
MORE BEANS

THE BUTCHER, THE BAKER, THE FARMER

Peter Merrill is a baker. Peter Merrill is a farmer. Peter Merrill is a savvy livestock farmer. Kind of like the butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker... except you're more apt to find him fixing his tractors rather than dipping wicks.

If he wasn't such a grounded young man, twenty-eight, you might think he leads a kind of schizophrenic existence. His thirty acre farm, The Big Ox Farm is found on Route 2A in the Minute Man National Historical Park which straddles the towns of Concord, Lincoln and Lexington.

Twenty-seven acres in Lincoln, in an old apple orchard next to a large yellow farmhouse and barn that was once the Noah Brooks Tavern, is the home to his animals. The 3 acres he farms for vegetables and flowers is in Concord, right across from the Maplewood Farmstand and then there is an additional 2 acre patch across the road that is also his to use but currently lays fallow.

Four days a week he works at B&R Artisan Bread in Framingham with Michael Rhoads. Merrill not only helps with the baking, he also helped with the original build-out of the bakery that opened in January 2006. Sometime between midnight and 3:00 am, Merrill begins this part of his life, and he will make some of the best bread to hit the Boston area, ending his shift somewhere between 9:00 am and 11:00 am.

Then he goes straight to his farm where he works until 5:00 or 6:00, then returns home to his wife Meg and their six-month-old daughter, Eleanor Elizabeth who they call Ellie. After dinner and once Ellie is down for the night, Merrill himself goes to bed to catch maybe 6 hours of sleep. "Then I get up with the baby at 3:00 in the morning," and it starts all over again.

He grew up in Rowley, but as he puts it, "wanted nothing to do with country life, or farming, and never wanted to throw a bale of hay in my life." His path began at Mass Art, which somehow segued to the Cambridge School of Culinary Arts. He applied for a job as a line cook at Sel de la Terre, but they needed a morning baker, and it was there with Rhodes they began the in-house baking and got the wholesale portion of the business off the ground. Then Merrill switched gears.

"I'd been thinking about going into agriculture for a while; I wanted to raise livestock," says Merrill. He was buying produce for Sel de la Terre at farmers' markets when he met Chris Kurth (now owner of Siena Farm in Sudbury) who was farming for the Practical Farm Training Program at The Farm School in Athol, MA. Merrill left the restaurant and signed on for the year long resi-



dential training program for adults in organic agriculture on Maggie's Farm at The Farm School. While there he found that the greens really excited him too, so when he began his own farm, it included both prongs: agriculture and livestock.

But this is a man who is now literally in pig heaven. He started with six Tamworth pigs, an old English breed with a reddish color that is probably historically accurate to what was originally on the farm during the revolutionary period. This is part of Merrill's mission -- though these pigs are becoming extinct and the ones he is able to obtain are quite costly.

He loves talking about them, and is a born educator. The Park Service is lucky they found each other. "The gestation period for pigs is 3 months, 3 weeks, and 3 days," Merrill explains, "which is about 2-1/2 litters a year." He uses rotational grazing and the pigs are helping to clear parts of the land. "They start at one pound at birth," Merrill continues, "and in the course

of six months they grow to 300-400 pounds, which becomes 250-300 pounds of useable meat.”

He knows his animals well, but acknowledges that he is raising them to produce the finest meat product around. “I get so much enjoyment from taking care of them and having them in my life every day,” says Merrill with great love. “If I wasn’t harvesting them, I couldn’t have them as part of my life. It’s something I have to do.” He takes them to Blood Stanley Farm in Groton, a five generations business of custom slaughtering and family farming. “It’s very quiet, very humane.”

T.W. Food, a new restaurant in Cambridge, with a menu of innovative and eclectic dishes based strongly on classic French techniques, was the first recipient of Merrill’s first three pigs. “Our ‘From Seed to Plate’ Philosophy is applied to all the stages of the cuisine,” states the restaurant’s mission as written on their menu, and their emphasis is on sustainable and fairly treated ingredients. Chef-owner Tim Wiechmann and Merrill are perfectly partnered and have known each other since Merrill’s days as the baker at Sel de la Terre.

