



(Left) Michael Moran; (right) Ken Kohnsey



The Reluctant Farmer

Craig Haney ('94) wanted to be a lawyer, but he took root in the agricultural business instead. Now, he's part of a new breed of farmer changing the way food is grown, and consumed, in the United States.

by Lara Lulin

Craig Haney



stands in a wedge of pale sunlight. Behind him is a stone barn, one of several built by John D. Rockefeller Jr. in the 1930s on his estate in Pocantico Hills, New York, just 30 miles north of Manhattan. As Haney turns, birds roosting nearby take flight with a sound like a plastic tarp snapping. Craig hardly notices; this is life as usual for him. It's farm life, to be specific, on 80 acres of rolling land that, in 2001, David Rockefeller, J.D.R. Jr.'s youngest son, gave to the nonprofit Stone Barns Center for Food and Agriculture. The Center is now dedicated to raising environmentally responsible foods as well as educating people about how their food choices affect their health, their communities, and the environment.

Haney oversees much of the land and all of the animals, with the daunting task of continually figuring out how to make this little square of acreage sustainable, both economically and environmentally. Considering Haney stepped carefully—even reluctantly—into farming, it's a challenge he might never have predicted he'd shoulder. But these days, the history major from Cooperstown, New York, wouldn't want to be doing anything else. By working to ensure Stone Barns' success, Haney can provide a model for other farms to follow, helping rethink and reshape the way food is produced—and consumed—in the United States.

Major in the Majors

"I always thought I'd become a lawyer," says Haney, explaining how, as a boy, he'd go to the Cooperstown court house and just sit there, watching the proceedings. Cooperstown is small and, growing up, Haney knew just about everyone: the bus driver, the postman, the people who ran the market. It was knowing such a variety of people that Haney missed most when he came to UM in 1984. "I was surrounded by people my own age and I missed older people, I missed that community of people," he says.

As a remedy, Haney started hanging out at the farmers' market in Ann Arbor, getting to know the vendors. "Afterwards, I'd walk over to Zingerman's," Haney says. "I really liked the atmosphere there, and I liked the people."

After his freshman year, Haney got a summer job at The Farmers' Museum in Cooperstown, a living history museum, where he helped raise crops, milk cows, and smoke meats so visitors could get a firsthand idea of what farming life was like circa the



mid-1800s. There, Haney gained more and more respect for what he calls "a whole separate culture of people who were stubborn, tough, and not bogged down in details."

Haney's own grandfather, a farmer himself, fit that bill.

"My grandpa had five fingers, total, when he died," says Haney, who saw firsthand the loss of one of his grandfather's fingers with a crosscut saw. He marveled when it happened that it didn't upset his grandfather more. But Haney says his grandfather was a man who "majored in the majors" and wanted Haney to do the same—in other words, to not get upset by "little stuff."

Haney seems to have learned the lesson. As a student, he didn't sweat about not completing his degree in four years. Rather, he chose to take time off and travel, and to obtain his degree in a timeframe that made sense to him. "I wanted to figure out what I wanted to do," Haney says. "I was always a good student but I wasn't sure what I wanted from my education. My goal wasn't just to stay and take out more loans."

During this period of searching, Haney dipped his toe into the farming waters, "working," as he says, "with different aspects of agriculture." This included everything from helping out part-time on a large dairy farm, milking and carrying out chores, to working at a "maple sugar bush," a farm where maple syrup or maple sugar is produced. The line of work just wouldn't stop calling to him.

In 1994, ten years after he

(This page left) Craig Haney takes time out to pet Stella, a Maremma dog that lives with Stone Barns' sheep full-time, protecting and herding the flock; (right) Joan Raiselis, a Stone Barns' volunteer, sells produce at the Center's outdoor market. (Opposite page) the scenery, animals, and Blue Hill restaurant at Stone Barns reflect an environment where good food and responsible farming are valued equally.

John Tebeau; (opposite page, middle) courtesy of Stone Barns

first started at UM, Haney officially graduated. By the time he received his diploma, he had a better sense of his direction in life: He had officially decided to become a farmer. And he was going to start his farm with bull calves.

A Better Market

On dairy farms, male calves, called bull calves, aren't usually of much financial value. They can't produce milk and so, unless they're exceptional calves that can eventually be used for breeding, they are usually sold for veal production. Haney says the bull calves are such cast-offs that, depending on the market, farmers sometimes have to pay truckers and auction houses to take the calves away.

New York-based agricultural agencies, such as the Center for Agricultural Development and Entrepreneurship and the Natural Resource Conservation Service, realized farmers were getting the short end of the bull calf stick. As a result, Haney says they "encouraged entrepreneurial farmers to try raising and selling the calves as pastured veal." The idea resonated with Haney. "I was excited about the idea of taking a bull calf that a dairy farm saw as a liability and raising him in a humane manner," he says.

