

# farm to plate

STRENGTHENING VERMONT'S FOOD SYSTEM

## CAREER PROFILES AND PATHWAYS



 Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund





# CAREER PROFILES AND PATHWAYS

To encourage more young people to consider food systems careers, the **Career Pathways Task Force** of the **Farm to Plate Education and Workforce Development Working Group** worked with teachers and students at **Hannaford Career and Technical Center** in Middlebury and **Montpelier High School** to develop food system career profiles that align with the Agency of Education's Proficiency Based Graduation Requirements.

More than 20 students interviewed farmers, chefs, entrepreneurs, and other food system professionals and compiled their results in a question and answer format. The profiles highlight key skills that are useful for specific career paths but also show that the “school of life” and following your passion are equally important in achieving your dreams.

Special thanks to **Janice Bosworth** (Hannaford Career and Technical Center) and **Tom Sabo** (Montpelier High School) for facilitating this project.



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# ANNA JO SMITH – HERDSWOMAN



Interview by: Maria Welch, Hannaford Career Center

## What are your job responsibilities?

I am a herdsman for [Rail View Farm](#) in New Haven. I am responsible for all aspects of heifer and calf management on the dairy farm. I work with fresh cows (cows that have just calved) and sick cows, and help manage the herd health program. I am also working to start my own beef and pig farm on family land. I'm currently raising 50 head of beef and raising pigs to sell directly to consumers in the area and through retail markets such as the Middlebury Natural Food Co-op.

## Are there any personal risks to you in this job?

There is always a risk working with livestock animals and farm equipment. I'm very cautious and aware of the chemicals and medications that I sometimes have to work with since it's important to know where chemicals or drugs are stored and to closely follow all the label directions. I wear gloves to protect myself when I'm giving shots to animals.

## If you could start your career over, what would you change?

In retrospect, I wish I had taken an internship outside of Vermont when I was a freshman in college. I see the benefit of experiencing a dairy operation that would be different than those typical in Vermont.

## What do you enjoy most about your job, and what is most challenging?

I like that every day is different and always changing so I don't get bored. Working with animals is actually easier than working with people. Sometimes it's people who are the most challenging to work with!

## What advice would you give to someone starting out in this line of work?

I suggest shadowing dairy farmers and talking with them as much as possible. Also, work at several different farming operations and



PHOTO: HEATHER GRAY

know what you are getting into before you fully commit to it. Farming can be tough but rewarding work. You have to enjoy working with animals too. College was helpful not only for the education but also for the great networking opportunities with people in agriculture businesses. I made a lot of friends in college who were also interested in agriculture. I've stayed in contact with my friends and we've supported and helped each other out professionally.

### **What does your average day look like?**

On the dairy farm, every day I feed, clean, and supply medications (when needed) to the calves and then check dairy cows that are close to giving birth. I keep records, post notes for other employees, and administer medications and vaccines.

### **What inspired or lead you towards this line of work?**

I grew up on my grandfather's farm. I was a 4-H member and showed calves. I decided at a young age that I wanted to work in some aspect of dairy farming. I work as a herdsman now but plan to fully operate my own farm someday.

### **Are there any special skills, licenses, or training required for your job?**

There are no general licenses for farming. If you are interested in breeding cattle there is a certification program to be a dairy artificial insemination breeder. You may also need some licenses to run certain farm equipment. Understanding livestock behavior is important when working with cattle, for detecting animals ready for breeding, and especially for detecting sick animals.

### **Do you feel that your career provides you with a livable wage?**

Yes and no. It's a manageable wage if you have minimal expenses. I kept my student college loans low and keep an eye on my spending.

### **Is there room for you to grow in your career?**

I feel like there is room to grow, take on more managerial responsibilities, and lend my ideas for changes or adaptations in the operation. I'm constantly learning on the farm.

### **Did you go to college or have any post high school training?**

I went to Vermont Technical College and the University of Vermont through the Vermont 2 + 2 scholarship program. I studied agriculture business, dairy management, and animal sciences. Vermont Technical College provided me with a lot of hands-on experiences with their

dairy herd and I was involved in research at the [Miner Institute](#) in Chazy, NY as part of my UVM coursework. I also took agriculture courses in high school at the Hannaford Career Center and was involved in 4-H and with the state Future Farmers of America.

### **Was there any training or education that you wish you'd had that you didn't get in or after High School?**

I would have liked to spend more time learning and taking courses on crops and soils. This will be important for running my own farm.

## RESOURCES

**FARMS 2 + 2 Program:** Tuition scholarships are available for Vermont residents who begin this Dairy Farm Management Degree Program at Vermont Tech and maintain at least a B average each year of their college career. The amount of the scholarship can be the current year's full tuition cost at either **Vermont Tech** or the **University of Vermont**.

▶ Visit: [www.vtc.edu/scholarship/farms-2-2-program](http://www.vtc.edu/scholarship/farms-2-2-program)

**Hannaford Career Center:** Offers sustainable agriculture courses for students, including entrepreneurship, sustainable livestock/dairy production systems, animal anatomy/physiology, food production and other elements of diversified agriculture.

▶ Visit: [www.hannafordcareercenter.org](http://www.hannafordcareercenter.org)

**Vermont New Farmer Project:** Statewide resource of all of the organizations, services, and educational opportunities for new and aspiring farmers.

▶ Visit: [www.uvm.edu/newfarmer](http://www.uvm.edu/newfarmer)

**Future Farmers of America:** National association with statewide chapters that promote agricultural education and leadership.

▶ Visit: [www.vtffa.com/vermont-ffa-foundation.html](http://www.vtffa.com/vermont-ffa-foundation.html)

**Vermont Food System Job Listings:** Statewide resource of food system job listings.

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# RICHARD WISWALL – DIVERSIFIED VEGETABLE FARMER



Interview by: Isaac Avery-Padberg, Montpelier High School

## **What is your current work and how long have you been in this line of work?**

I have been an organic vegetable farmer for 35 years. I am also a farm consultant, providing farmers with advice on how to run a farm business.

## **What was your educational pathway to end up in this job?**

I went to Middlebury College. During college, I went to Nepal and lived in a very minimalist fashion. This was a very pivotal moment in my career— it opened my eyes to farming. I graduated college with a Liberal Arts Degree and a BS in Environmental Science.

