

BY WALTER ZEICHNER

**A**griculture has a rich history in Vermont ranging from vegetable gardens and field crops to dairying with cows, goats, and sheep, to orchards. There has been agriculture in Vermont since the Abenaki were the only humans here. Europeans brought their agriculture to Vermont before it was a republic, prior to joining the fledgling United States. The Roman goddess of agriculture and brewing, Ceres (Demeter to the Greeks) stands atop the state capital building in Montpelier.

Currently, according to the US Dept. of Agriculture, Vermont exports \$11.5 million in direct agricultural products like milk, Christmas trees, and other unprocessed items. According to Jason Aldous, spokesperson for the Vermont Dept. of Agriculture, Vermont exports another \$98.5 million worth of processed foods like cheese, ice cream, salad dressing, etc.

Vermonters spend an average of \$5500 per household per year on food. If Vermonters bought just 10 percent more local products than they already do, it would put \$130 million back into the local economy. Currently Vermonters spend 2-3 percent of their food money on organically grown items. The amount spent on organics goes up by roughly 25 percent a year.

I spoke with some queer-identified people who are involved, in one way or another, with agriculture in Vermont. I asked them about their involvement with the land, about politics, and about queer-specific issues.

I spoke with a woman in her mid-50s, a horse farmer in north central VT since 1997 who asked not to be identified by name. She and her partner of 11 years are not "out" locally but they figure people in their community have "figured it out." Both partners are ministers and perform civil unions, weddings and handfastings. "People know we're different in that we're both ministers, into Native American [spirituality], it's obvious that we are different. People who are not churchgoers ask us to marry them, and we fit into this [rural] community where people don't have a lot of money, many people have three jobs, households can have a number of people ... but we stand out some as two women in same house, with no men flirting with us.

"My partner is like one of the boys, she works with the horses. Women who work with horses often look rough anyhow, and dykey, so she is readily accepted. We used to have a social group of women that met monthly for potluck, but the money to fund these gatherings dried up. There are a few male couples we're friendly with. An Abenaki medicine man once said to me 'Gay people make best medicine people,' which was his way of letting us know that he knew."

**H**arry, 45, grew up in a farm family. He is not a farmer now, but he was in partnership with his dad in a dairy farm for a few years in his twenties. He decided, he says, "It wasn't for me." I asked him if he missed anything about dairying and he said "I can see a field of beautiful jersey cows and wax longingly ... I liked haying." He doesn't miss early mornings.

Currently he sugars with his extended family every year on the family farm. Harry also raises some animals still: exotic chickens and peacocks, ducks, and draft horses.



The horses are necessary for sugaring but they are not moneymakers. "They don't spin in the mud or get stuck, and I prefer their exhaust to tractor exhaust," Harry pointed out. "They are also a connection to my dad and his forefathers who all worked horses on this land. My dad loved draft horses." Sugaring is a piece of his family culture, keeping six of the seven siblings involved every spring. "The 7th is too busy farming to help."

I asked Harry about some of the politics of farming, what he sees happening. "There used to be 40 farms in this town, now there are only three, that's pretty dramatic. A large dairy farm down the road sold his cows in the last year. He is now is boarding 200 miniature horses. Diversification is what we'll see more of, farms producing specialty items, etc."

When he was in his 20s and still on the farm, Harry wanted to meet other gay farmers. He put a personal ad in a Boston paper looking for other farmers - and got maybe three responses. "It's pretty tough to find someone else who is involved in or interested in agriculture ... it's that much tougher to find someone compatible." Harry was not aware of any gay farmers' organizations. A Google search found that ruralgay.com was the only site with a section just for gay/lesbian farmers.

**D**avid is 45 and newly coming out. He changed occupations recently so he wouldn't feel like he had to be closeted anymore. Before, he worked in a school system, and eventually decided he was not going to hide anymore.

David's involvement with the land also started in childhood. He grew up in a large family with a large garden. His father was a game warden, and his mom grew up on a dairy farm. When his Dad died, David was sent to live with an aunt and uncle on the farm his mom had grown up on, becoming part of that family, including doing farm chores. When his mom remarried, they still had a garden.

David was always involved with planting, weeding, harvesting and putting away, "[That was] the lifestyle I grew up with," he said. David eventually moved to Eden (in the northeast corner

## Queer Farmers: Three Farm-Connected Queers Talk About Their Community, the Land, & the Economics of Farming.

of Lamoille County), got some land, and the garden got bigger and bigger.

