

## **Dirt Farm with a Brick Oven by Erik Andrus**

### **May, 2011**

A few weeks ago I gave a guest lecture to a large anthropology class at UVM. The students had already been through Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, and were anxious to hear an alternative-minded small-scale practitioner's ideas for solutions. At the end of the lecture, a student came up to the lectern and suggested that he might be interested in becoming involved in small-scale agriculture, but didn't know what the first step might be.

My question to him, simply, was this: "What do you love?"

I elaborated. For me, a childhood lifting stones in brooks, loading haywagons and climbing mountains instilled in me a kind of love for our landscape and the people, plants, and animals that call it home. As an adult this love became a determination to become part of what is best and most enduring in our region's agricultural tradition as best I could. This is my drive to farm and create food.

I would still describe myself as a new farmer. It took me until age 34 to accumulate the resources, will, and confidence, and support I needed to get started farming. My wife Erica and I bought our farm in 2005 and it is only in the last few years that I have begun to see our plans taking shape. What other career path demands such patience?

Over time we've also altered our plans as our understanding of our land developed. Currently we are working on low-tech wind power, crystal sugar from non-GMO organic sugar beets, organic short-grain brown rice, and the cropping of heritage wheat and barley for use in baking and brewing. We maintain a herd of grass-fed cattle and farm primarily with draft horse traction. Underpinning all of our farm enterprises is the belief that small farms like ours can be, in fact have a *duty* to be, engines of regional self-reliance in both food and energy, as well as being stewards of genetic diversity and ecological integrity.

### *Landrace Grains*

Entering the marketplace as a new farm is particularly challenging in a region already served by many capable growers! I decided early on to focus on grains, both because of the relative lack of grain and grain products in the local-food economy, and a belief that agrarian revival will ultimately entail a revival of community-scale grain-growing.

As a farm apprentice in France in 1993, I worked on a farm that grew and milled wheat and sold in bulk directly to bakers in the nearby market town. Today, France is home to a new wave of *paysan-boulangers*, (farmer-bakers), who in many cases are growing and marketing heritage grains that are actually not legal for sale under E.U. agricultural law, merely because they are non-standard, non-conforming varieties. In France, as here, agricultural laws and policies work to diminish genetic diversity and serve to consolidate power in a small number of agencies and corporations.

I am heartened by the success of France's farmer-bakers, who can legitimately lay claim to the taste of place—ancient landraces of wheat and other grains, ancient traditions of baking, and local control of genetic resources. This is the trend of our times. Agribusiness, and the governments agencies who unquestioningly legislate its interests, have horribly overreached. It falls to local farmers and communities to connect the dots and recreate agriculture on a human scale.

To this end we opened Good Companion Bakery in 2007 and its always-warm oven is a focal point of life on the farm. We've also been working on reviving rare landraces of wheat and barley for use in bread and beer, and are now moving into rice!

### *Moving Towards a Landscape of Farmed Wetlands*

One of our biggest projects this year is installation of a small commercial-scale rice project. When the project is mature we hope to produce 16-20,000 lbs of rice per year. This is possible thanks to the pioneering research of Takeshi and Linda Akaogi of Westminster West, Vermont, who have demonstrated that the Japanese varieties and field practices that allow rice to be grown in cold climates like Hokkaido (Japan's northern island) work equally well in New England! We are also honored to be working with Japanese farmer Takao Furuno, author of *The Power of Duck*, to develop a system of integrated crop and duck farming.

Rice has massive tradition behind it in Asia but is a newcomer to the Northeast. If we're to be honest, our European agricultural paradigm gives little consideration to wetlands and none to farmed wetlands. Yet farmed wetlands (with rice and other products) have been proven to be perhaps the most sustainable and energy-efficient annual-based food systems in the history of the planet. After struggling with waterlogged fields for a few years, I became convinced that rice is an excellent fit for my farm and probably for many other farms too. If New England had been colonized by Asians instead of Anglo-saxons we would already have been doing this for a few hundred years. I look forward to sharing the results of this project.

### *Energy for our Food Future*

Our drive to farm with horse and hand comes from a desire to make our farm a net producer of energy. We can argue about the future of gas prices, or about the viability of various ethanols and biofuels, but there is no doubt that animal power is a readily-available option that can immediately address farmers' needs for power and traction. Last year we put up 34 acres of hay with working horses—only the baling was done with a tractor. That hay overwintered the horses and our beef cattle too, giving that beef a much smaller carbon footprint than conventional beef. This is good farm economics for the here and now, and also insulates us against rising fuel costs, since very little is required to produce and distribute our food.

In addition we are also exploring generating electricity through low-tech farmer-built technology. We are currently developing a simple but effective Savonius Rotor, a type of wind turbine. Our butcher came by for a visit and received a cell phone call while we were standing next to it--"Hey, you know that guy whose beef we did the other day, Erik Andrus? Well I'm standing next to that wooden...windmill thing....whatever you call it....and it is spinning like a *bastard!*" A positive impression, though not very scientific! We are now collecting production data from the windmill to evaluate its cost-effectiveness.

### *Farmer Boys*

We have two lovely little boys, Julien and Robin. My hope for them is that they have a childhood lifting stones, climbing mountains, and stacking hay bales. I hope they travel, and that their journeys reinforce, for them, the specialness of their home.

I have come to feel that the age of cheap food, with all its blessings and curses, is now coming to a

close. This makes me confident that the future will hold a place for real dirt farmers--creative thinkers who can bring food to the table by dint of determination, sensitivity, and sweat, without recourse to massive machines, laboratories, or government schemes.

As difficult as it has been at times to begin farming and climb the many steep learning curves, and as hard as it has been to become financially viable, I remind myself of what we have done and where we are—in a special place in our natural and social landscape, a landscape that seems *made* to produce food and durable community.

*Erik Andrus farms with horses and bakes bread in Ferrisburgh, Vermont. Erik holds irrelevant degrees in Arabic, anthropology, and linguistics, and comes to farming out of interest in traditional cultures, technologies, and food systems. Erik and his wife Erica established Boundbrook Farm in 2005 with the intention of growing staple crops with live horsepower and community involvement. Erik is on the Board of Directors of the Draft Animal Power Network, and will be presenting three workshops at the NOFA 2011 Summer Conference: “The Savonius Rotor: Low-Tech Wind Power for Small Farms,” “Animal Powered Community Grains,” and “Overview of Draft Implements and Vehicles.”*