A report for:

Small Success

by **Aaron de Long**

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In submitting this report, the Scholar has agreed to Nuffield International publishing this material in its edited form.

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DISCLAIMER

My focus on successful small scale farms and businesses arose because that is the scale at which I work, and within which I am personally motivated to succeed. What exactly do we mean, though, when we discuss small scale success?

“Small” is a subjective term, especially in agriculture, where scale can vary from rural subsistence plots to operations the size of a small country. While within this paper I do not intend to create an official definition of the word, a key observation gleaned from my Nuffield experience has been that focusing on success at the small scale will often lead to larger scale success, while simply thinking getting bigger will make you a success is not nearly as reliable a strategy. At its most basic level, the small success idea emphasizes the importance of the “little things”, acknowledging that how we handle the minutiae within our farm creates the culture of how we will handle the larger projects and vision of our business.

“Success” is a subjective term, as well, for how does one judge “success”? What variables are considered, and how are they weighed? And at what point do you stop the clock and judge something has been completed, and so can be fairly judged at all? Is the ten year old farm a success? The 20 year old farm? Or is it only the “centennial” farms that have really succeeded? Along similar lines, how much money or net profit does a business have to generate in order to be considered a “success”? These questions are subjective at heart, and the key is to understand one’s own definitions of the term. In this paper, I often employ the triple bottom line concept of environmental, economic, and social worth when judging the success of a business, but at some point we need to look at a deeper, more personal definition of success, part of which includes examining the delineation between standard of living and quality of life.

The essays comprising the main narrative of this paper are all drawn from actual encounters in the places in which they are described. The majority of the names of the individuals interviewed, however, as well as the names of their enterprises, have often been changed to allow a more candid record of our exchanges than I would feel free to divulge, otherwise. I have also taken the liberty, at points in the narrative, to paraphrase statements from my hosts for purposes of clarity and concision.

Executive Summary

Success is not a final destination, but a constant process. Large, successful organizations do not happen spontaneously. They are the product and process of long term growth, of many small successes layered atop one another, from the first seed planted to the first fruit picked, to the first sale made to the opening of a new market to the construction of a new production facility. From this perspective, successful farms of all scales are, at their heart, small scale successes. Understanding this, we can come to understand that focusing on small successes within the context of a larger vision will naturally help to create a more powerful, resilient, and joyful business than one which embraces economies of scale, alone. Ultimately, the view towards the accumulation of small successes leading to a larger overall good, encourages one to nurture and care for their world and community, in addition to their bottom line. Such success actually increases social and ecological worth in multiple aspects, while sustaining positive economic growth.

During my Nuffield research I had the privilege of visiting and speaking to many different farmers, academics, artisans, and policymakers. This paper details many of the key observations my contacts made and demonstrated to me regarding the success of their businesses and livelihoods, both large and small. Perhaps the principal insight gleaned is the notion that adaptability and diversity is compulsory for a business' survival, and a farm is no different. It is often not the strongest or luckiest, but the most versatile, that survive over the long term. These businesses are the ones who adapt to change in their surrounding culture and environment, often by finding their own change within. Such adaptability is especially crucial at smaller scales, where the margin for error is often thinner.

Perhaps arising from the notion of diversity in approach, creating team leadership models, as opposed to sole chief executives, was also observed to be an effective strategy towards success at multiple scales. Alongside the notion of sharing power within the business, the practice of creating social networks connecting a farm and business to a community was observed to be a strategy of both social and economic value. This idea is closely linked to business practices that honor the culture and tradition of a place and practice, such that they are helping to build and reinforce cultural ideals. Such practices begin to transcend conventional measures of success, and can indicate a success within one's heart, a fulfillment which is difficult to realize in any way other than doing good. Balancing land ownership with strategic leasing arrangements, and a shift towards regenerative agricultural practices, as well, were also observed strategies adopted by many of the farms and businesses encountered and described herein. A big vision with a long term view is a powerful tool for success, particularly within a small business, where many variables are beyond your control. In such instances, a sense of balance, closely linked to understanding your place within your community, ecosystem, and market, is often as important as taking any particular action.

Nothing lasts forever. Just as a person is born and dies, so do farms and nations. The essential question I believe we should ask ourselves is what kind of world are we creating moment by moment, recognizing that the vision we hope to achieve is realized in this way, as a matter of course. Big or small, there is the potential to succeed as well as to fail, and success might not just be measured in profits or longevity, but also by the more basic question: is the world a better place for what you have given, given what you have taken?

FOREWORD

At the time of my Nuffield application, the COVID 19 pandemic was world-wide, and the value of small farms in many regions across the planet was being demonstrated. Global supply chains broke, and even staple foods often became difficult to find in supermarkets. The United States government handed out large subsidies to many farmers during this period to offset the crippling losses many farms suffered due to the breakdown of national and global supply chains. Smaller farms, however, particularly those linked directly to their customer base, did well during the shutdowns. Many actually flourished. At that time the question arose for me: if in a time of global food crisis local food systems shine, shouldn't they then be seen as the essential cornerstone of any larger, sustainable and resilient food system? Further, can small, local, nourishing food systems not just be viable, but possibly even be at the center of the future of food?

This insight felt particularly important to me because much of the policy and conversation I've been involved with over the years has inherently viewed large scale agriculture as superior to small scale agriculture. The prevalent opinion has typically been that small scale agriculture is inefficient and ill-equipped to "feed the world", even while studies have shown small farms to be exceptionally productive, creating nearly 40% of the world's food supply on roughly 10% of all agricultural lands (1). Over 70% of farms worldwide are actually small, defined in this instance as under two hectares. They are also often subsistence scale operations, focused on feeding communities that are often the most in need (1). These farms put into question the notion that small farms are not inherently productive (2). This isn't to discount the relevance or efficiency of large scale agricultural operations, but rather to balance the dominant perspective with the reality that a diversity of scales in agriculture is of benefit to all of us, from the ecosystems that sustain life on this planet to the growing human population.

Our cultural tendency to discount small business in favor of large, sprawling enterprises does a disservice to the planet, including ourselves. Currently, many large scale agricultural systems work to disempower smaller markets and producers. Many of these global businesses exploit labor- including children- and actively degrade our collective natural resources, including the planet's waters, earth, and air. These businesses are often only considered successes because we are failing to account for the damage they inflict with their production, marketing, and sales methods. These costs, from the destruction of local markets through cheap, subsidized imports, to the corruption of waters worldwide by massive loads of petrochemicals and fertilizers, are borne by all life on the planet. Such business practices are a net loss for the global ecosystem; their dividends are derived from the depletion of the natural resources upon which all life depends. This sort of commercial culture perpetuates a culture of death and destruction as the means to survival . This approach is, at best, selfish. At worst, it is suicidal. It is true that small, diverse farms are often poor in monocrop productivity per square foot, but how many different life forms is each system sustaining? Beyond economics, how much more powerful are small scale management intensive systems, in terms of social connection and environmental wealth? Clean water is worth something, as is clean air and earth. Farming should be cultivating these

resources first and foremost, as the basic foundations of life. Community is worth something, too, from farms feeding their neighbors to farms powering rural (and increasingly urban) economies. Which scale is better at stewarding our collective natural resources and fostering community, or can either one perform such functions, in the right context? It might be that one scale is not inherently better than the other, it is inarguable, however, that small scale systems are much more sensitive to the negative impacts that they are creating in their immediate environment. This reality means that smaller scale farms must be more responsible in their practices as a matter of course, or else they are bound to fail. This conclusion leads to the view that, while farm businesses of all scales can be both positive or negative regarding their net global impact, any large scale agribusiness should be informed and influenced by the practices that all small scale agricultural systems must adopt in order to succeed. In this paper, I describe a number of these strategies and practices, gleaned from encounters with farmers and agribusiness leaders from farms and businesses both large and small.

This topic and the insights gained are of a personal matter to me, as my wife and I operate a small farm and farm market for our primary livelihood.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would first and foremost like to acknowledge Nuffield USA, and primarily Walter “Ed” Kee, who supported me throughout the Nuffield application process. Ed stepped down as Nuffield president during my award period, and I regret I was unable to meet my award requirements in time to validate his support of me as a scholar candidate.

I would also like to thank Jodie Redcliff and Nuffield International, for their unending patience with my scholarship and all the life changes I have gone through in the last four years. Finally, I would like to thank the many fine scholars I have met abroad, as well as at my own home. You have all helped me understand agriculture, and my path within it, on a far deeper level than I ever would have otherwise. May I put this knowledge to good use on my farm, in my family, and in this world.

OBJECTIVES

One of the prime objectives of this report was to elucidate some lessons and themes that help make businesses- and smaller scale farm businesses, in particular- successful.

Another objective is to discuss the social and ecological values of the farm business, in general, especially as related to the value of ‘small’ agriculture. Understanding these values creates a more robust understanding of what “success” actually is, and what one might want their business to actually be, beyond the balance sheet.

Examining the social, environmental (or “ecological”), and economic impacts of small farms and food systems, especially in comparison to larger farms and food systems, is also an objective, both in terms of highlighting the power and positives of various scales of operation, as well as acknowledging each one’s limitations.

NARRATIVE

CHAPTERS

CoreValuesKnowYourPlaceAmericanTruckFarmEngl

ishFarmShopTheSuperiorFarmFamilyBusiness

Carlos and the Chocolate Factory

French Connections

- Arrival in Paris
- The Muscadero
- The Cooperative Spirit
- Slow Food
- The Subsidy Game
- The New Regional Park in Limousin
- Neighborhood Chestnut Garage
- Profiles in Leadership
- Last Night in Paris

CORE VALUES

Ireland

We each had before us a casual basket lunch that tasted like something much finer. Our host, the world travelling, epicurean gourmand, stood before us in his kitchen apron. He was in his sixties, still spry and cheerful, but also nearing the end of his adventure: a slow food ride via an import food market, specializing in fine raw and prepared foods. He begins his address.

“Be kind in business. It’s not always about the margin.

“We bought this building from a tanner. It’d been a tannery below, and a feather loft above. We turned the downstairs into the kitchen and grocery, and the upstairs into our home. Many of our uptown friends felt bad for us, having to live down here by the rail and the port, but this was where we wanted to be. Not up in the business district with the banks, but down with the markets, where the people worked and lived, and where the food came and went. At that time, they used to close the street down for cattle auctions,” he recalls, a bit wistfully.

“First day we put white soda bread in the window. Nobody sold soda bread back then. Everybody made it at home, of course, but nobody sold it. There was too much of a stigma about it, about the war and the rationing that had led to it becoming such a household staple. There was a shame about it; but there was a love of it, too. Well, we sold out that morning.

We’ve had a queue at our door since the day we opened, and it hasn’t stopped yet.”

His wife is down in the kitchen, where the two of them have spent much of the last 40 years. Their adventure in business and partnership has stretched across decades and continents. Their base has been this little shop near the Irish coast, but their journey has taken them from pop up gigs at rock festivals, to illegal horse markets, from orange peel vintners in Spain to peanut farmers in Argentina. There is the notion that, while “local” is a cornerstone for their business, there is also a place for the importer in the vision of a vibrant, robust food culture: a sense of adventure and curiosity that can delight even the most provincial soul.

The market shop itself was a work of art, a physical manifestation of these years of passion and work, love and sweat. The space was small, but the products covered the breadth of the couple’s experience- charcuterie and wines from afar, cheeses and fruits from the farms just outside of town. It was something he and his wife and the place, itself, had uniquely created; irreplicable, to its own advantage and detriment. His daughters had floated through the business but had ultimately moved on to starting a peanut butter company, instead. Listening to him, and thinking of all the aging farmers I’d known, I recognized the difficulty of transitioning a

business that was so closely intertwined and defined by its owner on to someone new. I also reflected on how many farmers I'd known who couldn't let go, even when it was time to do so.

In the end, he acknowledges that what he is doing is becoming more difficult. He points towards food safety regulations, in particular, that have impacted his business and his ability to sell a number of his prepared food specialities. I can feel that he hates the idea of complaining, but there is evident frustration about the idea of being regulated by people who know less than you about the product they are regulating. It makes me think of some of the illegal food markets I've seen in the United States, such as raw milk, and how many ways people have devised to go around the authorities in order to get the food they really want.

