

## Profile: Rolling In Dough

*Profile of a Helga Gregory, the manager of a large organic bakery. (Names of people and places have been changed.)*

How does someone born and raised in a small city thirty kilometers from Frankfurt, Germany, end up as the co-manager of an organic bakery on a bio-dynamic farm in upstate New York? It's an intriguing tale—one of determination, courage, travel, and excitement—one that could easily play out in a novel or a movie screen. Instead, however, this intricate biography is that of Helga Gregory, ABC Farm's admired and adored baker and manager.

There was not a trace of agricultural life in Helga's childhood. She and her sister grew up in central Germany, where their experiences were urban, not rural, and where, for thirteen years, she attended the local Waldorf school.

Like many children and young adults, when the question "What do you want to be when you grow up?" was posed, she gave responses that spanned the gamut. When the main lesson in school was archeology; she wanted to be an archeologist; when she studied chemistry, it was in a laboratory that she wanted a career. From geography to politics to physics to art, a variety of professions beckoned her. (The only subject that didn't induce excitement for a vocation was math!) But when she expressed an interest to follow in her father's footsteps as an art historian, his words of advice were, "Do anything, but don't do that!"

So with no clear decision in her mind as to her future, Helga, between her 11th and 12th school years, took off to spend a summer with a classmate whose musician grandparents lived on a farm. Helga and her pal were both part of a string quartet, so there was strong appeal to spending a few weeks with them. In order to help earn their keep, the girls were asked to help out in the garden, and Helga quickly found a connection to the land. In fact, she distinctly recalls the very day that she made the resolution that she wanted to commit to doing something *for* biodynamic farming: she was up early in the morning, working in the garden, and saw the sun rising up behind the fir trees, just starting to spread its glow into the narrow Bavarian valley. She was hooked!

At the same time Helga and her friend were at this farm, one of the girl's uncles came home for a visit. Her uncle worked for a Waldorf school,

leading the farming practicum on a biodynamic farm in another part of the country. Amongst subjects discussed at the dinner table was the transformation of his city-dwelling students from high heel-wearing, painted fingernail-sporting, and dirt-shy to shovel-toting and soil-digging. These reported mutations were not lost on Helga, who was experiencing her own metamorphosis, and although she was certain about the direction in life she wanted to pursue, she was uncertain as to how or where to do so.

After that summer farming, Helga finished her 12th and 13th years of schooling, concentrating on subjects geared toward agriculture and biology, with the intent of taking exams that would allow her to attend an institution of higher learning that offered these specializations. Throughout this period, she continued to be impressed by the connection between farming and education.

Taking a breather before going to college, Helga cooked at a boarding school for six months. To fill out the year before starting school, she decided to serve three months as an intern on a farm, since she would be required to do this either prior to or during her attendance at the university. The farm at which she wanted to serve was already established in her mind: the one where her friend's uncle had taken his Waldorf classes.

At this family-owned farm, Helga and two of the daughters did some unusual physical work, especially in an era when young women in farming was an anomaly. In the course of the demanding labor, Helga damaged a nerve, which led her to seek help from a physician whose husband, Dr. Nikolaus R e m e r, was a researcher, scientist, and "guru of biodynamic farming in northern Germany." The couple held daily anthroposophy study sessions, to which Helga was invited. Doing so turned out to be a pivotal point in her life, as the learned gentleman strongly posited that there was no sense in having someone try to teach biodynamic farming without actually having *done* it for at least a full year's cycle. In other words, actual *experience* was crucial to teaching.

So much for Helga's desire to take the scientific, studious approach to her goal of merging education and agriculture! To the dismay of her parents, who "were flattened" by the news, Helga passed on the route of higher [college] education and opted for an apprenticeship. The required three years of such, under the country's educational regulations, were shortened to two because of her college-entry background. The first of the two years was spent in Germany, the second in

Austria.

