

Profile: Have You Herd?

In this edition's profile, we introduce you to Peter Winter, who joined ABC Farm in December 2003. Come September, he will assume the role of Farm Herdsman, taking over the post held now by Cathy Jones, who is stepping aside from the Farm for a while to raise her family. Peter brings a wealth of experience, learned and practical knowledge, a sturdy back, and a hearty laugh with him as he makes the transition to working here in this new capacity. (Names of people and places have been changed.)

With his long, easy gait, tall stature, and athletic frame, it takes no stretch of the imagination to see Peter Winter's foot-trapping a soccer ball, heading toward the opposing team's goalie. But this former college sports star has traded grassy fields for, well, grassy fields: only instead of racing up and down them in cleated shoes, he now creeps along them atop a haying tractor; instead of jostling and hustling with a small crowd of two-legged creatures (men) between goal boxes, he quietly moves amongst four-legged animals that peacefully plod within fence posts. And although Peter might not have much opportunity to kick around the black and white orb these days, many of the skills and attributes he developed while excelling at soccer will serve him—and ABC Farm—well as he steps into the role of the Farm's herdsman this September. Cooperation and collaboration, joint efforts, team unity, a strong work ethic, and a reveling in a physically demanding routine helped Peter to be an outstanding member of his college's squad, and they certainly will be gainfully employed as he takes on this position here.

Peter's childhood years weren't spent on a farm, nor did he grow up in a city. For that matter, he can't claim as home a suburb or the country.... nor a small town or urban sprawl, a broad, tree-lined avenue of Colonial homes or a narrow, crowded street of brick townhouses. The son of two teachers, Peter had the uncommon experience of growing up in a boarding school environment (three, actually: in California; Connecticut, and Rhode Island). During his upbringing, Peter spent all his years in student dormitories; in fact, it wasn't until he was a high school senior that his parents moved into their first house. His backyard and playground were the school grounds, and his friends were those who also lived within the school community.

From the time he was a youth, sports and athletic

endeavors were an integral part of Peter's life and were eagerly pursued, both casually with friends and through his schools' teams. Concurrent with this, and following in the footsteps of his Latin-teaching father, Peter developed an interest in Latin and the classics, and for some time it seemed that a combination of these pursuits would shape his college and career tracks.

So how did a ball-kicking, Latin-reading, Russia-visiting, liberal-arts-leaning guy end up being a herdsman on a biodynamic farm in rural New York? The foundation for the answer lies in one of the programs at the Mountain Ridge School (MRS), where his parents were teachers (and still are today) and he studied during his high school years. Since the school's founding in 1879, it has had a work curriculum for all students, requiring them to contribute their time and energy to the school in order to assist in its running and, more importantly, to gain an understanding of the worth of labor. Students have the option of working in a wide variety of fields, from cleaning and cooking to office and science lab tasks.

For about three dozen students each year, there is an opportunity to discharge this obligation in a rather extraordinary manner—through the MRS farm program. A small, diversified farm is a key part of the institution, and students are a key part of the farm. Crops grown include apples, pumpkins, lavender, raspberries, asparagus, and flowers; a stand of maple trees is tapped each spring. More recently, dairy and horse initiatives were added to the farm operation. With the help of the kids, crops are harvested, cider syrup and jelly turned out, flowers and herbs distilled, milk and cheese produced, and horses are raised, trained, and utilized. A somewhat unusual twist for a different crew of students comes during the sugaring season, when they work 8- to 12-hour daily shifts gathering sap and boiling it down into syrup. These grueling stints have their reward as darkness approaches: a hearty and satisfying meal—freshly prepared by a community member—awaits the bunch. They share this nourishing and nurturing repast as a dog-tired team, savoring the experience of working hard and dining together.

Participating in this farm program spread a wealth of new corporal and philosophical avenues before Peter. He thoroughly prized the challenges to muscles and sinews and the sense of physical exhaustion at the end of demanding days. But he found himself also reaping great pleasure from the subtlety, observation, and engagement of the senses necessary for successfully growing and yielding crops and flowers. Further, living and

working together toward a common purpose made a deep and lasting imprint. It was both logical and gratifying to have a group toil in concert, then sit down and share the fruits (literally, in some cases) of their labors.

The farm experience at MRS held enough sway with Peter that it factored into his college selection process: he applied to three liberal arts schools, at which he planned to study Russian or the classics, and to Cornell, at which the major would be agriculture. His options were not simplified by a narrowing of the field, as all his choices found him reciprocally appealing. What tipped the scales? The Division I standing of Cornell's soccer team, perhaps....?! No, more likely it was the fact that of all the work experiences he had had to date, the farm one "was the only one that felt like [it was] what I wanted to do."

