

# Stone Barns *redux*

When we last looked at the Stone Barns complex in Pocantico Hills, it was just another 800-acre Rockefeller estate with an uncertain future. There was (and still is) a well-regarded restaurant and a lunch café, but the rest of the property was closed to the public and could only be seen from Bedford Road in Sleepy Hollow. Since then, agricultural and educational programs have been developed, and busloads of students, farmers and would-be farmers come and go regularly. We decided to take another look at the project and its programs to see how close Peggy Rockefeller's dreams for the property are to being fulfilled. (See "A Blue Hill in the Valley," Valley Table 20. —Ed.)

**T**HE SYNERGY BETWEEN

soil and food resonates at the Stone Barns Center for Food and Agriculture, a former dairy farm on the expansive Rockefeller estate in Westchester's Pocantico Hills. The 80-acre parcel is dedicated to farming "in perpetuity," and an active "farm-to-table" practice fuels the forward-moving, seasonal magic that is the center's *raison d'être*. While the center occupies acreage that could reap billions from a developer's bulldozer, the farm is tackling the other end of the economical spectrum: How to grow healthful food that is affordable for everyone and dispel the belief that safe, nutritious food is only for the rich.

The farm, anchored by towering granite silos and Norman-style buildings, was donated by David Rockefeller, Sr., to carry on the work of his late wife Peggy, known for championing the preservation of farmland and founder of the American Farmland Trust. Today, the farm is a non-profit agricultural education center.

The rolling fields of crops, flowers and vegetables, free grazing sheep, cows and ducks are a living lab for twenty first-century farming. Steps connecting the farm buildings lead down to a small valley where a 22,000-square-foot year-round greenhouse teams with constant attention and allows Stone Barns to be a four-season farm. With full-time farmers and apprentices on staff, Stone Barns pursues sustainable and environmentally friendly farming by rotating fields, pastures and greenhouse beds to preserve and enrich the soil.

"We can afford to take risks and fail here where other farms can't," says Stone Barns Executive Director Jill



text and photos  
by abby luby



*We are looking to enhance the farm experience for the Stone Barns visitors so they walk away feeling inspired about the food system and the consequences it has on their community, environment and their health.*

—Jill Isenbarger

Isenbarger, formerly Chief of Staff and Director of Marketing for The Nature Conservancy. “We can try new practices and innovations that can be easily replicated,” Isenbarger says of the center’s mission. “If it’s a success or not, we can document and explain why things do or don’t work.”

How to grow and prepare food is the connective mantra and active lifeline between Stone Barns and its on-site restaurant, Blue Hill at Stone Barns. The relationship is more than symbiotic. Run by *uber* chef Dan Barber (the James Beard Foundation’s 2009 “Outstanding Chef”) and his brother David, Blue Hill at Stone Barns has received a three-star rating from *The New York Times* and has an appropriate seasonal menu. Barber, is an advocate of sustainable, local farming, and his dishes honor the natural tastes of meat and vegetables raised right outside the Blue Hill kitchen.

The Stone Barns Agriculture and Education Center aims to be a resource available to local and global farming communities wanting to be sustainable without the use of pesticides. Education programs are designed for students from kindergarten through high school; courses and seminars are aimed at adults and young farmers. Programs cover the gamut from training teachers how to start a garden at their schools that can tie in to various curricula, to designing high tunnels that can dramatically extend the growing season. Most students are from nearby school districts in Pocantico Hills, Port Chester, Tarrytown, Irvington and Ossining, among others.

With a staff of about 35, Stone Barns’ operating budget is about \$5.5 million a year. Over 50 percent of the needed revenue comes from individual contributors. David Rockefeller bequeathed \$25 million (to be given at the time of his death) with the proviso that income from the invested sum be used to cover part of Stone Barns’ expenses. Income also comes from selling farm-raised vegetables and meat to Blue Hill at Stone Barns and Blue Hill Restaurant in Manhattan. The center also charges the restaurant rent.

