

# MASTERS OF THEIR CRAFT

## FORREST PRITCHARD // SMITH MEADOWS



Forrest Pritchard

Written by Karen McGrady  
A production of Char Co

“...raising 1,800 free-range chickens seemed almost therapeutic.”

“To my teachers...who read poetry to their students. I listened,” writes seventh generation farmer Forrest Pritchard in the dedication for his book *Gaining Ground: A Story of Farmers Markets, Local Food, and Saving the Family Farm*. Forrest, a successful grass farmer in the northern Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, has a deep penchant for poetry. Quite fittingly, for his childhood of rolling hills, white blossomed apple trees, early morning meadow mist, and cracked, dusty lanes trained his eye to see beauty...the beauty of the world and the beauty of words.

Children who grow up on farms tend to be in a sphere of their own—a bit removed from societal expectations. And so it goes with Forrest. The son of a Washington D.C. bureaucrat and a graduate of William and Mary, Forrest shirked the path predicted for him and instead chose one that reaped him an \$18 profit for his first year of labor. Witty, composed, and sharp, if any one could endure such discouragement, it'd be Forrest. He possesses that endearing southern calm and slowness...the farm day isn't too hectic to prevent him from enjoying a cold beer or bantering with customers at Saturday's market.

Upon graduation from college, Forrest charted a lofty course: rescuing his family farm from significant debt and a certain end and returning the farm to its former profitable state. He would succeed, though not without challenges including finding farmers markets where he would at least make more money than the price of gas to drive to them and the echo of his father's voice to find an easier career. However, no hindrance could dissuade Forrest from his undertaking.

Today, Smith Meadows operates with ten full-time employees, sells

its products at six farmers markets, and has an artisanal kitchen and bed and breakfast on the farm. Cattle, goats, sheep, pigs and chickens graze in pastures that have never been chemically treated. Forrest continues to thoughtfully steward the land, as well as pen books and articles and give lectures regarding sustainable farming. To the delight of this father's ears, he now has a son of his own who says he wants to be a farmer.







**COULD YOU SHARE WITH US AN OVERVIEW OF THE JOURNEY OF YOUR LIFE THUS FAR?**

I grew up on my grandparents' farm in the northern Shenandoah Valley, straddling the West Virginia/Virginia border. My grandfather was a prosperous farmer from the 1920s to the 1970s, but after he passed away, our farm fell deeply into debt, adopting conventional grain and livestock practices that never generated a profit. When I returned from college in 1996, I decided to change our agricultural philosophy, went completely organic, began selling at farmers' markets, and have continued to do this as my sole source of income for nearly 20 years.

**HOW DID YOU COME TO THE REALIZATION THAT FARMING WAS WHAT YOU WANTED TO DO FOR YOUR LIVELIHOOD?**

Returning home from college on holidays and summer vacation, it was easy to see how rapidly our agricultural landscape was shifting. Centuries-old farms were being bulldozed into strip malls and subdivisions, and it didn't take a huge stretch to imagine a similar fate for our own land. A farm can't take care of itself; that requires a farmer. So that's what I did, attempting to become a steward of the land as best I knew how.