"Food systems are human systems at their best; they bring people together. I don't know if other industries or trades are like that, but I can go to the Pyrenees and sit down in a hut with a herder and we can talk about beef and barbeque over a fire and eat and connect, even if we don't share a common tongue. What we are doing is not just about food, it is also about people, too, and food is not just nutrients and calories, but stories, as well. We can taste these stories and histories when we eat, we can feel them in our body and in the world around us.

"Always look back. Nothing lasts forever. Appreciate those who came before, who made all of this possible, and recognize your responsibility to those that may come. We all stand in each other's shadows."

KNOW YOUR PLACE

Argentina

Gastón and Soledad lived on a leased farm in a pasture-rich district north of Buenos Aires. They were both veterinarians who worked for a large dairy supply company while managing an organic, grassfed dairy herd on leased land. The two of them hosted us in their modern design farmhouse, amidst a brief copse in a landscape of verdant pastures and fields. It was windy outside, but we were cozy in the house, gazing out the large south windows onto the bright, sunlit pasture, and the black and white Holstein herd. Gastón spoke while Soledad sipped her coffee nearby.

“85% of the milk in Argentina is consumed domestically. People drink a lot of milk,” he said, beginning his slide presentation. “And, of course, they eat a lot of beef.”

As a vet, Gastón visited a lot of farms. He saw a lot of decision-makers amidst these operations, and had observed that many of them make their business decisions based more on what “feels” right, or what they have learned from their forebears, than on any solid logic or data analysis. He thought that this tendency is the main profitability issue with most of the dairy farms in Argentina.

Andre, our in-country Nuffield host who arranged our visit with Gastón and Soledad, interjected. He blamed the Argentinian government, the high domestic tariffs, and the subsequent poor export market as the major issue in the industry. He claimed these policies shackled domestic dairy production and kept farms from achieving profitable scales. Gastón didn’t wholly disagree, but he still felt that it’s more on the industry to adapt to the policy than vice versa. He observed such a strategy is virtually essential if you’re small.

Gastón and Soledad’s dairy was small. They milked 200 cows on a few hundred acres. There was some general laughter when Gastón told us they are doing all their milking in a 16 stall herringbone parlor. Soledad, silent until that point, took offense. She told the group that Gastón and her were not stupid. The exchange was so quick that I admit I missed it when it occurred. It was only later, upon the bus leaving the farm, that one of my colleagues pointed out the exchange to the group, and how upset our host had been by a few of our judgments, both spoken and implied.

Judgment is the end of an open mind. Sometimes irrational decisions are just that, but sometimes decisions only appear to be irrational to the observer ignorant of the conditions which created them. To understand a business, we have to understand the environment in which the business has arisen and grown, in which it has been both nurtured and challenged, and then we may determine how it may best grow from there. This is no different than encountering a new crop or variety, in which a grower tries a variety of methods before finding

the best techniques for that particular crop on their particular site, soil, and given their own particular temperament.

Another necessity for a small business, Gastón observed, was maintaining a long term view. For small producers, many of their variables of production are out of their control. He stressed to focus on what you can control, and not dwell on external factors. Thinking along those lines, I thought of some of the farms we had seen in the country direct marketing their product. A roadside charcuterie shop at a gas station. A farm selling milk and ice cream on site. Even a custom butcher inside a house within a subdivision. I asked Gastón about this. He said he had never given much credence to direct marketing ventures in dairy, but also acknowledged that, with the current economic situation in Argentina, diversity in markets might be a solid strategy. "For instance, some farms have a cheese plant and sell their cheese local to hedge against their processor's milk price," he noted. "Ordinarily, they could do better selling all their milk to the processor, but in this economy the hedge might actually be better."

After the presentation, we went outside and walked the pastures alongside the cows. It was a beautiful farm. Argentina is cow country, from Buenos Aires to Patagonia: the land is suited to them, and the people are, too. Throughout the country we saw images of the gaucho and gaucho culture, and on Sundays everyone had their asada. I asked Gastón how he and Soledad had come to start the farm where they had. He chuckled a bit and told me that the wealthy foreigner who owned the land had agreed to lease to them on good terms. Apparently, he'd been in communication with space aliens who thought it was a good idea.

AMERICAN TRUCK FARM

USA

The first farmer I worked for who actually made a living from farming was Pete. Pete was a dairyman turned specialty crop farmer in Pennsylvania, near Philadelphia. He specialized in sweet corn and tomatoes sold primarily direct to consumer, via a roadside stand. When I started working for him, Pete's market was a humble spot off a sleepy byway, near a busier county road. The last time I worked for him, his farm and market had moved onto the busier county road and his roadside stand had morphed into a million dollar market housed in a barn he'd built for that express purpose. He was grossing seven figures annually at that point, and did so for the next twenty years. He sold plenty of product wholesale, but it was his farm market that made him a success. He knew the power of the direct market, and the often fatal lure of the big wholesale accounts. He could tell me more than one story of successful farmers who'd been lured into big wholesale contracts, based their businesses around them, and then watched the offered price drop through the floor just as they became fully reliant on those sales. Pete's agribusiness didn't work to dominate in that way. It was farm-based, and had its own territory. He even had regular dinners with other farm market owners in the region, each of them small enough to respect that they each had their place in a commercial ecosystem with a strong, diverse, community-rooted consumer base. Each of these markets also had particular specialties; some of their crops crossed over, but others were unique. At first, almost everything Pete sold, he grew. The growth of his business, however, was closely linked to his decision to narrow his crop focus, to some extent, and to partner with other local farms to bring in produce and goods that he wasn't willing (or able) to provide, himself.

Leasing was another one of the interesting ways Pete's farm and market succeeded. Initially, he'd never wanted to leave the land he'd farmed in the township, the farm where I'd spent most of my teen summers, working in the fields and store. The owner of the land died, however, and when the farm was given to the scattered children, they all wanted to sell. They weren't farming, nor were they interested in doing so, and they wanted to cash in their inheritance.

Pete found himself adrift. He could never afford to buy nearby land at the prices the developers were offering, and his next step wasn't clear. This has been quite a common phenomenon in my region for all of my life. Most of the farms I knew growing up are long gone, the land developed-primarily into subdivisions. Pete got a bit lucky, though. The boarding school down the road from his old leased farm was looking to do something new with its dormant farmland, and they offered him a hundred acres and a roadside property on a ten year lease. He took it, and that's when his business really took off. The location was optimal, smack in the middle of a growing sea of development, on a county road that was only getting busier by the day. His timing was

good, too, as “local’ was now becoming a powerful marketing tool. He embraced the term “Locavore” (and avoided the word “organic”). In the end, the land was not his to sell, but everything he’d used to cultivate it was. His final piece of business, on the land he’d stewarded for over thirty years, was an auction that included everything from his greenhouses to his tractors to his hoes and market baskets. It drew people from out of state. Pete was ready to retire, and he could afford to; the final auction was, if not a golden parachute, at least a nice silken one.

Pete’s farm taught me many joys. Picking sweet corn before sunrise and cutting sunflowers not long after. Trellising tomatoes in the mid-morning sun, and loading hay in the afternoon. How to appreciate the heat, itself, and how the body can become fluid within it, and then the joy of the body itself at work, strong and tired at once. The peace of the back field, bordered by the forest, breathing and growing and fruiting in the humidity of July. A farm is a wild place, at its heart, and the wild is a balm for many hearts. This was my primary connection with farming, and what I found so nourishing about the work, and so I did not like the chemicals in Pete’s operation. I did not like the feeling that I was often at war with nature; that it had to be destroyed in order for me to get what I wanted. It took me years to learn that not all fertility amendments are highly toxic, dangerous substances that can burn skin upon contact, or cause cancerous tumors.

Perhaps the most significant thing Pete’s farm demonstrated to me, beyond the example of a small, profitable farm, was that a farm can be a place of growth for people, too, as well as plants. As a teen, I had a great deal of depression; working at Pete’s farm alleviated much of my inner pain and gave me a joy I’d never known. It was a kind of nourishment even deeper than food, it fed my heart and soul, and if a farm can give that to a person, it can give it to a community- from the waters to the birds, to the people and the air.

ENGLISH FARM SHOP

England

The familiar, roadside farm market from my childhood has an analog in the English “farm shop”, a business model that I found surprisingly common as I explored the British countryside in the spring of 2021. In contrast to the, roadside farm markets I’d known since my childhood, however, the term “farm shop” is a legitimate, marketed brand in England, and as such its definition has been stretched in many directions.

I visited a number of other farm shops and spoke with many more farm shop owners via Zoom during my time in England. The businesses varied in substance and size from an old potato shed manned by the grower, himself, to a veritable farm shop strip mall whose Nuffield alumni farmer/owner was impossible to reach via any means. Not all farm shops were owned by farmers, however. South of Sussex I visited a shop whose series of billboards along the highway had caught my eye. The shop was housed in a large, recently built barn. The interior space included a cafe and grocery, replete with a small butcher counter. I met one of the owners, who told me the ownership team’s focus was on creating a customer “experience” and inducing customer “linger”. She told me a crucial component of the customer experience was that they “feel good” about their purchase. Interestingly, she didn’t talk about the province or quality of her products, at all. I asked if the farm whose fields stretched away in back of the shop were hers. She told me that she and her business partners weren’t farmers at all, but sales and marketing professionals escaping London, rather,looking for something new.

*

The farm shop in England I most wished to visit was one I could not, due to my contraction of COVID during my time in country. The shop’s owner and former Nuffield scholar, Rona, had invited me to stay with her family in Cornwall, warning me it was a bit chaotic and I’d likely be on a couch. I regretted having to turn down her offer. Such hosts are the ones with whom I often feel most comfortable, knowing that they are fitting me into their life, and not putting their life on hold to accommodate me. My conversation with Rona gave me some respite from my depressing chain motel room, located a half hour away from the airport and a long way from the English seaside.

There are a number of interesting aspects to Rona’s business. The first is location. Rona’s farm is in Cornwall, the storied peninsula south of London dubbed by some as the “Cornish Riviera”. It’s home to picturesque harbour towns and cliffs, beaches and moors. Her farm and market are on leased land, held by the National Trust. It’s the third lease arrangement Rona and her family

have farmed, and they've finally been able to buy some land as a hedge against losing their lease, again.

"Our first two lease experiences taught us some hard lessons," she tells me over the phone, while I stare at the blank wall of my room. We couldn't get Zoom to work.

"The first one we just outgrew, but the second one we invested in. We funded the construction of an abattoir just so we could find a market for our beef. As first generation farmers we didn't have the history or connections to get into existing slaughterhouses. Then I had twins, and when our lease was expiring the landlords told us they didn't like how big our family was getting." Rona and her husband have four children. "It really was for the best. I mean, who wants to give money to people who are anti-family?"

Rona's family was careful about their next lease situation. "We definitely wanted to find a tenancy where having a family was actually seen as a positive, but we also needed one that would guarantee us a good period of time to establish and grow. Farms are not portable, overnight operations, and the way we farm, in particular- from building community to building healthy soils- takes years to really yield profits." They couldn't afford to buy a farm, but they now had enough experience to define the terms and characteristics of a lease arrangement that might be more sustainable than those they'd cut their teeth with. Eventually, they were connected to the National Trust, and the property Rona and her family are currently farming and stewarding in Cornwall. Following some of their lessons learned, they were able to lock in a twenty year lease for the farm in Cornwall, which is unusually long in the region. Today, they raise lamb and beef for direct sales and grow cereals and grains for feed. They also operate a small, locally-focused farm shop where they sell a variety of products.

Rona's family wasn't the only party in their lease arrangement who had learned some lessons along the way. The National Trust, too, had been dissatisfied with previous lessees, and so had gone about surveying the community and stakeholders in the Cornwall region about what they would like to see in a new tenant farmer. They asked environmental groups and businesses, the school district and residents in the nearby village, as well. Some common themes emerged, primarily that all parties wanted a family to farm the land, and not an absentee grower. Everyone wanted someone who would root in the community, as well. This aligned with Rona's values and made them a good fit.