## **How did you get involved with your current job?**

After college, I started a farm with friends that were fellow farming enthusiasts. I only owned 5% of the business. Ultimately, the other partners lost interest in the farm and I was eventually the full owner of Cate Farm.

## **What is your typical day like?**

A typical day entails waking up at 5:30-6:00 am, organizing the day, and getting ready until 8:00am when the crew arrives. I work with the crew on the farm until noon and take a lunch break until 1pm. We work until 5pm or until the day's tasks are more or less complete.

## **What specific skills (technical and interpersonal) are needed in your work? What skills do you find most useful?**

A wide variety of skills are needed to be a good farmer. Organization is very important—being able to organize a large group of people and have conversations with them can take a lot of effort. Knowing



PHOTO: HEATHER GRAY

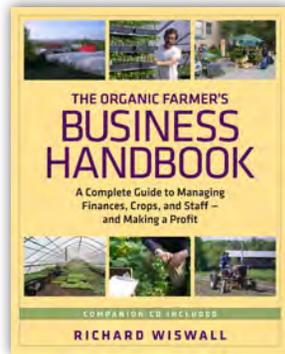
how to weld and do some woodworking is very helpful as well. It's also important to know how to run a business and manage money. This is a skill that has to be learned and takes a lot of time and energy.

### **What kind of training could you have used that you didn't get in High School or beyond?**

I learned little about farming in high school and it did not really prepare me to be a farmer. There was no financial literacy course in high school at the time which would have been very helpful.

### **What did you learn on the job that you didn't learn in the classroom?**

I learned everything about this job from starting my own business, reading books, making mistakes, and checking out how other peoples' farms are run. After years of learning from mistakes and gaining experience, I wrote *The Organic Farmer's Business Handbook*, which educates farmers about the business side of farming.



### **What do you wish you had known before getting launched into the work place?**

I wish that I had known how to manage money. There were a lot of mistakes and learning done in that area before I became proficient at it. Good judgment takes experience, and a lot of that comes from bad judgments you make along the way.

### **If you could change anything looking back, what would you change or do differently?**

If I could change anything, I would have planned for the future and had goals to both expand the company and raise a family. As it turned out, my plans consisted of being a happy farmer growing vegetables in Vermont.

### **What advice would you give to someone starting out in this line of work?**

Someone starting out should work on farms as much as possible to gain a broad range of production skills. At first you may learn harvesting and weeding, but then you will learn tractor skills and other more advanced farm work. Studying agriculture in college may be a good choice too, like Vermont Tech, but hands-on experience is essential. If a student does not go to college, then some kind of secondary education is important, like workshops or certifications. One way to get started as a farmer is to rent an acre from an existing farm to grow vegetables.

## **RESOURCES**

**The Organic Farmer's Business Handbook:** Richard Wiswall shares advice on how to make your vegetable production more efficient, better manage your employees and finances, and turn a profit, based on more than 30 years of experience at Cate Farm.

► Visit: [www.chelseagreen.com/the-organic-farmers-business-handbook](http://www.chelseagreen.com/the-organic-farmers-business-handbook)

**Vermont New Farmer Project:** Statewide resource of all of the organizations, services, and educational opportunities for new and aspiring farmers.

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Interview by: Karly Lekberg, Hannaford Career Center

## **Why did you decide to produce organic milk?**

We were always believers in the principles of organic agriculture, starting with reading the book “Silent Spring” by Rachel Carson. We grew up with Organic Gardening Magazine. Healthy, nutrient-dense food starts with microbe filled, mineral rich soils, which leads to healthy crops for healthy cows and healthy people.

## **What are the pros and cons of operating organically?**

One of the benefits to producing organic milk is the stable price we receive for our milk (unlike conventional milk prices that vary widely and dip below the cost of production). It is also very personally satisfying to learn to manage cows and crops without pesticides, herbicides, antibiotics and hormones. We enjoy having a supportive community of farmers to look to for information. The downside to running an organic operation like Taconic End Farm is the record keeping and paperwork involved, along with keeping up with allowed practices.

## **What Inspired you to farm?**

What inspires us is the love of animals and the natural world, and that our work combines the care of crops and cows to make delicious milk!

## **What changes in the dairy market have you noticed throughout the years?**

Since we started milking over 30 years ago, the milk market price paid to conventional dairy farmers has been an ongoing roller coaster. It’s led to a huge loss in the number of dairy farms. It is very hard to run any business when the price for your product is always changing. However, this has led to more farms trying on-farm processing, cheese making, and organic production.



PHOTO: HEATHER GRAY

### **If you could start your career over, what would you change?**

If we were starting over we would buy a slightly bigger farm to be able to include the next generation who will work this farm.

### **What advice would you give to someone going into this work?**

Our advice for someone going into this line of work would be to get a lot of practical work experience on different farms, practice good management, observe closely, ask questions and read as much as possible. Be realistic about what the financial limits of farming are, as well as the amount of long hours and patience it takes to run a farm.

### **What major skills would you recommend having?**

There are many skills needed for dairy farming, but some of the most important would be a love of taking care of animals and basic veterinary skills, rotational grazing experience, crop management, and mechanical know-how. Also, financial management and business planning skills are critical. You have to be able to keep an eye on the big picture along with getting the day to day chores done. You can learn these skills at college but you also need hands-on experience.

### **What does an average day look like?**

Our average day starts and ends with milking in the spring, summer and fall as we run a seasonal milking operation. We also put our milking herd out on pasture along with the heifers and calves which are outdoors in the day all year round. The winter days are similar except we do not milk, but still have to clean out the barn in the a.m. Other responsibilities which vary from day to day or season to season are: haying, clipping pastures, gardening, fixing up projects, paperwork and recordkeeping, etc. Every day is different depending on the season and if a cow needs tending to or if something breaks. Haying takes a lot of time as we do all our own dry hay.

