instinctual,” to the student-farmers. The results of their joint effort will show in the quality of the plants carried out of here, set in cold frames to acclimate, and finally planted in the field.

The greenhouse-sowing schedule is a five-page table of crop names, planting dates, numbers of plants needed, and the amount of field space those plants will take up. Another spreadsheet like it details a field-sowing plan for crops that can be started outdoors. Frigard has spent many winter hours developing these schedules and the Master Crop Plan from which they are derived – a collection of spreadsheets that represent the farm’s intended produce, everything from basil to zucchini, in numbers.

Frigard led the apprentices in three days of lessons on how to conceive plans like these. They began with their goal of a 135-member CSA, the weekly demand at farmers’ markets and the ten acres of land available to them. They considered timing – of growing days to maturity, harvest windows and perishability. They projected yields for a variety of crops and discussed the categories they fall into – those that are direct seeded and those transplanted. Must they be planted many times, like lettuces, or just a few times, like tomatoes?

It was “more long division than I’ve done since I was in school,” remarked apprentice Karen Johnston.

The group considered the pros and cons of different varieties – heirlooms, organic and hybrids. They weighed their preferences and, of course, cost. Finally the students translated all that data into a seed order.

Says Frigard, “I’m feeling great about the upcoming season. I’m glad to have ten students this year to help with the fieldwork.” He’s planning for an increase in the number of CSA members by 35.

If all goes as planned, members will enjoy a tremendous variety of organic vegetables in a rainbow of colors, from red to purple with every shade of green in between. They’ll find leafy lettuces, herbs and cress, in their weekly boxes; sturdy roots of carrot, parsnip and turnip; aromatic onions, garlic and shallots; palate-cleansing cucumbers and

celery; spicy radishes and arugula, just to name a few. They’ll receive four kinds of eggplant, five types of carrots, 17 varieties of tomatoes, many of them heirlooms and peppers both hot and sweet. Fresh eggs will be available too.

Before all of that goodness grows; before the long days of fieldwork that this growing takes, the apprentices will be spending some long nights in April, attending expectant sheep. With seven ewes due to deliver, the student-farmers will keep overnight vigils. They’ll look for signs of labor, and stand ready to assist if they are needed. Last year, as one ewe struggled to deliver her second babe, an apprentice reached in and pulled the lamb out. But mostly it’s just about being there – making sure mamas and lambs are nursing well, and witnessing the wonders of life at Maggie’s Farm. ♦

*Part One of this series can be found in our Winter 2008 issue at [www.edibleboston.net](http://www.edibleboston.net).*

**CORRECTION:** We regret that in Part I, the last name of Maggie and Bob Rouleau was misspelled.

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