"A farm should be a backdrop to a community," she says. "A lot of villages have lost a sense of community, and farms have been heavily subsidized by public money but are still very closed to the public. Farmers want people to buy British but they don't want to engage, or they want people to pay for their engagement. I don't agree with that culture. Farmers should see their job as a public service, and public outreach as an obligation. Farming is a privilege." As first generation farmers, this particular view might be an advantage for Rona and her husband. They were not born into the farming world, and so have a different perspective than many who were born into farming, and might take the rewards of such a vocation for granted. "Creating true community, not just in the fields with the flora and fauna, includes creating strong, nourishing

connections with the whole land, and the ones we share it with, from the earthworms to the people who live in subdivisions." To wit, Rona's farm has public footpaths. In addition, they welcome over a thousand people to their farm every year as part of Open Farm Days, a national program Rona's family helped pioneer.

"I don't pay for marketing anymore. Instead we just try to connect with our community, we try to make this a better place for everyone. Our marketing is public service and engagement." She tells me that a great part of Cornwall is that buying local is a strong value in the community, both in the tourists and year round residents. "They know that they are not just buying a piece of meat when they buy our beef or mutton; they're buying a piece of our life, of Cornwall, itself."

Today, Rona's family farm primarily markets their own grassfed beef and lambs, as well as some pastured poultry with which they do box schemes and branding that helps tell their story. They've also begun a farm shop to connect more directly to their community, as well as to increase income. Initially a small seasonal grocery, the business has grown into a year round community market, in large part due to Rona's willingness to listen to the community around them and to serve their needs. For instance, when newspapers began to disappear from many shops, Rona's shop began carrying them at their customers' request. Although newspapers in themselves are at best minimally profitable for the business, this addition created a loyal following for the store, especially among older residents in the village. This is part of what drove them to run the business year round.

"Farmers often complain about 'consumers'," Rona comments. "First off, they're people, and if you treat them poorly you probably won't do very well. If you're anti-social, why should your community support you? What makes you any better than the self-checkout at Tesco?" Quality of product is very important, too, she emphasizes. The store and the product needs to be tidy, clean, and priced fairly. Their pricing might not beat Tesco, she tells me, but they're close enough to sway people.

Rona's farm is also adding a bit of real resilience to the land and community where they farm, something that is not always easily seen. The pandemic, however, illustrated the fragility of our long, complicated supply chains, and the value of small, local markets and food systems. Unfortunately, some of these lessons not only seem to have been quickly forgotten, but perhaps were simply ignored altogether. In the UK, for instance, Rona tells me, the government propped up the broken corporate food system to the extent that Tesco, the grocery behemoth, not only felt no discernible pinch in their profits during the shutdowns, they actually expanded. In the midst of the crisis, Tesco purchased Bookers, the major product distributor small shops like Rona's used to round out their inventory. Many of those products are no longer available to shops like Rona's. This was particularly frustrating to her, as rather than working to diversify the food sector in terms of scale and supply chain, the government's intervention on behalf of industry actually helped consolidate the food industry further, in direct contradiction to the systemic issues the pandemic had exposed. "Apparently, putting all our eggs in one basket is

now sound policy and the most efficient way to govern an industry, in spite of what the pandemic showed us, and what we intuitively know to be true."

There is frustration in her voice, but also resignation. Changing gears, I ask her what the key to her success has been, and she responds.

"I guess the key to our success exists in telling the story of our farming careers and life together. Letting people get to know us, and feel like they are part of what we do. They are, of course; they're the most important part, in many ways.

"But the real question is how do you even evaluate success? I think Raymond would agree with me that our children, their rearins, and the team we've all made together, this has been our great success.

"Money just isn't that big a deal to us. We have good food, and a good life, and I guess I'd say that as long as you have those things, you're doing well. We've had moments where we were at the end of our bank accounts, but you figure it out, you bounce back.

"One thing about being a first generation farmer, we don't have generational pressures telling us what to do. We're all new to this farming life. We can make mistakes, and if it all goes wrong, we'll try something new."

The Superior Farm

Poland

Andre, founder and CEO of Superior Farm, spoke to us at an old distillery in a small agricultural town in Poland. The distillery was a well maintained, living museum; a functioning operation replete with a guided tour and exhibits. It was curated by an elderly gentleman who spoke no English but led us through the building with ease. From the main room housing the top of the two story, stainless steel still, down a spiral, wrought iron staircase, curling round the rocketship, into a cellar with brick walls and countless photographs telling the story of the distillery. A sumptuous banquet had been laid out before us there, bordered on one side by a wall that was entirely composed of a rack housing innumerable fruit liqueurs. After dinner, we were given a taste of these liqueurs, each one featuring various fruits of the region, distilled down to their essence. They were heady and dreamy and packed a bit of a velvet punch. As we sampled them, Andre told us the story of his agribusiness, Superior Farm.

“I started Superior Farm in Romania, where I was born. Initially, we just grew grains for the commodity market. We didn’t own the land, and paid many of our leases with grain, rather than cash. I liked that sort of business. We’re typically cash focused, but barter can be a good hedge, sometimes. Cash and barter transactions also help keep a business fairly liquid, light and nimble. These are still characteristics of Superior Farm, today, but we are much bigger now than we were then.”

Andre describes the beginning of Superior Farm in the period after the Berlin Wall fell and the Soviet Union dissolved. At that time, all of the former provinces of the Soviet empire had to decide what their new nation’s government and economy would look like, without central communist control. Some resisted the obvious capitalist impulses, while others found a blend of east and west policies. Poland, for its part, went free market overnight.

“It was a bit of the wild west, at first, and there was a goldrush for land. Buying land was (and is) difficult, but that didn’t bother me much. I didn’t really want to own heavy assets, anyway, especially in such a politically volatile environment. What the Polish government was offering fit our goals. They were willing to lease state farms cheap, just to keep them in some kind of shape. The farms were a bit run down, and posed some significant challenges, but the land was good. I saw the opportunity and seized it.

“I initially negotiated 30 year leases comprising 12,000 hectares in total, located near 12 different villages. The logistics were massive. We began intensifying production, guaranteeing employment to the locals. Three years later we had 25,000 hectares under lease. Three years after that Poland joined the EU, subsidies started coming in, and cash flow really improved.”

For the Polish government, Andre's immediate investment of private capital into the brand new Polish economy provided industry and income on land that might otherwise have declined in value through simple neglect. In the long term, Superior Farm actually increased the value of the leased land in multiple ways, something the Polish government may not have expected but will likely be glad to receive in the near future, when many of the leases expire.

"It's been a good arrangement. Superior Farm is now a multi-national agribusiness consisting of eight separate but linked enterprises: a genetics company, a seed company, a farm technology company, and five farm production companies. Our gross annual revenue in 2022 was over 600 million euro with a net near 200 million, which comes out to about 1000 euro profit per acre. We're currently managing over 80,000 hectares within the EU, most of it within Poland, and are employing over 350 people."

The obvious question on all of our lips was what was going to happen next with the company, when the leases the company had built their success upon ran out.

"A lot depends on the elections," Andre admitted. "If the Polish government goes to the right, we could lose a lot. My guess is that even if it goes left, we'll have to give up a symbolic amount of acreage. But that's for them to manage," Andre tells us, gesturing towards his leadership team, seated among us. "I'm retiring."

A murmur went through the room at Andre's announcement, but clearly the news was not new to the members of the leadership team. TThis was the group of a half dozen men who had coordinated our visit to Poland and spent the week touring all of us across their country, communities, farms and homes. Their expressions did not change at Andre's announcement, but remained stoic and attentive.

"I've had a good run, and now I want to enjoy the rest of my life." Andre motioned towards his daughter, a bright, sharp, friendly young woman who had recently completed an advanced degree at Oxford and had joined us for the meal. Andre told us he wanted to support her in her first venture as a luxury brand designer, and generally scale back the pace of his life and work. He had the air of a man who had accomplished what he came to do, and was well satisfied with the results.

"Ultimately, it will be up to these men whether Superior Farm survives or not. It will be a period of transition and change, without doubt, but that is nothing new. How does a company survive? How does anything survive? Adaptability and change. As a society and in agribusiness, too, we are learning about too many of our mistakes after calamities have already occurred. We need to see trouble coming. We need to be able to change our approach, without changing our vision. We need to be self accountable, and agile. We need to be able to cooperate together, as well as operate independently, and everyone has to earn their keep. My departure will certainly have an impact on Superior Farm, but the preparations for my departure have been years in the making."

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In tracing back our visits and conversations over the course of the week, Andre's statement that preparations for his departure had begun years before became clear. Perhaps the first measure Superior Farm took in creating resilience in their leadership model was the creation of a diffuse leadership structure that relies on a team leadership system, rather than a sole chief executive. For Superior Farm, this leadership team consisted primarily of a team of crop specialists, each specializing in their own crop sector, all networked across the company with shared resources. One of the interesting aspects of this team leadership structure, resonant with the theme of resilience, was that rather than each subsidiary farm having its own individual, "do-it-all" manager, Superior Farm had each crop specialist lead the growing operations for their particular crop across all company farms and operations. This created a team approach both at the top levels of leadership, as well as at lower tiers in the company's structure. Such a design may eventually allow even an organizational cornerstone, such as the founder, to be removed without serious damage.

Another key practice Superior Farm instituted in recent years that will help with the transition in leadership from Andre was the unification of all of the accounting systems across Superior Farm's various businesses in order to create a common accounting language across all departments. This system essentially boils down to a common spreadsheet that is used by all farms so that they can be compared between and across sectors in terms of value. On a basic level, this accounting system allows the company to more effectively sort out what's working and what's not. Economic analysis of a crop's performance down to the field level, as well as per hectare, takes a lot of subjective analysis and guesswork out of a collective decision making process.

Andre's strategy of leasing land, and even equipment, as opposed to purchasing, was a practice he had employed at the beginning of his career out of necessity, and later in his career out of strategy. He wanted his company to be low on overhead, light and nimble. In such a rapidly changing political landscape, he didn't particularly want to buy land, or any heavy, fixed assets. This strategy will also serve to ease transition for Superior Farm from Andre's leadership; Andre doesn't hold any real capital investment in the company, and so there's no need for a large buyout that could potentially harm the business at the critical point of transition.

Overall, adaptability and change on the farm, as well as in the marketplace, has been a key cultural aspect to Superior Farm's impressive growth over the last three decades. The company's movement away from generic commodity crops to a specialization in more complex specialty crops was driven by the company recognizing their talent for creating quality product, as well as recognition of their relatively small scale within the global market. Consumer demand has been increasing for some time in the specialty crop sector, and the barriers to entry- often due to the difficulty in growing, harvesting, and processing specialty product- gave Superior Farm a strategic niche. Even in their remaining "generic" commodity markets, Superior Farm has

looked to specialize, focusing on “biscuit” wheat, for example, as opposed to animal feed grade product. They consider themselves “the only European player able to supply on-trend specialty crops at scale” and tout “precision farming technology at every stage of the supply chain.”

Diversity in complementary enterprises is another strategy Superior Farm has employed to some success over the years. Each of the eight interdependent, linked businesses comprising Superior Farm has arisen over the years as the opportunity (and need) has presented itself in the marketplace. For instance, their farm technology company initially evolved to study and further regenerative agricultural practices, with the belief that such practices would create more robust agricultural systems as well as better quality, healthier food. Originally, their move towards regenerative didn’t have anything to do with marketing; it was actually based on saving money on water (irrigation) and building soil fertility to reduce input costs, rather than finding a new market niche. By the time of our visit, however, the technology company was quite involved in marketing, working with a third party certifier to certify 21,000 hectares of their production land “Regenerative”, using a label they’d privately developed in collaboration with other industry groups. One of these industry partners, General Mills, had already contracted Superior Farm for 20,000 tons of regenerative ag certified wheat at the time of our visit. Part of the push on creating a certified, regenerative label had to do with what Andre and his leadership team had seen happen to the Organic label, a certification they felt was well intentioned but ultimately flawed, and growing weaker by the day.

