

## Leaving Behind the Trucker Hat

By ALLEN SALKIN

Tivoli, N.Y.

THEIR Carhartts are no longer ironic. Now they have real dirt on them.

Until three years ago, Benjamin Shute was living in Williamsburg, where he kept Brooklyn Lager in his refrigerator and played darts in a league.

Raised on the Upper East Side by a father who is a foundation executive and a mother who writes about criminal justice, Mr. Shute graduated from Amherst and worked for an anti-hunger charity. But something nagged at him. To learn about food production, he had volunteered at a farm in Massachusetts. He liked the dirt, the work and the coaxing of land long fallow into producing eggplant and garlic.

He tried growing strawberries on his roof in Brooklyn, but it didn't scratch his growing itch.

And so last week, Mr. Shute could be found here, elbow-deep in wet compost two hours north of New York City, filling greenhouse trays for onion seeds. Along with a partner, Miriam Latzer, he runs Hearty Roots, a 25-acre organic farm.

"I never thought I wanted to farm," Mr. Shute said. "But it feels like an honest living."

His partner, Ms. Latzer (the two are not a couple) is 33 and a former urban planner. Her par-



Chris Ramirez for *The New York Times*

**CITY SLICKERS?** KayCee Wimbish, 32, a former teacher, moved to Tivoli, N.Y., to raise sheep and chickens with Owen O'Connor, 22.

ents, a professor and a librarian, "think it's crazy that I'm a farmer," she said. "They wonder what planet I came from."

This one. Steeped in years of talk around college campuses and in stylish urban enclaves about the evils of factory farms (see the E. coli spinach outbreaks), the perils of relying on petroleum to deliver food over long distances (see global warming) and the beauty of greenmarkets (see the four-times-weekly locavore cornucopia in Union Square), some young urbanites are starting to put their muscles where their pro-environment, antiglobalization mouths are. They are creating small-scale farms near urban areas hungry for quality produce and willing to pay a premium.

"Young farmers are an emerg-

ing social movement," said Severine von Tscharner Fleming, 26, who is making a documentary called "The Greenhorns" about the trend.

While this is hardly the first time that idealistic young people wanted to get back to the garden, the current crop have advantages over their forebears from the 1960s and 70s, many of whom, inspired by the Whole Earth Catalog or Wendell Berry's books about agrarian values, headed to the country, only to find it impossible to make a living.

But the growing market for organic and locally grown produce is making it possible for well-run small farms to thrive, said Ken Meter, 58, who studies the economics of food as an analyst at the Crossroads Re-

source Center, a nonprofit advocacy group for local food initiatives that is based in Minnesota.

“A lot of people in our 20s went to the land and wanted to farm and had a lot of enthusiasm, but not many resources,” he said. “It has only been the last five years where the payment from working your fingers to the bone and supplying urban markets with high-quality produce has been enough where you could imagine making a living.”

Whether young, first-generation farmers constitute a flood or trickle is difficult to say. But many long-time observers of small farms say they have noticed an increase in recent years among college graduates who want to farm, even if they intern at established farms or rent tiny parcels.

“We’ve had a big spike in the last decade and especially in the last few years of people who are new to farming applying to sell at Greenmarket,” said Gabrielle Langholtz, manager of special projects for the Manhattan-based Greenmarket, which runs 46 farmers’ markets around the city. “Maybe they went to liberal arts schools and read Michael Pollan,” she said, referring to the author of “The Omnivore’s Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals,” (Penguin Press HC, 2006), “and shopped at farmers markets and said, ‘I’m going to buy a farm upstate and sell to Greenmarket.’ ” The typical size of farms that sell at Greenmarket is 50 to 100 acres, she said.

Nationally, there were 8,493 certified organic farms in 2005,

using just over 4 million acres of land, more than double the acreage in 2000, according to the United States Department of Agriculture. (The federal government introduced a uniform standard for organic certification in 2002.) New York had more than twice as many certified organic farms, 735, in 2007 as it did in 2004, according to the state Department of Agriculture and Markets. The agency estimates there are three to five times that many organic farms in New York which, like Hearty Roots, choose not to spend the \$500 to \$1,000 it costs to become certified.

Put that together with research indicating organic farmers are on average 46 years old, compared with an average of 52 for all farmers, and the numbers seem to reflect what experts say they see in the field: the demand from consumers for food produced on a small scale, bought directly from farmers, has allowed a younger generation to enter farming, even as global markets drive many conventional farmers off the land.