### **What is the balance of business and personal life?**

Finding a balance to work/ personal life can be tricky! We are always at work and during the busiest seasons we have to work fast and don't always keep up with it all. Trying to find (or make)

small windows of time to get away and relax is important, as well as having things on the farm out of the routine that you enjoy. We have someone who can occasionally relief milk for us in order for us to get away for a few days. Life on the farm is very seasonal and more so for us since we have the cows all calve in the spring/ early summer. All the cows have a dry time when they are not being milked from mid-January to mid-March. We also focus a lot on a big garden and grow a lot of our food, everything from dried beans and wheat to vegetables and fruit. Preserving food is another activity that takes a fair amount of time.

### **How did you get involved selling to Organic Valley?**

We started shipping organic milk in 1996, after shipping conventional milk for nine years. We went with Organic Valley in 2001, when they began picking up milk in our area. Organic Valley is a farmer-owned cooperative. They promote organic integrity and maintain the pay price at a decent level for their producers. We are very appreciative of the strong support they offer the farmers. They offer resources to learn about soil fertility and agronomy, energy saving projects, veterinary advice, succession planning, and farmer-to-farmer sharing opportunities.

## **RESOURCES**

**Organic Certification:** NOFA Vermont and Vermont Organic Farmers are statewide resources for organic certification resources, guidelines, and events.

▶ Visit: <http://nofavt.org>

**Organic Valley:** A national cooperative of organic dairy farms. You can find Vermont member by using the Find Your Farmer feature on their website.

▶ Visit: [www.organicvalley.coop/our-farmers/find-your-farmer](http://www.organicvalley.coop/our-farmers/find-your-farmer)

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# GEORGE GROSS – DIVERSIFIED VEGETABLE FARMER



CAREER



PATHWAYS

Interview by: Katey Perry, Montpelier High School

## What is your current work and how long have you been in that line of work?

My current work is owner, operator, and farmer at **Dog River Farm**, an organic diversified vegetable farm in Berlin. We grow vegetables, fruit, and maintain a flock of laying hens. We sell our products to just about every type of venue: CSA farm stand, farmers' market, local restaurants, and grocery stores, as well as wholesale markets up and down the coast from Maine to Florida. I started farming in 1996 when I visited a friend's small vegetable operation and I was inspired to be an entrepreneur.



[www.dogriverfarm.com](http://www.dogriverfarm.com)

## What was your educational pathway to end up here?

My undergraduate degree was a bachelor's degree in biology and science. My real educational path for farming was a lot of hands-on work with older farmers who taught me about equipment maintenance and field preparation. The more finite details I gleaned from books and the internet and just from word-of-mouth conversations with other people who are working in this field. There's so much information out there, and just so much creativity that's being shared that you could pick up so much information in just hours through YouTube. So I had lots of hands-on experience to start and the more finite details I learned from others in the field, research, and trial and error.

## Is there anything else that helped you to get involved in farming?

I've always been interested in operating my own business and I've always been willing to go out on a limb and take that gamble and see if I could make it work. So farming is definitely for people who aren't scared to try new things. With diversified retail and wholesale production, you have to be more extroverted than introverted because of all the contact you have with the public. It takes some experience but also a willingness to get out there and try.

## What's a typical day like for you?

My wife works so we can have health and dental insurance, and all that fun stuff, and in case a natural disaster strikes, we have a side salary. Because of that, I take care of my kids in the morning and get them off to school. At work, we have a check-in meeting with our team of



PHOTO: HEATHER GRAY

employees every morning for 15 minutes prior to starting the day and then we all go our separate ways and tackle the jobs that need to be done. We will check in periodically usually with cell phones so that we can tell where we are and make sure everything's going properly. We have a nice lunch together, either outside or in the greenhouse. We handle another task in the afternoon.

So in the springtime it's a lot of prep, seeding, and taking care of strawberry plants and things like that. As we transition into summer it's a lot of planting and then harvesting and then as we transition in the fall it's a lot harvesting and transitioning into winter. Usually three tasks get done per day: we have a block in the morning, a block in the afternoon and a block in the evening so that we don't spend all day doing one thing. It's usually a solid 9 or 10 hour day for me, and employees work 7 to 10 hours depending on what they get done.

### **Are there any specific skills you need to do your job?**

You always need math whether it's calculating unit pricing or number of seeds or fertilizer rates—you must have math. And it's not anything crazy, it's just mathematical sense, multiplication, division, and some geometry is beneficial. Understanding spatial relations is important and, because we are certified organic, a lot of what we do is scientifically based. Medium level biology is important to understand how ecosystems work and some basic chemistry is important so you understand how elements and compounds relate and how they affect your soil and your plants. Language arts is important so that you can communicate what you want clearly.

### **What kind of training could you have used that you didn't get in high school?**

I would say that I got zero training from the educational system for farming other than science and math. I got that training because I went out and sought it. At the farm that I leased in Johnson before this one, the farmer was very willing to share and was very willing to use his equipment to train and helped us get going. Today, there are more resources and things like new farmer training programs and I think that's important. And with the development of the local food system, there are teachers that are inspiring kids to get out there and grow stuff and explore.

### **What did you learn on the job that you didn't learn in the classroom?**

I have people that come here all the time and they want to do apprenticeships and I don't do it unless they are really interested, because if not, it's a waste of my time and their time. There are two really important things about wanting to get into a job. The first is being really into the job, and the second is an interest in truly learning. They are going to acquire knowledge by working so if they're really interested in farming, they are going to ask a lot of questions. You're going to be paying attention, you're

going to be thinking in your head "how can I do that?" And I still do that, I'm continuously researching. If you're not inspired about something it's really hard to keep that interest.

### **Is there anything specific you wish you would have learned before you got into this work?**

I wish that I had learned more about managing people. For me that's the most difficult part. Getting people to do what they need to do, when they need to do it, without scaring them away and then also making sure all pieces of the business are working so that it's profitable. Those are two really key pieces that I would like to have learned. Because I've been doing it for so long, I figured those pieces out. But I think I could have been more successful earlier in my career as a farmer if I tackled those first.

### **If you could change anything looking back what would you change or do differently?**

I would have done more market research to find a product that was in need and focused on that product. We just found it in these eggs. There's a need and a want for local eggs.

### **What's your favorite part about your job?**

There is nothing more satisfying than watching people enjoying the fruits of your labor, seeing them love the product. There is just no better feeling of success.

## RESOURCES

**Vermont New Farmer Project:** Statewide resource of all of the organizations, services, and educational opportunities for new and aspiring farmers.

