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Larry Cross of Amawalk Farm shows off his Bull's Blood beets (opposite).

nature calls

A new heyday for the gentleman farmer



A little over a hundred years ago food tasted very different. Fruits and vegetables were grown at nearby farms, yielding fresh, juicy, sweet flavor. Across the country, a seemingly endless patchwork of fields brought forth the nation's bounty. But a burgeoning population demanded

stepped-up production, and in the ensuing years farmers either sold their land to mammoth agri-businesses or to developers who redefined the rural landscape with sprawling housing developments.

Enter niche farming, a growing trend that is reinventing the gentleman farmer and is taking root right here in suburbia. Impassioned tillers of the earth are sprouting up everywhere, reclaiming former fertile fields and reviving the farm-to-plate journey of a century ago.

Lisa Schwartz is a perfect case in point. Having lived in Bedford Hills for 20 years and raised two children with her husband, Mark, who works in finance, Schwartz originally purchased an adjacent 35-acre property, a former farm, in order to preserve the land. The purchase, however, sparked Schwartz' interest in what could

be. **RAINBEAU RIDGE FARM**, a small, five-year-old enterprise, is the result.

"I was a farmer wannabe motivated by things like the Slow Food movement, getting back to the earth, growing food, being sustainable," recalls Schwartz. Once she got started, she decided to try her hand at cheesemaking. "As long as we were growing vegetables, we could raise goats to make goat's cheese," says Schwartz, who studied the art of making fromage in France. After a period of trial and error, her efforts paid off and in 2005 Rainbeau Ridge was certified to make and sell commercial

cheese. The farm's fresh-tasting feta and chèvre caught the attention of local restaurants such as Crabtree Kittle House, Blue Hill at Stone Barns, Rebecca's in Greenwich, Mt. Kisco Seafood, and the Darien Cheese Shop. The farm also has a community-agriculture partnership with about 25 shareholders who pay to get a box of homegrown produce each week in the summer and fall.

Schwartz, 51, is also committed to educating people of all ages about local farming, and joining her in that endeavor is her sister, Karen Sabath. Sabath is ten years younger with two small children, which allows her to tap

into how kids connect to the farm. "Summer camp is for the whole growing season, not one week or four weeks," explains Sabath. "We have a dedicated garden for the kids so they can appreciate the season cycle. We take the kids 'shopping' outside in the garden for apples, squash. When they see there's no more tomatoes it connects them to the season." At the height of harvest time Schwartz and Sabath say they rarely shop at the supermarket. "Other than meat, coffee, chocolate, and bananas, we are pretty self-sufficient."

Another revitalization is **CABBAGE HILL FARM** in Mount Kisco, owned by Jerome and Nancy Kohlberg, the former a founding partner of the investment firm Kohlberg Kravis Roberts & Co. Nancy Kohlberg said it all started in 1992 with her love of weaving the fine wool from Shetland sheep. "You get wonderful wool from this heritage breed, and they were the first animal here on the farm," says Kohlberg, who previously lived in Larchmont but has owned Cabbage Hill's 225 acres for over



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20 years. The farm now has old-fashioned breeds of cattle, pigs, turkeys, ponies, and geese that freely roam the pastures eating natural grasses.

But Nancy Kohlberg was driven to do more with the expansive property. "My motto was always that the freshest food is the closest," says Kohlberg, who wanted to grow sustainable, organic produce. The Kohlbergs built four acres of raised beds to grow vegetables and a 5,000-square-foot greenhouse for an experimental aquaponic system that grows vegetation and raises fish—tilapia—in the same water.

"The fish and vegetables work together," explains Randy Woodard, farm manager at Cabbage Hill. "We use fish water as fertilizer for the vegetables so we don't have to use synthetic fertilizers." Cabbage Hill is now a non-profit group giving regular tours for schools and the public. "Our big mission is education," says Kohlberg. "We have local schools and schools from Harlem come up here and learn about aquaponics. We teach them the benefits of sustainable agriculture."

Over in Bedford Corners, Gwenn Brandt has been the owner of

DAISY HILL FARM for the past five years. She and her former husband purchased the property from Wilhelmine Kirby Waller, who stipulated that 50 acres of the parcel be a conservation easement. Although most of Daisy Hill is grazing ground for retired horses, there is a parcel set aside for Brandt's organic vegetable garden, the produce of which she has been selling at her farm stand for the last four years. "I like connecting to the community," says Brandt. "A lot of people come with their kids because there is a big area to run

around in with animals they can look at. Sometimes they stay for two or three hours. It's like bringing the community back together." Brandt hopes to expand her farm-stand offerings to include sandwiches and local breads, items that are requested frequently. "A lot of people come and ask me to grow giant zucchinis so they can grill or stuff them," she says. "I also grow Amber Cups pumpkins—customers didn't know what they were before they saw them here. You can't get those at the A&P."

The newly revived **AMAWALK FARM** in



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high-end restaurants wanted the scapes

Katonah has become a popular "U Pick 'Em" raspberry patch. Larry Cross, executive director at the Norwalk Community Health Center in Connecticut, together with his wife, Marian, purchased the 32 acres and started clearing fields to plant three different types of raspberries. Cross knew how to cultivate the berries because he grew up on a 55-acre farm in Maine, where his father was a doctor and part-time farmer. The landscape at Amawalk Farm is ideal

for growing fruits and vegetables. "We have the perfect north-facing slope with good light, ventilation, and drainage," says Marian Cross, a retired educator for adult literacy who also serves on the board of the Nature Conservancy. In the summer of 2005 the Crosses sold their heirloom tomatoes and eggplants to Scaglio's and Mrs. Greens in Katonah. A year later a prolific raspberry crop filled 200 cases, which were also sold locally along with beans,


cucumbers, and mixed greens. Growing certain vegetables became a learning experience for the Crosses. When they planted five types of gourmet garlic they always cut back the curly shoots known as the scapes. "I didn't even know what they were," says Marian. It wasn't until Marla Mendillo, the chef from the Mt. Kisco Day Care Center, noticed the scapes and told Cross that the delectable green was sought after by high-

end restaurants. "Marla called a friend that sells to New York City restaurants and about 20 minutes later someone arrived and bought about 40 pounds of scapes and promptly sold it to Per Se restaurant." For Larry and Marian Cross the farm offers a place for people to have what they call an "authentic experience." "People love to pick things and be outdoors," says Larry. "It isn't a Disney World experience. It's just like the old days and people love it."

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