

(AGRI)CULTURE SHOCK

THINK THE FARM-TO-TABLE MOVEMENT IS HOT? THE IVY-LEAGUE-TO-FARM MOVEMENT IS EVEN HOTTER—ALTHOUGH IT OFTEN TAKES TIME FOR PARENTS TO WARM TO THE IDEA.
by Andrea Crawford



AT SOUL FIRE FARM, co-owner Leah Penniman leads a visiting youth group to reflect on power and privilege in the food system.

WHEN PEOPLE ASK Robin Apton what her two sons do, she happily tells them that one is a lawyer and one is an organic farmer. “They’re all intrigued by the farmer,” she says. “Nobody asks me anything about the attorney.”

But when Max Apton initially announced that he had quit his job in journalism to farm—in Hawaii, then in Vermont, now in an exurb of New York—she didn’t speak to him for two weeks. And that was after Robin “finally stopped crying on the kitchen floor,” she now admits. Her emotional response had more to do with the fact that he was moving far away than with what he was planning to do there, but she was plenty concerned about that, too: “To be perfectly honest, I was just hoping he wasn’t going to Hawaii to learn how to grow pot.”

Max is one of a fast-growing group of young people from professional-class

families who, schooled at elite colleges that pour graduates into law, medicine, and business, are now looking to make their lives from the land. Parents often respond with surprise, confusion, and a lot of skepticism. After all, many have been hyperinvolved in their kids’ schooling for a long time and nurtured entirely different dreams of their success.

It’s just that the values they often instilled—independent thinking, creativity, passion, commitment to others—are

playing out in a way they never expected. Once they get over the shock, they often come through with support.

Apton was converted when she visited her son in Hawaii and then on a farm in Vermont and saw both his happiness and his deep commitment to the work. “This is someone who grew up in a very nice home in Westchester County,” says Apton, herself an Ivy League graduate. “I was like, ‘Wow, you’re living in a trailer with no electricity. You must really want to be learning what you’re learning.’”


Max, a University of Wisconsin grad, is now field manager at Stone Barns Center for Food and Agriculture in Pocantico Hills, New York, the epicenter of the farm-to-table movement in the East.

For many parents, the initial reaction stems from fear of the unknown. Without agriculture in their past—or with it at least a few generations removed—the typical concern for a child’s well-being is refracted through traditional notions of farming: It’s risky, physically demanding, and not notably lucrative or socially respected, although that is changing.


“It’s not the easiest job in the world to make a living at,” says Jacqueline Allen, whose daughter Danielle has farmed for 13 years. When it became clear that Danielle was set on her career path, Jacqueline mostly just wondered how it was going to work. “I didn’t have farming in my background, and I didn’t know anybody who was a farmer,” says Allen, who spent three decades in corporate marketing. “This is all new territory.”

Danielle, who grew up in Norwalk, Connecticut, sees the same attitude in the parents of friends and of the apprentices she hires. “They’re not openly disapproving; they just don’t totally understand.”

Other parents fear exactly what they know all too well. Leah Penniman owns Soul Fire Farm with her husband, Jonah Vitale-Wolff, in upstate Grafton, New York, where they use the land as a vessel for social change by bringing diverse communities together. They run



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immersion programs for novice black and Latino farmers. “A lot of parents want to come and check this out and try to figure out why on earth their child is doing this,” says Penniman, who is also a high school science teacher. During youth programs on the farm, she says, “the black adults often refuse to participate in the activities because they’re like ‘Oh no, no, no. I don’t do stoop work. I don’t farm.’” She notes that the feeling is understandable given the history of racial oppression.

Some first-generation Americans have a firsthand knowledge of farming that also shapes their attitudes. Susie Yeo, a Williams College graduate who has apprenticed at several farms, says her father, a biomedical engineer, and her mother, an obstetrical nurse, immigrated to the United States in their 20s, and “associate farming with guaranteed poverty, especially because of their experience of Korea’s lack of socioeconomic mobility.”

Doug Preston, a 61-year-old accountant on Long Island, had to drag it out of his 31-year-old Columbia University-educated son, Matthew, that he was quitting his lucrative job at a digital advertis-

ing start-up in Manhattan to farm. “I’ll be paying for his school loans for the rest of my life,” Preston père says. But “I can’t blame him; who doesn’t go to the supermarket and buy bad tomatoes? Matt took it to the ultimate degree.”

All the parents share a desire to see their children happy, and what’s making many millennials happy is work that has a positive impact on the world. Max Apton thought that through journalism he “would uncover a lot of corruption and right a lot of wrongs.” Instead, he covered a lot of zoning meetings. “When I discovered farming,” he reports, “it felt like this is something that helps people.” Picking the first cabbage he planted allowed him to “connect all the dots of the hard work I’d done to the reward I had.”

Danielle Allen farmed for a few years after college, then got a master’s degree in landscape design. But building condominiums and parking lots raised ethical concerns—which sent her quickly back to farming. “Growing food,” she says, “is unquestionably a good thing to do.”

Even her mother cast her lot with the land. She recently “retired” to Vermont, near the farm her daughter and son-in-law run. She puts her marketing expertise to work for them and savors the response at the farmers market. “They’re well liked, and people are happy with their products,” she says.

Craig Nelson of Seattle was not immune to concerns when his 21-year-old son announced an interest in agriculture. But as CEO of a company that helps businesses understand generational shifts in the workforce, he had more context to draw on. “Millennials want to make an impact,” he observes. “I see an incredible reservoir of talent, passion, energy, and commitment,” and, along with it, “a heightened caring about the environment and about what goes into our bodies.” Agriculture, he says, “affects those two things dramatically.”

ANDREA CRAWFORD is a writer in New York.