So Haney started Skate Creek Farm just outside of Albany, New York. The calves on his farm would still be slaughtered for meat, but this way Haney could make sure they weren't raised cruelly, cramped in too-small pens and fed poorly, and that their end would be as humane as possible. "We fed them milk twice a day," says Haney, noting that many of the calves became quite social. "It was win-win. A win for an aspiring farmer and a win, at least for six months, for a helpless dairy bull calf."

Dan Barber, executive chef and co-owner of Blue Hill restaurant in New York City, began working with Haney to get the humane veal delivered to, and served at, the restaurant. "Blue Hill was always supportive in utilizing lesser desired primal cuts from the calves," says Haney. "Everybody wants the loins but Dan would call each week and ask about the whole calf. He'd even have questions about what his diet was, where he was harvested, and how old he was."

Barber told Haney

of the plans to open up a Blue Hill restaurant at Stone Barns and invited Haney to come look at the then-unfinished Stone Barns campus. "Stone Barns wanted to find a way to raise meat and vegetables, and Blue Hill wanted to serve it," explains Haney. And Stone Barns also wanted to raise its animals in the same way Haney was—humanely and respectfully.

Haney thought that a for-profit restaurant partnering with a non-profit agricultural center was a good idea, but he understood it would be a challenge to raise a large number and variety of animals on Stone Barns' limited acreage: Out of the Center's 80 acres, only 23 would be available for pasture. "Twenty-three acres may seem like a lot," says Haney, "but when you're talking about raising animals, it's really nothing." According to the American Farmland Trust, the average farm in New York is 228 acres—almost ten times the land Haney would have to work with. Even so, Haney decided to go for it. In January 2004, he moved to Pocantico Hills to launch the Center's livestock program. When Stone Barns opened in May 2004, it offered a campus where not only food (both plant and animal) is grown, but where on-site classroom facilities provide spaces for food education, and Blue Hill restaurant gives visitors the chance to taste the farm's "fruits" firsthand. Stone Barns "helps people make farm-to-table connections," says Haney.

All Creatures Great and Small

Haney walks down a sloping hill toward a group of turkeys, one of seven kinds of animals Stone Barns now raises (the other six are rabbits, bees, swine, meat chickens, laying hens, and sheep). Haney points to the movable electric fencing all around the turkeys. "All the animals get moved on a daily basis," he says. "This is how we raise literally tons of animals with limited acreage, while responsibly tending to our pastures and forests."

Haney's job in this sense is a lot like choreographing an elaborate dance between the land and the animals. He has to figure out not only which animals to put where, but at what time. Sheep might graze in one area first, then the chickens move in.

Then come the rabbits, and so on. In addition



to the movement of the animals, there's the added element of caring for the pastures, which is largely what the animals feed on. "We're raising grass as much as we're raising animals," Haney says. "We pay attention to it and treat it as an asset. Nutritionally, the right grasses are great for the animals. It keeps them happy and healthy."

So healthy, in fact, that the Stone Barns animals rarely require antibiotics—a novel concept in an era when large farms feed their animals antibiotics regularly. "We stress the harmony between plants and animals and try to build up the animal's own natural immunity," Haney says.

If it sounds like this is a fresh approach to farming, it is. "There's no school you can go to, to learn this stuff," Haney says. "We're learning it through the school of hard knocks."

It's a commentary on U.S. farming practices that a farm like Stone Barns would be considered so innovative. But Haney says he understands it. "I recognize how we got to this point," he says. "As a country we became focused on producing cheap food. That was the goal and we forgot about the other things like ecology, human health, and animal welfare. That doesn't make the large dairy farmer, for example, an evil guy." Rather, it's just that the demand for cheap food is setting the tone for how the food is produced, which isn't necessarily on par with other places in the world.

"For example, Norway, Sweden, the European Union—they all have higher animal welfare standards than the United States," says Haney.

As the guy on site who operates Stone Barns' poultry processing facility, it can be ironic to hear him talk about animal welfare standards. He's killing, after all, about 200 chickens a week—not to mention other animals. But Haney is earnest about animal welfare—even if the goal is that the animal is for human consumption. "I want our animals to have a good life and a good end," he says.

He says it from a wealth of experiences that have taught him how to respect and care about the creatures he works with. He's connected to them. "The sound of the sheep's mouths are like rain when they all stand and chew the grass together," he muses at one point.

The entire farm reflects the care and attention. It doesn't smell like a typical farm—the air is fresh, the animals

smell earthy and healthy. It's pleasant. The turkeys aren't frantic, clawing over each other in cramped cages. They're outside, foraging for grass and insects. The pigs live in the forest, rooting around among trees, snuffling happily. The chickens cluck and scratch to their heart's content.

