

ORGANIC FARMING?

Now there's a plan for retirement!

by KATHARINE DYSON

Located on Route 53 north of Side Cut Road, going into Bethel, you come to a weathered barn on the left, its front decorated with festive evergreen wreaths, red bows and berries. This is Holbrook Farm. The barn, moved here from Westport and once part of the Rippe Farm, is the retail hub of the operation.

As soon as I slid the heavy wooden door open, I was greeted with the delicious homey aroma of freshly baked apple pies just being pulled out of the oven. Looking around I saw a magical place filled with homemade food products and locally produced fruits and vegetables like baby carrots, apples, squash, cabbages and onions. Shelves were lined with jellies and jams, chocolate sauces made in Saratoga, homemade scented Goatboy soaps from New Milford, artisan cheeses, goat milk fudge, salad dressings, olive and grapeseed oils, items Lynn and John Holbrook either produce themselves or search out through their local food and farming network.

Spreading out around the Holbrooks' eight-acre property are gardens, the earth turned over now in mounds of rich, dark earth and compost. Long Quonset-style greenhouses house winter-hardy plants warmed under the plastic-domed roofs. Another larger



John and Lynn Holbrook's farm is active through the winter. —Katharine Dyson photo

barn in the back (moved from Cannondale) and a handful of trailers that have been insulated and converted to chicken coops, complete the farm's facilities.

After 12 years of operation, this is the first winter Holbrook Farm has stayed open. Thirty-five years ago, Lynn and John met at Procter & Gamble in Cincinnati, Ohio, where Lynn worked in market research and John in marketing. After mar-

rying, the couple moved to Connecticut where John went to work for Glendenning in Westport while Lynn took a teaching position in the Westport schools. Looking for a place that had some charm and some land, they brought a lovely old house in Bethel where there was room for animals and gardens and where their children, Amy, Stephen and Andrew, could enjoy growing up with a taste

of the country.

"We always had animals," said Lynn. "Sheep, cats, dogs, chickens, cows, horses, ducks, turkeys, rabbits...we had them all. We always had a garden and people would come to ask if they could buy our surplus. The kids did well selling vegetables and the eggs."

At one point, the Holbrooks went into business for themselves, founding a crafts stitch-

ery kit manufacturing company and opening American Family Crafts Needlework, a crafts store in Danbury. Still all along, the Holbrooks continued to cultivate their gardens. "John has a green thumb — he put himself through Brown with his landscaping business," said Lynn.

Then, as their children grew up and moved on — all three into the ministry, and Lynn and John hit their mid-50s, they started thinking: how do you pay the mortgage as you retire and get older? "We didn't have a lot of savings and we had experienced a couple of real estate deals that were not that good," said John. More and more, the idea of a farm sounded appealing. Already they were doing well selling produce and flowers from a stand in front of their house and offering a pick-your-own option for vegetables and berries to their customers.

Farming commitment

So 12 years ago, they made the commitment to become full-time farmers. Lynn, who grew up on a farm in Kentucky, said, "I was not intimidated by the idea of a farm. I grew up with animals, climbing the cherry trees, picking the cherries and helping my mom can and freeze. But I always said John was the one that wanted the farm. I knew better."

"I've been growing organic food all my life. My grandparents had organic farms in Indiana and Pennsylvania," said John. So the idea blossomed: develop a farm to grow organic produce and sell eggs. Today their animal menagerie is "down" to a friendly blond lab, JB, a couple of cats and 500 chickens. "We have White Leghorns, Rhode Island Reds and a Rhode Island Red/White Rock cross," said John. "The cross is good. White leghorns can go nuts, while Rhode Island Reds are calm, cool characters. By crossing them (the chickens), you get the best of both worlds."

While I was talking with Lynn and John, a pretty 21-year-old girl, Lindsey Harold, came into the barn lugging two large cartons. She was delivering milk from Grassy Hill Dairy in Woodbury — raw milk, fresh from the cows, not pasteurized



and not homogenized. "It's the real deal, straight from the cow," said Lindsey.

But lest we worry about the unpasteurized part, Lindsey who had just milked the 40 Jerseys (cows) that morning, said, "We keep the cows well fed, clean, in a good environment. We've never had any problems." She pointed to the tag tied around the top of the glass bottle. "We won an award for our milk. Our bacteria count was just 200 while the bacteria count for pasteurized milk can be as high as

1000." And indeed, John pointed out that Grassy Farm milk was a big seller.

After sampling the scones and some incredibly rich and yummy cranberry cookies, I moved to organic pickles. They looked like the ones my mom used to make, kind of pale green and are called "Real Pickles" from a company based in Greenfield, Mass. It was started by a young man just out of college. "Here his parents spent all this money in tuition at Brown and now he's making organic pickles and

sauerkraut," said John, laughing. "He's as happy as can be and loving it." (www.realpickles.com)

The Holbrooks are obviously not only passionate about what they do, but work long, hard hours. "At first I used to do all the baking until it got overwhelming as we grew," said Lynn. "Now I bake everything, but I don't make everything," she explained. "We've done the research and found the best suppliers for things like pies with crusts made from scratch. We

bring them in and bake them. We also make sure the ingredients are organic and the very best out there.”

One of their most popular items, their scones (ginger, raisin and cheddar/chive), are made by David Golden, an Englishman living in Newtown. “These are a tremendous hit,” said Lynn. Other baked goods sold by Holbrook include cookies, breads and pies. All products are carefully researched by Lynn and John. Take their Black Ace licorice, which one customer said is the best she’s ever had, “It’s licorice the way it’s supposed to be,” she said, after her first taste, immediately buying six packages as John was stocking his shelves.

