
HEIRLOOMS

BY CAROLYN IANNONE

THE NEXT GENERATION

A few 20-somethings see a future down on the farm.

On February 22, amidst snow, slush and freezing rain, a few dozen people who make up the young members of the Long Island Farm Bureau were assembled in Mattituck. They were there not only to discuss farm business, but to socialize, and, of course, crunch on quite possibly the freshest, crispiest potato chips, arm's length from the machine that made them in the North Fork Potato Chip Factory. A monster contraption displaying a riot of metal, conveyor belts, sharp knives and hot oil dominated the space.

Farm Bureau executive director Joe Gergela quieted the group. "Young people have to be involved," he said. "To be aware of what is going on in New York and the rest of the nation so that farming on Long Island can continue for another 50 years. You are and will be the future of farming."

Half a century ago, Suffolk County boasted 123,000 acres of farmland. That number has diminished to an estimated 34,000 today, with future land development a constant threat. While organizations such as the Farm Bureau, the Peconic Land Trust and Suffolk County have taken substantial strides to preserve what's left on Long Island, one can't help but wonder, just how long will it last?

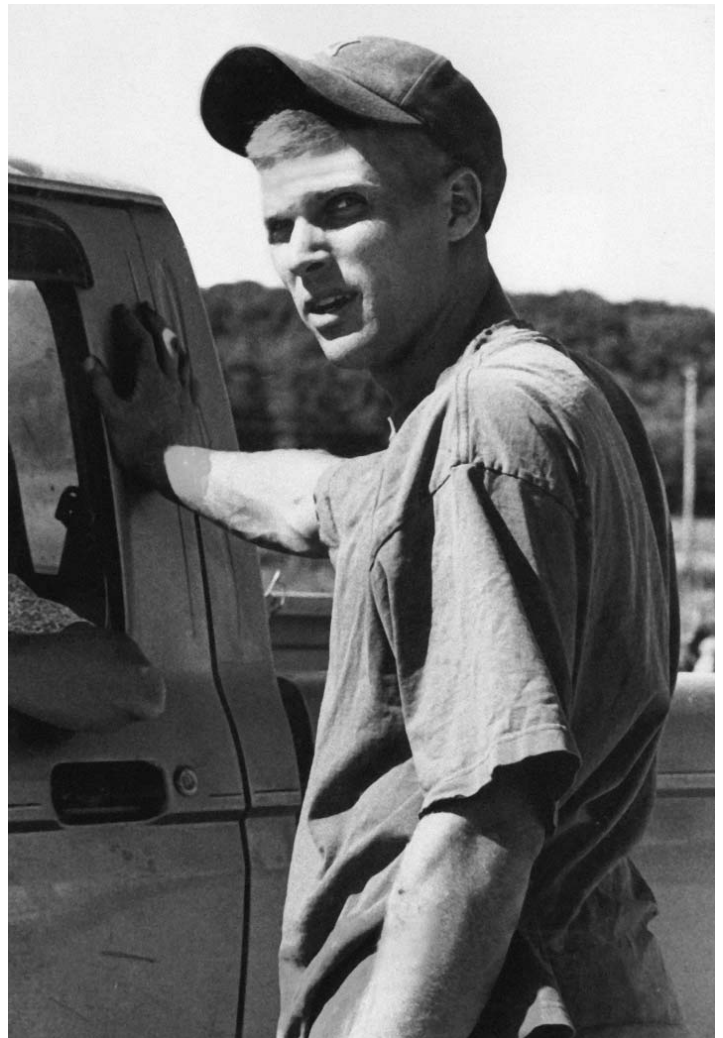
This question holds special meaning for one group in particular: the 20-somethings (and some 30-somethings) who are changing the face of East End agriculture. Returning from school with degrees in finance, business management and environmental economics, and drawing on knowledge and experience from being farm-raised kids, they are a formidable group. Standing in the path of all the forces (and there are many) working against the future of farming, the young people I talked to were anything but scared.

Consider 23-year-old Ed Harbes Jr., who recently sat with his parents, Ed and Monica, among a confetti of two dozen glasses on an oversized dining room table, all glowing with the syrupy, rosy-red color of newly fermented grape juice. Better known for super-sweet corn and jam-packed farm stands, the Harbes Farm in Mattituck is exploring a new venture: wine.

Sipping with his parents, Harbes records in a black and white notebook the characteristics of their latest vintage, a 2005 Merlot. His piercing blue eyes are made even more intense against his sun-kissed face and slightly chapped lips; they hint at a day spent working in a vineyard.

In 2005, after graduating from Cornell with a degree in business economics, Harbes was Manhattan bound, landing a job at Thompson Financial with the title of Capital Market Intelligence. He tried the hustle and bustle of city life, and found himself back on the farm where he was born and raised.

