

## Featured Articles



John Gill, left, sold his 1,300-acre family farm for \$13 million, placing it under the management of the New York Foundation's Local Economies project, whose director is Bob Dandrew.

# Seeds of Change

Farm Hub unites the soil, social action and science

By Deborah Medenbach  
Photos by Steve Borland

THE VIEW ALONG ROUTE 209 in Hurley is likely the same as it has been since the early 1700s. Long expanses of prime farmland stretch across the Hurley Flats to the Esopus Creek, with crops turning the sandy bottomland into lush geometries of grains and legumes, meeting the eye in soothing tones that change by season and light.

Where once the early Dutch farmers grew wheat for the 13 colonies, the Gill family has raised top varieties of sweet corn for three generations.

What happens when nearly a century of farm wisdom meets a well-funded social action think tank and a phalanx of scientists?

The Gill family sold the 1,300-acre farm to the NoVo Foundation, headed by Peter Buffett, last December for \$13 million to start one of the most progressive farm projects in the country.

Placing the farm under the management of the New World Foundation's Local Economies Project, the regional food supply chain was studied for strengths and weaknesses in crop selection, processing, storage, transportation and marketing. Scientists combed the fields for evidence of past crops and native plant life stretching back hundreds of years and examined soil fertility and health.

Crop researchers touted their grain varieties for space in the first growing season's test plots for extended studies that could change which crops are grown locally.

Now well into the first year of planning, Local Economies Project director Bob Dandrew lays out the farm's progress in a thoughtfully organized overview that belies its "hit-the-ground-running" pace.

"Our larger goal is to create an ecologically sound, socially just and economically viable food system," Dandrew said of the foundation's many-pronged mission to foster regionally secure food sources and encourage the next generation of farmers.

### Grooming up-and-coming farmers

The key projects are the Hudson Valley Farm Hub, located at Gill Farm, which will

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#### Opening the Doors of the Mind

Lucas Handwerker of Woodstock has spent most of his 20 years trying to learn what's beyond the door of physical reality. And he tries to take others there by showing them where the mind can go.

#### Gong Songs

Kundalini yoga is practiced in Kingston at Shuniya, which seeks to provide power mantra, meditation and sound healing with gonging.

#### Growing for the Future

Nearly a century of farm wisdom meets a social-action think tank; the Hudson Valley Farm Hub is one result.

#### Tuning into the Past

What would happen if you took a group of "sensitives" to explore 400 years of Ulster County history? Writer Deborah Medenbach did just that, and the results are surprising.

#### Warm Looks for a Cool Fall

Fashion photographer Donald Kennedy illustrates a variety of looks – from soft to edgy – for our crisp autumn days.

#### A drink with the DJ

Popular WDST radio host Jimmy Buff sat down over a Thai Iced Tea with Ulster Magazine to talk about his passion for music, family and life.

be used for scientific agricultural research through Cornell University and be the home for a farmer incubator program.

“The incubator will train farmers for the next generation. We have a particular interest in mid-sized farms since that’s the missing piece in our food system,” Dandrew said. “A farmer will train and develop an enterprise they are interested in, develop expertise in maintaining equipment, managing staff and marketing in wholesale markets. Over five years they will graduate to more responsibility and when they are ready, we’ll help them find farmland in the Hudson Valley and help them move there.” Applications for the first round of farmers for the incubator program will be available this fall and the land-access funding program for fledged farmers is in development.

“We’re doing a national search,” Dandrew said of the application process. “We want them to have a base of experience already. There are already other incubators for new farmers. This is for experienced, skilled farmers who have a serious interest in mid-sized farming and want to be in the Hudson Valley. This is about grooming the next generation. It will be the only mid-sized farm training of its kind in the country and is a fabulous



Workers pick produce in the Gill Farm's "Market Garden." The vegetables will go to the Farm Hub.

opportunity. It’s about making a commitment to our regional food system and farms.”

Ulster County Comptroller Elliott Auerbach was director of the USDA’s Rural Economic Area Partnership back in the 1990s and has watched a steady stream of mid-sized family farms close over the years as economic and development pressures narrowed farmers’ options.

