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## FARM ON!

By Abby Luby

and the pursuit of young farmers

Photography by Jennifer May

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Tessa Edick (center) with her next generation of young farmers

If you want to become a farmer in the 21st century, how would you do it? Reviving and maintaining the world's oldest means of subsistence today isn't so easy. But there are a few takers. In this era ruled by invisible, teeming micro-circuitry, taking plough to soil is a practice seeing a tangible resurgence.

The allure of small-scale farming has attracted gentlemen farmers who romanticize turning back the clock and being one with the earth, the select few making little difference to the farmer population. The serious challenge is introducing a new generation of young women and men to the life of agriculture, generating excitement and a sense of industriousness and teaching them how to stay economically viable in their farming endeavor. And there is, of course, the independent farmers' main competition: Big Ag. America's vast sprawl of industrial farm factories has monopolized the food industry since the end of World War II, stacking mass-produced food on supermarket shelves that is overly processed and laden with chemicals, but deceptively cheap and always in season.

Enter the local food movement. In the last few decades people have seen the importance of eating locally grown organic food and drinking milk from the dairy farm down the road. Overall, making regional produce accessible has been a boon to Hudson Valley farmers. But these farmers are a fast dwindling breed. Surveys reveal the average age today of the American farmer is 58. In 1982 it was 50. Additionally, according to a Glynwood report published in 2010, only 17% of Hudson Valley land is farmland, 10% less than it was in 2007. High school and college students are less than inspired to pursue careers in agricultural; enticing young people to farming is like wooing a sculptor to a cookie-cutter assembly line.

## EMPIRE BUILDER

Stepping up to the challenge is the nonprofit foundation FarmOn! and its founder and executive director, Tessa Edick. Since its inception in 2012, FarmOn! has pledged to educate and motivate prospective young farmers, sometimes as young as school-aged students. Edick has also blazed a trail into the regional public schools, brandishing the foundation's credo: Teach youngsters the importance of eating local to secure Hudson Valley farmers' future economic stability.

“Agriculture hasn’t been lifted up to the noble profession it really is,” declares Edick. As the prime mover and shaker of FarmOn!, Edick is tireless and seems to contain reserves of energy that reach deep. Last year, it took her only five months to raise \$1.5 million to purchase the 220-acre Empire Farm in Copake, 100 of whose acres are farmable land. The property is now being used as an educational incubator to allow students exposure to a functioning farm, solidifying the foundation’s base of operations. “Now everyone can have a direct experience of what a farm actually is,” says Edick, who last fall authored *Hudson Valley Food & Farming (American Palate, 2014)*, a book that praises regional farmers for growing and producing fresh, nutrient-rich food that directly impacts our physical health and the health of the local economy.

Empire Farm is a 200-year-old farm formerly owned by Henry Astor, a 19th-century equine enthusiast who raised horses on the property. Of the eight structures on the farm, the main buildings are now being renovated and remodeled and the barns are being refurbished. A huge, organic victory garden will redefine the former oval-shape horse track. “The soil here has never been treated with chemicals and is like black gold,” Edick says. But the 90 acres on the adjacent hillside is a different story and requires a three-year program to cleanse the soil of residual pesticides to eventually grow certified organic produce.

“We’re now seeding with organic alfalfa seed,” says Jeremy Peele of Herondale Farm, a neighboring farm. Peele’s farm, one of the 20 regional farms that Edick has befriended, is known for its organic, grass-fed livestock. Peele has helped Edick lease out the 90 acres to a local farmer who, as part of the deal, will pay for the seed, till the land, plant and harvest the alfalfa to feed to his cows.

Edick’s office is in the roadside farm house, but major construction is in a larger building that boasts a 3,000-square-foot community room reserved for talks and special dinners, two professionally customized kitchens—one for residential use, the other an industrial kitchen for teaching—both connected by a prep room. Upstairs, the four bedrooms and four bathrooms will house students, visiting chefs and their families. “When chefs come and cook or speakers visit, we will invite them to stay for several days,” Edick explains. “This building will be particularly useful for fund-raisers, where chefs can meet the farmers and where we will bridge the urban to rural.”