**WHAT TYPES OF FARMING DO YOU DO AND HOW DID YOU CHOOSE THOSE AREAS?**

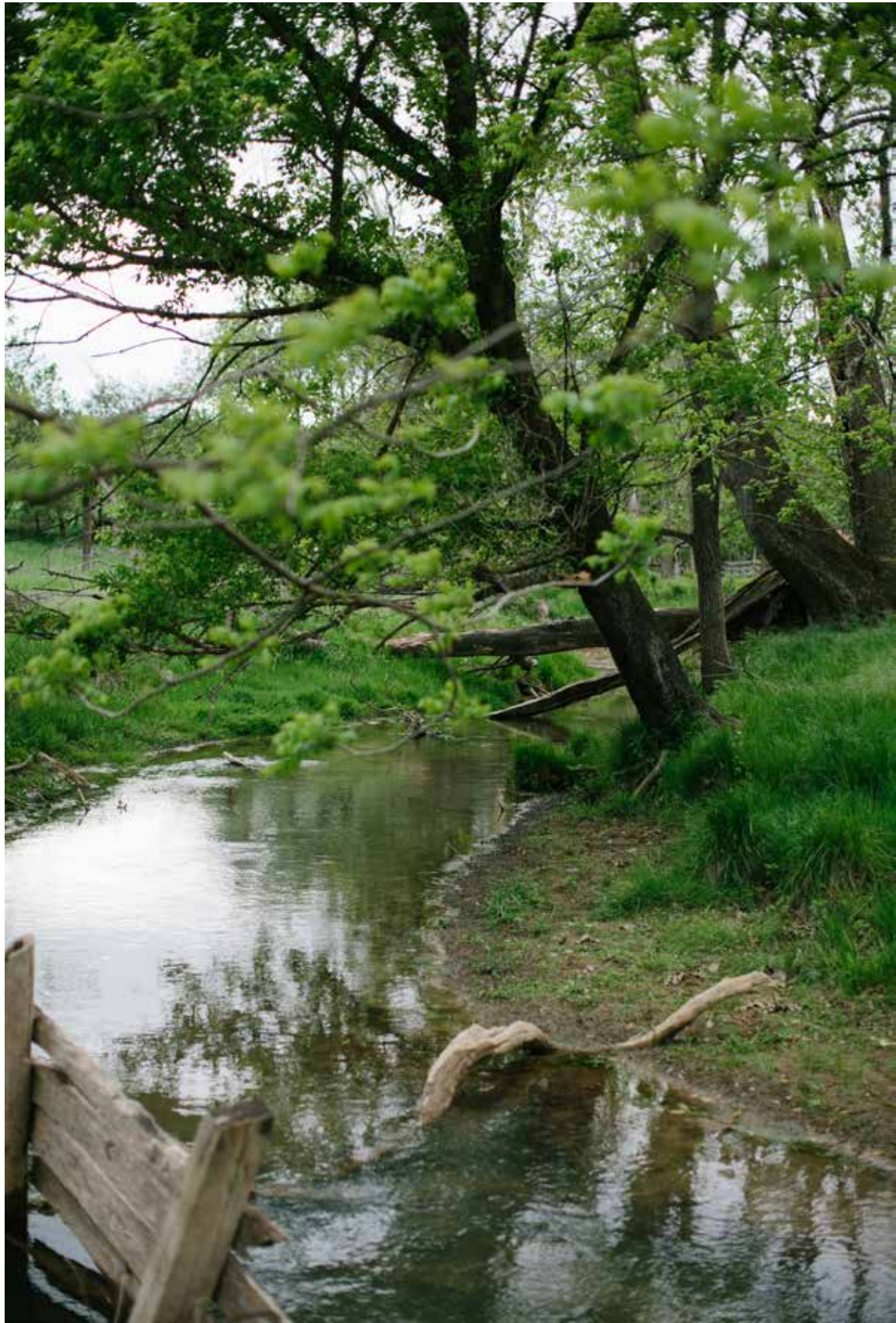
I am a grass farmer, with focus on soil vitality, carbon building and renewed fertility, all under an organic system. We graze grass-finished cattle and sheep, and free-range pigs and chickens across our pastures, and work with a local USDA inspected butcher shop to process them. I followed this agricultural path because our soil, climate and scale of acreage is ideally suited for this style of minimum input farming.

**TELL US A LITTLE BIT ABOUT YOUR FAMILY. HOW IS YOUR FAMILY INVOLVED WITH THE FARM?**

I'm a seventh generation farmer. The farm came down through my mom's side (it's always interesting to me that most people assume that my dad was a farmer, but he was a bureaucrat in Washington DC) and the farm has been in our family since 1816. My son is now ten, and wants to be a farmer like his dad.

**HOW DID YOU TURN YOUR FAMILY FARM INTO A PROFITABLE BUSINESS? COULD YOU SHARE SOME OF THE SIGNIFICANT STEPS YOU TOOK?**

Ha, I wrote an entire book about that! It was an amazing adventure. In a word, faith was the biggest key to success: faith in the resiliency of nature, and the reliable reward of steady, intentional work. From my experience, 95% of success is showing up on time, and doing what you say you're going to do. And that's what I try to provide for my customers at farmers' markets each weekend.