“It’s dynamite,” said John. “The old-fashioned kind.”

While the Holbrooks’ barn is filled with interesting and wholesome foods, the heartbeat of the farm is the gardens which continue to produce. Ducking into one of the greenhouses, John pulled a corner of the protective insulation off the raised beds to reveal rows of bright green spinach, kale, onions, radishes and other vegetables. It was a chilly 40° or so outdoors, but inside the greenhouse, the temperature was considerably higher, almost cozy, even though the space was unheated.

“We’re at same latitude as Rome, Italy, but they have the tempering factor of the Mediterranean. We had to figure how to create these microclimates without installing heat, which would be too expensive. Can we produce enough in the greenhouses to handle our customer base? That’s our goal,” John said.

“We call this bed the geriatric ward,” he continued. “These plants don’t have to go down too far or work too hard to get the nourishment they need.” Digging into the soil with his hands, letting it run through his fingers, he showed me how just how light and rich the planting matter was.

Pulling up a head of leafy lettuce, a few radishes and some baby carrots, the soil still clinging to the roots, I saw a salad in the making. Later I took a nibble on one of the carrots. Now that’s what a carrot should taste like, I thought. It was sweet, tender.

An enthusiastic cheerleader for local growers and strong proponent of growing and eating organic, John added, “We grow a lot of vegetables, but we also buy organic produce from other growers like Blue Hill Orchards in Wallingford. We start

from the premise, If we can’t grow it, we want to know who can and where we can get it, and if that’s in Connecticut, all the better. When we can’t find what we want in this state, we’ll look beyond to New York and other areas.”

“Governor Jodi Rell is really active in trying to re-establish farms in the state,” said John, pointing to Ambler Farm, a 200-year-old working farm in Wilton where a group of volunteers are trying to make this a viable business. “This area used to be all farm lands,” he added. “The trains running down to New York were filled with produce from this area. There aren’t many farms left. Don Taylor is the last one in Danbury. We would welcome new farms in Connecticut.”

Part of Holbrook Farm’s financial success lies in John and Lynn’s ability to work hard and be resourceful. Take compost. “Landscapers get paid by folks around here to chop up their leaves. Then they (landscapers) bring the mulched leaves to us and pay us a fee to dump them. I turn them into compost. It takes a bit of effort, but it works. It’s absolutely amazing. I don’t need fertilizer. I’m talking about growing in beds two to three feet thick. Our goal is to be completely self sufficient.”

A master of recycling, John got his four commercial baking ovens for \$100 each from New Britain General Hospital when it was upgrading its kitchens; a storage cabinet was free from Stew Leonard’s as were bakery cases from a shop in Woodbury where new cases were being installed. “You just have to look. Keep your eyes open and you can find everything you need,” said John.

Chefs are also starting to use locally produced organic produce. Among them are the chef at the Redding Roadhouse in Redding, Carole Peck in Woodbury, and Michel Nischan at the new Dressing Room Restaurant in Westport.

Still, John said, “It’s a tough business to make money. You have to be resilient. But we have this Yankee environment where you have to be tough.”

Is it worth it? Just wait until you taste the lettuce, carrots, tomatoes, spinach — to put it simply, they taste the way they should taste.

Holbrook Farms: 45 Turkey Plain Road (Route 53), Bethel; www.HolbrookFarm.net; 203-792-0561. Open 10-dark, daily except Sunday.

From Lynn Holbrook’s recipe file:

Fresh Apple Bread

1 cup oil
2 eggs
2 cups sugar
2 Tbsp. buttermilk
1 tsp. cinnamon
1/2 tsp. salt
1 tsp. baking soda
2 tsp. vanilla
3 cups all purpose flour
3 cups diced apples

Preheat oven to 350°. Beat oil, eggs, sugar and buttermilk together. Add cinnamon, salt, soda and vanilla. Mix well. Add flour and apples and mix well. Pour into 2 lightly greased loaf pans. Bake 45 minutes to 1 hours.

Butternut Squash & Apple Bisque

3 Tbsp. butter
5 cups half-inch cubes peeled seeded butternut squash
1-1/4 cups chopped onion
1/2 cup chopped carrot
1/2 cup chopped celery
1 tart apple, peeled, cored, chopped (about 1-1/4 cups)
1/2 tsp. ground allspice or cinnamon
4 cups vegetable broth or low-salt chicken broth, preferably homemade
1/2 cup apple cider
1 cup whipping cream, divided
extra broth for thinning
chopped fresh parsley

Melt butter in large pot over medium-high heat. Add all vegetables. Sauté until vegetables soften, about 10 minutes. Mix in apples and spice. Add broth and cider; bring to boil. Reduce heat to medium-low. Cover and simmer until vegetables are tender, about 30 minutes. Puree soup in batches in blender; return to pot. (Can be made one day ahead).

Add 1/2 cup cream; bring to simmer. Thin with remaining broth if thick. Season with salt and pepper. Ladle soup into bowls. Drizzle with 1/2 cup cream; sprinkle with parsley.

Broccoli Salad

Put into bowl:

1 head broccoli cut into small pieces (about 5-6 cups)
1/2 cup raisins
3-4 green onions sliced into small pieces
2-3 stalks celery, diced
8 cooked bacon slices broken into small pieces
1/2 cup sunflower seeds

Dressing:

Mix: 1 cup mayonnaise, 1/2 cup sugar, and 2 Tbsp. vinegar. Add to salad just before serving.