WINTER WONDERS

Beginning farmers take root in New York and Wisconsin

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With the organic farm movement on the rise and constantly being glorified in the media, almost every fan of Michael Pollan and "Food Fight" has fantasized about spending a summer working on an organic farm in Vermont. There is the romantic vision of waking up with the bright, hot sun every morning and harvesting fresh, chemical-free produce that you can eat as you walk through the field, your bare knees covered in dirt. But how many people dream about farm life during the less glamorous season, winter—where early mornings are spent washing stored vegetables in frigid root cellars or redoing the roof of an old dairy barn-turned vegetable-packing-house, while snow awaits beneath? How many fantasize about farm life once the busy season stops and the staff decreases by 75 percent? "In the winter, it's just really bare bones," says Tianna Kennedy, a 34-year-old farmer at Lucky Dog Organic in Hamden, N.Y. Of the four farmers Lucky Dog employs on the off-season, none are currently working full time.

A New York City resident for almost a decade, Kennedy, a cellist, wood finisher and pirate radio aficionada with a master's degree in performance studies from NYU, "didn't ever make a decision to leave [the city]." But a series of serendipitous circumstances led her to farm life; it agreed with her, so eventually she stayed. Even so, her new career doesn't always click. After securing a new client with a large potato order last winter, Kennedy had one of her bumpier moments on the farm. "One day I shoveled, like, 20,000 pounds of potatoes or something, and I just felt like I was in some weird prison camp and couldn't understand what I had done to myself," she recalls, laughing. She quickly snaps back into serious mode, "But, you know, that's what you have to do."

Since 2000, Lucky Dog Organic has been owned and operated by husband and wife Richard Giles and Holley White-Giles—their arrival to farm life in upstate New York an entirely different brand than Kennedy's but with definite intersecting chapters. The couple met while living in New York City—Giles was working at a high-end printing lab with a master's in creative writing tucked under his tool belt and White-Giles spent her days working for a specialty book publisher, her master's in art conservation. Not exactly who you might imagine running a 160-acre vegetable farm with approximately 60 acres dedicated to cultivating produce each year. But these city folk, like many New Yorkers, did not originate from New York. They both grew up in the South—White-Giles mostly in Texas and Giles in Mississippi—and Giles worked as a farmer and farm manager, first in Mississippi and then Alabama before making his return to the land in Hamden.

The couple makes their money by selling their produce through a variety of means: distributors, farmer's markets, through a CSA, to local restaurants and stores and at their own store, which is run by White-Giles along with the four-bedroom inn and café across the street. Meanwhile, Giles and his crew are in charge of the farm work. In the summertime, the duo has three thriving businesses—the farm, the inn and the store—but as it gets colder, a trip up to the Catskills becomes less appealing. "We're in the part of the country that gets a good bit of traffic in the summer and very little in the winter," Giles says.

While the winter is a sign to slow down for some, for Giles, it's a chance to catch up. "Things slow down, but there's still work; it's just a different kind [of work]." Vegetables like potatoes, carrots, onions, cabbage, beets, garlic and leeks that are planted during the spring get harvested in the fall and then stored all winter. "You'll have this whole huge room full of nothing but potatoes, and then there will be another room of onions, so you spend the winter in 10-degree weather in the barn breaking the ice so you can wash these potatoes [and onions], pack them up and set them up for distributor orders and such," Kennedy explains.

This year, Lucky Dog is short on stored crops because of the double whammy of Hurricane Irene and Tropical Storm Lee. As a result, they are trying to grow more winter crops than they normally would—cold-hardy crops like kale, arugula, tatsoi, mache and claytonia. One way to grow these winter crops is by planting them in cold frames—unheated greenhouses that are used all year round and are able to protect some cold-hardy crops. Another avenue they're experimenting with is heating up one of the greenhouses to grow microgreens.