“We know that certain practices banned in Organic production can actually be regenerative, when properly employed. The science on this has evolved over time. There’s also a lot of fraud in Organic, regarding where the food is actually coming from. Part of our Regenerative label is the slogan ‘Trusted Field Trusted Food’. If you want to show the food chain to your customer-that famous traceability everyone touts and in which so many are lying all the time-here is a label you can actually trace from a trusted field you can actually see. We can prove our supply chain, and we will give you the technology to prove it to yourself. That’s real traceability.

“There have been two great revolutions in my career. One has been in technology, enabling something like ‘Trusted Field, Trusted Food’ to exist, as well as the increased ability for us to analyze data at the macro and micro scales. The second has been in biology, and the ability of science to describe the nature of life, especially within the soil. We need to look more into soil, in particular, not just in terms of nutrient power, but also in terms of water retention and sorption capacities. I don’t buy much the theory of human-induced climate change, but I do believe it’s getting drier.

“Big money is behind food technology,” he tells us, in conclusion. “If I had 25 more years, that’s where I would commit myself.”

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After his address, Andre sat beside me at the banquet table. During our conversation, I asked him what he thought about direct market farm operations, where the farm is largely geared towards direct to consumer sales, as opposed to wholesale markets. His chief financial officer had expressed admiration for what my wife and I were doing in our home in the USA, and I thought there was a link there given Andre's remarks about working to provide specialty crops within shortened supply chains. Andre told me he didn't believe anyone could succeed farming at the scale I described, however. When I told him my family farmed at that scale, and we were doing okay, he was thrown off balance, for a beat. He recovered quickly.

"Of course, you can never go to the beach in summer," he said, waving his hand. I couldn't deny that truth, and we both laughed at the exchange.

An Australian colleague at the table referenced Andre's comment regarding the drying climate, and shared some photos with him of her grain crop that year, a planting spread across many thousands of hectares. The images were countless stalks of grain withered into nothing by a crippling drought. A complete loss.

Andre shook his head in disbelief, and turned back to me. "Maybe your scale is better!" he remarked. We both laughed, once again, before he turned back to my unfortunate colleague and began coaching her on how to squeeze every last nickel she could from the gas companies that wanted to drill on her land.

FAMILY BUSINESS

Poland

Roland was twenty five years younger than me and already had a better resumé. His father was a forester and Roland had started his first business at age 11: chopping and selling firewood.
This is a business that he still operates, alongside his brother, now stacking huge poles of trees in windrows beside his family's sheep pastures, splitting the wood mechanically and drying the finished product in a huge barn. It's a family business. His father was a forester for many years. He mentored his sons, and now he's a delivery driver for them.

The next business Roland started, as a teenager, was direct-marketed lamb. His sisters and mother were key partners on this venture, and now do most of the work in the business, including sales, marketing, and accounting. The margins are tight on lamb, so they went for the niche Organic market that exists in Ireland. This market is small, but the subsidies from CAP (Common Agricultural Policy) and the EU for being Organic are significant; these subsidies actually comprise a good part of the family's net income from the lamb business.

The importance of this income from agricultural subsidies was not unique to Roland's family farm. Many farms in Ireland- beef and sheep, in particular- are only profitable because of subsidies. These farms serve multiple purposes, at least in the eyes of the policymakers who are responsible for these payments. On a basic level, the subsidies are geared towards making sure the agricultural industry in the region is not depleting natural resources or causing serious pollution. On another level, these incentives help preserve the agrarian, rural character of the country and its communities, themselves, as opposed to a model where consolidation in the ag sector leads to a few big players and the inevitable disintegration of rural communities, in particular. There is an open question as to whether these subsidies will continue, as CAP is set to expire and the politics of the EU are changing. It is an open question what will happen to small farms across the region if the subsidies do end. Carbon markets, typically based on sequestration, are the new(ish) private industry solution to environmentally-based agricultural subsidies, but the science around these markets is often suspect. Roland comments on this.

"The only way any carbon or environmental service market can really function properly is through trace-abiliity and transparency. Farms need to be open to data collection in order to be properly compensated for whatever ecological services they are providing. We've been asked to get to Net Zero carbon emissions, but we haven't really recognized the tools to measure that."

While it is always a question whether these subsidies will endure within the European Union, the demand for Roland's lambs is strong enough that Lidl did approach his family about their

Organic lamb product. They didn't do the contract, though. "Not everything needs to be huge," Roland comments. "We like this particular business at this particular scale."

Roland's most recent venture, in which he's again partnered with his brother, is an agritech solution to minimize treatments in sheep herds for various pests and disease. It's essentially a gated chute that they initially made to facilitate administering vaccines, only now they've included diagnostic tools in the chute that can actually tell a farmer whether the sheep actually needs treatment for parasites, or not. This could not only save farmers a good bit of expense in pharmaceuticals and labor, but would also help curb the use of possibly unnecessary antibiotics and vaccines. This invention is innovative, and looks promising.

Each of Roland's family enterprises have evolved based on what will work and complement the commercial foundation the family has already built with previous ventures. Their sheep systems complement their forestry system through grazing the understory of the young plantings. Their tech invention was devised wrangling with their own efficiencies in the sheep enterprise, with a goal of both lowering pest loads as well as treatment costs.

"Ag is often a reactive field rather than a proactive one," he comments. We were in his family living room looking out 8 foot tall windows onto the emerald pastures rolling below. "We like the proactive approach. With a big view, you can often see what's coming and gain an edge. In Organic, for instance, you need to prevent sickness before infection because treatment can be very difficult; you have limited tools at your disposal. This gave rise to the gated chute technology we are pioneering. Another example: in our firewood industry, we dry our firewood longer and more thoroughly than most producers, which gives a superior product when compared with kiln-dried wood. The price is higher, but the wood burns cleaner. Recently, legislation was passed establishing a standard for moisture content in commercial firewood, aiming to reduce the particulate emissions caused from burning wood, in general. This legislation was problematic for many in the firewood industry. For us, though, it was no problem. We actually pushed for this legislation; we're ready for it."

We ask about his family's business structure, for all the different enterprises, and who does what.

"We have several long term employees, and they're key. We treat them like family, or maybe a bit better, actually, " he laughs. "With family, though, a formal structure is very difficult. Many of our employees and family work across ventures and are ideally placed where their skills are best suited. One of the real issues with such a model is when multiple people are trying to occupy the same niche. One of the real positives, however, are how many different perspectives you get with so many different stakeholders. You get a lot more good ideas when you have a lot more eyes and thoughts."

He pauses and reflects for a moment. I was a bit dazed by this young man's vision and concepts. He made it all sound very easy, and very logical. I knew from personal experience, however, that working with family was not always so simple, especially in agriculture.

“Anyway, if it all falls apart, I do have a business degree,” he chuckles. “Always good to have a Plan B if you’re an entrepreneur.”

CARLOS AND THE CHOCOLATE FACTORY

Belize

At the end of the Hummingbird Highway in Belize, just as one starts to head south along the Caribbean coast, there is a small town called Maya Center. As we were passing through, my wife, Emma and I saw signs for a small chocolate factory and cacao farm. We decided to stop and toted our one year old along on two tours, one of the cacao farm, and the latter of the factory. Our first visit was to the farm, where the farmer, Carlos, greeted us and took us down a brief forest path to a clearing within his plantation.

Carlos' cacao farm was more like a young forest than any sort of tree fruit farm I've seen in my life. Cacao was just one of the species present, and there were other trees in the forest that towered above the cacao trees, many of them legumes that brought nitrogen into the system for all the plants in the community. Cacao, native to the region, is naturally an understory tree and requires a diverse ecosystem to thrive the way Carlos farms, "beyond Organic", by default. He has very few chemicals at his disposal, in part because he has very little cash at his disposal. Many farmers are like Carlos in Belize, farming at small scales that range from subsistence level to regional market trade. Belize is a small country with marginal soils. The country does not export much food, but it does have a thriving agriculture that serves a fairly sleepy, pleasant country.

Carlos told us he had been farming his whole life, taught by his parents and grandparents and great grandparents. He recited a general tourist script, but was also able to answer any question we had about his farm and practices. He smiled more when he realized we were growers, too, and talked more indepth about the horticultural aspects of the cacao plant. Emma was fascinated by the tiny cacao flowers, borne directly on the trunk and limbs. "Pollinated by midges," Carlos tells her, waving his hand at the small midges and flies that were zipping about, around our arms and faces and eyes. He offered us bug spray, but he didn't use any, and we didn't want to disturb the work of the pollinators, either.

Cacao was actually a pivot for Carlos, a return to an older crop his family had farmed for decades before the citrus boom. The citrus boom had taken over Belizian agriculture over the last number of decades, but it was currently on a severe downturn and possibly headed towards extinction. Citrus "greening', a disease caused by an invasive Chinese insect, has been wiping out plantings all across the Americas for decades, with no end in sight. We'd personally seen many overgrown, dead orange groves as we'd crossed the Belizean countryside. Cacao was a native plant, though, the sacred province of the Maya, and could still thrive in native conditions. Carlos told us his people had begun cultivating the plant nearly 4000 years ago, around 1800 BC.

He showed us various cacao fruits, of various hues. He explained that he had numerous different varieties of cacao on his 10 acre farm. At the time of our visit, the market for his crop

was the chocolate factory located across the street from his farm. Carlos' grandfather had sold to Hershey's Chocolate for years, however, the famous chocolate company that was located not an hour from my home in Pennsylvania. I was amazed. Carlos told me Hershey's only stopped buying in the 1980s, when the company was bought out by a larger concern. This was particularly interesting for me to hear, because as a child I'd liked Hershey's chocolate, but as I grew older it seemed to deteriorate in quality to the point where I no longer liked it. I wondered if my palate had simply changed, or if I'd been picking up a clear change in quality. After losing Hershey as a buyer, his father had shifted the family's market to Green and Black, an English company, which I knew to be much better quality chocolate, and certified organic. Then Green and Black got bought out by Cadbury's, and the family lost their buyer, again.

I asked Carlos how he liked selling to the guy across the street, as opposed to a large, multinational corporation. He commented, with some irritation, that the factory hadn't changed the price paid per pound for beans since they opened, a number of years ago, but he also noted that at least the price hadn't gone down. He further observed that, though, the money isn't as good as citrus, the market for cacao did seem more resilient. He felt that there's a power in selling to the guy across the street, too, and a company that is serving the region as opposed to a distant nation.

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After our time with Carlos, Emma, Eddie and I headed across the road to the chocolate factory. Chocolate factory might seem like a grand term for what was little more than a two story concrete warehouse, replete with gift shop and an open air classroom on the second floor. It was a modest factory, easily overlooked, though over a thousand Belizean cacao farms sold to it. The factory had built a variety of high quality, boutique products, and sold all of them direct to consumer. Our host at the factory, Hector, told us with some pride that the factory had actually been paid a visit by the Prince and Princess of England, William and Kate, in the recent past. A framed newspaper article displayed on the wall included a quote by the Prince, himself, suggesting he might like to intern there.

Hector manned the front tourist shop and gave us our chocolate making demonstration on the second floor of the building. He was not a farmer, not even really a chocolatier. He had actually been a marketing man in the south of Belize before he'd been recruited by the man who'd started the chocolate factory. After showing us the gift shop, he led us up to the second floor of the building for a chocolate making demonstration. He showed us the cacao beans, and the nibs, and we ground them all into an oily paste on an ancient, volcanic stone. He was a bit of a trickster. He tried convincing me that the secret ingredient in their chocolate was oil extracted from the tail of a squirrel. We pressed the paste we had ground into molds. Hector put the chocolate in the freezer while he told us more about the history of chocolate and the factory itself, including the owner, who was in the picture with the Prince and Princess. He was in a white suit and looked vaguely like Colonel Sanders.

Belize is finding a market with cacao for export, again, with their high quality beans. They're starting to drift into coffee, too, another luxury item where quality of bean is prized in the marketplace, and where quality arises from regions with robust ecosystems surrounding the crop, tended by small, intensive growers. Coffee, like cacao, is naturally an understory tree, and is best cultivated in such habitats where many species exist symbiotically, and the living system is strong and diverse.

The chocolate we made with Hector was good, so we bought nibs and beans and one chocolate bar in the shop. We only bought one chocolate bar because the product had to be refrigerated and was not stable at room temperature. We opened it in the car and devoured it in less than five minutes. It was amazing. Then I broke open the cacao nibs and tossed them in my mouth like pop rocks.

