

EVOLVE OR DIE

By **Abby Luby**

Rustic intelligence at Little Ghent Farm



Little Ghent Farm owners Mimi and Richard Beaven with two of their flock
PHOTOGRAPHS BY MEREDITH HEUER

The brown paper packaging stamped in stippled black ink says “Bread & EGGS.” Beneath that are the words “Laid in Ghent, NY.” The simple, homespun parcel is emblematic of what Little Ghent Farm owners Richard and Mimi Beaven are all about: forward-thinking 21st-century farming that embraces the old and new.

Located in Columbia County, on Snyder Road just off County Route 22, the farm’s pastoral fields stretch between wetlands and a creek before sloping up into verdant hills forested with old stone

walls and long-standing hickory and oak trees. Climbing higher are points where, on a clear day, you can see the Hudson River and the Catskill Mountains.

When the Beavens purchased the long-neglected, 75-acre farm in the winter of 2012, they realized that the old barns and farmhouse were beyond salvaging. “We had to imagine what a farm in 2015 and beyond looks like and what the activities might be that would make it a viable proposition,” says Richard. They began clearing large swaths of young forests and overgrown fields riddled with invasive plants. As they got a feel for the property, their philosophy on the farm’s purpose evolved. Honing in on the meadows, logging roads and hills, they envisioned raising chickens, pigs and a few beehives.



“Our purpose here is to get the farm back to being productive again after nearly 40 years of not being so,” explains Richard. A new barn was built using reclaimed barn siding topped by a steel-gray corrugated metal roof. The barn has two sides separated by a wide drive-through, a portal to another dimension of the farm where there is a new, solidly built chicken coop.

The barn looks angular and modern, with one section built directly into the side of the hill, an old tried and true practice that provides structural support and added insulation. Their new farmhouse is perched on a nearby hill and was constructed with structural insulated panels (SIPs), known for their energy efficiency. Where the old farmhouse once stood is a high-end commercial kitchen and farm store.



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STORE BOUGHT

Richard and Mimi's store, Made In Ghent, one part farm stand and one part culinary outpost, has put the Beavens' farm on the map. They opened the store around Thanksgiving 2014 after reviving the old farm and raising a diverse population of hens, chickens, ducks and pigs. The spacious entrance way bisects the structure; one side houses the kitchen replete with stainless-steel appliances and dining area with a garage-size door that opens out onto a field and nearby stream. On the other side is the farm store lined with product-filled refrigerators and freezers; a few large blackboards with white-chalked writing lean against the wall, one lists names of people picking up bread that day. A personal touch on a smaller blackboard is Richard and Mimi's cell phone numbers for customers to contact them, in case they are not around.

Initially they sold fresh eggs, pork and chicken, but the list has grown to include ice cream, jam, relish, granola, roasted plum sorbet, cookies, chicken liver pâté, among other seasonal items. The real crowd pleaser is Mimi's freshly baked breads.

The store has become the Beavens' commercial expression of their growing community. "We're new at this but we see that part of the key is to develop new markets, find new customers," says Richard. "Some of our customers are new to buying direct from farms, which is great."

Of the 200 laying hens are heritage breeds with imaginative names including Speckled Sussex, Cuckoo Maran, Dark Cornish, Rhode Island Red and Silver Leghorn (to name a few). Eight months out of the year there are at least 200 hens. However, during the summer there could be as many as 400 chickens at varying stages of maturity. Depending on the time of year, the daily output is six dozen eggs, which are collected two to three times a day. In the box, the eggs are a colorful assortment of pastel blues, light khaki and creamy white. The Indian Runner ducks lay large, blue-gray eggs that Mimi says are particularly rich in antioxidants.

Beyond their main chicken coop are mobile coops. "These coops are moved every day so the chickens can get fresh grass to eat," explains Mimi. Meat chickens are black Freedom Rangers and are raised in batches of 100. The first group is sold in August, the second in September. In warm weather the chickens roam freely outside where there is a nearby garden of sunflowers for shade. Little Ghent Farm eggs have found their way to restaurants who champion farm-to-table cuisine such as the Grazin' restaurants in TriBeCa and Hudson and Foragers restaurant in the DUMBO section of Brooklyn.

A fenced-off wooded area is where a dozen pigs forage for shagbark hickory nuts, their hooves creating muddy pathways between trees and bushes. A feeding trough is next to a metal lean-to for shelter if the weather is bad. "This is our third year of raising free-range pigs and we raise about a dozen a year," says Mimi. "After we slaughter them, we buy 12 more piglets and do it all over again."

They slaughter the pigs at Eagle Bridge Custom Meat, located in Washington County. The Beavens had to get on a waiting list at Eagle Bridge, a slaughterhouse highly sought-after by small and midsize farmers that's known for its high-quality products and Animal Welfare Approved (AWA) status.

The animals on Little Ghent Farm freely range in the fields and woods and they eat certified organic feed. Richard admits the organic feed pushes up their costs "but at the same time provides our customers with a clear picture of what our practices are and how their food is produced." The Beavens follow AWA standards for all their laying hens, meat chickens and pigs. The AWA stamp means farm animals are sourced, raised and slaughtered according to rigorous standards, which are based on the quality of environment where animals are raised and their physical and psychological well-being, as well as consistent access to pasture for all animals.