“I feel there will be a secondary and tertiary impact to what happens at the Farm Hub because it will draw people of like mind to the area,” Auerbach said. “I’m now seeing farmers who are willing to embrace what comes next rather than tossing in the towel when one form of farming seems to be over. I think the Route 209 corridor will change dramatically over the next 10 years. Farms that were aging out will be attractive to new farmers. Rather than conservation easements dictating open spaces, the market need will keep farmland in use.”

### Going with the grain

The Hudson Valley Farm Hub is already home to a four-year Cornell University grain trails study. John Gill remains the farm manager, and a research director from Cornell will be named to oversee the research programs for next year.

Cornell Cooperative Extension educator Justin O’Dea strolls through the plots, identifying 10 varieties of both modern and heritage grain crops under testing, using organic methods for some plots and integrated pest management techniques for others.

“We planted barley and Emmer, which is an ancestor of wheat,” O’Dea said, pointing out the feathery “awns” around some grains and the Red Fife wheat of the mid-1800s that are awnless.

“Settlers on the Gill property probably got started in the 1700s raising wheat. Then the Erie Canal opened up trade to western New York and there was a Hessian fly blight, and that was the last time the Hudson Valley was a key wheat-growing area,” O’Dea said. “The goal with this four-year project is to have three growing seasons to find varieties of promise for Hudson Valley growers that show promise for end use for bakers, brewers and distillers.”

“They are 20 minutes from our bakery,” said Sharon Leader of Bread Alone. “We always know the farmers who grow and grind our wheat. There was nothing nearby. Montreal was the closest, and then recently a source opened up in the Champlain Valley.”

Don Lewis of Wild Hive Farms in Clinton Corners also started baking with organic grains two decades ago and convinced farmers in nearby counties to switch from growing cattle grains to growing the wheat he needed for his bakeries. This year farmers in Ithaca and Columbia counties committed 600 acres to his grain needs.

“I guarantee that if you switch to eating baked goods made from fresh grains for two weeks, you couldn’t possibly go back to your favorite breads from before because they’ll taste like cardboard,” Lewis said. “For commercial grains grown at a distance, it takes two to three months just to get it to the local shelf. Freshness is important. If you grow it local, you keep it local. If it’s here, it’s here.”



Varieties of Hub-grown produce available at the Hudson Valley Farm Hub stand on Route 209 in Hurley.

### New things to try at the farmstand

Lewis looks forward to the results of the test plots and testing grains from larger plantings with commercial grinding and baking methods.

"If we are trying to affect the food system, we have to keep an eye on how these grains function in commercial production," Lewis said. "You can't focus on just one part of the system. You have to include both artisanal style and standard commercial."

The Farm Hub is already actively forming partnerships with potential end users of its grains, vegetables and even cover and border crops. The farmstand reopened this season to maintain continuity with residents who'd purchased vegetables from the Gill farm for decades. Those who were used to getting sweet corn from the farm will have a chance to try the same corn grown using organic techniques.

"Some of the farm is certified organic. There are other parts dedicated to conventional growing. It's scientific. We're looking at both," said Dandrew. "Corn is something John Gill has grown all along. There's interest in getting it organic, so we're experimenting to see if we can go from conventional to organic in three years. If we are successful, we will have a really valuable sweet-corn crop and techniques that we can share with other farmers. Everyone wants to do it, but so far it's just been an idea. We're taking the risk for them and will be fully transparent. We will share everything we learn along the way."

That information sharing will happen through open-farm workshops for area farmers who are not part of the incubator program and through research papers published by the Cornell scientists.

### Feeding the poor

The New World Foundation's Local Economies Project is also looking at solving food insecurity issues among area poor.

"The New World Foundation granted \$1.4 million to the Community Foundation to administer over the next three years," said Kevin Quilty of the Community Foundation. "Our job is to work with the Hudson Valley Food Bank to establish solutions for local food insecurity issues. Locally that means partnering with Family and People's Place to reach out to underserved communities. Some of that might be mobile units that distribute food in towns where Family already has a presence. Some programs are up right now and others will be up later in the fall."

Another project idea is developing a food product made from local ingredients that can be marketed along a similar model to Newman's Own foods with all of the proceeds returning to the charity to sustain the feeding programs.

"I thank God for Bob Dandrew and the Local Economies project for having the foresight in their planning to address these kinds of issues," Quilty said. "They cast seed over all kinds of ground to see where it would take root. At the end of the first year, we'll see what works."



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