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Months after our trip to Belize, back home in the United States, I discovered a chocolate called "AlterEco" on a local supermarket shelf. The company was marketing eco chocolate, using the slogan "Farm Like A Forest". The inside of each paper chocolate bar package was printed with the picture of a forest in which the company's cacao trees grow, along with a mixture of other fruits, legumes, and timber species. The label touted better soil health, better biodiversity, healthier cacao trees, and more stable farm incomes for the growers. I thought of Carlos, again, and wondered if he and his family might someday find a bigger buyer, once more.

FRENCH CONNECTION

France

Arrival in Paris

At one of the airport car rental shops, we picked up a 15 person passenger van. I was volunteered as the driver, and then my navigator decided I should that boat drive it straight into the heart of Paris. I did so with trepidation. The airport, itself, was a dizzying array of on and off ramps and bumper to bumper traffic, I couldn't imagine the city. But there were very few horns. The traffic was chaotic, but also seemingly accepting of itself, and so in some way a deeper order persisted, and we were carried to our destination as if by providence: the Eiffel Tower. There were throngs of people all about the area, and I moved the van like an oil tanker nudging past stationary reefs and smaller vessels. Just beyond the monument, a copse of cops were chatting on the sidewalk, beside a wide, "No Parking" zone. We rolled down a window and asked them if we could park there fora moment, just to jump out and get a picture in front of the landmark. From my experience in the USA, I thought it was an impossible ask, but the French police simply gave us a disinterested wave and went back to chatting amongst themselves. I might have hit a stanchion pulling up close to the curb, but in the end no one cared, not even the rental company.

Vigneron and Vintner

We made our way south from Paris, to the muscadero wine region near Nantes. On our first full day in country we met a vigneron/vintner at his winery. Gaston was in his sixties. He was gentle and kind and made no effort to speak English. He had a few English words, to be sure, but he did not use them. Through two amateur translators we heard his story, of how he had been slowly losing his farm and so had decided to try and add on to his operation an agritourism business, complete with an event space and wine tasting room. He'd also added huge wine casks retrofitted to tiny houses for air bnb style accommodations on-site, in the vineyard. Even in the wine production, he'd started taking chances, working with the local biodynamic community to try growing his grapes without so many sprays and chemicals. Once he saw the results of this particular experiment, he told us, he was sold. Not only was the wine better, but his grandkids were actually showing interest in the vineyard for the first time. Different kinds of life and energy were beginning to return to the farm, and Gaston didn't see himself going back to his old methods of chemically intense pesticide sprays and fertilizers.

There were difficulties. Gaston told us the name of the region in which he was growing, and the wine the vintners in that region were allowed to produce. He told us that, for his wine to bear the trademark name of the wine assigned to that region (muscadero), he had to cultivate a specific grape in a specific way. Only then could he use the regional brand the French government had created in order to market his product. These are the rules from the Champagne valley to Bourdeaux, and all throughout the nation. Gastón wasn't sure the biodynamic practices he was beginning to embrace would pass muster for the regional appellation. There was also the more basic issue that muscadero isn't considered a top tier wine or grape, so his tourist clientele were harder to recruit, and his product was often harder to move wholesale. Finally, there was the fact that his region was getting more frosts than in past decades- the climate was changing- and it was even becoming questionable whether the traditional grape, identified over a century ago as the strength of the region in terms of production, was still the best choice. As a result of many of these issues, some of Gastón's neighbors were beginning to grow different grapes to make wine, going it alone, without the nationally-endorsed, regional appellations. This, of course, was an uphill battle, as the regional brands in France are powerful marketing tools developed over centuries of use.

The future of Gaston's farm and business was uncertain, but his transition into biodynamics and more agritourism in his farm and business was still fresh, and time would tell if it was a good play. Regardless, he seemed resigned to whatever his fate might be, and at the end of our tour he led us down to his wine tasting room to relax. He was generous with us, uncorking bottle after bottle of his wines for our tasting, telling us in detail the uses and characteristics of each vintage he poured. This was late in the day, however, and many of our group were fairly worn out from weeks of travel. We did our best to persevere, but when our translator informed us, politely, that it was not unusual for Gaston to go through all the bottles on the wall in a single tasting, we had to draw the line. There were dozens of selections on display and the notion of tasting them all was daunting. Instead, we expressed our appreciation for his generous hospitality, and bought a few bottles for the road.

Cooperative Culture

Although larger scale agricultural operations certainly exist in France, our Nuffield group did not tour them, and it may be said that the food system in France is largely made up of small parts, as opposed to a few behemoth powerhouses. The French are intensely focused on preserving regional identities, in particular, such that you could say they've taken 'local' and made it a national mandate. There are positives and negatives to this approach. The notion of a large scale small scale agricultural industry might sound like an oxymoron, but at its core it may be seen as a preservation of traditional agricultural communities, and the larger culture of which they are such a vital part.

This smaller scale, community focus in French agriculture is well represented by the multitude of CUMAs in France. CUMA, loosely translated to "cooperative for the use of farm equipment", were established after WW2 to help the modernization of agriculture in France. This was at a

time when most of the farms in the country were still small-scale, family operations using pre-war technologies while trying to rebuild from the war. By pooling resources, these farms
were able to recover quicker and access larger scale machinery to produce at larger scales than ever before.

CUMAs must consist of at least four farmers, but can be composed of many more. Some have paid staff, but most are self-governing. Members collectively schedule use of equipment and often help one another during busy periods of work.

The idea of sharing a tractor or harvester with another farmer, much less a group of them, seemed somewhat impractical to me. I'd experienced first hand issues with such situations. To my Aussie colleagues, many of them farming thousands of hectares scores of miles away from anyone else, the notion was pretty much unimaginable. The system works for the French, however. As of 2019, there were over 11,000 CUMA active in France. Over half of all French farmers belong to at least one CUMA, and many farmers belong to multiple. Importantly, CUMAs often bring farmers of different stripes together, allowing not only equipment exchange but information exchange, as well. Many conventional farmers within France, for instance, have shifted towards more sustainable (and Organic) agricultural practices due to peer to peer exchange within their CUMA.

Many CUMAs in France are large enough that they actually have bureaucracies, including non-farmer employees who manage them; many have political sway, as well. The CUMA system has even collectively funded what amounts to its own Cooperative Extension service, similar to the government funded entities connected to land grant universities in the United States. Our Nuffield group visited with Elise, a leader within the CUMA Extension service. She was a generous, middle aged professional who met us at the end of her working day with a
large smile, tea, biscuits, and a massive power point that she skimmed through at a respectable pace. She fielded all our questions with a good natured aplomb, and didn't shy away from any critiques, veiled or not. "Our system is crazy," she freely admitted, discussing the byzantine bureaucracies of French politics and agriculture, but she clearly delighted in it. Like many of the French we encountered, she had an earthy groundedness that seemed unswayed by professional snobbery.

At the end of Elise's presentation, we each had a dixie cup of wine and generally socialized. I got to chat with our Nuffield host for the day, Emile, the man who had organized our visit to Elise and the CUMA Extension service. He was a younger fellow, maybe in his early thirties, a self-employed ag equipment consultant whose business functioned in much the same way as the CUMA's Cooperative Extension service did. In some sense, he was competition for the Extension service, representing the kind of private industry consultants and sales reps that the collective French culture have kept much more at bay than in other western nations, such as the US. Still, there was no bad blood between Emile and Elise, which spoke to the basic shared mission of the two, and an underlying sense that they were all pulling in the same direction. This kind of interaction reminded me of the idea of collaborative competition I'd contemplated in my own farm business ecosystem at home, the notion that overlapping niches and scales can be

good for a system, supplying diversity in options and greater community resilience towards larger scale disruptions.

Slow Food

Emile took us out to dinner that night in Nantes. We were at an outdoor cafe/restaurant, a casual dining environment that was comfortable with the early evening traffic of the city swirling about. Conversations came and went amidst the group, but my memory is of watching the evening traffic in the pedestrian friendly city, where wide stone walks curled around centuries old churches. There was a massive sculpture exhibit outdoors, across the square. The Loire river flowed quietly under and through.

The pace of the meal was leisurely. We drank wine before ordering, and the servers were in no rush to serve, either, so that by the time we finished our main course the traffic that had been swirling around us at the end of the day had slowed down to a trickle in the dark of night. We thought to leave when the servers shut down the sidewalk dining area and asked us to move closer to the cafe doors. Many of us felt we were being an imposition, and it was getting late. Emile told us not to mind the staff cleaning up around us, however, and assured us that no one would bring us the check until we asked. He convinced us to have something sweet. We were swayed. Dessert was exquisite. Now many of us were ready to go, but Emile protested. The coffee must be sipped. He was shocked when most of the group decided they'd rather go back to the hotel. .

I couldn't blame those who had left. It had been another long day on the road, but I hung in there. Emile was friendly and gregarious and I understood that he was working on us, to some extent, trying to teach us something about food and culture that we might not really understand, and would never learn from an academic paper or book. While he was an undeniably modern, more capitalist-type Frenchman, he was still undeniably French. He delighted in his culture and our group's near inability to truly enjoy an organic, slow food experience.

After our coffee we readied to leave. The evening had actually grown quite chilly, and we were approaching 11pm. Emile protested, once more, that it was the further custom in the region to follow the post-dessert coffee with just a very small bit of a very strong liqueur. The last of us collectively drew the line. He laughed and relented, excusing us, and himself, for the night. He rose to visit the restroom inside the restaurant as we gathered our cash. Finally, we called for the bill, but when the server arrived she told us that our host had already paid.

The Subsidy Game

Approximately half the French population worked in agriculture in the aftermath of WW2; today, the number is about two percent of the population. Before the war, much of the farming in the

country was more or less community subsistence level; after the war, the nation followed the wave of the American Green Revolution- consolidating and aggregating. As a result of this trend, by the 1980s many small to mid-sized farms in France were failing to keep up in the marketplace as a combination of oversupply in both global and domestic markets crashed prices. Something similar happened in the United States at the same time, but the French reacted quite differently than the United States to the situation. Rather than allowing these smaller farms to simply disappear and espousing a “get big or get out” philosophy, the French government stepped in with quota systems, subsidies, and regulations to protect their smaller farm businesses and the communities they anchored. Government subsidies that had once been crafted to increase production began to shift towards supporting the historical character of the country, in terms of agriculture, and mitigating the environmental impacts of farm operations, in general. Without these policies, many of the farms we saw and visited in France (and other parts of the European Union) probably wouldn’t exist. At Pierre’s farm, that was certainly true.

We visited with Pierre on our journey south from Nantes, towards the Limousin region of France. Pierre’s family raised beef cattle on pasture and also grew grain for feed and oil seeds. They sold their cows to a large processor cooperative who processed their cattle for sale. This is the route almost everyone has to go in the country with beef. The number of processors has shrunk over time, however, and the few remaining are becoming larger and larger and are more and more scaled to simply work with large scale suppliers. During our tour, Pierre admitted he did not know the price the co-op would be paying for his beef when he eventually sent the cows away. He had few options, and very little power in controlling his market. This made the agricultural end of his business dubious, and somewhat fragile. One source of income he did have more control over, however, and what was ultimately the most profitable aspect of the operation, were the multiple subsidies the farm received. Many of these subsidies came from the adoption of environmentally-friendly agricultural practices, such as managed grazing, minimizing the use of tillage and nitrogen fertilizers, and protecting nesting bird and wetland habitats.

