

COMMENTARY ABOUT WHERE WE LIVE

By MARK WINNE

**M**ark Palladino was an accountant and an elementary school teacher before deciding a few years ago that "there was something else." That something else turned out to be farming. But unlike established farmers, Palladino, 51, was sorely lacking in most of the profession's basic necessities. He didn't own a farm or farm equipment, he didn't have a team of investors falling over themselves to finance a start-up venture and, most important, he didn't have farming experience.

In other words, he had a long row to hoe before he even had a row to hoe.

But with the deliberateness of an accountant and the patience of a teacher, Palladino set out to realize his dream and is now in the middle of his first season growing fruits, vegetables, flowers and herbs on six acres at Bristol Farm in Canton.

Palladino is one of Connecticut's breed of "new" farmers, without whom there won't be anybody to replace the "old" farmers. Though most of us know that Connecticut is leading the nation in the loss of farmland, few know that the average age of our farmers is 55.4, up from 52.5 just 20 years ago. Unless a medical breakthrough occurs that allows our aging tillers of the soil to farm well into their hundreds, we had best pay attention to how we cultivate agriculture's next generation.

### Breaking Into The Business

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# NEW FARMERS

The Future Of Connecticut Agriculture Might Just Depend On Them



TOM BROWN / THE HARTFORD COURANT

JOE MCGUIGAN, 16, of Canton, stops to wipe his brow while picking potatoes at Bristol Farm on Route 44 in Canton. McGuigan works for new farmer Mark Palladino.

## Breaking Into The Business

Land, capital, training and markets are the essential ingredients for any farm enterprise. But serious new farmers (which exclude starry-eyed romantics like myself) who didn't grow up on a farm or have one passed on to them might have an easier time starting an automobile factory in Connecticut than a commercial agricultural business.

"You can't buy farmland at Connecticut land prices," says Palladino. "That's why you have to lease the land or get it from a land trust."

David Bristol, 78, one of Bristol Farm's many family owners, has worked the land his whole life and wants to keep his prime farmland in production. Sitting smack dab against Route 44, this is land that could be sold to a commercial developer in a New York minute.

But not only is Bristol leasing the land to Palladino, he also plows and tills it, amends the soil with compost that he's been making for years, and lets Palladino use the adjacent farm stand, which, along with the Farmington Farmers' Market, gives Palladino his marketing outlets. Like many new farmers, Palladino farms organically, and like most veteran farmers, Bristol did not.

"Mr. Bristol knew where I was coming from regarding organic farming," says Palladino, "and has supported my efforts."

## Organic Movement

There are some bright spots in Connecticut's agricultural statistics. Since 1997, the amount of land in vegetable production actually increased by a few hundred acres to 10,691. The value of agricultural products sold directly to individuals for human consumption, such as fruits and vegetables at farmers' markets, went from \$11 million in 1997 to \$17 million in 2002. Organic agriculture in Connecticut is also on the move. As of 2002, we had 73 certified organic farmers, a number that does not

include farms that are transitioning to organic farming. And it is also worth noting that Connecticut has an all-time high of 70 farmers' markets operating this season around the state.

Tracy and Dan Hayhurst are a farming couple in their late 20s who are a part of these growth trends. After farming organically for two years in Columbia County, N.Y., where they lived in a trailer, they had an opportunity to pursue their passion for farming in Falls Village. Thanks to the generosity of Bill and Kay Schrenk, who own a 340-acre property that's been farmed for 150 years, the Hayhursts were given a three-year lease with an option to purchase 42 acres of farmland at a very reasonable price. The property even comes with a house. Now they're growing a variety of organic vegetables that they sell to about 60 community supported agriculture members in New York City (a holdover from their New York farming days) and at the Salisbury farm stand every Saturday morning.

The Schrenks placed a conservation easement on their property a few years ago with the Nature Conservancy, which is one reason the land is now affordable to farmers. "We felt it was important to keep some of our land in its traditional use," said Bill Schrenk, who, after protecting the land, set off to find a farmer willing to work it. "It's very hard to find able young farmers," he said, but was fortunate to find Tracy and Dan. With money borrowed from their parents, the couple turned a few very beautiful acres of northwestern Connecticut into a working farm. They don't miss the trailer, have health insurance for the first time in their adult lives and, according to Tracy, "feel very special here" because the community and their families are behind them.

## Taking The Plunge

New farmers live and breathe farming. There's no better example of that than Paul Buccicaglia, 37, who



**POTATOES** are one of the many organic crops grown on Bristol Farm. As of 2002, Connecticut had 73 certified organic farmers.

leases 20 acres and a house from the Nature Conservancy's Sunny Valley Preserve in New Milford. Though not raised in a farming family, Paul knew from the age of 7 that he was destined to be a farmer. He's used his life's savings, maxed out his credit cards and borrowed from his parents to buy tractors, coolers, trucks, irrigation equipment and greenhouses. By his own admission he is obsessed with farming (the only reading material you'll find in his bathroom are tractor catalogs). Paul grows dozens of items from heirloom tomatoes, arugula, cucumbers, beans and by his own estimation, "the largest block of organic sweet corn in the state," which happens to command the very respectable price of 60 cents per ear.

As a former high school wrestler, Paul's body was well trained for the rigors of farming. But today's successful farmer requires considerably more brains than brawn, so Paul earned a bachelor degree at

Penn State and a Ph.D. in biology at the University of Minnesota. After graduate school he apprenticed on farms where he really learned how to be a farmer. Paul preferred working long hours as an apprentice for \$400 per month to paying a university tuition. "Good mentors are priceless," he says, and in his opinion, government is not useful because it doesn't understand organic or small-scale farming.

Palladino, Buccigaglia, and the Hayhursts are not anomalies or the last pathetic gasp of a dying industry. Rick Macsuga at the Connecticut Department of Agriculture said, "Last year was a banner year; I certified 20 new growers for our farmers'

markets." His colleague, Jay Dippel in the department's farmland preservation division, gets on average one call per week from farmer "wannabees" looking for farms. And the New England Land-Link Program in Belchertown, Mass., has a database with over 40 new farmers who want farms in Connecticut, but the same database lists only three available Connecticut farms.

The desire to farm is as old as Connecticut's hills and fertile soil. But our state's affluence is a two-edged sword — it has driven up land prices as well as the demand for great-tasting, locally produced food. How do we

nurture this desire to farm and sustain these fragile enterprises? Affordable farmland and secure land tenure must be at the top of the list. Seed capital funds would give competent new farmers a better chance of turning their dreams into viable business enterprises. Finally, training programs that are farmer-driven and farmer-supported must be nurtured because farmers learn best from each other.

We used to say, "No farms, no food," but we better start saying, "No farmers, no farms, no food."



**MARK PALLADINO** prepares to open the farm stand adjacent to Bristol Farm. Palladino, who leases land from the Bristol family, grows and sells organic vegetables and fruit.