**J**ACK ALGIERE HAS BEEN THE VEGETABLE FARM manager at Stone Barns for the last six years. Algieri says the best way to learn about successfully growing an edible landscape is to be directly involved with what’s happening on the farm. About the center’s educational philosophy, he notes, “We lead groups that are involved in daily farm practices and we talk about the core concepts of farming and associated chores. We don’t set up a class for the sake of having a class.”

The philosophy is perhaps best demonstrated by the center’s now-defunct community supported agriculture project, which attracted area families and even spawned a newsletter. But what people learned about the farm was more “anecdotal,” Algieri says, noting that the effort going into the CSA by Stone Barn workers didn’t seem to be shared by the group.

“People were coming to the farm and learning about vegetables and our story,” Algieri says, “but we wanted people to *be* here and see the bigger story.” After two years, Stone Barns ended the CSA. “We determined that the

center was better suited to pursue other opportunities that engage a wider audience with our farm products,” Isenbarger says.

The center transitioned the CSA project into an expanded farm market, now open three days a week between May and November, and once a month from December through April. The Farm Market is open to the public (members have preferred access one hour earlier on Wednesdays and Fridays).

Because of the renewed emphasis on the education component of Stone Barns’ programs, Algieri is teaching young farmers and apprentices basic farm management and how to grow marketable, pesticide-free vegetables and meat. Emma Hoyt worked as an apprentice with Algieri for three years at Stone Barns. She started out as an apprentice and by the time she left last March she was a field manager. Hoyt, 27, is now a working farmer at Shelter Island Farm, a small organic farm.

“I learned a lot because I was there consistently for three seasons,” Hoyt remembers. She also worked with children who were part of Stone Barns’ Farm Day Camp,

percent were under 35. Today, most young farmers under the age of 40 are interested in organic, small-scale farming.)

Of particular interest for visiting farmers is the ongoing composting system at the center—an unremarkable, plywood compost bin sitting next to the greenhouse. “I think of it as a hybrid, low-tech system,” Isenbarger says. Outside the greenhouse are rows of long, plastic-covered berms of compost made up of kitchen scraps, manure, straw and other organic materials left to “cook” for about six months. Isenbarger says that 98 percent of the farm’s waste stays on the property, including recycled paper goods.

Isenbarger notes that the center has renewed its commitment to educational efforts, including raising public awareness about food issues. “We are looking to enhance the farm experience for the Stone Barns visitor so they walk away feeling inspired about the food system and the consequences it has on their community, environment and their health,” she notes. “The kids’ education program has been wildly successful,” says



where the challenge was to work efficiently yet creatively while giving the campers a rewarding, positive experience. “I remember one time we had to plant buckwheat into the soil,” she muses. “Although the kids weren’t allowed to step on plants or in the fields, we made a one-time exception and told them they could run around, play tag or follow the leader as a way to get the seeds compacted in the soil. It was a fun, nice moment.”

Hoyt met her new employer by networking at the 2008 Stone Barns “Young Farmers Conference.” She was one of 171 attending the December conference, which sold out two weeks before it started. According to Isenbarger, the attendees, predominantly female, were from the northeast but some came from as far away as Georgia, Nebraska, North Carolina, and the U.K. (Statistics supplied by Stone Barns about today’s young farmers are surprising: In 1910, about 28 percent of America’s farmers were under 35; 8 percent were over 65. By 2002, 27 percent were over 65 while 5.8

Isenbarger. “We count the number of students that are here yearly and we keep track of them. Many more kids come here on the weekend with their parents.”

Isenbarger relates a tale that has been repeated widely at Stone Barns about youngsters taking a farm class with Algieri. “Jack pulled a carrot out of the ground and one of the kids asked him why he stuck all the carrots down in the ground and ruined them.”

For Isenbarger, Stone Barns is a work in progress with education at its core. “It’s about knowing how to grow diverse species on farms and having a pest management system that’s chemical free. You want your kids to have healthy food to eat and to live in a healthy environment where the air and water are clean,” she says. “I hope that’s the connection that creates accessibility for people from all different walks of life.” ❖

**Stone Barns Center for Food and Agriculture**  
630 Bedford Rd., Pocantico Hills  
(914) 366-6200 [stonebarnscenter.org](http://stonebarnscenter.org)