"It's always been a family collaboration," says Harbes. "I want to



advance the family business, plus there's the lifestyle here—you can go to the beach, go fishing, go for a walk." When he walked into his parents' office and realized that things were running the same way that they had been for the past 25 years, Harbes set up a cost-accounting system to simplify bookkeeping and look for ways to save money. "It's a work in progress, I guess it's what my expertise has to offer." And now, Harbes shoulders the family's collaboration with nearby Paumanok Vineyards in Aquebogue to turn Harbes grapes into wine.

With talk of a tasting room, anything is possible. Harbes's younger brother, Dave, 20, has been designing labels that look impressively pro-

professional on the same computer that he uses to lay out the farm's intricate corn mazes. Meanwhile, his four other siblings manage the farm full-time. "It's always been expected of us to work on the farm," says Harbes. "But when you take a step back, you realize it is unique and that we do take a lot of it for granted. We grow things. It's simplistic, but it's in our blood."

This combination of nostalgia and innovation is emerging on most of the remaining East End farms. There are new farms like Garden of

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Eve in Aquebogue and the Golden Earthworm in nearby Jamesport that are attracting customers by raising food organically and delivering it through the convenience of weekly CSA boxes. There

are potato-farming families like the Sidors of the North Fork and the Fosters of the South Fork who are turning some of their crop into high-value chips. And there are the heirs of the Island's first vineyards, including the Massoud brothers of Paumanok, who aspire to put Long Island wine on the national map, even as their parents hoped only to show that they could make good wine.

"The government has finally realized that if they don't act now, there won't be any farming left in Long Island," says fourth-generation farmer Phil Schmitt, 24. His father, Phil Sr., president of Long Island Farm Bureau in the late 1990s, made constant trips to and from Albany and Washington, DC. "If you want something done, you can complain about it, or you can get something accomplished yourself."

That philosophy has Schmitt very busy. With a bachelor's degree in business management, he orchestrates his family's 180 acres in Riverhead, raising lettuce, cabbage, spinach and various other vegetables alongside his younger brother, father, uncle and grandfather. He also manages his own business that started as a hobby when he was 14, working as a disc jockey at Diggers Irish Pub in Riverhead on Thursday nights, and Four Doors in Mattituck and Buckley's in Southampton on various other nights, all after putting in a 16-hour day at the farm.

Phil and his younger brother, Matt, constantly brainstorm for ways to turn more of a profit for the farm. Their newest project is to clear out a space for a farm stand on the west corner of Roanoke and Sound Avenues, right in front of their farm. "Matt and I are really pushing the idea, and we are more motivated to make it happen," says Schmitt. They plan to add their vegetables to their mom's already-successful wildflower sales. "We want to clear out a space for parking, maybe pave it over, and get a permanent sign, instead of the hand-painted sign made of plywood," he laughs.

For Schmitt, a more permanent sign may be just one part of a more permanent life on the farm: he has just purchased his own house in Wading River. "I have always felt that there is a definite level of respect that goes into our operation and the value of working hard and getting paid for it," he says. "We don't take that for granted. There is a sense of pride there. It is what America was based on at one time." □

WHAT'S IN SEASON

PRODUCE

Apples, Beets, Broccoli/Cauliflower, Brussels Sprouts, Cabbage, Carrots, Corn, Eggplant, Garlic, Greens (Chard, Collards, Kale & Mustard), Leeks, Jerusalem Artichokes, Mushrooms (Farmed and Wild), Onions, Potatoes, Radishes, Winter Squash/Pumpkins, Turnips

MEAT AND SEAFOOD

Bay Scallops, Sea Bass, Blowfish, Bluefish, Butterfish, Chicken & Eggs, Clams, Duck, Eel, Fluke, Lobster, Milk & Cheese, Oysters, Porgies, Sea Bass, Striped Bass, Swordfish, Tuna, Turkey

FRIED GREEN TOMATOES

by Ron Philipps, pitmaster at the Farmer Bar, Cutchogue

Mix 3 parts flour and 1 part cornmeal. Mix in salt, pepper, garlic powder, a little bit of oregano and basil, a small bit of paprika and some onion powder. (Basically, it's the kitchen sink in there).

Slice the green tomatoes into nice 1/4" slices and dip them in flour, then into buttermilk and back into the flour mixture.

Deep-frying gives a nice, even coating all around. Skillet frying makes tomatoes dark on two sides and creates different textures: crispy on the outside, moist inside. The skillet might impart a little better flavor as it works on the crust a bit more and provides extra caramelization. Deep-frying also seals in juices. Maybe slice skillet ones a bit thicker and treat them like big crab cakes.

I prefer nice, firm green tomatoes. Some people say pink has a bit of flavor, but it's a lot more delicate. Some people actually use red tomato, but you really have to finesse that. I like the bite of the green. The greenness is what I dig about it. Use a similar batter and technique for fried okra.