Although they are accustomed to seeing female apprentices at ABC, when Helga served her term as one in Germany, there were very few women in the ranks. In fact, she was one of the very first females in the 1970s to come out of the city wanting to learn about farming. Earlier in Germany, around 1959, there had been a great migration of farmers who fled the countryside to move to the cities, leaving the farms nearly deserted. Not until about 10 years later—when Helga was looking to find her way in the world—was there a resurgence of interest in agriculture. This pioneering spirit and chosen path made Helga quite well known in the farming/educational circles of the country.... a bit of a "celebrity" came to the modest young woman.

Again, a personal encounter with someone "unexpected" unfolded another chapter in the book of Helga's life. Discussions with a student from Elliot College (England), who was helping on the farm where she worked in Austria, brought to the forefront the heretofore still-simmering desire to support biodynamic farming through an educational role. Hence, off to Elliot College to go through the [Waldorf] teacher's training curriculum. There, she met the American who would, before the program was over, become her husband.

The young couple moved to Frankfort upon completion of their studies, with Mr. Gregory taking a position as a teacher at the Waldorf school Helga had attended as a child. For a variety of reasons, the pair left the city and the classroom so that he could work as an apprentice on a biodynamic farm. A vivid image is painted as Helga describes it, the focal point of which was a 1000-year-old castle, complete with turrets, drawbridge, moat, and foot-thick stone walls. To complete the picture, a dictatorial baron owned the estate and lorded over it and the workers like a feudal nobleman from medi-aeval times. Farmers—including Helga and her husband—were provided with meager housing and a pittance of a salary. So along with more farming skills, Helga "learned a valuable lesson on how not to deal with people."

The next step in the hopscotch of their lives led the Gregorys to the United States. The two most appealing teaching job offers for Mr.

Gregory were in Vancouver and New York; specifically, for the latter, Pine Ridge School in Our Town, which was not un-familiar to the duo, as it was an oft-spoken name in the halls of Elliot College. It was Our Town that tugged at Helga's strings of desire, as she still had a strong urge to meld agriculture and education. Here, perhaps was where she could do so.

Eschewing plane travel for the baby that was born into the Gregory household, Helga and her husband took a boat trip across the Atlantic. A fellow passenger, unbeknownst to them before launching, was Emory Black, whom they knew from Elliot College and who was returning to New York after a number of years in Europe.

When the young family arrived at midnight to their new home in Our Town, the tinkling of the cow bells in the adjacent fields warmed Helga's heart, and she recalls that she immediately felt, "this is where we should be!"

While her husband taught at Pine Ridge School and sold cheese for ABC Farm, (part of the school) Helga helped on the farm, guiding children at the ABC Camp with their chores.

Meanwhile, the cook at the Camp, during the less hectic times off year, was baking bread to take to the famous Farmers' Market in New York City. Unlike today's vast variety of available breads, then there were only two kinds offered: whole wheat and light wheat, both of which were made with grains grown for the cows. When the demand for breads increased and the Camp cook was called back to his duties there, Helga's husband took, over the farm's baking. Eventually, he opened his own bakery in the small town just a few miles down the road.

Back then, the options for store-bought bread were very limited: basically, there were just "Wonderbread-type" loaves for purchase. To get a wholesome alternative, you had to bake your own, which many women in this area did. Imagine, then, how thrilled they were to have ready access to fresh, whole-grain breads, without having to make it themselves.

While her husband baked away in the neighboring community, Helga tended their four acres of land, vegetable garden, and assorted animals. Using *The Joy of Cooking* as

her guide, she—with no prior baking experience—also helped Mr. Gregory turn out luscious stollens, Danish, and assorted pastries. This seat-of-her-pants learning would serve her well in the future.... but there were still a few more twists and turns in the circuitous path that lead her to her current post.

After a divorce from her husband, Helga and her three daughters relocated to Germany, returning to her long-desired idea of combining education with a reverence for and experiencing of the land. However, this was still not the period in Helga's life for moss to begin growing under her feet, as after two years of working with children as a volunteer in a school garden, Helga was approached by one of the two women on the family farm with whom she had worked earlier.

The woman, her brother, and their respective spouses were assuming the reins of their 40-year old, biodynamic farm, which was taken out of family ownership and placed in a trust. In order to do this, the group, which included Helga, had to establish a sound business plan, which required valid concepts for the future of the place. They developed a strategy to strengthen the already existing, although somewhat run-down, vegetable, cheese, sheep, bakery, and wholesale market components of the farm.