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Casting a wide net and connecting anybody and everybody who is a part of the local food chain (we all eat so that means all of us) is Edick's driving modus operandi. From Hudson Valley farmers and business owners to culinary celebs like chefs Jean-Georges Vongerichten and David Burke, Edick has created a widening, social latticework forming a tight weave of group support. "Community and food means building local connections that fortify the region," she says. Contributing with "at cost" materials to renovate Empire Farm are companies such as John Deere and Benjamin Moore; local, organic seeds to plant Empire Farm's victory garden are from Turtle Tree Seed Company of Camphill Village in Copake and the Hudson Valley Seed Library in Accord. Local wood is being used for farm renovations, large iron hinges in the main building were purchased from the local farrier Peter Buckabee of Ghent.

The vibes at Empire Farm glow with promise for a new generation of farmers. "We want to use agriculture to get kids a little more dialed in," says Ted Hennessy, a career development specialist who has been guiding local high school students for 27 years and who advises the FarmOn! Foundation Farm Academy, a new incubator/apprenticeship program starting this summer that will offer 16- to 20-year-olds a chance to live on Empire Farm for a semester and receive a direct hands-on experience they can relate to in the classroom.

"We'd like to engage young people in productive pathways in the local food system. We have a niche business here in Columbia County, a robust market where there's a demand for fresh produce from restaurants in New York City," adds Hennessy. He believes that teens can learn how to develop a proven business model through their exposure to farming at the academy, even if they don't want to plunge headlong into an agricultural pursuit. "Along with farming basics, we want to be able to teach entrepreneurial strategies so that students can identify a market niche for a business idea and have the tools to grow that idea into something big. At the very least, they will learn how to start a business that could have countless benefits for the local economy."

FarmOn! Foundation Farm Academy will take applications in September 2015, and the first formal semester is slated to begin in January 2016. Edick has praised such organizations as Hawthorne Valley Farm School, Stone Barns Center for Food &

Agriculture, Cornell Small Farms, among others, that have already laid the groundwork to support and nurture potential young farmers. What distinguishes FarmOn!'s approach from these more erudite and collegiate programs is the outreach to an even younger set, young teens, who tend to drop out of the high school–college education stream and fall into the gap of indecision. Edick is pursuing college accreditation from SUNY (State University of New York) so students enrolled in the FarmOn! Foundation Farm Academy can receive college credit for their courses taken at Empire Farm.

“These are the kids that usually go the vocational track,” Edick explains. “If we can make local food a touch-point, we can prepare them—whether they go the vocational track of food entrepreneur or apprentices on family farms. Or, we can send them to a SUNY college with credits they earned at the Farm Academy.”

FarmOn! already has a track record of educating teens from the foundation's free Camp FarmOn! summer camp that started in 2011 in partnership with Cornell Cooperative, and initially operated from Columbia–Greene County Community College but this August will be held at Empire Farm for the first time with 20 children in attendance.

The curriculum was geared to 8th, 9th and 10th graders who visited farms and hooked up with either an agricultural or business mentor. Campers were organized in teams who were challenged to create a business model concept that would work in the world of agriculture and then pitch their ideas to a FarmOn! “shark tank.”

Hennessy recalls a camper's idea was to create a specialty farm equipment co-op for items farmers needed seasonally. “They figured out the cost of insurance, came up with a website—it was impressive.” Of those first campers, one went to culinary school and another pursued agricultural engineering.

“I wanted to lobby for the farmer, so I went to the chefs I knew and told them that if they came to Empire Farm and cooked, I would source food within 20 to 40 miles.”





Its not all planting and harvesting—practical skills like woodworking factor into the farming education at the camp

## MILK MONEY

For years locally grown food advocates have tried to get Hudson Valley milk and produce into the local public school system, which seems a logical initiative, except for the tangle of bureaucracy that has stood in the way. In 2012 Edick reached beyond the existing obstacles and out to Dr. Sam Simon who runs Hudson Valley Fresh, a for-profit LLC dairy farmer partnership that distributes dairy products throughout the Mid-Hudson Valley, Long Island, New York City, New Jersey and Connecticut. The problem with getting fresh, locally produced milk into school cafeterias was not just the aforementioned bureaucracy but the cost, as school districts tend to accept the lowest possible bid for a milk contract. FarmOn! approached a few local school districts and offered to make up the difference, offering an additional five to seven cents per carton of milk for every student—an offer that was competitively low and hard to refuse. To date, FarmOn! Foundation Milk Money program currently funds Taconic Hills, Ichabod Crane, Germantown and Chatham school districts whose students get fresh milk, or as Simon puts it: “36 hours from cow to kid.” Starting in September 2015, Hudson, Rhinebeck and Red Hook school districts will also be part of the Milk Money program. Prospective districts for the 2015-2016 school year include Beacon, Poughkeepsie, Millbrook, Valley Central and Pawling.