Wiechmann reserved the pigs in November 2006, and on May 8th, 2007, Merrill delivered 600 pounds. T.W. Food has a huge band saw in its basement – Wiechmann knew he’d be butchering his own meat – and Merrill spent the rest of the day helping with this project, one day before the restaurant had its “friends and family” night, two days before it opened.

It’s a business relationship, a friendship, and a somewhat symbiotic philosophical relationship as Wiechmann saves his egg shells, coffee grinds, and vegetable and fruit peels for Merrill to use as compost. This summer, T.W. Food will take Merrill’s vegetables (mostly baby ones) as they come, and is looking forward to getting lamb from The Big Ox Farm in spring of 2008.

The Big Ox Farm will also be supplying Sel de la Terre and Formaggio Kitchen as Merrill’s meat and vegetable harvests expand. And Merrill plans on adding chickens (and with that, eggs), turkeys, and ducks and having a pre-pay poultry operation.

Six Dorset pregnant sheep bred from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, livestock program will give birth in September, and there will be high quality lamb in March or April of 2007, if you eat in the right places.

Merrill also has a herd of Scottish Highlanders and a few Irish Dexters, the smallest breed of cattle there are, all being bred for beef. Lincolnite George Travis, who is on the Board of The Farm School in Athol and Codman Farm in Lincoln, mentors Merrill and helps take care of the cattle.

Merrill gives a quick rundown of cattle definitions with enthusiasm. “A cow is a female that’s given birth; a heifer is a female that hasn’t given birth; steer are castrated males used for beef; a bull is the male cow that does the breeding. And the ox is a castrated male bovine over the age of three that has been trained to work.”

There is one Gloucester Line Back Ox, thus The Big Ox Farm, who supplies the draft power. “I try not to use any tractors for my animal pasture management, and use the ox as much as I can,” says Merrill. He has been working hard to take back some of the pasture, getting rid of invasives like bittersweet and multiflora rose, plus the small hardwoods that pop up in the life cycle of unused farmland. “It was pasture for 400 years or so,” he explains, “some of the oldest farmed land in the country because the Native Americans farmed it.”

Down the road is the vegetable component of The Big Ox Farm, and Merrill is keeping it pretty simple: garlic, baby salad greens, a few varieties of carrots and beets, potatoes and haricots vert grow in hand planted lines on a moist piece of land that needs no irrigation system. An ancient piece of farm equipment weighted by a huge vintage double porcelain sink that Merrill found in the fields is actively used. And on this land he uses a tractor, albeit one that is constantly in need of repair – no big deal for Merrill who has a long-standing relationship with tractors. His grandfather had lots and lots of farm tractors in Woodstock, Vermont and Merrill became his grandfather’s hands when the older man became blind. He laughs and says, “He could see pretty good for a blind man.”

Besides the Minute Man National Historical Park, Merrill has also partnered with The Farm School in Athol and will provide an educational component to his farming. He already helps with the historical interpretive part of the park -- not just by having animals accessible to visitors as part of the park experience, but by taking out an ox team on Patriots Day.

Peter Merrill is a worthy keeper of the land. ❖

Big Ox Farm, 231 Liberty Street, Concord, MA, 617-529-8577, www.thebigoxfarm.com.

TW Food, 377 Walden Street, Cambridge, MA, 617-864-4745, www.twfoodrestaurant.com.

Peter Merrill’s vegetables and flowers are also available at the farmers’ market in Wayland, located at Russell’s Garden Center on Wednesdays from noon to 5:00 p.m..

Rachel Travers is a freelance food, lifestyle, and travel writer who contributes regularly to several sections of The Boston Globe, as well as a smattering of national magazines. She is on the Board of the Boston Public Market Association, and is committed to “locally produced.” She lives in Lincoln with her daughter and can be reached at alphasoup2@aol.com.