



## **Field of Plenty**

**A Farmer's Journey to the Frontiers of American Agriculture  
by Michael Ableman**

*The only thing small scale about Fairview Gardens is the acreage it occupies. On just twelve and a half acres, this organic farm produces over one hundred different fruits and vegetables, feeds over 500 families, employs more than 20 people, and hosts as many as 5,000 people per year for tours, classes, festivals, and apprenticeships. Michael Ableman farmed at Fairview Gardens from 1981 to 2001. Under his leadership the farm was saved from development and was preserved under one of the earliest and most unique active agricultural conservation easements of its type in the country.*

**Michael Ableman:**

**Close to 35 years ago I joined a commune in southern California that was based on agrarian principles. We had three different parcels of land totaling some 4,000 acres on which we raised row crops, orchards, operated a complete cow and goat dairy, and produced grain and fiber. We supplied our own natural food stores, bakery, juice factory, and restaurant, as well as feeding ourselves. We even made our own clothing, backpacks and shoes. After only four months living in that community, I was given the responsibility of managing the 100 acre pear and apple orchard located in a high desert valley east of**

Ojai, California. At the time, this was just one of a handful of commercial orchards in the country that was farmed organically.

And here I was, at the age of 18, with no orcharding experience, having never managed anything, directing a crew of 30 people, most of whom were older than I. The orchard had been abandoned for 15 years. The branches between the trees had become so intertwined that you couldn't find the alleys down the middles of the rows. I had a 1930s copy of *Modern Fruit Science*, the journal from the guy who ran the place the year before and gave up in frustration, and a copy of Goethe's famous quote "Whatever you can do or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power and magic in it." attached to the door of my 20-foot unheated trailer.

Now, this could have ended up really bad, and under most similar situations, I probably would have ended up working in some high-rise office building. But there was something that took place down those rows of apple and pear trees, something very different than what is happening in most agricultural fields and orchards in North America. I went to work each day with 30 of my friends, and while we worked we joked, and we talked, and we discussed our dreams. We tried out our latest theories and philosophies on each other, speculated on the fate of the Earth, and ate our lunch together under the shade of the trees. In the winter, we pruned every day for four months straight. In the spring we thinned fruit. And in the fall it was a ten-week harvest marathon. It was repetitive work, but at the end of each day, instead of feeling I had been chained to some mind numbing drudgery, I felt like I had attended an all day party.

The work got done, the orchard thrived, and those apples and pears gained a reputation around the country. And while the cold nights and hot days of that high desert provided ideal growing conditions, I

am sure that that fruit was equally infused with the energy of that group of people, and the pleasure they found in each other and in that land. Now this was my introduction to agriculture. This community experience has informed all of my agricultural endeavors since. It demonstrated that good food is more than just about the confluence of technique and fertile soil, that it is the result of men and women who love their land, and who bring great passion to working with it. That experience was my preview into the new agrarian movement that is now sweeping the country.

It is a movement that I believe embodies many of the most critical and crucial elements of a healthy society: reverence, mystery, humility, ecology in its wider sense, and community. For a long time I wanted to pick up the thread from where I worked on my first book, and visit and write about and photograph this movement. Tell the good story.

We went to see folks who are happily married to a place, many of them master farmers and innovators, their farms incubators for the new agriculture. Folks who are demonstrating that farming is not just some lowly form of drudgery, but that it is an art and craft and an honorable profession. I'd like to very briefly introduce you to just a few of these folks. I'd like you to see their faces and to hear their story. And these images and narrative are excerpted from my new book, *Fields of Plenty*

Richard Dewilde and his partner Linda farm a couple of hours outside of Madison, Wisconsin. Richard drives us around in his Chevy pickup to check out some of the 39 fields of vegetables that are scattered around the valley. There is a case of 30-odd eight Springfield, silver-tipped rifle cartridges sitting next to the four wheel drive shift, a bag of tobacco and some rolling papers, and a single cipollini onion sitting on the seat. I don't normally get all gaga about kale, but the field we're looking at is as deep a green as

anything I've ever seen. Not the kind of artificially pumped up rank green that comes from too much ammonium nitrate or urea. This one is deep, and blue, and forest like.

The plants are vibrant and well formed, with huge turgid leaves, each plant standing up straight as if they'd been told to pose for my cameras. Richard tells me he gets snapshots in the mail of someone's kid eating a piece of their squash, or corn, or a carrot. There is an enclosed note that says, "This is Johnny's first meal." 18 years later and they're providing the food for Johnny's wedding. At the market his customers will introduce their kids to our farmer. There are these beaming kids standing there that have been raised on his food.