Mimi in the kitchen

MENTORSHIP

Although the Beavens work hard, they are relaxed and easygoing. Both Mimi and Richard are 49 and were born and raised in England. Mimi is half French and her father and grandfather were French chefs in restaurants where she worked when she was younger. “I guess that’s where I got my food thing,” she says. Mimi’s expertise in raising farm animals comes from her training in agriculture school. When she and Richard moved to Westchester County over 10 years ago, she volunteered at Stone Barns Center for Food and Agriculture.

They have two teenage daughters, Martha and Meg, and a lively, two-year-old dog, Bumble, an integral part of the farm. From spring to fall, the Beavens’ 14-hour day starts at 6:30 a.m. when they release their livestock into the fields. On the weekends Mimi bakes bread and her day starts at 5 a.m. During the summer their daughters help out and occasionally friends drop by to give them a hand on the farm and in the kitchen. Last year a neighbor plowed one of the fields for planting. “Our neighbor farmers, in particular Georgia and Lee at Kinderhook Farm from around the corner, have been great mentors,” says Mimi.

The only other person working regularly on the farm is a young farmer, Jesse Tolz, who leased one of the farm's five fields, under the name VIDA farm, where, last summer, he planted 50 varieties of wild flowers. "The flowers were used as a cash crop," explains Mimi. "It was a way for him to get a feel for the soil." Next season Tolz plans to grow vegetables, herbs and flowers. Tolz has apprenticed with the Turtle Tree Seed Company, Pfeiffer Center and recently Stone Barns Center for Agriculture. "Our desire is to help a young grower incubate a business and Jesse represents a large group of young people who have a real passion for farming," says Richard.

They've also considered creating positions for apprentices. "I've been interested in doing that," says Mimi. "But I want to be really sure we can provide more of a real learning experience as well as a working experience. Before we do that, I'd like to have that set up properly."

Besides word of mouth and the signs on the road that went up this past spring directing passersby to the farm, Little Ghent Farm's main promotional activity is via social media, an increasingly popular practice used by many 21st-century farmers. Their website is updated regularly, they routinely check in with their Twitter and Facebook pages and they also e-mail digital newsletters.

But it's Instagram that is their predominant way of reaching out. "Most of the people we ask say they find us by Instagram," says Mimi. "There's a community of people who follow what we are doing."

Their Instagram page has over 2,600 followers and last summer alone had almost 700 posts. Messages, many of them food orders, read like notes between friends: "Would love one boule, one focaccia and one plum chutney for today if possible"; or from Mimi, "Today and this weekend we have regular boule, white tin loaf and focaccia. Let us know if you'd like your name up on the sourdough door....."

"There is a greater thirst to understand where food comes from and social media provides that," says Richard. They check posts and respond several times a day. "It allows for a sense of community, and we are really straightforward about what's going on at the farm," says Mimi. "We try to balance the good news with the bad. Farming isn't always rainbows and unicorns."



The mobile chicken coup

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OUTREACH

Attracting a larger, more diverse community to the farm is part of the Beavens' philosophical design applied to this traditional farm. Last fall, Little Ghent Farm was included on the Chatham Farm and Art Tour that is run by the Chatham Agricultural Partnership. The Beavens' former careers provide the skills and ability to manage Little Ghent Farm as a business: Richard was an advertising executive and then became a professional photographer (he still gets photo assignments from major publications and newspapers), and Mimi worked in and managed restaurants. Pairing their sense of community with sharing business ideas inspired them to offer workshops on the farm.

Last fall they invited two different speakers to hold motivational workshops about entrepreneurship. The first workshop was run by David Hieatt, co-founder of the DO Lectures in 2008, who talked about building a brand on a shoestring. The second workshop featured Maxine Bédard, the co-creator of Zady.com, who discussed branding with values, transparency and sustainable practices. A daylong workshop cost \$350 and included lunch, refreshments and, most importantly, a day in a pastoral setting where, ideally, nature serves as an inspiration for sharing ideas. Hieatt's workshop was overbooked so they scheduled two sessions with 15 participants each. Both workshops were sold out and attendees came all the way from New York City, Canada and Colorado. “Our main goal is to get this place productive and viable and to offer a range of possibilities for people to come and enjoy. We are continually thinking laterally about productivity,” says Richard.

The Beavens believe in the strength and future of local farming and that running a small farm is no different from any other small businesses. But the looming imprint of big agriculture is a constant pressure. "Individual farms will evolve or die," Richard says. "The huge, corporate farms have changed the game and now family farms are fighting back."

Richard and Mimi Beaven have firmly established Little Ghent Farm and Made In Ghent as a productive and viable farm and store that, while holding to traditional farming practices, gives them a solid base to branch out, experiment and be original and unique.

They believe new ideas are there to be put into action. "Some ideas will succeed. A number of them fail," says Richard. "We try to keep things simple and manageable without too many distractions and without spreading ourselves too thin. Ultimately, we won't consider ourselves a true success until every inch of the place is contributing in some way."

Little Ghent Farm

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