“We build the farm around the regulations, and CAP (the Common Agricultural Practices legislation that applies to farms across the European Union),” Pierre told us. “Rather than fighting the regulations, we are following them, taking advantage of them.” One of the digs on the French that was new to me, until I came to Europe, was that the French always surrender. Of course, as any good 12 step program will tell you, surrender is often the first step to success, and it seemed that this was the case for Pierre and his family. “There are many rules involved in following this strategy,” he admitted to us during the tour, constantly referencing different regulations and stipulations he and his family have to abide by to secure different pots of money. His managed grazing subsidy, for instance, required him to maintain a grazing book that was then verified via official government satellite imagery tracking his pastures over time. At times during the conversation, it seemed to me like Pierre was not so much a farmer as a contract government employee, being paid to treat the land a certain way and grow food for the state-sanctioned cooperatives. This sort of view was not unique to France, we had seen much of it in Ireland, as well, and I learned it was not uncommon for small farms in the EU, in general, to rely as much on environmental subsidies for income as for actual agricultural production. This

reality has several issues. One is the bureaucracy required for such large scale policy administration, contrasted with the need for the small producer to have maximum flexibility as times (and climates) change. There are also the vagaries of a changing sociopolitical climate, and how resilient a strategy that relies on government subsidies might be; the future of CAP was on everyone's mind as we traveled throughout the EU.

One environmental project on Pierre's farm that had been especially profitable, and laid somewhat outside the subsidy system, was solar farming. Solar power has been growing in France for some time, but Pierre got in before many other farms, and so secured a generous contract that, he estimated, would pay off all his outbuildings in 20 years. He noted that the farm's solar contract, alone, sometimes generated more income than all the farm's production in beef and grain. The urge to expand this aspect of his operation was strong, but so far, Pierre had restricted solar installations on his farm to the roofs of his buildings, as opposed to converting cropland and pastures to panels. He told us that, in the current market, he wanted his farm to make 1500 euro per hectare, while solar companies were offering 2000 per hectare for putting panels in the fields. He told us that this was becoming a real issue for the French government, who want food production to be more lucrative for farms than energy production, but are not always able to make that the case, even with strong subsidy programs.

Pierre's farm was a multi-generational family business, run by himself, his brother, father, and mother. They were a small team. He told us that they didn't hire employees, anymore, largely because of exorbitant employee taxes, as well as the difficulty in dismissing someone if they don't work out. He described a very good manager they had once employed who had eventually figured that, with government cost-of-living payments and the occasional odd job, he could make more money not "officially" working at all, and so he started doing a deliberately poor job. To fire him would have been difficult, given the labor regulations in France, and so Pierre and his family eventually just negotiated a lump sum buyout to convince the man to leave.

"You have no friends when you talk money," he told us, shaking his head.

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The New Regional Park in Limousin

We drove well into the night to reach Limousin. Our host for this final leg of our French experience was Choe. Chloe was a beekeeper, if you had to assign her a trade. She was also a networker, a caregiver, a forager and orchardist. Upon our late night arrival at our charming cottage rental, she offered us all a dawn hike the next day, to get a look at the countryside we had come to. Only a few of us woke up for the walk, but we were all glad we did. Led by Chloe, we hiked through backyards and chestnut groves up to a clearing overlooking the valley through which we had driven the night before, now illuminated in sunshine, bright in the early autumn dew. It was a rolling, pastoral, somewhat remote landscape in the center of France.

Limousin is perhaps most famous for its eponymous breed of beef cattle, but it was possible that, in the near future, farmers in the region would have to look elsewhere to have their beef

processed. On our walk Chloe told us one of the current battles in Limousin involved trying to retain the last custom butcher and slaughterhouse in the area, something easier said than done. Losing the processor would mean possibly unmanageable distances for ranchers to transport their cattle, if they could even find processing services within the bottleneck that already exists in the meat processing portion of the French supply chain.

The meat processing issues Chloe described to us were not unique to her neighbors. Pierre had mentioned the same issue during our visit, Rona had discussed this during our conversation in England, and we were actually experiencing the same issues in my home region, in the United States, as well. As we talked, we discovered some other unfortunate commonalities in our experiences, such as growing mental health issues within the agricultural sector and with farmers, specifically. At one point, Chloe related to us that a farmer in her neighborhood had recently killed himself, without any clear warning. She told us that the day before his death the farmer had actually ordered trees to plant in the spring. Many people in the community were in a state of shock regarding the tragedy, but Chloe noted that suicide rates were higher among farmers as compared to the rest of the population in France. One strategy the French government had tried to address this trend was giving farmers a state-sponsored vacation. The government had actually created a plan where a farmer could take two weeks off for mental health reasons and the government would send trained workers to handle their farm chores. It seemed like a good idea, but I wondered how such a thing could really be put into practice. Still, it was a good step above a mental health hotline, which was about the extent of what I'd seen offered to farmers where I lived.

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Neighborhood Chestnut Garage

At the time of our visit, Chloe and a number of other farmers and small businesses in her region were working with the French government to create a regional park and brand name for Limousin. This appellation would enable the region's producers to market their products better to other markets in France, and beyond, as well as hopefully bring in more tourist revenue. It was a rural region, with a rich agricultural and trade community, but modest in scale and income. Chloe and her partners with the regional brand campaign felt many of the region's smaller producers, in particular, would be helped by the marketing tactic. One of these operations was located in the center of Chloe's small town, where a large garage had been converted into a chestnut collection and processing facility.

All around the Limousin there are myriad chestnut groves- low, spreading plantings of chestnuts casting a deep shade over a mixed thatch of grass and other forbs. Some of these plantings are well maintained, commercial plantings, others are plots of backyardists and hobby growers. Older, abandoned plantings, often overgrown and becoming mixed forest, were evident, as well, in our journey through the countryside. We'd even noticed a number of chestnuts growing in the forest through which we'd hiked in the morning, wild planted trees that had assimilated to the area. The chestnut garage was a community resource to which all of the growers and foragers in the area could bring sacks of chestnuts they'd harvested and foraged in the fall for their own

use, or for wholesale to the chestnut concern. The facility consisted of a huller and roaster that could quickly take the raw product to a fresh, edible form. For many of the people in the region, a visit to the garage was something of an annual ritual, providing some small income as well as a good supply of a food that had been a staple in the region for generations. For the chestnut concern, itself, the market was primarily Paris, the income from which kept the operation in business.

Marco ran the chestnut garage. He was a slightly stoic, good natured man who showed us how the huller and roaster worked and encouraged us to try the fresh product. During the war, he explained, chestnuts became an especially valuable foodstuff for the region, and garages like his were crucial in keeping the community fed during that time of scarcity. The value of the business in the community, it was clear, was far beyond revenue produced. It was a community resource accessible to multiple scales of production that had supported the people in the past, and hopefully would do so into the future. At the end of the tour, Marco showed us the company's new, value-added venture, chestnut preserves, which he hoped would create a new revenue stream for the company while decreasing crop loss in storage. He was hopeful regarding the regional brand petition Chloe was helping to lead, feeling that it could help him with this product line, in particular.

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Profiles in Leadership

For our last day in Limousin, Chloe took us to two different operations that were an interesting study in contrasting leadership styles. Our first visit was to a wool mattress factory that was housed in a beautiful old barn and farmhouse. Like many of our visits in France, this company was small and guided by an artisan aesthetic. The founder had been a remarkable man, and our tour guide spoke of him with some reverence. He had originally guided every step of the process in creating his products, from farm to finished mattress and cushions. Over time, he'd developed relationships with farmers in the area, and had worked to teach them what breeds would be best for his use, and best practices for harvesting and handling the raw material. He imposed strict animal welfare demands on all his farm partners, but also offered to pay a living wage price for their product. Many of the places we'd traveled, and many of my Nuffield colleagues, had bemoaned the death of wool, even describing wool being routinely composted as the global market had suffered from the onset of synthetic fibers, in particular, but here was a small operation that was thriving, guaranteeing their farm partners living wages for their product, and selling beautiful wool cushions and mattresses within France and beyond. The waiting list of farmers who wanted to contract with the company was forty strong at the time of our visit, speaking to the willingness of the community to adopt new practices if the market is there for them.

At first, the founder of the wool company had done all the work himself, from sourcing to stitching, but as his reputation had grown a team of employees had joined him in his venture. When he retired, however, there was a panic among his team of employees. It seemed impossible for any one person to step into their mentor's shoes and so, instead, the team of

employees formed a team leadership structure to take on equal responsibility in the business, moving forward. Today, the company is a cooperative model with nine employees and three associates. Everyone has equal stake in the business, but only the associates (typically longer tenured people) can make long-term, strategic decisions for the business.

We toured the small factory. Upstairs, in a converted hayloft, bales of wool were stored. We watched through a window a man working to combine three different lengths of wool to be fed into a machine that would then fashion the batting to be used in the mattresses. The work was as much an art as a science, and was a job entrusted to only the senior members of the company's team. Downstairs, we watched a young woman, one of the newer members of the team, use a massive needle to sew on the buttons and stitch the seams of the mattresses themselves. The atmosphere was one of pride and industry, at a thoughtful, precise pace. Finally, we were led into the display shop where we could lay and sit on all kinds of beds and chairs and cushions. It was luxurious, divine, functional art.

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After the wool barn, I wasn't really looking forward to our last visit, the mustard factory. It would prove to be the largest agribusiness we visited in France, a true factory building somewhat innocuous in the rural countryside, and I figured it would be a somewhat boring tour. As usual, I was wrong.

Our host, Julian, was the chief executive for the mustard company, a slight, pleasant, unassuming man with a fine, aquiline nose. His English was decent, particularly for the French, and inside the factory's conference room he led us through a presentation on the history of the mustard company, which was nearly one hundred years old. It had been a family business for a long time, small and focused on quality. The focus for the company was still the same, but the ownership had passed to a corporate partnership group, led in part by Julian.

It was hard for me to stay focused, at first, being in a mustard factory boardroom late in the day. Julian was understated, and it was easy to doze, but the longer he spoke the more I woke up. He had a gentle power, really, that came into one, and cajoled attention. One point of particular interest was Julian describing his work in engaging local growers for the company's mustard seed. The primary purpose of this for the company was to reduce reliance on imported mustard seed, as well as to be able to more directly monitor for quality among their seed suppliers. But there was a social mission in this work, as well, recognizing growing a region, as opposed to one singular brand.

The company's networking among the local farmers hadn't been easy, at first. Although the French are known for their mustard, the crop was an older one from more bygone times, and it was unfamiliar for many of the local farms who had some time ago switched to row crops with higher margins. As a result, many of the farmers were reluctant to experiment and take on the risk of a new crop, particularly with margins as thin as they typically are on a farm. As a result, the mustard factory offered to pay each of their contracted growers a set price per hectare

which was independent of yield. This was a recruiting tool which eliminated the risk of crop failure for the farmers, and gave them a guaranteed payment that they could factor into their budget at the beginning of the year.

A number of our group were stunned and skeptical. A guaranteed payment, before they'd even planted? Wouldn't there be some cheating? Julian explained to us that the key to the whole arrangement was the personal relationship between the farmer and the mustard company. The relationship was one of trust, rather than suspicion. I'd seen a similar farmer incentive used in the USA to incentivize farmers to grow a heritage crop in a region. More than one of those farms had planted the seed and done nothing else, however, not even applying fertilizer to fields heavily cropped the year previous. Such practices virtually assured crop failure, and endangered any future contracts for farmers in the region either because the farmers were not to be trusted, or because investment in the crop from industry might disappear, due to disappointing initial returns. This kind of short term view, on the part of the growers, is a bit of cutting off the nose to spite the face, and cultures in which such practices abound typically falter. In France, or at least in the Limousin region, however, such bad faith practices would be violating a social contract that was clearly a part of the broader culture.

A culture of trust and generosity at the mustard factory was evident in other ways. All along one wall of the conference room there were photos of different charitable causes the company supported- athletic teams, charity races, food drives. One of our group asked about this obviously active aspect of the company's culture. Julian acknowledged the company's charitable works, but deferred any significant credit for them. He told us that all the causes we were seeing on the wall were projects the company's employees engaged with and led; the company merely funded them.

"It's unseemly to have too much money, as an individual or a business," he commented at this time. I asked about the comment, since I felt that the view was pretty antithetical to the dominant cultural view where I live. Julian seemed surprised by my question, and struggled to answer me for a moment. In the end, he simply said that having too much money isn't good. "If you have a lot, you should pay your employees more," he replied. "You should invest more in the company, you should give to charity..." He trailed off; it was clear he felt such a sentiment should be tacitly understood, and shouldn't have to be explained.