Born in Idaho, raised in potato fields, Gene Theil comes from four generations of root people. Ask any chef or farmer's market regular in Portland, Oregon where they get their potatoes, and they'll tell you matter-of-factly, "From the potato man." Theil farms at 4,600 feet in the mountains of eastern Oregon, taking advantage of a perfect convergence of ideal potato conditions, a blend of high elevation, deep glacial soils, clean and abundant fresh water and low humidity. "It's rewarding to go to restaurants and markets and find people who really appreciate what you're growing," Gene reflects. It's fundamental. We need that sustenance, that connection, that completion. When you produce a product and they see its value, it's like searing truth. They taste that truth. It's the ultimate compliment.

Everything at Strafford Dairy in Vermont is run on gravity. The milk moves downhill from the milking barn, to the cooling tanks, then on to the bottling and ice cream rooms without the use of a single pump. When the pasture was cleared, trees were left strategically so that as the shade moves across the pasture, so will the cows. At first I marvel at these simple innovations, then I realize it doesn't exactly

require a masters degree in industrial design to figure out that using gravity is a good idea or that trees provide shade and the cows will follow. It's just that so much of agriculture has lost any relationship to common sense. We've got this idea that things need to be complicated to be any good—that simple solutions can't possibly as good as technological ones.

Earl Ransom runs the 30-cow Guernsey dairy herd, selling milk in glass bottles, just like the milkman used to drop off at my house when I was growing up. The farm also produces premium ice cream made with the eggs from older brother Barry. "Of all the things I'd like to give my boys, I want them to be able to die as old men on this land," Earl's wife Amy tells me. "I also want them to be respectful. I want to make pickles. And I want to personally eliminate all the flies from this farm with my swatter."

Jennifer Green farms alone, producing 30 different grains with a team of horses. She does her own milling, and produces pancake mixes, and polentas, and breakfast cereals, which she provides to the 200 families in San Francisco who are members in her grain share program. We often agonize over the quality of our vegetables or fruit, wax eloquently over cheese or wine, but accept flowers, edible seeds and cereals that are rarely fresh and come from a limited diversity of plants. Jennifer's 30 acre canvas is filled with one-third to one-half acre plots of amaranth, barely, millet, teff, heirloom wheats, blue and yellow popcorns, garbanzos, lentils and fava beans, pumpkins, sunflower, and poppy seeds, all merging and mingling together.

In the spring before our visit, the pear and apple trees on Bob and Eileen and Selena Lane's place were loaded with fruit. Special attention was paid to the orchard to pest and disease control, to summer pruning, and to the very time consuming, expensive job of fruit thinning. By late July, the Lanes were

preparing for the largest crop they had ever had, and doing as most of us would, quietly planning on what they would do with the much needed extra income. Tuesday, July 26<sup>th</sup>, was clear and sunny and hot. Work had wrapped up early and the small crew was hanging out talking near the house. There was a distant rumbling and a mellow thunderstorm began. Then the sky turned black, the temperature plummeted 30 degrees and lighting came down in sheets. At 3:15 the hail came. Large hail. Hail up to a half-inch in diameter. Exactly thirteen minutes later the hail stopped, the sky cleared, the sun came out and the Lane's fruit crop was destroyed.

Eli Zabar is not a farmer, he is a successful baker and retailer with several stores in Manhattan that feature products from his own kitchens, bakeries, and now from over half an acre of their own rooftop gardens. These gardens aren't just some passing novelty trial experience. Zabar invested in installing steel beam reinforcements for the rooftops above his bakeries, where pipes carry the spent heat from the ovens into the greenhouses. Winter tomatoes and salad greens are produced by two full-time rooftop farmers.

Ask anyone in northern Wisconsin what to grow and they'll likely tell you milk cows or corn. No one would ever suggest sheep, and if they did it most certainly would not be for milk or cheese. So when Mary and David Falk launched their sheep dairy operation, their neighbors though they had lost their minds. This ain't no high tech, heavily capitalized dairy operation. From the Orv's pizza truck-turned cooler, to the homemade milking platform, everything has been patched and pieced and thrown together. The cheese is truly adventurous, wrapped in vodka soaked nettles, aged on cedar boughs. If you've been raised in white-bred America, eating individually wrapped, sliced Swiss and orange cheddar singles, you'll probably think twice if you saw the Falk's cheese. Brown and crusty, with ruts and holes,

blue and white with brown streaks, covered in leaves, they look like some bad experiment gone awry. Mary's own mother told her they looked like moldy horse turds. But their customers seek out their classic homely and ugly look, and the cheeses have won numerous national awards.