▶ Visit: [www.uvm.edu/newfarmer](http://www.uvm.edu/newfarmer)

**NOFA Vermont Journey Farmer Program:** Two-year program for beginning farmers that matches participants with farmer mentors.

▶ Visit: <http://nofavt.org/programs/farmer-education-services/beginning-farmers/journey-farmer>

**Organic Certification:** NOFA Vermont and Vermont Organic Farmers are statewide resources for organic certification resources, guidelines, and events.

▶ Visit: <http://nofavt.org>

**Vermont Vegetable and Berry Grower Pages:** Statewide resource for vegetable and berry growers.

▶ Visit: [www.uvm.edu/vtvegandberry](http://www.uvm.edu/vtvegandberry)



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# JENNIFER BLACKWELL-ELMER — DIVERSIFIED VEGETABLE FARMER



Interview by: Macey Ross, Hannaford Career Center

## **What is your profession?**

I am the Co-owner and Business Manager of Elmer Farm, a vegetable farm in East Middlebury.

## **What inspired you to go into this career?**

I was inspired by my grandmother who was a farmer. I spent many summers on my grandmother's farm as a young girl. As an adult, I became fascinated by community issues around food such as food access, health education, and the farm to school movement.

## **Did you need any college preparation or post-secondary schooling for this occupation?**

Although I do have a college degree (B.A. Cultural Anthropology), I really feel that my job skills developed through many different experiences in service-related jobs, farming apprenticeships, and various farm workshops, conferences, and short courses.

## **Is this your only source of income?**

I do rely on income outside of our farm income. However, much more than half of our income is derived from the farm.

## **Are there any personal risks in sustaining this career?**

There are many: each season we are at the mercy of the weather and how the crops perform. Our physical abilities are crucial for our work. Our production levels are dependent on finding and retaining employees—having reliable and hardworking employees is very important to our success from year to year.

## **What is your favorite part about your occupation?**

I like the various roles that I play. I do office work (payroll, payroll taxes, accounts receivable)— which is challenging



PHOTO: JENNIFER BLACKWELL-ELMER

because I've had very little accounting experience. I found help setting up Quickbooks. I also do the marketing, which allows for some creativity, and enjoy the farm to school connections we've developed. This aspect of the farm is central to the mission of our farm in this community. I also really enjoy being in the greenhouse seeding flowers. I manage the 125 member CSA (Community Supported Agriculture): I sign up members and maintain regular communication with them throughout the season via email, newsletters, and in person during pick-ups.

### **What does your typical day look like?**

It is very different every day. Currently, I am with our toddler on Mondays and Tuesdays so I don't get much work done these days. Wednesday through Friday all 3 kids are in school or childcare. Most of this time is spent in the office on payroll, correspondence, paying bills, creating marketing materials for ads or brochures, and keeping financial records current. I often eat lunch outside with the crew. Some parts of the year I am busy coordinating farm tours with schools or daily work projects with students from the diversified occupations program. I try to get in the greenhouse when possible. I also weed in the flower garden. On Wednesdays, we have 125 people come to the farm to pick up vegetables for 20 weeks. This is a big part of my job—preparing for pick-ups and greeting members all day.

### **What are the benefits?**

The benefits are having great food, raising kids in a great environment, sharing the farm with the community, being self-employed, and making our own decisions.

### **How many employees do you have?**

We usually have between 4 and 6 employees, but only 1 person works year round. The rest of the crew works from spring through Thanksgiving. We have one farm manager and everyone else is hired as a seasonal crew worker and they all do a variety of tasks. If an employee is able to stay for multiple years they take on more responsibilities in the areas they are most interested in— composting, flower production, managing wholesale accounts, etc.

### **If you had the chance to do something differently throughout your process what would you?**

This is really hard to answer because there are so many things we could have done differently. For example, we had a baby the year we bought the farm and tried to rebuild our house. That was too much to take on at once, and it was a hard beginning. Also, we have old tractors that are difficult to operate, which is a real challenge because although my husband is mechanically inclined, it takes away from his time operating and managing the farm. I also wish I could have figured out a way to stay more connected to the field work. Once we had two kids, I stopped working in the field and focused on the business aspects of the farm.

### **What would you suggest to someone that has interest in this career?**

Make sure you have great soils to work with, start slow and grow into your business, don't take on too much too soon, think "quality over quantity," and take time for personal growth outside of farm work.

## **RESOURCES**

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**Vermont Land Link:** Vermont Land Link makes it easy for farm properties to be posted, and for farm seekers to search through them. It is free, simple, statewide, automated, and constantly current, serving as a friendly portal for property holders and farmland seekers.

▶ Visit: <http://vermontlandlink.org>

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# ROB HUNT – DAIRY & HOG FARMER



CAREER



PATHWAYS

Interview by: Cassie Clark, Hannaford Career Center

## **What's your job title and responsibilities?**

I am the farm owner and manager of Bonaspecta Holsteins. I am the general manager and oversee the operation of the farm, which produces milk as well as hogs.

## **What does your average day look like?**

My day starts early around 5:00am in the morning. I then have a meeting with the employees to ask them if there is anything that they think needs to get done for the day. Together we develop a plan of work for the day.

## **What led your desire to be a dairy farmer?**

My grandfather was a dairy farmer and I worked on his farm growing up.

## **Did you go to college to prepare you for farming?**

I graduated from Vermont Technical College in 1982 with an Associate of Science (AS) degree in Dairy Herd Management. I returned to Vermont Tech in 1983 and graduated with an AS in Agribusiness. I also got a Bachelor of Science degree in Animal Science from the University of Vermont in 1985.

## **Are there any special skills, licenses, or training that are required for your job?**

For my job there are no licenses necessary. However, it's important to have good people skills and good animal husbandry skills.



PHOTO: HEATHER GRAY

### **What prompted you to become a hog farmer?**

I had raised pigs when I was younger. Bonaspecta dairy farm had land that wasn't suited for cows and room to put up some buildings. So my wife, Susie, and I took advantage of that. A friend of offered me three sows.

### **What do you like best about your job?**

I like working outside. I would rather have a boring job outside them an exciting job inside— being in a confined area makes me feel trapped.