On the factory floor Julian was greeted by many of the factory workers, from forklift operator to quality control inspector on the conveyor belt. He shook hands with many of them, smiling and laughing at times. There was a clear relationship between him and the factory employees, and I reflected on the wool barn we'd visited earlier in the day. Similar to that much smaller operation, there was a team feel at the mustard factory, and the feeling that the business was more than simply commerce, but a community of people working together towards a common end.

The end of our tour took us to a laboratory where the various mustards were tested, and an adjoining room where formal taste testing of all the mustards was done. There they tested their

mustards against other mustards, as well as between factory batches and varieties. Julian said many people in the factory had helped with taste testing, but in reality it takes a fine nose and a certain set of qualities to be a really good taster. We asked if he ever worked as a taster. He smiled and said he did, occasionally.

“I’m not very good though,” he admitted. “I like mustard too much!” We laughed, but he was also being sincere. “Those who don’t actually like mustard,” he observed, “are often the best tasters.”

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Last Night in Paris

We left Limousin with somewhat heavy hearts. We’d enjoyed our time in France, and Chloe had done a wonderful job showing us her home region, in particular, and its many facets. On our way back to Paris, she encouraged us one last stop, a particular castle that was on the way to the city.

The castle was somewhat disappointing to me, to be honest. It was really just an old vacation home for the French elite, and had never been sieged or battled over. I suppose I’d wanted to see battle-worn ramparts and dungeons, but the architecture was unequivocally superb. As I strolled the cavernous interior, I was eventually taken by the history of the palace, and the general description of French history I found in nearly all the halls and rooms. Parsing together the narrative among the various placards in the palace, and joining them with my general impression of the France we’d encountered over the course of the week, It seemed to me that the general French culture was still powerfully influenced by their revolutions against their monarchies in the nineteenth century, as well as the Nazi invasion in WW2. Perhaps as a result of these intense periods of social upheaval, and general, collective suffering, there was also a collective resistance in the culture towards the consolidation of power into fewer and fewer hands, which included a general distrust of corporate cultures that embrace massive scales of production. This was refreshing to me. I come from a country where corporations have been granted legal “personhood”, and the postwar agricultural industry adopted the slogan “get big or get out”. Following WW2, however, the French seemed to focus more on preserving and rebuilding what had been, as opposed to conquering a new global marketplace.

We drove away from the palace to Paris. We’d been booked in a hotel out by the airport which, given Paris traffic, was a good morning flight strategy, but it also put us a half hour outside the city. We’d been in France a week, but spent virtually no time in one of the most famous and storied cities on Earth. In spite of our fatigue from a week of adventure in the country, we couldn’t resist the city of lights.

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We left the airport hotel in the early evening in our 15 person passenger van. All along the highway the plexiglass barriers, separating the congested traffic corridor from the sprawling,

urbanized landscape beyond, were heavily spray-painted and tagged. Motorcyclists and others on motorized bikes zipped through the traffic and occasionally spilled. We passed an accident of this type, though no one seemed seriously injured, or even very upset.

Entering into the city was like flowing into a river, where one could choose a path but the current would inevitably rule the course taken. We wound up in a canal district, a tributary into the Seine. The waterway was lined on either side by wide sidewalks and cafes. It was Saturday night, and people sat along the low wall above the canal and smoked and drank and played guitar and danced and kissed all along the crumbling sidewalks (and in some sense it felt as if it had all been crumbling forever, the whole concrete and stone metropolis, gradually eroding among all these currents of cyclists and poets and salesmen and drivers and life that swirled round the buildings; currents of humanity that had eroded its own creation).

No one rushes there. To try and rush there could drive one mad, but to linger, to find time (as if time were a malleable thing, and not linear at its heart, but more like roundabouts and rivers) this might allow one to recognize both the unending complexities and genius of not only the cosmic order but of the French bureaucracy, as well, and simultaneously the absurdity of both, and the life that underlies and supercedes it all like the glorious color of music. Only there did I feel the breath of the muse that once had even kissed my cheek, in Paris, who was the judge of Helen, who was the very incarnation of beauty, herself.

CONCLUSION: Strategies for a Successful Small Farm Business

The conclusions in this section are reviews of principles and insights detailed both in the preceding essays, as well as other interactions in my Nuffield travels. These insights touch on the triple bottom line concept covering the social, environmental, and economic value of a business. These bottom lines inherently overlap, and when they are synchronized in action and strategy a business (or an individual) typically succeeds.

Be Willing to Change

In the winter, when we do our crop plan for the year, the farm seems like a solvable problem, and everything generally lines up nicely with all of our social, environmental, and economic ideals. Once spring hits, though, reality sets in, and we begin the process of constant adaptation to the changing social, environmental, and market conditions with which we are met. While no business can be everything to everybody, and understanding one's identity is crucial to having a clear vision and effective decision-making, the small farm business also has to be willing to change what it is doing based on the reality they are confronting on the ground. From a regenerative standpoint, this approach allows a symbiotic relationship between the grower and the earth on which they are growing. One of the failings of modern mainstream agriculture has often been a vision of agriculture that seems to be battling the natural world to get what one wants, as opposed to working with natural forces to create shared profits and vision. In Ireland, however I found a family business that was working directly with the resources and markets available to them by innovating new technologies and enterprises that would strengthen the natural and market capital available to them. This sort of vision and strategy creates more resilience as the business broadens and diversifies itself both ecologically and economically. In the end, it is perhaps not the most efficient or specialized that endure, but rather those that are most willing to embrace diversity and change as part of their process. This truism is visible in natural systems, from a single species to ecosystem levels, and is translatable to human enterprises, as well, from small farms to global enterprises.

Consider Alternatives to Land Ownership

Traditionally, farms and properties have been passed down generation upon generation, such that in my home of Pennsylvania it's not unusual to see signs by the side of the road marking a centennial, or even bicentennial, farm. The Mennonite community near my home has been farming the same region in Pennsylvania for hundreds of years, such that the proverbial phone book for the region is fairly dominated by only a dozen or so names. With such a long term view, it's easy to see how a farm and family's assets may accrue over time, as the weight for maintenance and growth of the family business is less for each generation, at least in terms of sunk cost investments. Of course, this does not guarantee a farm success, but it certainly helps, and when a region works together with such a collective social view, the developments and pressures of a larger, changing culture and economy may be softened or even dissolved.

Following this traditional view, and a broader cultural norm, it is generally viewed that the first step towards starting a successful farm enterprise is buying land. Farming, in particular, is a land intensive enterprise. Whether you are a high technology indoor grower, or a permaculturist in the wilderness, land is required. What's not always discussed, and which may elude many beginning farmer calculations, is that acquiring land is just the beginning of your investment, and not necessarily even the biggest. What about housing? What about electricity? What about water? What about equipment? What about buildings to store said equipment?

I encountered many examples of farm businesses on leased lands throughout my travels, varying in scale from four acres of specialty vegetables to tens of thousands of hectares of specialized commodity crops. It was clear from these encounters, and my own experience, that leasing land is a viable strategy to building a successful farm enterprise, but it requires different conditions and skills than purchasing land to build a farm enterprise. As our host in Poland observed, the leased farm enterprise should focus on light, easily transported (or disposed of) investments. A good tractor can travel as needed. A good barn can not, but a modular hoop structure could. The business should be agile, flexible, and cash friendly. Debt is often necessary, but it is important to know your risk tolerance level. No matter your scale, you need to know your numbers, but perhaps even moreso with a small farm business.

Most of the best lease arrangements I observed arose when both the lessee, as well as the landlord, had a good idea of who and what they were looking for (perhaps we need a dating app for this?). I saw such an example in Cornwall, where Rona and her family fit the bill for the National Trust. Both parties involved in this instance wanted to create a family-based farm, as opposed to an absentee leaseholder, that was willing to farm with both ecologically and socially friendly practices- a farm business that was yielding both social and environmental dividends, as well as a family income. Regardless of the situation, buy-in from both parties for a singular farm vision is essential. My early mentor, Pete, lost his first lease because of the death of a matriarch, and the reality that none of the children wanted the farm, they just wanted the money the land would bring. For his second lease, Pete partnered with a boarding school nearby, working on long term leases and stewarding the old farm in a way in which both the school and Pete had agreed. Put another way, leased land situations work best when both parties involved are engaged and informed about what they want in a leasing partner, and share a somewhat unified vision as to what the farmed land will be.

Finally, no matter how light and nimble a farm business, it should be understood that significant investment will often be needed on leased land. Long term leases offer the best potential for return on investment, but it should always be understood that the land is not owned. Certain investments, like a house, may never make sense, and perhaps that reality lies very close to the inborn desire to own a piece of land: to have a home of one's own. Still, a leased farm can accrue some value to the farmer, even if the land can't be sold in the end. Pete, for instance, invested heavily in the property he leased. At the end of his land tenure, however, his business had already paid for his retirement. The income he realized from the auction he held to sell off the accrued physical assets of his operation- including his equipment, his greenhouses and high

tunnels, as well as everything in the barn he'd built but the very frame of the building itself- that was all a bonus; if not a golden parachute, then at least a very nice, silken one.

Be A Worthwhile Business

It can be easy to lose focus of the larger picture of our life for the momentary details that occupy our everyday existence. Paying attention to the larger picture, however, allows us to place our momentary decisions within a larger, more meaningful context, and so make better decisions both for the now, as well as the longer term.

Many business decisions can seem obvious when taken in isolation. At my family's farm market, for instance, we try and reduce our waste stream and recycle as best we can. Recently, however, I had a bit of expired product in glass and plastic jars, and I didn't feel I could take the time to empty the contents, clean the jars, and dispose of them properly in three different bins. Instead, I threw the lot out in the general waste bin, probably destined for the landfill a half hour away, and moved on with my unending list of tasks. In the moment, and in my own little corner of the world, this was a very easy solution. In the larger context, however, this action is problematic. If this kind of practice was emulated by everyone, all the time, it would lead to the sort of pollution issues that plague our world today, from the peak of the tallest mountain to the deepest depths of the sea (3).

Modern business culture is arguably the largest environmental issue facing the world today, and agriculture is no exception. For many decades, environmentally destructive practices have made economic sense for farm operations the world over. The environmental costs of the pollution these farms were causing were flowing downstream or up into our collective atmosphere, while the remarkable yields being realized easily covered the costs of the inputs. In the long term, of course, these costs come home to roost. For instance, nitrates from farming operations are now the most common chemical contaminant found in groundwater aquifers worldwide (4). Such costs are borne by all, including those who have caused the degradation of their commons. It can be easy to believe that one farm violating the public trust is not a big deal, but as such a business grows, the practices and culture the business embodies grow, as well, and its culture of exceptionalism begins to have a much bigger impact on society, especially when others begin to mimic it, seeing how well it works.

A business has a social responsibility to make the world a better place, or to at least not degrade our shared, collective resources, the principal one being our planet. Just because a business is worth a trillion dollars doesn't mean it's worth much. Such a business might actually be a net negative for all of us, including the owner of the corporation, who is ultimately bearing the responsibility for the suffering of multitudes.

Discussions of this sort can sometimes feel "soft" or value-laden and subjective. After all, dollars are dollars, and the balance sheet tells a very specific story, with numbers to back it up. Even environmental impacts can arguably be measured quantitatively and correlated to specific

practices and policies. Quantifying the social impact of a business can be more difficult, however, and is not something our culture has paid as much attention to. It might be argued, however, that the social impact a business has on its immediate, as well as broader communities, is the most important of all three triple bottom lines. After all, if a business profits, but the communities both near and far suffer, what are those “profits”?

In Cornwall, I was given the notion of marketing incarnating as community outreach and engagement; the notion of a farm being a place of gathering, as well as production.I learned of a farm market being influenced and designed by the customers that support it, specific to that place and culture. Such a business thrives in a way that creates a stronger community ecologically, as well as socially, and contributes to a food system accessible to all.

In France, I learned about agribusinesses working to market a region, rather than a specific, easily replicated corporate model. Again, these policies arose from a desire to not simply increase food profits, but by viewing food systems as integral parts of a larger whole, a social economic complex in which food is crucial in multiple ways.