Farmer John Thurman chuckles as he tells me, "We're sure not keeping up with the Jones," nodding towards the three rusting 20 foot trailers that house him and his wife Ida and their 7 children. At night we gather outside to talk. I take out one of my harmonicas to entertain the kids and begin to blow a slow blues in the key of G. Ida rolls her eyes with pleasure when I play the final note. She tells me it reminds her of her roots in Mississippi, when the old timers used to sit around telling stories and playing music. Considering the poverty that exists here, I am amazed to discover how much of John and Ida's time and energy goes into community projects. Teaching local youth how to grow food, providing fresh vegetables to seniors, organizing a black farmers cooperative. John describes the farm as "nothing special," just a group of hard working people trying to make something beautiful. Each week, John and Ida and their kids trek into Chicago to sell collards, and sweet potatoes, and beans, and melons, and pasture raised chicken to the all black Austin farmers market, in a neighborhood that does not have a single grocery store.

Ken Dunn farms in the city of Chicago in the shadow of Cabrini Green, the 16-story, prison styled, wired covered housing project, built in the '50s to warehouse the city's poor and unemployed. Dunn's two one-acre plots boast 30 varieties of heirloom tomatoes striped German, brandywine, green zebra, black Russian—growing in the composted remains of rejected apple and cherry pie filling, and the uneaten arugula salads and filet mignons from local, high end restaurants. Five tons of compost made from Chicago's waste has been laid down over this site—just a fraction of the 15,000 tons of urban waste that

is disposed of in this city each and every day. The ground feels like a sponge, and if I close my eyes and plug my ears it would feel as if I was walking on the floor of some virgin forest. The tomatoes don't seem to mind the constant noise or bad air, or the poverty that surrounds their little island. The plants are tall, and robust, and absolutely loaded. Their world is rich in nutrients, reflected warmth and light from pavement and buildings, and the attentions given to them by local chefs who are thrilled to tell their clientele that the tomatoes on the menu were harvested down the street.

Elario Álvarez slipped over the border into the U.S. 20 years ago to work in America's fields. He had nothing. Now he owns his own farm and employs over 100 people. Álvarez's pepper field is like an out of control block party. Eighty-five varieties, many of his own selections, are thrown together in an 8-acre burlesque of color and shape. There is humor in this field—a former migrant statesman on the ultra-linear, mono-cultural, totally predictable fields of America's industrial agriculture. I tell Elario he is crazy, that I've never seen anything like this before; that he should quit harvesting peppers and open the field up as a seasonal museum. I imagine docents giving tours, stopping along the rows to discuss the history and culture and use of certain varieties; the arrangement of color and shape; what the farmer was going through in his life when he planted this section or that; as if they are standing at the Metropolitan Museum of Art analyzing a Matisse or a Van Gogh.

George and Anna Zebroff are Russian Doukhobor fruit farmers in British Columbia. As we are preparing to leave, George pulls me aside. "You have eaten our apricots fresh and dried. You drank our apricot nectar, and even tried the kernels, but there is one thing left." There is a slightly mischievous tone in his voice as he guides me to the front of the house. There on the stump of a cherry tree, now used as a table, is a bucket of fresh, warm goat's milk, a small container of amber honey, a few spoons and



glasses, and a tall glass bottle filled with a clear liquid. This, he tells me, is apricot elixir. There is ritual to all of this. In Russian, he asks his young grandson to demonstrate. With a spoonful of honey in one hand, and a glass of warm milk in another, the young boy alternates back and forth. Then comes the elixir. George mixes it with goats' milk and we toast. It is a powerful drink, but it goes down easy. He pours another and we drink again. I protest when he offers me a shot without the milk.

John Thurman, who you met in these slides, told me, "If you have farmed you can run the world." I thought about that and about what it means to be a leader, and I realized how few leaders there really are. We've got plenty of managers and legislators, actors and dictators, and manipulators, but I'm talking about leaders. Folks that have compassion, respect for diversity, creative vision, and understanding of our true place in nature. I wonder how it happened that lies, and deception, and obfuscation, greed and thievery and murder, could have become the dominant characteristics required for government office.

So who are we going to be able to seek out to guide a society that has become so completely disconnected from the natural world, from the most fundamental necessities such as food and water? What will happen if there are more Katrina's? What will happen when the oil runs out? I think John Thurman may be right. In a time when our primary connection tools are the computer and the cell phone, those who have maintained an intimate connection with the land, whose daily work is inextricably connected to biology and botany and animal husbandry—those who know how to restore and nurture soil, care for animals, coax food from the earth—may become very important to all of us.