### **How far do you think you will go with the pig farming?**

I'm not sure how far my business could go, I take it one day at a time!

### **How well are you able to balance your professional life with your personal life?**

What personal life? The job is never done when you're a farmer and you take the work home with you. Most of the time the business computer is at the house along with all the business files. You could be at home relaxing and have a neighbor call you at 8:00pm to tell you one of your cows is calving and needs help. However during the slower time of year from November to April it's easier to relax. Our family can go on vacation and feel comfortable leaving the employees in charge.

### **Is there any personal risk involved with this job?**

Yes, it can be dangerous. I've had several surgeries that were due to job related injuries.

### **Do you make a livable wage?**

Making a livable wage depends on the year. Each year it's different due to the nature of milk pricing. Pig prices are subject to market demands and feed costs also.

### **If you were to start over, what would you do differently?**

The biggest thing I would change is how I replaced cows in the dairy business. I used to raise all of my heifer calves to be replacement

cows in the milking herd. I then switched to buying new heifers every year instead of raising them. That decision turned out to be more costly than raising replacements. I finally decided to switch back to raising the replacements. Looking back, I wouldn't have made the switch to buying new heifers every year.

### **What advice would you give to someone starting out in this line of work?**

Ask for help and advice from other producers and agriculture professionals. When you start out in farming this is the best thing to do—there is no such thing as a stupid question. Ask other farmers for help when needed.

### **Is there anything you wish you had known more about before going into this line of work?**

Having good people skills is definitely an asset to farming, especially when it involves selling products or animals to customers. You can't just send them away when they make you mad. You just have to take a deep breath and relax.

## **RESOURCES**

**FARMS 2 + 2 Program:** Tuition scholarships are available for Vermont residents who begin this Dairy Farm Management Degree Program at Vermont Tech and maintain at least a B average each year of their college career. The amount of the scholarship can be the current year's full tuition cost at either **Vermont Tech** or the **University of Vermont**.

▶ Visit: [www.vtc.edu/scholarship/farms-2-2-program](http://www.vtc.edu/scholarship/farms-2-2-program)

**Vermont New Farmer Project:** Statewide resource of all of the organizations, services, and educational opportunities for new and aspiring farmers.

▶ Visit: [www.uvm.edu/newfarmer](http://www.uvm.edu/newfarmer)

**Vermont Food System Job Listings:** Statewide resource of food system job listings.

▶ Visit: [www.vtfarmtoplate.com/job-listings](http://www.vtfarmtoplate.com/job-listings)



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# WILL & JUDY STEVENS – DIVERSIFIED VEGETABLE FARMERS



Interviewer: Paige Myrick, Hannaford Career Center

## What is your job title and what is your profession?

We are co-owners of **Golden Russet Farm**, and we grow organic vegetables, cut flowers, and bedding plants. We currently produce and sell direct to the public through our CSA and farmstand, and wholesale to local grocers. We sold our produce at farmers' markets for thirty years.



<http://goldenrussetfarm.com>

## What inspired or lead you towards this line of work?

We both liked gardening and being outdoors working in the soil. And we also liked the idea of being self-employed.

## Did you attend college to prepare for this job?

Neither of us went to college for this line of work. Will majored in studio art (blacksmithing) and took environmental studies courses. Judy attended the University of Vermont and took courses in botany and environmental science, which she finds useful for her work. Both worked for other farms for a short period of time.

## What job skills would you recommend for someone preparing for entry into this line of work?

Will suggested spending time working with people in this business: "See how other people are managing and running a market garden operation. Going to a school or taking courses are other great ways to learn. Take advantage of opportunities to join organizations that offer workshops and on-farm experiences. Working for other farms is a good way to learn skills and develop a good work ethic."

## What does your average day look like?

The first hour of each day involves planning out the needs for the day and sharing instructions with the employees. A typical day involves watering the plants, field work, and any odd jobs that need attention. This could include planting, harvesting, or customer service. At the end of the day after closing, we meet to discuss how the day went and make any plans for the next day.



PHOTO: HEATHER GRAY

### **Are there any special skills, licenses, or training required for your job?**

We are required to have a retail license to sell fruits and vegetables and a nursery license for the flowers. Because we are certified organic, the farm is also required to be inspected every year by an organic certification agency.

### **Are there any personal risks to you in this job?**

Being a farmer is very physical. There is always a risk of overworking your body. Care must be taken to work safely around equipment such as tractors and power equipment.

### **Does your job or business take time away from your personal life?**

We consider the business as part of our personal life. We view our customers as friends and our friends as customers. Finding a balance between work and family time was more challenging in the beginning of our careers when we had children.

### **Does your career provide you with a livable wage?**

There were financial challenges for us when they started the business. This is typical for most businesses. Over time, we found a niche for our products and slowly grew the business over the years with good management.

### **What do you look for in an employee?**

We look for people who are interested in what we do here on the farm. Age doesn't matter to us, but employees need to be hardworking, honest, on time, and not be afraid to get dirty! We like employees who ask questions, can anticipate what needs to get done, and are results-oriented. Also, we need team players and employees who get along with others.

### **How many employees do you manage?**

On average there are four full-time and a couple of part-time employees.

### **Do you plan on expanding your operation in the future?**

We continually tweak what we have but are happy with the current size of the farm. We would consider expansion if there was someone who would like to take over the farm in the future.

### **How do you market your product?**

We meet with buyers in the winter to plan out our orders and adjust our product needs during the growing season. We mail out a flyer to our Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) customers and post information on our website. We also rely on word of mouth and

newspaper advertising. We are getting familiar with Facebook as another advertising venue for the future.

### **What do you do when the growing season is over?**

Fall is the busiest time of year with a lot of harvesting of crops, putting products into storage and sales. The week of Thanksgiving is our busiest week. Starting in January we meet with buyers to plan our seed/plug/cuttings orders for the greenhouse and fields. There is desk work and cleaning up to do. Eventually the greenhouse work starts up in mid-late winter. We try to get out for some skiing and hiking as much as possible!

### **If you could start your career over, what would you change?**

Judy would have stayed in college and finished. Will and Judy both would have stayed on farms for longer than they did in order to learn more before starting their own business.

### **What advice would you give to someone starting out in this line of work?**

It is really important to work on other farms in order to get as much practical experience as possible.