“What we *should* be eating is more vegetables, especially the ones that we grow in our backyard gardens. ”

**YOU NOW HAVE TEN FULL TIME EMPLOYEES. HOW DO YOU FIND YOUR EMPLOYEES AND WHAT CHARACTERISTICS DO YOU LOOK FOR IN THEM?**

That's a great question, and I wish there was a succinct answer. The common denominator, I think, is that our crew truly appreciates what the farm has to offer. Beyond a steady paycheck, our farm provides so much more than a typical job: a chance to be creative, self-starting, and work in an environment that's genuinely receptive to constructive feedback. When you find a person who values these aspects, then we know it's the right fit.

**WHAT WERE A COUPLE OF THE MOST DISCOURAGING MOMENTS OF YOUR FARMING CAREER?**

How much time do you have? Most notably, I've been threatened to be murdered twice, so that's really something (rest assured, these individuals are no longer employed at my farm). In short, discouragement must be coaxed into opportunity; the opportunity to learn, reflect and improve. Make no mistake, I operate in a landscape where death is a corollary to life, and despite living in a world where this is a known fact, dealing with this reality doesn't seem to be a job for just any average Joe. Ironically, perhaps that's the greatest discouragement of all—being reminded that my fellow man can be so deliberately disconnected from the essential circle of life. That's a super bummer.



**SUBSTANTIAL DEBT SEEMS LIKE A NECESSARY EVIL IN FARMING, AS THOUGH THERE IS NO WAY TO AVOID IT. WHAT ARE YOUR THOUGHTS ON THIS MATTER?**

When it comes to debt, America is like a functional alcoholic—impressive in its public consumption, but behind the scenes, miserably failing its annual physical. So it should come as no surprise that debt is commonly linked with agriculture, as it is with most facets of life, but it's exceedingly odd that something as fundamental as food production should be associated with debt right out of the gate. Financing your pet's jogging shoe business? Debt, yes. Growing an acre of carrots? Perhaps not so much. It's quite revealing to examine where our cultural priorities are situated, and the contemporary state of agriculture casts an especially revealing light.

**YOU MENTION THAT FARMING GRANTS YOU A “LIFESTYLE PAYCHECK.” WHAT DO YOU CONSIDER AS THE LIFESTYLE PAYCHECK FARMING GIVES TO YOU?**

Fresh air. Sunshine. Lambs quarters and dandelions, lilacs. Kids running through meadows, and skipping stones along the creek flats. Warm wind through the sycamores, mockingbirds trilling exquisite music, and lightning bugs flashing on a June evening. Did I overlook anything?





“Warm wind through the sycamores,  
mockingbirds trilling exquisite music,  
and lightning bugs flashing on a June  
evening...”









**HOW EFFECTIVE IS SOCIAL MEDIA IN YOUR LINE OF WORK? WHAT TYPES HAVE BEEN HELPFUL PLATFORMS AND WHAT TYPES DO YOU CHOOSE NOT TO USE?**

I'm a complete troglodyte when it comes to social media; in fact, I've typed all this so far by pounding the keyboard with my fists. I didn't have a Facebook page till halfway through 2012, and honestly don't know what Pinterest or Instagram are. While I'm confessing, I've never quaffed a Red Bull, or watched Dancing with the Kardashians.

**DO YOU HAVE ANY BITS OF WISDOM TO SHARE WITH THOSE CONSIDERING BEGINNING TO FARM?**

Go for it. Don't stop. Food is really important.

**ON A SIMILAR NOTE, WHAT ADVICE CAN YOU OFFER SOMEONE WHO WOULD LIKE TO BE A FARMER BUT DOES NOT HAVE THE MONEY TO BUY LAND?**

Who said we need to purchase land in order to farm? Stated a different way: what did you get when you 'bought' your college degree... were you somehow instantly more valuable, or somehow richer? My point is this: there are tens of thousands of farmers who rent, lease or creatively finance their land without ever buying it. Just like a college degree, farming is an intellectual enterprise. Great farmers achieve value through execution, not ownership.