The hysteria over arugula or heirloom tomatoes, the explosion of farmer's markets, the desire to meet face to face each week with the person who grew your nourishment, goes deeper than the food. It may just be part of a desperate longing to have some connection to the real world. And I've watched chefs receive mythical rock and roll status. I think its time that farmers receive that same attention. So I strongly encourage each of you to make friends with a farmer. You're going to need them. For I am certain, as the current global industrial experiment—and that it is—comes apart, our society will once again have agriculture at its center.

This past spring I took my three-year-old son Benjamin out to a friend's cabin located on the west coast of Vancouver Island. We left the farm and hopped on the ferry in good spirits, the guys out for a little three-day adventure. What I didn't realize was that to get there required driving through a huge, relatively fresh, clear cut. Now, I've seen a lot of ecological devastation, but there is nothing quite so exemplary of human's most destructive ways as a rich, diverse, life giving, oxygen producing forest, reduced to vast fields of stumps, brush, and eroding soil. The emotional impact of being in the middle of such a thing for an extended period of time is overwhelming. And little Benjamin was glued to the scene, looking out the windows of the truck with the most heartbreaking look of horror and dismay. I felt like I had just unknowingly taken my young son to see a really violent film. And when it came time to drive home after our little retreat, he cried, he pleaded with me, not to drive back the same way we had come. Now "why" is a word that you hear a lot with a three-year-old, but there was a new persistence to Benjamin's "why" after our experience that day, and my responses could not satisfy. I find myself asking "why" a lot these days as well, but I cannot find answers when my questions stray too far beyond my own land and the community in which I live. "Why" is a word we should all be asking of ourselves and of those who claim to be our leaders.

**What if after the events of 9-11, America had asked “why” instead of “who?” What if we could ask “why” in regards to the recent hurricane? As we bear witness to the disappearance of nature and the disconnection of the society from it, we also see an increase in confusion, and extreme lack of compassion and understanding for how to take care of each other and for our world, a loss of understanding in regards to cause and effect. It takes a real conscious effort to rise above the propaganda and the lies, the litany of misdirected questions. Step out of the confusion, and be like little Benjamin. Come back into our beginner’s mind, to our sense of childlike wonder, and start asking “why” as honestly, freshly and as persistently as a three-year-old.**

**I believe that to deal with the great unraveling that is taking place around us, we’ve got to come back home, immerse ourselves in that which goes on in our own back yards, and in our own communities, and on the land that we farm. We can feel paralyzed by the broader world scene, but we have enormous power in and around the places where we live. It doesn’t really matter what the issue is: energy, water, food, waste, transportation, or even that pervasive sense of loneliness or disconnection that so many folks are feeling. When you focus your attention on the local world in which you live, when you come back home, real change is possible.**

**In a speech I gave at this conference just after 9-11, I proposed that we build an urban farm at the site of the World Trade Center—that it could become a model of local economy where once only the global was represented. It would demonstrate that Americans are not just about revenge, but that we could grow life and nourishment out of the ashes of violence and destruction. We even submitted this outrageous proposal to the World Trade Center design contest, but like many ideas for the rebuilding, this one was given some good press then pushed aside in favor of 1776 stories of glass and cold steel.**

Here we are again, less than two months after another U.S. disaster. The president and his cronies, purveyors of chaos that they are, are poised to make billions off the rebuilding effort. A flotilla of bulldozers is now being assembled to raze acres of what was once the home to thousands of folks who are now scattered across the country in a modern day diaspora. A disaster? Yes, absolutely. But also an unprecedented opportunity, a blank canvas, another chance to rebuild a city that could embody all the most thoughtful and visionary social and ecological design components. Imagine how many people could be employed, how many could be fed if the reconstruction included farms at the center of each neighborhood. There is enough land there to supply every New Orleans school lunch, every hotel and restaurant, nourish every household in that city. Our arrogance, our wholesale disconnection from the natural world, our belief that somehow we are in control, keeps us from recognizing the most fundamental law of nature, the one that every good farmer is bound by—what we sow is what we reap; for every action there is a reaction; cause and effect. It is the law and none of us are immune to it. At every turn, in each moment with each change in our lives and on the broader world stage, we must bring forth the hopeful and positive alternatives and models.

No matter how outrageous, no matter how ridiculous we may appear, we must gently and creatively and persistently repeat and remind and demonstrate, that a new world is possible. A new world is possible. A new world is possible.