## **RESOURCES**

**Vermont New Farmer Project:** Statewide resource of all of the organizations, services, and educational opportunities for new and aspiring farmers.

▶ Visit: [www.uvm.edu/newfarmer](http://www.uvm.edu/newfarmer)

**NOFA Vermont Journey Farmer Program:** Two-year program for beginning farmers that matches participants with farmer mentors.

▶ Visit: <http://nofavt.org/programs/farmer-education-services/beginning-farmers/journey-farmer>

**Organic Certification:** NOFA Vermont and Vermont Organic Farmers are statewide resources for organic certification resources, guidelines, and events.

▶ Visit: <http://nofavt.org>

**Vermont Vegetable and Berry Grower Pages:** Statewide resource for vegetable and berry growers.

▶ Visit: [www.uvm.edu/vtvegandberry](http://www.uvm.edu/vtvegandberry)

**Vermont Food System Job Listings:** Statewide resource of food system job listings.

▶ Visit: [www.vtfarmtoplate.com/job-listings](http://www.vtfarmtoplate.com/job-listings)



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# KIRA WINSLOW – PRODUCE MANAGER



Interview by Bree Laframboise, Hannaford Career Center

## What is your job title?

I am the produce manager at the Middlebury Natural Food Co-op (MNFC).

## How did you get started in this line of work?

I got started at MNFC as a member and volunteer. Then I became a substitute for MNFC when they needed extra help or when another employee was going on vacation. Eventually, I started working in the produce department and I quickly became the produce manager.

## What attracted you to this job?

I really believe in the co-operative model of running a business. As a co-op, the community owns it. You can be a member for \$20 a year and then you get all the benefits of membership, like a discount off your grocery bill. Members also elect a Board of Directors that makes the decisions on how MNFC is run. I wanted to work in a place like that. Also, my grandparents ran a truck farm and they sold vegetables. So selling vegetables is part of my background.

## What are the benefits of this job?

I get health insurance and 20% off of my food purchases. I've been here long enough to get 5 weeks of paid vacation time. Another benefit is the people I work with. There are about 85 employees at MNFC and they are awesome people. They want to be here and make the place successful. An additional benefit for me in the produce department is the opportunity to work with all the local growers. The MNFC buys from over 50 local growers every year and I get to know them all.



PHOTO: HEATHER GRAY

### What do you like best about this job?

I like the physical component, organizing our products, and working with the customers. It's a good balance of both physical and mental abilities. I enjoy arranging the produce for sales, writing up recipes for customers to try, and supporting the growers. I like having an impact on the community and getting as much local produce as I possibly can onto the co-op shelves.



<http://middlebury.coop>

### What skills are necessary for this job?

My work is physical work. It's wet, heavy, and cold. It's wet because produce comes in on ice and the ice melts and the produce needs to be prepped. It's heavy because you have to move the produce around. It's cold because the produce is stored in a cooler at 40°. The work also involves a lot of customer service, multi-tasking, and being part of a team. You are helping customers with what they are looking for, answering the phone, stocking the shelves, or greeting a local grower when they come in. Working as a team helps keep everything in order.

### Did you participate in any college programs?

I did go to college and have a degree. But I'm hands-on oriented and was interested in a job that fit that need.

### Do you feel your career provides you with a livable wage?

Yes I do. I think that the MNFC pays very fairly.

### Is there an opportunity to advance in this position?

Yes. There are other managerial positions that open up which any of the employees can apply for.

### What do you think is the most challenging part of your job?

There are challenges but that's the fun part. One challenge is that the store has been experiencing growth in sales with the closing of some local competitors, so it's hard to maintain enough staff. I look forward to bringing in new folks.

### If you were to start over, what would you do differently?

I'm pretty happy, but I'm happy because of the way I did things. When I graduated college, I worked seasonal jobs. I had a lot of time off between jobs so I could travel and have all kinds of experiences. Now I have a family. I really like the fact that I took my time getting to a permanent job so that I had that kind of freedom. It allowed me to figure out what I enjoyed and where I wanted to build a career.

### What advice would you give to someone interested in your career?

It can be hard to know what your strengths are. My advice is to try whatever you think you're interested in, but pay attention to how you're experiencing that. As you work, try to figure out and be honest with yourself. What are you good at? What do you enjoy? Pay attention to those things. Also work hard because you can get a lot out of it.

## RESOURCES

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Interview by: Nadia Scoppettone, Montpelier High School

## What is your current work and how long have you been in this line of work?

I am the owner of [Red Hen Baking Co.](#) I have been a professional baker since 1993. We started Red Hen in 1999.

## What was your educational pathway to end up in this job?

I graduated from Marlboro College with a B.A. in theater. I've learned my baking and business skills on the job.

## How did you get involved with your current job?

I have always been interested in bread baking. My mother baked bread weekly when I was growing up. In high school, my summer jobs were mostly food-related. In college, I worked in the college kitchen, where one of the things we did was bake bread. After college I moved to Seattle to work in a bread bakery. I worked in 4 more bakeries, including managing one, before opening Red Hen.

## What is your typical day like?

My days are filled with a wide variety of tasks. I always start my day by checking in on the bread and pastry production for that day. Usually we work on improving a particular aspect of something we're doing there and that means talking with bakers to discuss matters. I also check in with our cafe manager and our sandwich department. Then I check in with our wholesale manager to discuss any issues that may have come up with our wholesale bread delivery. I often have some personnel matters to deal



PHOTO: HEATHER GRAY

with— perhaps hiring, scheduling or evaluating employees. Often, we are also working on a marketing project (the website, signage, pamphlets, bread bags, etc.) that I am involved in. That can require a lot of calls and emails with the people involved in producing those things.



On a weekly, monthly, quarterly, and annual basis I have different things that I am monitoring regarding our sales and budgeting numbers. This can take up a lot of my time at certain times of the year. And then sometimes my day can go in an unexpected direction! I may need to get up early and deliver bread or stay late and help with a large order. I also spend time working with the community like giving tours, speaking to high school students, or participating in various groups.