“It has opened up a better opportunity than we’ve had in a while for entry-level farmers,” said Stephen R. Gliessman, a professor of environmental studies at the University of California, Santa Cruz, who studies sustainable agriculture. He said many of his students in recent years have started farms after graduation.

When Mr. Shute led a seminar called, “So you want to be a farmer?” in December in New York, it was standing room only with over 40 people, he said.

Just a few years ago the prevailing style statement in Williamsburg featured metrosexually groomed urbanites wearing trucker hats and pristine Carhartt jackets and quaffing Pabst beer. Now some are choosing the real life behind the pose.

At a recent fund-raising party for Ms. Fleming’s film, in a warehouse next to the Williamsburg Bridge, men in shaggy beards and women in thick sandals sipped Sixpoint Lager from mason jars and snacked on Crane Mountain chèvre.

Guests included Rachel Mark and Betsy Devine, who own Salvatore Brooklyn, a cheese maker in Boerum Hill, and Rick and Michael Mast, tall brothers with Amish-length beards, who are starting a chocolate factory in Williamsburg.

The Billyburg scene has changed, said Annaliese Griffin, who contributes to a blog called Grocery Guy. “Having a cool cheese in your fridge has taken the place of knowing what the cool band is, or even of playing in that band,” she said. “Our rock stars are ricotta makers.”

When John Bliss and Stacy Brenner, both 34, first moved to Maine to farm seven years ago — Mr. Bliss from Tucson, and Ms. Brenner from Philadelphia — they knew little about farming.

“My lesson learned from that first year was that if the soil is good, it won’t let you down,” Mr. Bliss said.

On their Broadturn Farm, in Scarborough, they plan to raise sheep, chickens, pigs and turkeys along with vegetables this year. Like many new organic

farms, Broadturn uses the Community Supported Agriculture model to survive. Such businesses sell food subscriptions that entitle consumers to weekly boxes of produce in season. Broadturn's 20-week subscription costs \$500.

Mr. Bliss and Ms. Brenner moved to their current site last year after winning a bid to rent a parcel on the outskirts of Portland controlled by a land trust seeking to preserve open space.

A similar set-up is what allowed Ian Calder-Piedmonte, a philosophy major from Cornell University, to join three years ago with a former classmate who had started Balsam Farms on 60 acres on the South Fork of Long Island. For about \$150 an acre, they lease town land across from East Hampton high school, and the Peconic Land Trust leases them acreage in Amagansett, where they operate a farm stand on Town Lane.

"If we can find affordable housing, which is a challenge in East Hampton," said Mr. Piedmont, 28, who spent two years in Italy after graduation, "we're going to have two interns this summer."

Although publications like *Small Farmer's Journal*, published since 1976, often present the life of the small farmer in a heartwarmingly "Little House on the Prairie" light, a recent

article in *Sheep!* about the dangers of jackals and one in *Backyard Poultry* about preventing chickens' drinking water from freezing, are a reminder of the old-school risks of farming.

"We lost all of our soybeans last year to Japanese beetles," Ms. Latzer said. She often wakes up at 5 a.m. and collapses into an exhausted sleep by 9 p.m. She earns enough to afford health insurance, but if the landlord doesn't renew their five-year lease, the enterprise could become untenable.

A number of colleges have added organic farming classes because of demand from students. "A lot of them come out and realize they're not cut out for it," said John Biernbaum, a professor of horticulture in Michigan State's new one-year certificate program. Last year, the first, there were 9 students. This year, 18.

Some feel the strong tug of the land. On March 1, KayCee Wimbish, 32, a former second-grade teacher, moved from her Harlem apartment up to Tivoli to raise sheep and chickens with Owen O'Connor, 22, a Wesleyan dropout who helped come up with the name of their enterprise, *Awesome Farm*.

Ms. Wimbish grew up in Tulsa, Okla., a child of the suburbs, and it wasn't until she moved to New York that she



Chris Ramirez for *The New York Times*

**GOING ORGANIC** Miriam Latzer and Danny Percich, a farmhand, at Hearty Roots farm.

### Multimedia



#### [Interactive Feature](#)

#### **Stewards of the Land**

Some young urbanites are starting to put their muscles where their pro-environmental, anti-globalization mouths are. Benjamin Shute and Miriam Latzer run Hearty Roots farm in Tivoli, N.Y., selling food grown on the 25-acre organic farm.

discovered farmers' markets and the politics of food. She worked the last two summers at Hearty Roots and became hooked on the agrarian life. "Moving to New York City," she said, "was what first got me interested in food and farming."