“The program tells kids that here is something good that comes right from their backyard,” says Simon. “This type of education is integral to the local economy because of its future value.” Last month, 20 school districts met with FarmOn! to discuss how they can get the Milk Money program in their schools. According to Sandy McKelvey, a FarmOn! consultant who was at the meeting, 14 of the 20 schools filled out surveys and wanted to get involved. “The program and FarmOn! was extremely well received overall,” McKelvey says.

“Directors came up to us afterward and wanted to know the specifics. The general feeling in that room was so inspiring. They all want the best for their kids.” McKelvey is also implementing a farm-to school program in a growing number of Hudson Valley K–12 schools.



Edick's latest new initiative is to get local beef into the schools, and McKelvey started the process at the meeting. "We're trying to find out how often schools serve beef and what the cost would be. We need to have healthier foods in the cafeteria because hungry kids have difficulty learning. They need the proper fuel," insisted McKelvey.

## BALLS IN THE AIR

Edick is adept at fund-raising and seeking out those with deep pockets, but she actually shelled out a chunk of money of her own to get the foundation up and running. Her food consulting company, Culinary Partnership, has successfully marketed gourmet food products for over five years. Prior to that, dating back to 1999, she owned an award-winning food company, Sauces 'n Love, Inc., which she sold in 2010 and used the proceeds to start FarmOn! The first thing she did in the early stages of FarmOn! was visit about 200 farmers and ask them how she could help them.

"I wanted to lobby for the farmer," she says. "So I went to the chefs I knew and told them that if they came to Empire Farm and cooked, I would source food within 20 to 40 miles."

Wooing support by appealing to the palate and Edick's ability to bring gastro-glams to fund-raisers is a win-win for both FarmOn! and attendees. Last summer, one benefit boasted a menu by acclaimed chef Jean-Georges Vongerichten who used ingredients sourced entirely from regional farms, another fund-raiser saw 10 celebrity chefs and six acclaimed mixologists strut their stuff at the Fish and Game Farm in Hudson, and a later event featured the popular TV host Dr. Mehmet Oz and men's fashion designer John Varvatos (Varvatos's wife, Joyce, has been the FarmOn! board president for four years). Last fall, the official opening of Empire Farm featured locavore culinary diva Alice Waters of Chez Panisse.

To shine the culinary spotlight on the farmer, Edick is keenly enterprising in how she shortens the route from freshly picked Hudson Valley produce to the urban food plate. She partnered with ABC Kitchen in New York City and created a metro-based CSA (community-supported agriculture) group who could pick up their share of produce that was picked that same day. Edick claims the ABC CSA brought in over \$70,000 to 30 Hudson Valley farms. Starting in June, FarmOn! launches their children's farm program at the Bronx Zoo, where over the summer, kids can plant seeds at the garden and see them grow as well as take seeds home. Building on what she has in hand and

bartering for more is how Edick scales the wall of financial stability for the foundation. Having a presence at the Bronx Zoo gave her a leg up to approach Applegate Natural and Organic Meats and offer to promote their newest product Half Time, a packaged children's lunch, by giving out free samples at the popular city zoo, in exchange for stamping "FarmOn!" on some of their products. Edick estimates the barter is worth about \$50,000 in advertising. "I try to get businesses on board by offering exposure," says Edick. "Sometimes cash is involved, others are straight barterers."

Edick readily admits that raising money for FarmOn! isn't easy.

"You try to do it in a cool way, instead of the usual request for funding. You have to have a really good strategy when you're selling your soul and your passion and asking folks to 'please believe in me.' In effect, you're a banker for a cause. It's crazy."

**FarmOn!**

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[farmonfoundation.org](http://farmonfoundation.org)



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