When they are not washing stored vegetables, or growing cold-hardy crops or microgreens, the Lucky Dog team is busy selling these goods, usually to their regular wholesale clients and at the winter markets. But this year, the little stock they have all needs to go to retail sales, so they are focusing on markets only—Fort Greene and Union Square in the city, and Callicoon upstate. "We're so limited in produce that I'm not sure how long we're going to keep doing [winter] markets. It may be short term," Giles says, sounding realistic though not defeated. While it lasts, they will at least be prepared—they recently bought a little propane heater for the stall.

On a non-market day, you will most likely find couple plowing the snow and cleaning the farm's driveway early in the morning. A typical afternoon may consist of doing a bit of seeding in the greenhouse, working on Lucky Dog's organic certification paperwork, entering expense receipts into QuickBooks from the season before and putting together financial statements for their bank. Still, no matter the winter obstacles, Giles remembers that "the real and dramatic seasons are one of the things that most attracted [him] to this place." He adds, "When you go through a winter here, you know you have gone through a winter—I love that."

What first attracted Rodrigo Cala, 36, and his brother Juan Carlos, 34, natives of Mexico City, to the US in 2004 was the promise of a better life for their families. Winter is one of many obstacles for the Calas, but it has some strong competition—starting life from scratch in a new country, working full-time jobs while running their own farm and learning how to pursue their dreams in a language not native to them.

The Cala brothers grew up on a farm in Mexico, but learning to farm in the US comes with a fresh set of rules. In 2005, the Calas began a three-year training program for immigrants at the Minnesota Food Association, which, among other skills, teaches one how to run an organic farm. With the help of the MFA and other organizations that aid immigrants in starting anew in the US, the Calas learned how to develop business plans for their burgeoning farm, what financial assistance programs to apply for, how to save money for a house and how to search for a farm. In October of 2008, they found the 46-acre plot of land in Turtle Lake, Wis. that is now home to Cala Farms.

During the on-season, the Calas sell their produce—traditional veggies and a couple of Mexican specialties like tatuma, a summer squash and bertolaga, an herb—through a CSA, to wholesale markets and to a couple of restaurants in Minnesota where the majority of their business is based. But throughout every season, both brothers hold down full-time jobs—Rodrigo works making horseshoes and Juan Carlos is a mechanic at a plastic bottle plant. For all the obvious reasons that this complicates life for the men, they miraculously manage to make it work by dividing their time perfectly to ensure the farm is always being tended to. In the process, they are able to avoid the unpredictability that farms can bring—the very kind that left Giles in a pickle this winter. The Calas are not scrambling for money in the winter and they're not accruing debt every time a crop fails or a storm hits.

As the growing season comes to a close, the Calas plant cover crops like winter rye and clover in preparation for spring. Like their contemporaries in New York, the Calas look at the winter as a chance to catch up on the farm duties they don't have time for in the height of the busy season. "Winter is the time to prepare everything for next season," Rodrigo says. "You only have three or four months, and time goes by so fast. When the [next] season comes, you need everything to be ready," he adds with a sense of urgency.

The Calas' catch-up list includes signing contracts, ordering materials for next season, cutting wood to heat the house and, like Giles, filling out organic certification paperwork. The brothers use this time to assess their buyers' needs for the upcoming season so they know what to plan for. Will they need more or less cases of produce than last year? And, are there any particular vegetables they might want to try?

The wintertime is also good for reflecting on the farm's profits and losses, and for setting goals for the future. "We make a business plan every year. It's helpful to put our ideas for the next season [down] on paper," Rodrigo proudly announces. He also takes advantage of his free time by taking classes at the MFA in the winter. They offer myriad workshops for farmers: how to ride a tractor, how to use various tools and how to keep better records for your farm.

Not surprisingly, the hardest thing about keeping up the farm in the winter for the Calas is the drastic weather. When it snows, it makes trips between their workplaces and the farm arduous—and jobs like fixing tractors and other large outdoor equipment impossible. But despite their winter hardships, the Cala brothers have already beat a set of odds most immigrants do not overcome to a monumental achievement: They own their own farm. The Calas have a ways to go still before they can support themselves solely from their farm, but after coming this far, it seems safe to say they will not let the harsh Midwest winters stand in their way.