

# Farming for Intangibles

By Nancy Farr



Alexa and Janelle wash lettuce in preparation for market.

Why would anyone spend their life in a job with long periods of hard physical work, 24/7 vigilance against curveballs from the weather, crop-threatening irrigation malfunctions and invasions of bugs and other pesky predators; a job that demands expertise in biology, veterinary medicine, mechanics, and business; that requires investing heavily in land and equipment and educating consumers about the advantages of one's products over cheaper options; and that generally returns little, if any, profit?

Farming for a living, especially with a commitment to small-scale sustainable agriculture methods, is that kind of job. In early June, when nature was delivering one of her mixed blessings in the form of unusually heavy rains, I talked with three of the local families whose lives revolve around the challenging job of farming, to find out what keeps them at it.

Fresh vegetable grower Alexa Spivy puts high value on the privilege of working the land and on the up-close relationship with nature's cycles. "Being able to walk out my door and be at work, and look up north and watch the storms roll in, makes me grateful everyday for

**"As ye sow, so shall ye reap."** doing this work and getting to know this particular land so well. Every year, something's changed."  
Galatians 6:7, The Bible

Rancher Louis Sukovaty echoed that theme. Working with the natural cycles and inter-relationships between plants, insects, livestock and himself keeps him fascinated and humble. "The farmer is just one player. If you run these [sustainable farming] systems long enough," he reflected, "you realize that no one thing is more important than anything else. In fact, probably the most important thing for me is the bacteria in the soil. Man's hubris is huge, but it isn't justified. The farmer has to join nature's system." Louis and his wife Jennifer clearly love the challenges of rediscovering the husbandry involved in raising animals by working with, not against, nature.

Grain producers Sam and Brooke Lucy have tremendous respect for the heirloom grains and seed (emmer and flax) that they grow in addition to old strains of wheat. "The old

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Louis, Jennifer and Zoe Sukovaty at the Twisp farmer's market.

grains are just amazing to me," Brooke said.

"Emmer dates back to the first 5,000 years of recorded agriculture (which began approximately 10,000 years ago), and it has evolved while overcoming various adverse conditions over so many millennia. You can see in its physical structure why it's prevailed. It's tall,

stout, and gnarly with long awns." Sam added, "The emmer does have a tremendous amount of power from having been around so long. Despite all the insanity in this world, emmer has transcended it all. I feel blessed to be working with it." Brooke senses emmer's power as a spiritual aspect in these very old varieties. For the grower and the eater, "There's a very intimate relationship, not only with the grain, but also with our past – our history, our ancestors

and with time itself."

**"Innumerable labors brought us this food.  
May we know how it comes to us..."**

from the Zen Buddhist meal chant

All of the  
producers

spoke of the rewards of doing work that creates positive relationships between producers and consumers, gives people healthier food, and benefits the environment. For Alexa, "It does feel really good to do something positive that goes beyond myself and my family, that's affecting a lot of other people, especially local families. That feels amazing – that people really appreciate it and want it, and come back. Those people know what it means." She takes satisfaction from doing work that's consistent with what she sees as the inevitable long-term direction of our lives. "Especially with the looming fuel concerns, we are going to go back to a local supply of food. Maybe not completely, but it would make the most sense for food to travel the least distance. Also from the point of view of community and culture, maintaining a local food system counters the recent homogenizing of everything." She enjoys the educational aspects of local food production, such as, "Helping to inform people of the ecological issues in agriculture and other issues around sustainability."

In speaking of emmer, Brooke noted, "I really believe we're helping people to feel better. Emmer has a long history of medicinal uses in Europe, and many of our customers report that their digestion is better

## Tilth by Samuel Lucy

Cropping  
May not be all  
But all of most of it  
Sometimes for cover  
Sometimes for harvest  
Always in harmony  
To benefit one another  
Fatten those worms-  
Those ageless workers  
Kill those germs  
With time-tested microbes  
Nutritious nuggets  
That delight the soil.