**HOW DID YOU LEARN TO FARM ORGANICALLY? DO YOU HAVE ANY TEACHERS OR MENTORS?**

I was deeply inspired by both my grandfather and Joel Salatin, both of whom I got to know in the 1980s. Each day I farm I learn more, typically by just paying attention.

“Great farmers achieve value through execution, not ownership.”







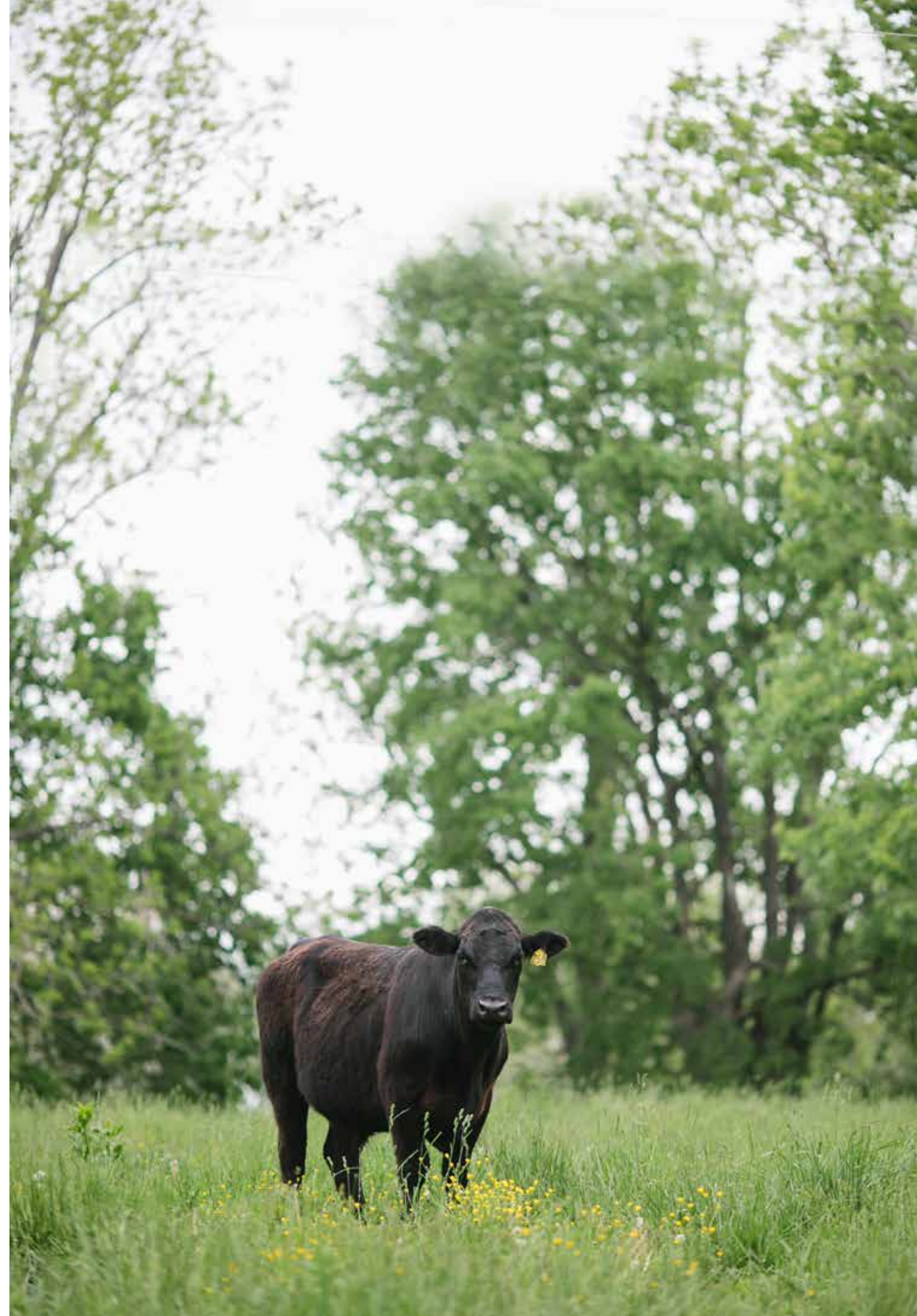


**WHAT HAVE BEEN THE MOST SIGNIFICANT CHALLENGES OF ORGANIC FARMING? IS IT VERY DIFFICULT? WHY DON'T MORE PEOPLE TRY IT?**