An earlier mentor—the same physician who told her that actual experience surpassed book-learning—stressed that the survival of biodynamic farming would be in value-adding and direct marketing (this still holds true today!), so the five charted a course with this in mind.

While parceling out the roles to be filled, it ended up that everyone involved decided what they wanted to do.... but no one wanted to take on the once-weekly baking, mostly because, at that time, people went to the local breadmaker for bread; few made it themselves or had an idea about how to do so. Further, the chore of home bread-baking, which was predominantly the province of farm women, was lost when the farmers left for the cities in the 1950s farm exodus. Who, then, to take this on? Heads turned to Helga, since, after all, she had been married to a baker!

Armed with little experience but a great deal of resolve, Helga entered the school of learn-on-

the--fly, being especially tested by the wood-burning oven and a schedule that needed to be sympathetic to the needs of her children. With the passing of time, a strict German baking apprenticeship, and a few scorched loaves under her belt, Helga became increasingly involved with and enamored of bread-baking. In particular, the wood oven fascinated her and was a constant source of both challenges and rewards. The combination of the "prima donna" sourdoughs and the dynamic, ever-changing oven brought a sense of "working with something living" to the now-committed baker. (Throughout the 14 years she used it, Helga remained captivated by the wood oven and the process of baking with it.) Creating loaves was an art that required an intimate relationship with the oven and the dough and all the many variables (wood type, age, size; weather conditions; grains and ingredi-ents, for example). No two batches, fires, or doughs were ever the same.

To successfully work with a wood oven required the ability to "leave your private self outside; if you could [do that], you would have a good day; the oven educated you." The requisite intense attention wasn't compatible with daydreaming or an else-wise burdened mind. Observation, patience, planning, focus, and a sense of timing were the key ingredients of and the strengths developed through this old method of bread making. The gifts bestowed by the work were the gaining of a love and respect for grain and the land it is grown on and for the [baking] profession.

Sales of the farm's original, sole variety of bread flourished at the weekly market, so much so that, under Helga's capable supervision, the bakery soon grew to a staff of three people that worked 5 days per week, making 14-15 kinds ("everything but ice cream cake!"). If there were a downside to such proliferation, it was that this increase in the bakery department's size and relative status on the farm collided with new regulations regarding allowable business run through such agricultural initiatives (and the consequent tax implications). In order to maintain its farm status and tax classification, it was required that there be a master baker on site; further, a master baker was required in order to take on apprentices.

A life-long student and lover of learning, Helga was eager to pursue this higher education in a field in which she was very happy. It took a bit

of sacrifice and a good dose of ironing out logistics, but she was able to go to Dresden to complete a program there. The time spent training also provided the opportunity for Helga to reassess what she wanted to do with her life. By then, there were many biodynamic farms in Germany and lots of bakeries; her children were grown, and she had a strong desire to "give and pass on" the knowledge she had gained. Perhaps a change was in order.

Just before finishing her course, a friend of hers (who lives in Our Town) told her about an opening in ABC Farm's bakery. While this prospect frolicked in the back of her mind, Helga returned to the farm in Germany. However, soon she had the sense that it "just wasn't right," and she felt a pull to return to the United States. In the summer of 2000, she came here to visit, and a couple of months later, she informed the farm in Germany that she would be leaving for New York in the summer of 2001.

In a nutshell, when she landed in Our Town, "everything fell into place, and the whole time after, everything felt right!" Helga is now helping to support a bio-dynamic farm, which was what she has wanted to do since she was a young girl. As for the future of ABC's bakery, Helga hopes that education will take a strong stand in it: through working in an expanded way with the Camp, through various area schools, and perhaps by having a training bakery there. However it is done, Helga has lived the importance of having "education happen in the real world," versus solely in a teaching kitchen, and of having students experience education out of their work.

Helga brought to ABC not just her amazing baking expertise (which is very impressive!), but she also offers freely her valuable life skills and perceptive views and opinions. She helps feed and nourish the bodies and souls of all those who have the pleasure of knowing her. We hope that her stay in the United State fills many volumes of her life's story!

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