"You struggle to earn a living, to pay your property taxes..." and that became his first goal: to get his garden to pay his property taxes. "I'm a garlic farmer commercially. Over the years the garden grew and eventually I had 5000 plants in the ground, and I thought, maybe that's my 'out' to pay the taxes. I converted another garden to garlic and went for it. If you're selling one item you have to have a good inventory. I figured if I could sell 5000 plants I could pay my taxes ... that's how I got into farming today."

Although David is a strong believer in organics, his garlic is not certified by national standards. "There are lots of hoops to jump through to get certified," he said. "I'm not there yet. The organic farming movement is growing but still small."

He hopes NOFA (Northeast Organic Farmer's Association, [www.nofavt.org](http://www.nofavt.org)) will be able to fill some of the gaps so that there are enough organic products to use on the farm, such as organic hay. "Organics [are] becoming more popular but the prices are still higher than non-organics. Part of the reason is that people are so used to big produce grown non-organically, so people are skeptical [about] paying more for smaller organically-grown items. People haven't sufficiently learned that organics are better for the earth. It'll take something catastrophic for people to see how much damage the chemical farming is doing to the environment."

David doesn't think of himself as a farmer because he doesn't make his living from farming. He has lots of respect for people who do the hard work of full-time farming, and strong opinions about the Vermont Department of Agriculture. "They're too focused on cows. Agriculture in Vermont is changing. The Department of Agriculture needs to step up to the plate and understand that small-scale growers are part of agriculture. We keep the land open" just like the big farms do, he said.

"Farms are going under all the time. The family farm, to survive, has had to become a larger

farm, more than just 200 head of cattle with extended family working the farm. It's not like it used to be, where one nuclear family could run a farm and make a living. Now we have goat farming, llamas, berries, and greenhouses," David finished. "The Department of Agriculture needs to redefine agriculture in Vermont to include the smaller producer."

I asked David what people could do to support agriculture in Vermont. He said, "Families without a garden, when they go to the store, they need to watch where things are produced. Buy locally, support the local economy. If I'm buying from someone local, I'm giving a job to a local person and they can buy what I produce. That makes for a stronger market. People [in the cities] need to think about that. If we buy goods from far away, from folks who are not buying what we produce, then we are hurting our local economy."

I asked David what he thought about the controversy regarding genetically modified organisms (GMO). "I think of Frankenstein; scientists working in a lab to make something. If you start doing this with food products, what are you doing to the food products?" he asked. "We've produced modified products and shipped them to places where that food item is not what people eat there. The big companies like Monsanto say they are trying to better the world, but they charge a lot for their products. It's a greed thing. It's big business."

Furthermore, he said, there are ethical issues in modifying food. "What happens if you end up with just a few varieties of any food crop? You breed 90 varieties down to two or three. You get a blight that knocks out the two or three varieties, and then what have you got? Nature's strength is in diversity. We're playing on dangerous edges, mad scientists changing things."

David, a burly bearish-looking guy, is single, and indicated that he has difficulty finding places to socialize. There are few opportunities to meet other gay men in his neck of the woods, so he comes to Burlington, but prefers the country. The bar scene isn't his trip. He would like to find a life mate, but doesn't have any out gay agriculturally-involved friends or peer group.

**T**hese few profiles illustrate that there are lesbian and gay people involved in agriculture in Vermont through various activities. There might be as many as 60,000 gay and lesbian people in Vermont (10 percent of 600,000). I bet there are a whole lot of those 60,000 who grow gardens, raise animals, harvest and prepare plants, and participate in so many more agricultural activities, some just for home consumption and some for market.

There is no cohesive gay/lesbian agricultural organization that any of these people knew of or that I could find. Maybe there isn't a need for one? Maybe there is? We've also established that we all can contribute to the local economy by actively supporting Vermont agriculture. What would \$130 million back into the local economy look like?

The two people who had both been involved in growing food both pointed out that the specialty market is an important part of what's happening in agriculture in Vermont. So feast on Vermont food folks, and just think ... some of it was undoubtedly grown by a lesbian, bisexual, a tranny or a gay man. ▼

*Walter I. Zeichner is into ritual, gardening and radio DJ-ing, and maintains a psychotherapy practice in Burlington.*