### **What specific skills (technical and interpersonal) are needed in your work?**

It was very important that, before I started the business, I had experience managing a bakery. This gave me knowledge of the business and personnel management side of the bakery trade. Knowing how to bake bread is obviously essential for running my business, but managing people and knowing how to keep the business afloat is just as essential.

### **What kind of training could you have used that you didn't get in High School or beyond?**

Learning to manage people effectively is a skill that is necessary in almost every business.

### **What did you learn on the job that you didn't learn in the classroom?**

I learned how to bake bread and manage a bakery through on-to-job experience. However, high school did provide a foundation of skills and knowledge that I draw from on a daily basis (math, science, language arts, etc.). Math is everywhere!

### **If you could change anything looking back, what would you change or do**

I would consider going to a good trade school to get formal training in my chosen field.

## **RESOURCES**

**Vermont Specialty Food Association:** The Vermont Specialty Food Association is the nation's oldest and most highly regarded specialty food association.

► Visit: [www.vermontspecialtyfoods.org](http://www.vermontspecialtyfoods.org)

**King Arthur Baking School:** Classes range from introductory demonstrations for beginners to intensive week-long professional courses, with a wide variety of hands-on classes for adults and children.

► Visit: [www.kingarthurfour.com/baking-school](http://www.kingarthurfour.com/baking-school)

**VBSR Vermont Intern Program:** Statewide resource for placing interns.

► Visit: [http://vbsr.org/intern\\_program](http://vbsr.org/intern_program)

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# JUDITH IRVING – CARAMEL MAKER



Interview by: Dillon Raftery, Montpelier High School

## What is your current work and how long have you been in this line of work?

I am a partner in a small business called **Fat Toad Farm**. We're a specialty food producer that started in 2006.

## What was your educational pathway to this job?

I don't really know if there was a direct educational pathway to this job. I went to Middlebury College and I have a degree in geography and education. I taught school for several years, started an environmental education program, and worked in higher ed and nonprofit administration for many years. As we began our business, we all reached out to different people and organizations to learn the skills necessary for starting a goat dairy and food production business. Even though I had no formal education involving food production skills or managing a business, I still think what I learned in college has helped me be successful.

## How exactly did you end up getting involved in the work that you do?

Our two daughters had the idea that we start raising more of our own food. We always had a garden but we decided to go deeper and start raising animals such as chickens and a couple of pigs. My husband said he wanted to milk goats so we got a couple goats and then we had a bunch of goats because that's what they do—they have a lot of babies! So we had a lot of extra milk. My daughter—who had been living in Mexico for 5 years—had experience making caramel sauce that's very popular there, so we started using the extra milk to make goats' milk caramel. Later we started selling it and that's how we started the business.



### What technical and interpersonal skills are needed in your work?

Currently I am focused on the order fulfillment, customer service, and financial side of the business, so I need to have basic organization, creative thinking, financial skills, and being nice to the customers.

### What kind of training could you have used in your career but did not get in high school?

It would have been great if I had a lot more business training. Honestly, the whole science behind owning a company like this is very complicated so college-level chemistry courses relating to food would have been awfully handy. It's complicated and a lot of work and if you don't know the basics then you are facing a steep learning curve. I think that that would be the primary area.

### What did you learn on the job that you never learned in any classroom?

Several things: how to make cheese, how to market products, software competency, ordering, working with distributors and stores—kind of everything! And then, of course, how to raise animals—we had a goat dairy for 9 years which required learning basic veterinary and animal husbandry skills. We sold our goats to Vermont Creamery's Ayers Brook Dairy at the end of 2015 and now have milk delivered here. We needed to do this so we could grow the business and focus our attention on that. But liberal arts are very necessary because it gives you the confidence to learn a lot of different things and gives you a broad exposure to lots of different subject areas. A lot of business skills can be picked up pretty easily if you have basic core skills like math and reading. Accounting, business planning, and management are very useful for running a business, so taking high school or college courses in these areas would be very helpful.

### What do you wish you had known before you got into the food production business?

It's hard to run a profitable business—8 out of 10 businesses fail in the first 18 months. There are factors that help make a business have a greater chance to succeed, and that would have been helpful to know



before starting a business. For example, understanding distribution systems and marketing would have been very helpful.

### If you could change anything looking back what would you change or do differently?

I think we spent too much time trying to do too much. When we started farming the expectation was, "I have to be home anyway to take care of things so I might as well do everything." So we raised goats, sheep, cows, chickens, ducks and vegetables! In reality, each one of these takes a lot of expertise. If we had focused on one thing earlier it would have been easier.

### What is your favorite thing about your job?

My favorite thing about my job is working with really great people—including my daughter and my husband. There's a certain creative part of farming and it can be really fun to run a small business. There's also a lot of work and responsibility, so it's really helpful to like the people you work with because you're spending a lot of time with them.

## RESOURCES

**Vermont Specialty Food Association:** The Vermont Specialty Food Association is the nation's oldest and most highly regarded specialty food association.

► Visit: [www.vermontspecialtyfoods.org](http://www.vermontspecialtyfoods.org)

**Vermont Small Business Development Center:** VtSBDC provides no cost, one-on-one Business Advising by a trained and experienced Business Advisor for starting growing, funding, marketing, and improving a business.

► Visit: [www.vtsbdc.org](http://www.vtsbdc.org)

**Vermont Tech Institute for Applied Agriculture and Food Systems:** supports students, farmers, and agricultural specialists with educational opportunities related to animals, plants, soils, food systems, sustainability, mechanical systems and agriculture business management.

► Visit: [www.vtc.edu/meet-vtc/centers-institutes/ag-institute](http://www.vtc.edu/meet-vtc/centers-institutes/ag-institute)

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# CARLETON YODER – CHEESEMAKER



Interview by Channler Gendreau, Hannaford Career Center

## What is your job title?

I am a cheesemaker at [Champlain Valley Creamery](#) in Middlebury.

## Did you attend college to prepare for this job?

My first college degree was in electrical engineering. Following that, I returned to college and completed a degree in food science and technology. I also took courses in wine production.

## What skills do you find necessary to help you in your line of work?

It is important to be able to follow directions. Math skills are also important as making cheese has a lot to do with ratios and measuring. It's also helpful to have good manufacturing and food safety skills in this line of work.