Tillage  
Scratching Mother's back

Not too deep  
too shallow  
Never when soaked  
Seldom when dry  
Before planting  
After planting  
Always with restraint  
Timing all and everything.

Patience  
Apply heavily  
During all weather  
Through every season  
Kneel and listen  
Touch and taste  
With open eyes for learning  
Only the soil will tell  
If you've been naughty or nice  
Only the soil can tell  
All that there is.



Brooke and Larkin at farmer's market.

than with other wheat-type grains. As a non-hybridized, “unimproved” grain, emmer doesn’t work in an industrial farming system, as it tends to yield lower and is challenging to thresh, hull and clean. Its wildness helps the condition of the fields, and the grain itself connects people with the environment.” Sam, whose two daughters are part of his motivation to keep trying to make a healthy living at farming, added: “A healthy environment and healthy children are symbiotic.”

Louis and Jennifer enjoy the creative stimulation of using everything available on their farm to feed, literally or figuratively, other aspects of the food production process. Old farm equipment and abandoned outbuildings have been recycled to new purposes; chickens and pigs contribute organic fertilizer as well as meat to sell; and cows harvested on the farm (for direct, ‘custom exempt’ sale of a portion of their harvest) contribute all of their non-salable parts to enormous mounds of composting nutrients that are later spread to build increasingly productive pasture soils. Ensuring “no dead ends” (no waste) isn’t just economical farm management; for them it’s fun and satisfying to make good use of all available resources.

Sam expressed another benefit of a job that involves all the steps from soil and seed to consumer’s hands. “I’m the instigator from when we start out in the spring, to getting it into Brooke’s hands so she can

package it. I’m dealing with it every step of the way, so there’s nobody to blame. That’s about as close as anyone can come to controlling his own destiny. I think the only way you can do something well is to know all the little details along the way, so you know what to pay attention to. That’s what it takes to end up with a beautiful, in this case nutritious, product.”

As a mother of two young children, Jennifer observes that the farming life is “A great way to raise kids. In Seattle, or anywhere where people go out to jobs, the mom goes somewhere, the dad goes somewhere, and nothing’s connected. Here, we raise the animals together, we harvest the animals together, and we eat the animals together. And we raise the vegetables together. The kids can see what you do, and they naturally see the importance of work. You can’t put a price on that.”

These smart, hard working and caring people could all be making an easier living doing just about anything else, but they have chosen to live with the tough challenges inherent in small-scale sustainable agriculture for the other rewards it offers them. We’re fortunate to have them dedicated to helping feed us and helping bring back sustainable approaches to farming. Our personal choices to purchase their products re-circulate our dollars at home, help keep the Methow green and “clean,” and help keep these and other local farm families doing what they love.

**Local growers of sustainably produced foods who contributed to this article:**

**Jennifer Argraves and Louis Sukovaty, Crown ‘S’ Ranch.**

Products: Beyond Organic grass-fed pasture finished beef, pork, chicken and turkey raised without hormones, antibiotics, steroids, herbicides, pesticides, synthetic fertilizers or GMOs.  
Phone: 509-996-3849 Email: [louis@crown-s-ranch.com](mailto:louis@crown-s-ranch.com) Website: [www.crown-s-ranch.com](http://www.crown-s-ranch.com)

**Brooke and Sam Lucy, Bluebird Grain Farms.**

Products: Organic Heirloom grains and flax seed: whole emmer (farro), rye, hard red & soft white wheat, and flax; fresh milled whole grain flour; cracked cereals; dry mixes; and animal feeds.  
Phone: 509-996-3526 Email: [brooke@methownet.com](mailto:brooke@methownet.com) Website: [www.bluebirdgrainfarms.com](http://www.bluebirdgrainfarms.com)

**Alexa Spivy, Twelve Moons Farm.**

Products: A wide variety of fresh vegetables in season, including signature salad mix and spinach, grown with dedication to sustainable farming methods; community supported agriculture memberships (Twelve Moons CSA). Phone: 509-996-4445