

# THE ROADSIDE DIARIES

## *Harbes Family Farm delivers an experience to go with the food.*

MATTITUCK—It all started with a pumpkin patch.

In 1990, hoping to attract Halloween shoppers, Ed Harbes planted the field adjacent to his small roadside farmstand with pumpkins. By October, he had piled a cart high with the most uniformly orange and rounded fruits—sure eye candy for Jack O’Lantern carving hopefuls.

But customer after customer avoided the pile to venture into the patch. “After saying no for the 20th time,” Mr. Harbes recalled. “I said maybe it’s not pumpkins they want. It’s the pumpkin-picking experience.”

This “accidental” discovery of u-pick pumpkins—which begins the third weekend in September—became a fixture. And that’s part of the reason that the tagline on the farm’s brightly-colored roadside signage isn’t just “Family Farm,” but also “Family Fun.” Who would have thought that pony rides, face painting, and three corn mazes—Wizard of Harbes, Wild West interactive, and Middle Earth—could help keep the family farm in business? Farmers and nonfarmers alike might dismiss such attractions as “agri-entertainment,” but Mr. Harbes thinks it’s common sense. “Every business has to deliver what its customers want,” he said. “Agriculture is not exempt from this.”

This evolution didn’t happen overnight. The Harbes family had been growing potatoes and vegetables in Mattituck since 1968 when Mr. Harbes’ father fled Huntington looking for cheaper land. When Mr. Harbes entered the family business in 1978, he had just married his high school sweetheart and began to worry about the



**Above:** Ed and Monica Harbes posing at the farm.  
**Right:** Pumpkins ready for the pickers.

future of his own family. Even though the Long Island spud commanded household recognition for the better part of the 20th century, by the 1980s potato production from Maine, Idaho, and Canada changed the landscape. “Time and effort and preparation in the American kitchen are all on a downward swing,” said Mr. Harbes, who speaks in the calm manner of a careful businessman. “No one keeps a bowl of potatoes on the counter and just grabs one and pops it in their mouth when they want a snack.”

So, with a skeptical father looking over his shoulder, Mr. Harbes and his wife Monica stopped growing vast fields of one or two crops

**WHAT:** Harbes Family Farm  
**WHERE:** 247 Sound Ave., Mattituck, and Main Rd., Jamesport, 298-0800  
**WHEN:** Daily, 9 a.m.–6 p.m. Mattituck, May–October. Jamesport, July–October.  
**MUST TRY:** Super-sweet corn, roasted corn, tomatoes, pumpkins



on the family’s 200 acres and jumped into the “Brave New World of retailing.”

“It was kind of scary,” Mrs. Harbes remembered of the shift. In fact, in the summer of 1989, when the family started selling tomatoes and supersweet corn out of a 14-by-14 foot gazebo on the side of the road, Ed’s son, Jason, who was 10 years old at the time (and now works on Wall Street), sold just \$57 worth of corn. But a visit to any of Harbes’ sprawling white-washed stands shows that the family didn’t lose interest. And they didn’t stop trying new things either.

Remember that rural adage about putting all your eggs in one basket that has become the parlance of investment brokers? At Harbes Farm, Halloween hayrides followed the year after u-pick pumpkins, and have become so popular that they now start on Memorial Day and include a Banjo player who recounts farm history. In 1992, the farm added a greenhouse in an attempt to harvest tomatoes early, and shortly afterward realized that they could open the stand in May—two months earlier than normal—by selling

greenhouse flowers and bedding plants. (The farm now counts 14 greenhouses.) That same year, the family cut a labyrinth through a patch of corn and created the first corn maze of its kind on Long Island. Instead of a 50-pound bag of potatoes, the Harbes family now offers its customers five-pound bags of baby potatoes, corn salsa made from its own corn, tomatoes, and peppers, and roasted sweet corn which Mrs. Harbes calls an "alternative fast food."

"My idea is to sell directly to people as much as possible in as many locations as possible," said Mr. Harbes. So the farm added picnic tables, wooden jungle gyms, and a miniature windmill for photo ops. A website and green Harbes uniforms with chest logos followed. Last year, Harbes opened a farmstand on the South Fork in conjunction with Wölffer Estate Vineyard.

The culmination of this evolution is the Annual Sweet Corn Festival, which celebrated its second anniversary this past July. "We made our retail debut with sweet corn, supersweet corn to be precise," Mr. Harbes said. "And that's still what we're known for."

Still, neighbors greeted many of the Harbes family's experiments with a raised eyebrow, which hasn't surprised Mr. Harbes. "It's just

like my skepticism about the first vineyards going in decades ago," he said with a knowing smile: this fall, Harbes will release the first wine made from its 5-acre vineyard.

But Mr. and Mrs. Harbes hope the experiments will entice at least a few of their eight children to stay on the farm. At least one daughter, Jess, has already said she would like to make it a career. "It would be nice," said Mrs. Harbes of her daughter's ambitions.

"Now you see what my favorite crop is," Mr. Harbes added, pulling a worn family photo from his wallet. The girls are beaming and blond like their mother. The boys are tall and broad like their father. "Growing up on a farm is one of the best experiences a child can have," Mr. Harbes said. "It teaches responsibility and hands-on skills and appreciation for life," and it's another reason Mr. Harbes wants to attract suburban customers.

"People can get produce from anywhere," Mr. Harbes said, answering his cell phone for the fourth time in about a half hour. "But if we can give them a nice experience, a nice time in the country, in addition to nice fruits and vegetables, then they will drive 50 miles to get it." □

## *North Sea Farms offers everything in a small package.*

**NORTH SEA**—Towards the end of July, Richard King of North Sea Farms received a shipment of 500 baby turkeys. "You can order them in large, extra large, medium, or small," said Mr. King, in anticipation of Thanksgiving. "They sex them out as babies and tell you exactly what size they're going to be. The biggest are about 18-pounders. The big ones are nice, but you need a big family."