If you spend 24 hours at Smith Meadows, you'll hear me repeat my mantra: "Everything must be easy." Nature eternally provides a 'sweet spot'; an intersection of effort, patience and reward. It's our job as farmers to remove the bias and arrogance of ego, searching instead for the nexus of industry and simplicity. When we identify this, our workday tends to proceed rather swimmingly.

**IN YOUR OPINION, WHAT TYPE OF FOOD SHOULD WE BE CONSUMING AND WHAT TYPE OF FOOD SHOULD WE NOT CONSUME?**

While it's our primary white meat, and we're subjected to never-ending cutesy, endearing commercials featuring cartoonish nuggets, breaded breasts and spicy wings, I feel comfortable that I'm not indulging in hyperbole when I assert chicken is the Great White Satan of our time. There's absolutely nothing natural about our country's chicken consumption; raised in confinement barns, fed antibiotics and GMO grain, and slaughtered at 8 weeks of age, these birds are essentially protein sacks on legs, dependent on humans every second of their short lives. A little known fact: confinement





chicken manure is commonly force-fed to cattle, a convenient way of disposing the nasty, unmentionable bits we'd rather not think about. (Don't believe me? Visit my neighboring farms, several of which import tractor-trailer loads of poultry feces to feed to their cattle.) What we should be eating is more vegetables, especially the ones that we grow in our backyard gardens. Grow a quarter acre of delicious vegetables, and share them with your neighbors! Honestly, give it a try... it's contagious.

**YOU GRADUATED FROM WILLIAM AND MARY WITH DEGREES IN ENGLISH AND GEOLOGY. HOW DO THOSE DEGREES HELP YOU TODAY, AND WHAT TYPE OF EDUCATION DO YOU THINK WILL MOST BENEFIT THOSE IN THE FARMING WORLD.**

College taught me to problem-solve, which is a critical intellectual skill set for any small business owner. I completed two degrees while co-captaining the fencing team, editing our literary magazine, and courting a very nice Italian girl who eventually became my wife (she's since remarried, but nobody's perfect). After all that, raising 1,800 free-range chickens seemed almost therapeutic.

**WHAT DOES AN AVERAGE DAY (OR YEAR) LOOK LIKE?**

Monday through Friday, my average day starts at 5, where I check on my most vulnerable animals, the chickens (everything eats chicken!). If no midnight mayhem has occurred, I then check the sheep and cattle, and finally the pigs, who, on the whole, seem to have life pretty nicely figured out. Next, it's subdividing pastures for livestock rotation, gathering eggs (we have 1,800 hens on pasture), and doing repairs and improvements. On weekends, I leave the farm at 4:30 AM, bound for Washington DC farmers' markets. If you pass me on the highway, be sure to wave!

**WHAT DO YOU THINK THE FUTURE OF FARMING IN AMERICA WILL LOOK LIKE?**

More balanced. Presently, 97% of our food comes from industrial agriculture, with nearly 80% of all processed foods derived from GMO monoculture crops. Quick question: Who wants to watch a basketball game where the score is 97-3? When I started farming, the score was 99.9 to .1, so that's progress. Let's keep supporting sustainable agriculture, and see what a 50-50 ballgame looks like.







**WHY DO YOU FARM?**

Because someone has to feed you people! Let's be honest: you're rather annoying, what with all your luxury vehicles, incessant lawn mowing, and pithy, entitled message board commentaries. But what the heck, you smell nice, so I'll feed you anyway.

**WHAT DO YOU HOPE YOUR FUTURE ENTAILS?**

Free-range bacon cheeseburgers and craft beer. Any further questions?

---

CHAR<sub>co.</sub>