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THE WAY WE EAT

# Out of the Kitchen, Into the Field

By MELISSA BREYER  
Published: July 13, 2008

“There is much work women can do on a farm with perfect propriety,” Laura Clay, a bluegrass farmer and veteran suffragist was quoted as saying in The New York Times on Nov. 18, 1917. Nearly a century later, Clay’s statement rings vibrantly true. There are 80 percent more women who are farmers than there were 20 years ago in the United States, even as the number of farms has decreased, according to the Department of Agriculture. In the Northeast alone, nearly 20,000 farms are run by women, some of whom are shown on the following pages. Whether raising heritage livestock, combing the woods for exotic morsels or coaxing delicacies from the ground, these women forge new bonds between field and table, strengthening the connection between things we love to eat and the stewardship that makes them possible.

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Gareth McConnell for The New York Times  
Barbara Shinn.

**Diane St. Clair** Animal Farm, Orwell, Vt.

In 1999, St. Clair (previous page) left her job in public health to live on a farm in [Vermont](#). First came the draft horses and then the family cow. Next, homemade butter. After investing in custom small-scale creamery equipment, St. Clair, 52, began selling to the local food co-op, aiming for the best butter she could produce — handmade and infused with Vermont terroir. To this day, St. Clair is involved in the entire process: the milk is hand-separated; the butter, hand-kneaded and washed. The renowned product of her labor — about 80 to 100 pounds a week — makes it only to Per Se, the French Laundry and No. 9 Park in Boston. St. Clair is clearly enchanted by the craft of food, although she is attentive to her seven Jersey cows as well. They eat only forage from the pastures, imparting a distinct flavor and color to the butter that is as changeable as the seasons of Vermont.

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Gareth McConnell for The New York Times  
Caroline Pam, with a young field hand (her daughter).

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Gareth McConnell for The New York Times  
Betsy Fink and Annie Farrell.

**Barbara Shinn** Shinn Estate Vineyards, Mattituck, N.Y.

Shinn (above) flits effortlessly between trimming vines and fixing the tractor, a farmer at heart. When she moved from California to Manhattan in 1990, it was a detour to the farming life she had long envisioned. Along the way, she and her husband, the chef David Page, opened the Greenwich Village restaurant Home and found themselves celebrating farm life and comfort food amid the concrete hills of the city. In 1998, they bought 22 acres of wheat fields and established Shinn Estate Vineyards. Shinn, 45, works in the field, conducts vineyard tours, talks wine in the tasting room and, along with her husband, runs the property's bed and breakfast and delivers their critically acclaimed wine to the 50 restaurants and 20 shops that sell it. Coursing through all of this is her mission to blaze a trail of sustainability in the small farm community. A pioneer of organic practices on the North Fork, Shinn never stops fine-tuning biodynamic and low-impact agricultural methods and sharing the lessons of their success with local growers.

**Nova Kim** Wild Gourmet Food, Randolph, Vt.

When Kim (opposite) moved to upstate New York in 1978, she started a garden. Or perhaps more accurately, she started a plot of weeds. Determined not to waste what was growing, she began working with the plants that thrived naturally. The result? A lifelong obsession with wild edibles. Kim, 65, and her partner, Les Hook, moved to Vermont, and by 1992 they had shifted from a successful wild ginseng herbal tea business to full-time "wildcrafting" (ethical collecting). They have collected more than 150 varieties of wild mushrooms and just as many greens, roots, nuts, barks and berries. Their yield is destined for seven adventurous chefs and 10 members of one of the country's most distinctive community-supported agriculture groups. During mushroom season, Kim and Hook collect 65 pounds of mushrooms a day from the woods and deliver the haul of the wild.

**Caroline Pam** The Kitchen Garden, Sunderland, Mass.

Pam (right) was drawn to farming by her love of food. She left a career in journalism for culinary school and a succession of farm-related jobs, eventually settling down on a farm of her own. The inspiration? To eat well and grow the things she wanted to cook. Pam, 31, works the farm with her husband, Tim Wilcox, often with their 5-month-old daughter, Lily, in tow. They each worked on farms in Italy, and their European training shines through in specialty crops like blanched frisée, Treviso radicchio and zucchini blossoms. Asia and the American South are represented in the guise of Thai eggplants and Shanghai bok choy, okra and crowder peas. This culinary approach to growing has led to a synergy with Pam's green-market customers and chefs,



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in which grower and eater work back and forth, trying this, requesting that, nurturing community and that most basic relationship between the soil and the things that find their way to our plates.

**Betsy Fink and Annie Farrell** Millstone Farm, Wilton, Conn.

Rare-heritage chicken breeds like mop-topped Golden Polish, feather-footed Sultans and Cuckoo Marans with their cocoa-brown eggs are the flashiest evidence of the diversified farming project at Millstone Farm (Page 60). Shetland sheep, Devon cattle and Tamworth pigs round out Farrell and Fink’s vision to help preserve genetic diversity — albeit in well-heeled Fairfield County. The 50-something Farrell was one of the first growers of organic specialty produce to supply Manhattan’s restaurants. Eventually she moved from hand-picking mesclun to helping other farmers create sustainable systems. She arrived at Millstone Farm to work with Betsy Fink in 2006. Fink, who is 52 and grew up in farm-forward Ithaca, N.Y., bought the 75-acre residential property with her husband, Jesse, in 2005 to establish a sustainable farm. What they have accomplished so far is nothing short of astonishing. Beyond the educational program and community events they sponsor, Millstone is challenging how we think about food and the self-sufficiency criteria that go hand in glove with anyone who grows food — and they’re doing it a dozen extraordinary eggs at a time.

*Melissa Breyer is a writer who lives in Brooklyn.*

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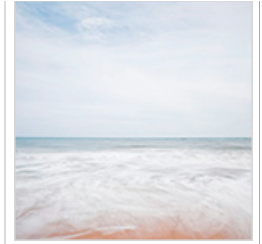
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