## Where did you acquire these skills?

Much of the necessary skills were acquired through job related experiences. There are also courses like the national ServSafe program that are available to anyone.

## Are there any special licenses or training that are required for your job?

I needed a state agriculture license in order to handle and transport food and milk products. I also needed to be certified to sample, test, and weigh milk. My small cheese operation is inspected periodically by the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food & Markets for safety and sanitation. The plant is also inspected annually by an organic certification entity in order to label our products as organic.



**What led or attracted you towards this line of work?**

I was always interested in food and the brewing / alcoholic production industry. I also wanted to have a job where I could use my creativity.



**What does your average day look like?**

The average day starts with picking up milk from a local organic dairy farm. I then work with my small group of employees to make cheese, package cheese, turn cheese in the cheese ripening room, ship product, and deliver cheese to local vendors. At the end of the day everything is cleaned!

**Does your job or business take you away from your personal life?**

At first, this job did take me away from my personal life. Starting a business takes a lot of extra hours. As the business grew, I was able to move into a larger space and increase cheese production, which allowed me to hire employees. Having employees allowed me some time outside of the business for my family and social life.

**Do you feel that your career provides you with a livable wage?**

After a few initial years of paying off loans, the job does provide me with a livable wage. As with any sole proprietorship, my income is directly related to how well I manage the business.

**What skills do you look for in an employee?**

Cheesemaking business employees often have some kind of restaurant or food preparation experience, a passion for quality food, and physical fitness.

**How many employees do you have?**

I currently have four employees.

**What do you like best about your job?**

I enjoy working with a raw agricultural product such as milk, changing it up and adding value to it. It involves creativity. I love

that we're creating this product from start to finish. I like the hands-on work that it takes to make good quality cheese.

**What is the most challenging part of your job?**

The most challenging aspect of running the business is managing the financials and the cash flow. It was challenging to grow the businesses because business management was not my area of expertise.

**If you were to start over what would you do differently?**

If I were to start over I would spend more time developing a business plan.

**What advice would you give to someone starting out in this line of work as a cheesemaker?**

Develop cheesemaking skills through experiences working with several cheesemakers. See if you like it before you commit to starting your own business.

 **RESOURCES**

**Vermont Cheese Council:** The Vermont Cheese Council represents cheesemakers throughout Vermont who are dedicated to the production and image of premier cheese. Their mission includes hosting educational events for the public and food professionals in order to learn more about the art and science of artisan and farmstead cheeses made in Vermont.

▶ Visit: [www.vtcheese.com](http://www.vtcheese.com)

**Vermont Tech Institute for Applied Agriculture and Food Systems:** supports students, farmers, and agricultural specialists with educational opportunities related to animals, plants, soils, food systems, sustainability, mechanical systems and agriculture business management.

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# SCOTT KERNER – FOOD ENTREPRENEUR



CAREER



PATHWAYS

Interview by: Leroy Dill-Hall, Montpelier High School

## What is your current work and how long have you been in this line of work?

I am an entrepreneur. I started my first business, **Three Penny Taproom**, in 2009, and have been a part of starting 4 other businesses since then. I currently own and run two restaurants (Three Penny Taproom and **Mule Bar**), a coffee roasting company (**Carrier Roasting**), and my newest venture, **Good Measure Brewing Co.** in Northfield.

## What was your educational pathway to end up in this job?

Most of what helped me get into this business, I learned by doing every part of it. I have a high school diploma, and attended college, but do not have a degree.

## How did you get involved with your current job?

By working hard, and constantly learning, and trying to be better at what I do. As an entrepreneur, I like to find things that people aren't doing and then figure out how to do them. I find new ways of looking at niche markets. If I think of a product or service and I see that there is really no one in the area doing—like small batch craft coffee—then I start to look at the viability of the idea, of how to make it work as a business. I think that nine times out of ten, an entrepreneur sees what they want the end game to be, and then they work hard to make it happen.



PHOTO: HEATHER GRAY

### **What is your typical day like? What do you like about your job?**

There are no typical days, as there are many facets to running restaurants, and operating small businesses. I try and spread my energy as evenly as possible between the businesses I am a part of. I love being able to accomplish many tasks at once. I feel that my brain works better when it is being challenged. Vermont's very lucky—it's a lot easier to have a strong local food system here than it is anywhere else, and a beer system for that matter. The restaurant is a great way to use local products and be able to support our economy.

### **What specific skills (technical and interpersonal) are needed in your work? What skills do you find most useful?**

As a business owner, you need patience and perseverance. Personal skills and service are also very, very important. I worked for other people for many years, looking at what they do to be successful and what makes them not as successful as they could be. Then I applied what I learned when we opened our first place. We were basically working for other people our whole lives and sometimes getting frustrated with the lack of efficiency or the way things were being run. So when you have your own business you can do things differently. Of course you make your own mistakes too and many brazen decisions but you learn from these things. The ultimate key is that you're always learning, you're always trying to become more efficient not only to make more money but to not waste time and energy.

### **What kind of training could you have used that you didn't get in High School or beyond?**

I would have appreciated knowing more about the money side of running a business. I have had to learn along the way, but I would have benefitted greatly from having a core knowledge of the accounting section of the business.

### **What did you learn on the job that you didn't learn in the classroom?**

Everything. My line of work is very hands-on, and I have been gleaning that knowledge since I started working in the hospitality industry when I was 14.

### **What do you wish you had known before getting launched into the work place?**

Save money when you are making it. It's so easy to spend when the getting is good, and I wish I had been a better saver when I was getting started.

### **If you could change anything looking back, what would you change or do differently?**

I would've stayed smaller with my first project. As a dreamer, I am always trying to get "bigger," and that doesn't always work.

## **RESOURCES**

**Vermont Small Business Development Center:** VtSBDC provides no cost, one-on-one Business Advising by a trained and experienced Business Advisor for starting growing, funding, marketing, and improving a business.

▶ Visit: [www.vtsbdc.org](http://www.vtsbdc.org)

**Vermont Fresh Network:** VFN encourages farmers, food processors and chefs to work directly with each other to build partnerships.

▶ Visit: <http://www.vermontfresh.net/>

**Vermont Brewers Association:** VBA is an industry association for Vermont's brewers.

▶ Visit: <http://www.vermontbrewers.com/>

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