

DRAFT Notes
Community, Culture and Taste of Place
February 18, 2010

Please find interim notes below. A full set of notes will be posted sometime in the next few weeks.

Description of the place of food / agriculture in culture & community of Hardwick Area

- Craftsbury, for one, is still known as a small agricultural community, even with the change in the 1970's and '80s away from farming & forestry as primary occupations.
- Hardwick has a stronger market for local / organic / natural products as shown by a longstanding Co-op that is both active in the community and financially sound even in a low population area.
- In some ways isolation has helped keep out chain stores, preserve cooking traditions (since prepared foods / restaurants were harder to find).
- There are successful CSAs
- There are a wide variety of agricultural businesses in Hardwick.
- Some businesses are very good at self promotion and that has drawn a lot of attention / publicity to the Hardwick area.
- This area is where the idea of “sustainable agriculture” that is so popular today is actually being implemented, not just talked about.
- There's a self perpetuating cycle of: an evolution of agriculture and forestry, changes get attention, new people interested in food / sustainability / rural lifestyle arrive, their entry revitalizes interest in ag & forestry, draws new people, etc.
- Hardwick is known for entrepreneurship – but not all entrepreneurs are recognized. There are people who start a new enterprise, inventing something new whole cloth, and those who are making changes in their existing businesses, reinventing themselves for a variety of reasons (e.g. financial pressure, wanting to pass the farm to the next generation). This second group doesn't receive as much recognition as entrepreneurs.
- The Hardwick area, particularly Greensboro, attracts unique populations – visitors or part time residents from more urban areas and with more money. Sterling College also draws in new people every year.
- The Hardwick area has more available land and fewer development pressures than further south in Vermont, although the pinch for affordable land is still felt.
- People who choose to settle in the Hardwick area are usually doing so to balance the need to earn some income with quality of life. This balance is an important part of farming, where many of the returns are intangible.
- Young people are moving away.
- Hardwick is a bit of an island regarding support services – it's not really part of the Northeast Kingdom service area, but not well connected to services in the Newport area either.
- Vermont is known as the “little engine that could” and the Hardwick area is too.

How does this culture & community impact the success of ag businesses?

- Publicity around successful businesses demonstrates that farming can be financially viable, and that helps attract new farmers.
- When people are excited about agriculture, they are looking for new opportunities and a lot of new ventures will follow.
- Entrepreneurs open new markets for others, who still need to be creative to take full advantage – for example, Pete’s Greens CSA is a business that can market new, creative products that other farmers are trying (eg sunflower oi).
- But new markets don’t always follow – for example the local market can quickly become saturated as new people try to recreate what a starting entrepreneur has done. There needs to be more creative thinking about what the best opportunities are and also a way to reach more distant markets if there isn’t any more local demand.
- Vermont is a place where farmers are proud to put their name to a product and promote its quality, the small scale farming culture it came from. This background can help a producer market his / her product to other regions outside of the conventional system of selling for the lowest price point – instead of trying to compete with the larger producers to our west, we are opting out of their system entirely.
- There is some question about how savvy consumers are that a “family farm” in Vermont is much, much different than one in California.
- The romance of farming is a way to get new people interested in continuing agriculture in the Hardwick area – but it’s not enough to sustain their interest. Sustaining requires a certain personality who will take on the hard work of farming, adequate economic returns, and also systems to make the transfer of farms across generations (and not only generations within one family) smooth so the new farmers are set up for success.
- Vermont producers are more collaborative than other places, which helps new people get started and helps everyone learn skills from each other.
- The impact of culture on farming isn’t just determined by the culture of the Hardwick area – it’s also the culture of Vermont and how that influences the decisions of key leaders in the state. For example, it seems like Vermont is at a tipping point where instead of feeling like we’re moving away from thinking of ourselves as an agricultural state as dairy fades, we are moving back towards claiming the title of agricultural state with new approaches to farming. But some things lag – the legislature doesn’t appear to recognize the value of the working landscape (eg cuts to current use) and UVM seems to be cancelling more ag programs than it’s strengthening.

What are some tools / resources that would help improve culture & community have a greater positive impact?

- Raise the profile of “Vermont”. Outside markets can respond really well to a “Vermont” product, but we need to work harder to make those consumers understand the difference in the type of farming between VT and other states. We can also take better advantage of the fact that Boston & NYC see Vermont as “local.” Finally, Vermont marketing dollars should go to promoting Vermont – not to promoting an entire region, which may have less cache.
- Build off the basis of a farming culture of collaboration to help new farmers learn from people with experience. Peer-to-peer information exchanges like NOFA arranges with

summer workshops are very helpful. Organizations like the grass farmers are helpful. Farmers can also work collaboratively in trialing new products, new practices.

- Another way to work collaboratively is to help farmers connect with people in the community who may have things they need, for example land that could be cultivated or skills that the farm needs but the farmer may not have (eg marketing, accounting).
- UVM should move back closer to its agricultural roots. Part of this shift would be not cutting ag programs (CREAM and small ruminants for example). Research should also include projects with practical applicability to Vermont farms. The university could reach out more to farmers (eg surveys), strengthen the role of Extension in bringing back farmer input, and use the talents of more local researchers who are personally connected to Vermont and plugged into our agricultural concerns.
- All business success requires greater infrastructure: vets, roads, broadband, slaughter
- More attention needs to be paid to transition points as farms go from an old to a new generation. Current farmers need help making the innovative changes that will keep the business strong through transition. Incoming farmers need to know a range of skills, including business skills, to make the farm successful. And there needs to be some way of identifying who is interested and the best fit to take over a farm if the children aren't interested.
- One way the culture of agriculture in Vermont could change is to understand it more as a profession. For example, in France cheesemakers go through 5 years of engineering training, and a dairy farmer can hire a cheesemaker like he would any consultant. This system may be more efficient and financially sound than our approach of going through multiple interns, with high training needs, high turn over.
- Vermont needs to think more strategically about how it takes advantage of the current wave of interest in Hardwick area (and Vermont) agriculture:
 - Are *all* the entrepreneurs getting attention, the ones with existing businesses in addition to the new business owners? Are we demonstrating the *different ways* Vermont farmers can be entrepreneurial?
 - Are the people who have their interest sparked being given the tools / skills to have an economically viable business in the long run?
 - Are we avoiding market saturation by new businesses either finding new markets outside Hardwick / Vermont or attracting a new segment of the Vermont market?
 - As businesses use this interest to tap markets outside Vermont, does that new income have a ripple effect through the community? (For example, Jasper Hill expanding the number of local milk suppliers to feed these markets)
- Moving to a robust farming culture around artisan cheese may require some culture shifts. One is redirecting a dairy farmer's perspective from low cost being the greatest goal to high quality being the greatest goal. Another is shifting from the farmer having the identity to the cheese having the identity.
- There is concern about how Vermont interacts with federal government in setting standards. The greatest example is organic – has the federal government really protected the spirit of organic? Should there be protections for other terms like “natural”? Can Vermont clearly establish for consumers why *our* organic is different / better?
- The legislature needs to understand the full value of a working landscape.