North Sea Farms specializes in poultry, so raising and butchering the gobblers is no problem. But when turkey day arrives, it's a rush to get the birds dressed in time. "We have to do everything in a week," said Mr. King, who depends on a crew of locals who are experienced butchers. "They're big birds, so you want big guys." Still, the hectic gobbler-buying is worthwhile. "It gives us a good kick before winter," Mr. King added.

In fact, although you might not know it from the farmstand's unassuming appearance, North Sea Farms figures prominently in holiday meals around Southampton. It's one of just two farms that raise turkeys on the South Fork, and it raises by far the most. And one of Mr. King's daughters, Kathleen, founded and owns Tate's Bakery, whose cookies, brownies, and pies are ubiquitous at parties, office get-togethers, and on kitchen counters. "A friend recently told me that, between my daughter and the farm, we're a big part of Thanksgiving in Southampton," Mr. King said, looking up from under his wide-brimmed leather hat. "Throw in the liquor store and that's the whole holiday."

Mr. King does joke on occasion. ("I'm the shortest guy in town,"



**Above:** Young gobblers getting fat at North Sea Farms.

**WHAT:** North Sea Farms

**WHERE:** 1060 Noyack Rd., Southampton, 283-0735

**WHEN:** Daily, 8 a.m.-6 p.m.

**MUST TRY:** Chickens, turkeys, eggs

he said, deadpan. "I drive a big, old car. I've got a reputation to uphold.") But he's completely serious when he notes that the turkey business is just one of the many "draws" that are essential for any small farm to survive on the East End.

Look inside North Sea's immaculate year-round farmstand and you see evidence of other customer-enticing decisions. The main cooler holds eggs from chickens, pullets, and occasionally geese,



next to freshly butchered poussins and ducks, and chicken strips from the farm's flock of 1500 birds. "People come from UpIsland for fresh eggs," Mr. King said. "And there's no such thing as a fresh egg if it doesn't come off a farm."

The farm offers baked goods (from Tate's, of course), its own barbecue sauce and sundried tomatoes, and a full range of produce. Assorted farm paraphernalia and nostalgia, including an ice-cutting saw, scythes, and a 2-man hedge clipper, hang from the rafters. "One of our biggest things is keeping the farm image," Mr. King noted.

Mr. King, who is "banging on 80," and just finished selling the



Richard "Tate" King below the sign that sums up his farm.

farm to his son, Richard, and daughter-in-law, Robin, still works every day and is a familiar presence at the roadside stand. On a recent late-summer day, his grandsons Brad and Nate, sought his advice on how many heads of cabbage and broccoli to buy from the nearby Falkowski farm and what steps to take in a planned truck repair. Sitting in the front seat of his 1978 Cadillac Deville, wearing paint-stained blue work pants and top, Mr. King surveyed the farm that he refers to as "a shrine to my family."

"My biggest asset was being born dirt poor," said Mr. King, who goes by "Tate," a moniker bestowed by his older brother when they were playing in a potato field as kids. "So everyday I knew I was making progress."

He pointed to a number of blessed twists that allowed his family to keep the farm: when a quirky neighbor left him an inheritance in the 1980s; when he won \$7,500 in the Farm Bureau raffle in the late-1970s; when, in the early-1970s, Ray Halsey of the Green Thumb suggested that Mr. King abandon the dairy business and set up a roadside farmstand; when Ted's Market on Hampton Road became his first consistent egg customer (and remains one); when, in 1952, he married his wife Millicent, whose steady job as a nurse at Southampton Hospital allowed the farm to secure loans; and when, at the height of the Depression, Henry Schwenk hired Mr. King's father for \$10 a week and let the Kings live and raise some of their own food on the Noyac Road parcel that would eventually become theirs.

"This was like an abandoned area," Mr. King laughed. "People thought we were crazy. We could have been moving to China. There was no excitement here except the house next door was a regular warehouse. We used to listen in on the party lines." A few years later, in the summer of 1944, Mr. King shipped off to war along with a handful of other local boys, lucked out when his field artillery regiment was sent to New Caledonia instead of Okinawa, and eventually marched on Tokyo. While he was away, he received a letter from his father saying that Mr. Schwenk wanted to sell the 27-acre farm for \$12,500. "Most people said you'll never live to pay it off," Mr. King remembered. "I told him to go for it. We never had nothing, so we didn't have nothing to lose."

Today, the farm works 13 of its 20 acres, planted mostly in flowers, tomatoes, and other specialty veggies. It supplements its own harvest with produce from nearby. (The farm also has resident peacocks, goats, pigs, geese, and black turkeys, an attraction for children and a hobby of Mr. King's animal-loving daughter-in-law.) Mr. King believes that the growing public interest in "real food" means a bright future for the farm. "Everybody wants to get back to the root," he said. "And few people actually try."

But Mr. King's devotion to friends and family, like his nickname, is a refreshing anachronism. Reflecting on his life, he praised his wife and four children (including two that didn't go into the food business, Karin, a registered nurse, and Kevin, a marine engineer), mentioned the minister who married him, friends at the Fire Department, and the lawyer who advised him on finances. North Sea Farms has hosted girl and boy scout hikes on its woodlands, and Mr. King regularly drives his 1936 John Deere in the 4th of July parade. "I've always told my kids to go out of your way for other people and help them every way you can," said Mr. King, who plows neighbor's roads, trims trees, and tends houses in the off-season. "If you can get along with people and you've got ambition, you've got it 95 percent made." □