In Ireland, I was given the insight that a business is not just about the bottom line, or even the food it grows or sells. It’s also about the relationships one creates, as well as the culture the business is embodying, and thereby creating. Farms have the ability and even responsibility to not just yield an economic profit to the farmer, but to actually create a better world for all. Some decisions made to follow this logic may not seem to maximize economic benefits for an individual business, but this fault seems to lie more in a myopic system of accounting than the truism that all our lands and waters and sky are connected, and that we invariably share in the larger impacts of our own individual decisions.

Small operations have a unique ability to capitalize on their regional identity and place within their community. These assets should be emphasized and utilized by the small farm business as differentiating factors for consumers who are choosing between local blueberries as opposed to fruit brought in from across the globe. The seasonal restrictions of such decisions, in terms of product availability, can even be a marketing tool- eat in season, support local economies. My early farm mentor Pete was not inclined to environmental practices, but the notion of the “locavore” was his prime marketing tool, along with the quality of his product.

In the end, our lives are lived beyond the confines of our business, and the deeper the positive feeling we have about the business we do, the deeper our positive impact on this world will be, this world which gave us all life and out of which we all will pass.

Increase Natural Capital

Intimately linked to social costs and benefit analysis are environmental costs and benefits. Our farms have their own communities of life that support them; are our practices working with these systems or actually working to defy them?

In nearly every country I visited, entry into the Organic market was an important strategy for at least one of the agribusinesses we toured. Sometimes, entry into the Organic market was simply a matter of finding a higher price point for a farm's product, but for most of these businesses-and for many non-Organic growers, as well- regenerative practices were of deeper interest, and Organic certification was often seen as one step along the way to a more resilient, powerful farm system. The rise of "Organic" speaks to a market in which people not only want to eat what they perceive to be healthier food, but also support practices which support a healthier natural environment, from land to water to air. The repercussions of decades- even centuries- of environmental damage from many of our conventional farming practices have both given rise to this market as well as demanded it.

In a changing climate, both environmentally and socially, farms need to be able to adapt and change to meet the resources of what's available. Crop diversity increases biodiversity, and more living systems working together in a food system provides more ability for that system to compensate when something goes wrong. GMO technologies espouse to address this, but as herbicides create more and more resistant weed strains, arguably the core mission of many of these technologies- namely to increase sales of affiliated herbicides and pesticides- becomes suspect.

Small farms, in particular, are visible in their communities, and rely on ethical practices to connect to their neighbors, who want good food but also good neighbors who aren't polluting their waterways and skies. There's a reason feedlot operations in the United States are isolated in remote areas: no one wants to live near them. It might be said that we have been living off the principle of a natural capital investment made by innumerable life forms over eons of time. As this principal has been slowly drained out of our collective natural bank account, the need to develop and realize practices of which food is but a dividend becomes essential. Technology is an essential tool in these new (and often old!) farming systems, but it is only a tool, useful only according to the abilities of the person handling it.. Our host in Poland shared with us his opinion that lab grown foods will inevitably fail, but the notion of what "regenerative" actually means is only beginning to be understood. This implies a need for farms to be open to change, to be progressive, but also to work within their natural environment to understand their niche best.

Focus on Partnerships Within and Beyond the Business

Team leadership approaches can be effective management strategies for the small business, giving more power to a team of people, including the burden that power brings. When everyone feels a part of the function and vision of the business, a solidarity develops that is much more powerful than a sole executive, alone. This is a strategy I hope to implement more at my family's own farm and market businesses.

Regional partnerships are another key strategy for many small farms and businesses. One of the highlights of my research and concurrent farm business was conceiving of the notion of collaborative competition, the posit that my small scale business can only succeed if many small

scale businesses nearby me also succeed. This includes businesses whose niche sometimes overlaps with mine, and not always at a far distance away. Understanding the benefits of similar competitors in the marketplace can create a natural culture of cooperation at a community level. When such collaborative competition occurs, there is the possibility of a communal economy of scale that might well be able to rival a corporate one. The Mennonite communities, near my home in Pennsylvania, come to mind. They are a foundational pillar within Pennsylvania agriculture, the second largest industry in the state, and hold considerable political sway. Their farmers range from conventional to Organic and regenerative, but they are all small operations compared to the global or even national scale. They are true family farms, whose lineages have tended the valleys and gentle, rolling slopes of Lancaster county for generations upon generations. They know how to care for their earth, and how to enrich her. They also support one another, as well as compete with another.

To some mindsets, it may seem counterintuitive to think the success of an overlapping business could actually help one's own, but this constellation of small farm businesses rely on one another in many ways. For one, all of these farms rely on a myriad of businesses to function, from hardware stores and electricians to plumbers and banks, seed dealers, equipment dealers, mechanics and technicians. Such a community of affiliated businesses can only survive with a community of farms to serve, and so while we may compete with our neighbor in the marketplace, we are collaborating with them and even relying on each other to create it. The trend of farm consolidation into larger and larger isolated units since WW2 in the United States has decimated agricultural communities across the country, not just reducing farm numbers but also driving out the related farm service providers, as their sales and accounts dwindle. Such consolidation impacts communities far beyond the agricultural system, as social services like schools, libraries, and fire departments begin to disappear without the population to support them.

There is also the notion that when a region develops a reputation for food, people visit the region for food, and everyone wins. The saying that a rising tide lifts all boats comes to mind. Of course, there can be too many ice cream shops or pizza joints downtown, but people don't tend to complain too much about too many small, regenerative farms in the neighborhood. Such businesses are enriching our collective natural resources while providing high quality, nutritious food to the region. This is a way in which good business communities can truly enrich an area, including but also beyond simple economics. This kind of business culture also creates a loyalty among customers, so that the region comes to shape the business, itself, just as the business shapes the region.

The process of a business finding its niche within a community is akin to a farm in which the grower's particular vision is always being altered, adjusted, and edited by the changing conditions of the world around them. There is an interaction in which we are influencing our world, and our world is influencing us; living at the nexus of those two forces is balance, synergy, symbiosis. This is the flow, or the way, as described in some traditions.

Recognize Success as a Process

How does one judge “success”? What variables are considered, and how are they weighed? At what point do you stop the clock and judge something has been completed, and so can be fairly judged at all? For the beginning farmer, or perhaps even for the experienced, success can feel a long way in the future. Recognizing one’s success in this moment, however, is paramount to realizing success, in general.

I worked with a farm apprentice once who, after three years on the farm, told me she could never be a farmer. She didn’t feel she had “what it takes” and was quite disheartened by this revelation. When I pointed out, however, that she had already been farming for years, and that she actually was a farmer, right then and there, she perceptibly brightened. The core lesson is to appreciate oneself, and to take pride in what you do. It might work over the long term, it might not, but you can always be grateful for what you are in this moment.

My family operates a small scale farm. We live close to the elements and our crops. Our work is often physically challenging and almost always economically challenging, but it rarely feels like a job. Taking care of land and water and sky, of birds and bees and rabbits and hawks, nurturing and feeding the community around us, from soil microbiota to human beings, is a privilege I have been granted and for which I am boundlessly grateful. For me, this is the feeling of success. It is a process, as opposed to a final destination, inextricably linked to the success of those around us, recognizing ourselves as part of the whole.

Recommendations

The primary recommendation for this paper, and for myself, is the application of the principles and insights gained within this project to my own farm, business, and community. In many ways, this is the most effective way I can see to disseminate the results and conclusions of this research. There are countless educated, knowledgeable, and skilled speakers on the topics discussed herein, but words and articles and books in magazines are still just ideas and notions, intellectual exercises that sound good but may cause more than one skeptical observer to wonder if any of the concepts are truly practical. The reality is the strongest statement we can make is what our actions convey; this is also the most challenging way to verify ideals as truly workable. The idea that success is in each moment, rather than a far off destination, is crucial to understanding truly regenerative principles.

At the same time, writing and talking about this research and work is certainly an important piece of the puzzle. Over the last number of years, I have written and spoken about the insights and ideas gleaned from my Nuffield experience in a variety of formats. I have been interviewed by local news media, including Lancaster Farming, the largest agricultural newspaper in my region, and posted multiple blog entries about my Nuffield research with my previous employer, Pasa Sustainable Agriculture. I have continued to write about Nuffield within the weekly newsletter my wife and I produce for our farm and market, and presented on the research this past February, at the Farming for the Future conference, a top five regenerative agriculture conference in the nation. For this presentation, I recruited three other Nuffield scholars to co-present their research, as well. I hope to continue to speak and write about this topic moving forward and plan to submit excerpts of this paper to both Lancaster Farming as well as other sustainable agricultural publications, such as Orion (an eco-conscious print magazine) and Civil Eats (digital news media site covering food and agriculture).

Broader recommendations of this research include policy work at local, regional, and national levels that emphasize the development and support of small scale agricultural enterprises and resilient, locally-based economies. In my home state of Pennsylvania, for instance, the development of a state farm bill, mirroring the national farm bill in the USA but prioritizing Pennsylvania-specific enterprises, is a policy initiative which should be supported, studied, and probably emulated by other states in the USA, allowing communities everywhere to work towards realizing food security in their own neighborhoods and regions. This process can create a stable national foundation of resilient, regenerative agriculture that can both provide successful entry into global markets, as well insulation against global market disruptions.

In the modern era, manufacturing has often been seen as the key to economic revitalization in depressed, typically rural regions. Such enterprises are typically owned by large, multinational corporations, however, that have little ties to the communities in which they exist, and are driven more by a global bottomline than a view of local prosperity. Small farms, however, rely on successful networks of interdependent businesses and social institutions, as well as local

communities, to thrive and succeed. Viewing the development and restoration of local and regional food-based economies as a key to both rural and urban revitalization can effectively decrease food insecurity, natural resource degradation, and economic poverty in ways that a brand new warehouse district or data center, for instance, simply cannot. This sort of holistic landscape and social management view is akin to the ethos of regenerative agriculture in general, an agriculture that is not only serving to produce healthy food, but also to produce a broader social and environmental health from which all beings benefit, as opposed to simply benefitting shareholders in some distant locale. From a more radical perspective, private land ownership itself might be questioned, particularly in ecologically sensitive areas, and farmers might be reclassified as land stewards rather than producers, and our collective natural resources might be recognized as assets shared by all life on this planet, as opposed to simply the party that owns the rights to a particular parcel of land. In a consistently growing world population, connected to a decreasing global natural resource base, a larger view towards overall environmental health and wealth is recommended towards a brighter, more prosperous future.

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Appendix

Recurring themes across visits/encounters described in text

ARGENTINA: Know Your Place

- direct market as a hedge
- Leased land
- Understanding context to understand actions
- Organic market

IRELAND: Core Values

- local and global,
- social aspects of a business
- honoring place
- respecting lineage
- Corporate culture- not always the bottom line
- Slow Food

USA: American Truck Farm

- Local, scale profitability
- Honoring place
- Leased land
- Regenerative practices
- Organic market
- Transitioning from founder

ENGLAND: English Farm Shop

- Local, scale profitability
- Honoring place
- Leased land
- Regenerative practices
- Organic market

POLAND: Superior Farm

- Regional scale, profitability
- Leased land
- Regenerative practices
- Organic market
- Transitioning from founder
- Team Leadership

IRELAND: Family Business

- Multiple scales, profitability
- Organic market
- Team Leadership
- Family business
- Corporate culture

BELIZE: Carlos and the Chocolate Factory

- Scale, profitability
- Organic market
- Resilience through multiple crops and markets
- Regenerative practices

FRANCE: French Connections

- Arrival in Paris
  - Culture
- Vigneron and Vintner
  - Scale profitability
  - Regenerative practices
  - Honoring place
  - Local, direct market
  - Changing climate
  - Pros and cons of the regional brand
  - Culture of generosity, of social custom
- The Cooperative Spirit
  - Corporate culture, national culture
  - Scale profitability
- Slow Food
  - Culture
- The New Regional Park in Limousin
  - Mental health
  - Community
- Neighborhood Chestnut Garage
  - Community
- Profiles in Leadership
  - Leadership
  - Corporate Culture
  - Local farm partnerships
  - Transitioning from founder
  - Team Leadership
  - Local farm partnerships
  - Regenerative practices (animal welfare)
- Last Night in Paris
  - Culture