

## Under 30: The Brave New World of Ranchers, Farmers, & Hog Butchers

By Jonah Raskin

At Barnard College, the all-woman's school in New York, Judy Butterfield hunkered down with history. After she graduated, she came home to California and embarked on a three-month internship at Green String Farm, under the tutelage of legendary Bob Cannard, who has educated more organic farmers than any other farmer in northern California.

Now 23, Butterfield lives with friends on True Grass Farms in Marin County and works at Grow Kitchen — the new West County hub for food, gardening, and media, on the outskirts of Sebastopol — where she weeds, mulches, and struggles to stop soil erosion. She's fast becoming a Jill of farm trades, though she says she "cowers and wonders at the bigness of it all." Still, she's already come a long way.

At Green String, she worked with piglets and rabbits, and as a Woofer in France, she acquired agricultural and communication skills. "I'm still a novice in the farming world," she says. "In college, I learned how to deconstruct everything. I realized that I wanted to make and grow things and live in and with the landscape. That's what I'm doing now."

For Mardi Gras dinner, Butterfield joined a lively group of two dozen young farmers and ranchers – nearly all of them novices under the age of 30 - at Grow Kitchen where they ate scrumptious gumbo and white rice made by Matthew Elias, the creative chef at Salt Water Oyster Depot in Inverness. I didn't see an ounce of fat on anyone in the room, nor a fatty entree on the large wooden table where potluck salads and pastas were arrayed. A lean, but not a mean group, these under 30 farmers eat meat proudly and raise healthy animals on farms such as Green Valley Village, Pocket Creek, and Green String — from Valley Ford and Petaluma to Graton and Occidental.

Mardi Gras dinner brought Judy Butterfield together with Evan Wiig, Eliza Murphy, Guido Frosini, their friends and co-workers. There were as many women as men, many in jeans and flannel shirts, a few in overalls and work boots, and everyone wearing Mardi Gras beads. There wasn't a wallflower in sight. One and all conversed intensely in two's and three's about food, farming, and about the art of slaughtering pigs, rabbits, ducks, chickens, cows, and the high and mighty hog.

Hard-working realists, they shared information about pasture land, pig genetics, the best breeds of chickens, and they talked about scythes, hoes, pitchforks, shovels, and tools for picking apples and for peeling them. Equipped with iPhones and laptops, they're the most plugged-in agriculturalists in human history and they're unabashedly candid, too. No one I talked to used the euphemism "harvest" that I often heard just a few years ago when I visited farms and ranches in Marin and Sonoma to gather information about the men and women who raise organic beef and boast about their beloved cows. Slaughter — not harvest — was the word that echoed across Grow Kitchen.

In 2006, 2007, and 2008, when I made my eye-opening farming odyssey across northern California most of the young agriculturalists I met were fanatical about growing delicious carrots, delectable peas, and the sweetest of melons. That was then. This is now. Increasingly, the new batch of back-to-the-land farmers are raising animals organically and sustainably, and, when their beasts are ready for market, they're cutting heads off, butchering, and carving up carcasses. They're not a squeamish lot afraid of a little blood, mounds of manure, or mending fences on bitter cold February mornings. Not surprisingly, they're inspired by Zazu's Duskie Estes and John Stewart who work culinary wonders with kale, fava beans, sorrel, and more and who bring out the beauty of bacon and pork belly. The Pig is dead! Long live the Pig!

More than any other person in the room, Evan Wiig, who is 26, gave birth to the Mardi Gras meet, greet, and eat at Grow Kitchen, which is owned and operated by entrepreneur par excellence, Jeffrey Westman. Wiig also knows how to market. Until recently, he sat at an editor's desk at Rowman and Littlefield, the New York publishing house. Now, he helps raise Black Angus cows and Blackworth hogs on the spectacular 1,000-acre pasturelands at True Grass Farms, which is managed by his long-time pal, Guido Frosini, who was born in Florence, Italy, speaks fluent Italian as well as English, and who wants me to know that he was "baptized in Oakland." Though he wore a faded T-shirt and jeans, Frosini looked as though he might model Armani suits. If Madison Avenue wants a farmer for a sex symbol, he surely belongs at the top of the list.

At True Grass, which has been in his family since 1867, Frosini and the crew aren't just raising farm animals and producing USDA-certified meats. They're also aiming to "rejuvenate" the fields along the Estero Americano that were severely damaged by decades of

overgrazing. To borrow a cliché, they've chosen a tough row to hoe, and yet it's spiritually uplifting and deeply satisfying.

Like Judy Butterfield, Jeffrey Westman, and Guido Frosini, Wiig feels a keen sense of connection to the community. "I think I can speak for most of us when I say that we want to blend consumers and producers," he tells me. "When shoppers go to a market, such as Whole Foods, they usually depend on labels for accurate information about what to buy or not buy. We're not so much about labels, as we are about conversations. Talk to us and we'll tell you about our chickens, eggs, and pork. You'll learn much more, I think, than you'll learn when you just read a label. You'll connect to the farmer, the land, and the animal he or she raises."

Judy Butterfield might well be a "novice." Hell, once upon a time, master farmer, Bob Cannard, was a novice. Like most of the under-30 crowd at Grow Kitchen, Butterfield has the bigness and boldness of the novice, and the novice's sense that anything and everything is possible. The day after we met, she sent me an email in which she wrote, "six months into farm life, I still have that feeling you have when you're shaken awake from a very vivid dream in which you're running fast from nothing and the winding streets appear as if from nowhere."

What would Bob Cannard say to Butterfield and today's novices in fields and slaughterhouses? Having heard him wax poetical about slow food, slow farming, Alice Waters, and Carlo Petrini, I think I know. "Right on," he'd say. "And keeping on growing organically!"