So what does all of it mean?

Haney says Stone Barns is helping to create a market—and a demand for—food that's grown responsibly and humanely, and that Stone Barns is plugging into people who are willing to invest in food that's raised that way. Right now, Stone Barns has more than 600 members who realize the value of what the farm is producing. Membership comes with levels and benefits, just like a museum. In addition, Stone Barns has a large volunteer base.

All this mobilization reflects a group of people willing to support Stone Barns and its food, even if it costs a bit more. According to the Organic Trade Association, organic produce is often priced 20–25 percent higher at retail than conventional produce. However, while Stone Barns' food may cost more, there are savings, too, they just don't come with a standard price tag. For example, no oil is used to freight Stone Barns' produce to market, and the environment is spared from the use of chemicals.

Haney says that ideally it won't just be people in New York who want this kind of food, but that people in cities all over the country will demand it and will help facilitate ways to raise it.

"We'd love to see all people enjoy food more and respect animals more," Haney says. "Hopefully Stone Barns will be a venue to encourage responsible farming."

For his part, Haney's delighted to be part of the whole process and wants to continue farming this way. "Ten years from now I'll be here," he says. "We're just getting started." 🍁

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(This page) Stone Barns' crops and animals are carefully selected for their compatibility with the native ecosystem. Stone Barns uses natural pastures instead of antibiotics to keep its animals healthy, and compost instead of chemicals to keep its land fertile. (Opposite page) Ann Arbor offers a variety of organic and local food venues, including the Ann Arbor Farmers' Market where Isabelle Carbonell ('07) checks out produce.

(This page, left and middle) John Tebeau; (this page, right) courtesy of Stone Barns; (opposite page, middle) Adrian Wylie



Eat What? Eat This!

STUDENTS BLOG ABOUT LOCAL AND ORGANIC FOOD

by Lynne Meredith Schreiber

WHEN JULIE COTTON CAME TO UM for a master's in terrestrial ecology, she was pleased to see the options available for obtaining good-quality, locally grown food. But one thing troubled her.

"I was surprised that more students didn't take advantage of Ann Arbor's options," she says, "like the farmers' market, co-ops, and the restaurants that promote the local food system."

So she helped create the Eat This! blog, a site that offers places and recipes for students to try, along with a discussion of the social and health issues surrounding organic and local food.

Cotton's fellow bloggers are both students in UM's School of Art & Design. Allison Apprill (known as Ally on the site) writes about food and health issues. Earl Carlson, who was just learning to cook when the site was formed, writes about recipes and his cooking experiences. Computer science and engineering student Matt Diephouse designed the site.

"We wanted to write from a lot of different perspectives," Cotton says, "to draw people in, show them what's available, what's affordable, and why it's a good idea to eat local and organic."

What are those reasons? Cotton says that simply put, it's about "a closer connection to our food system." She mentions that food grown locally reduces fossil fuels, supports local farmers, and is healthier. Produce at the supermarket is often coated after harvest with preservatives and pesticides, Cotton says, which can affect people's immune and nervous systems, especially those of growing children.

"Upon reading it, I was really influenced by what the site said," says English major Bethany D. Herrema. "I hadn't known there were so many

preservatives in the food we eat, nor did I think about what buying locally would do for the economy."

The posts also highlight campus classes and community events, like the LSA Residential College's Sustainable Food Systems course, which takes students on field trips to local farms and food processors. And Cotton encourages students to attend events put on by the local Slow Foods chapter, a nonprofit educational organization dedicated to supporting local producers. One of the events the blog promoted last winter was a morning walk to the nearby Ann Arbor Farmers' Market to raise awareness about the availability of local food.

Still, getting students to change their habits will be difficult. "It is unlikely that students are going to buy local fruit and veggies when there is 'free' produce in the cafeteria," Herrema says. "Even for those of us without a meal plan, lack of a car can make it difficult to buy fresh local foods."

Cotton says there are off-campus options for students—like the Ann Arbor Farmers' Market and the People's Food Co-op in Kerrytown. There are also restaurants such as Silvio's Organic Pizza and Café Verde, plus the more expensive Eve and Zingerman's restaurants.

What's more, it seems like the issue of eating local and organic food is beginning to resonate with students. "More and more students are excited by the prospect of eating local," says Cotton, who finishes her master's degree this May and wants to eventually own an educational farm, a place for people to take academic courses and also learn about agriculture.

"If I can convince a single person to change buying or eating habits, or help switch the on-campus coffee to only fair trade and organic, or help UM try a farm-to-school buying program," says Cotton, "then it could make a huge impact."

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