It took only a short spell at Cornell before Peter was hit with a seismic revelation: agriculture was *science*! This former literary-minded young man undertook a crash course in technical thinking! Equally as stirring was the awareness of agriculture in the largest sense; heretofore, Peter had given little thought about what agriculture *could* be, and even though he had toiled on farms, he had no real sense of how a working farm actually operated, especially in terms of its business and economic sides. With the intact gift of youth's innocence and simplicity, Peter had headed off to Ithaca figuring, "I would play soccer and learn to be a farmer, and when I was done, I'd start my own vegetable farm."

A relationship with a pre-veterinarian student who wanted to concentrate on large animals evolved to being a turning point in Peter's life. Through her, his concepts of farming increasingly expanded and began to include animals, dairy cows in particular. By the end of his undergraduate program, he was focusing on forage crops. About the time he was ready to graduate, he agreed to an Assistantship for his Master's Degree and enrolled in Cornell's graduate school; his Master's theme would be on pastures for dairy cows. Graduate school served two main purposes for Peter: it allowed him to earn an income (through his Assistantship) and it gave him exposure to extension service work. The latter was significant because, by this point, his earlier-planned target of being a farmer-on-the-land had metamorphosed into being involved with agriculture in

a different capacity. He was committed to the land and animals in some manner, but he didn't think it would be by actually tilling the fields or milking the cows himself.

Halfway through his three-year graduate program, family tragedies compelled Peter to step back and reevaluate what he was doing and his goals for his future. Though he experienced a great deal of success working as an extension officer, he questioned the validity of continuing to do it if it were not fulfilling and making him happy. This introspection and value assessment continued for the time it took him to receive his Master's Degree. Upon completion of his course work, Peter knew he needed to take a break from academics and "career planning." His choice of where and how to regroup and reassess his life and life's path was at a farm in western Connecticut, owned by a friend from Cornell. A further advantage to this choice: he would be close to his family's home.

For a year, Peter thoroughly appreciated what he was doing at Timber Hill Farm. Once again, he found the physical labor, being outdoors, and the connection to the plants and Earth to be satisfying and rewarding. A dilemma arose, though: while he was certain he wanted to remain in farming, he didn't want to continue as an apprentice. What to do and where to go to be a farmer?

The farmstead Peter was working on happened to be part of the TRAIN program, a cooperative effort of local organic and biodynamic farms to educate farm interns. Apprentices at this and over a dozen other participating farms in the area visit the sites of other TRAIN farms to broaden their education. Timber Hill Farm and ABC Farm were (are) both part of TRAIN. When it was ABC Farm's turn to host the apprentices, Peter was, as part of Timber Hill's crew, in the troupe. Peter recalls that "I felt really connected when I came [to ABC]. For much of our visit there, Cathy talked to us about the cows—how they are treated, what the Farm's practices are, and about the overall dairy herd. What she had to say resonated with me and was in sync with how I would like to see the animals cared for and managed."

The TRAIN visit prompted Peter to write to ABC to seek an interview for a job. The timing was just right, as both Cathy and the vegetable gardener needed help with the cows and in the fields, respectively. He was hired! December

2003 was the start of a great working relationship! Still not thinking long-term, Peter immersed himself in ABC and quickly gained the nickname of “the whole farmer,” since he bounced back and forth and in and out of all components of the farm operation. The position suited him just fine: he liked the support role and enjoyed working both with the cows and in the garden; the first year there he experienced the same contentment that he had back when he was at the Mountain Ridge School.

When Cathy announced her decision to step away from being herdsperson, Peter was initially unsure whether or not he wanted to make the transfer into the job. But when he thought about it, he realized that there was no place he’d rather be than at ABC Farm!

The obvious advantage to being at this particular farm is its uniqueness in having both strong animal and vegetable elements. But it was something less tangible and more profound that made the decision to stay very clear (and Peter plainly recalls that moment of awakening and acceptance): it was the sense of selflessness that exists here, which is also part of team work and group process. “Maybe I’d given lip service [to selflessness] before, but now I’m experiencing it; it’s revolutionary,” Peter said. “Not only would I not find that somewhere else, but I didn’t want to be somewhere else. When I realized that, becoming the herdsperson was an easy decision.”

As the herdsman, Peter will join the ABC Management Group, which means he will have a hand in creating its budget and deciding which capital expenses are approved. In this financial arena, Peter is impressed with the “us versus they” approach to management and decision-making. A manager must sometimes forego securing something for his own department (regardless of where the money for it was generated) if equipment or an investment in another one better serves ABC as a whole. “People really believe this; it’s hard, but it’s good,” added Peter. Another major strength and draw of group process for Peter is the quality of decisions that are often the outcome of lively and open discussions, when several points of view and options are presented.

Aside from working with a human team, Peter will have a close relationship with the bovine constituency. “Cows have their own rhythm, which I need to respect and be part of,” he

penively commented. This tempo and regularity of the cows Peter finds to be a steadying force and one that can bring a sense of balance to life. In a place as busy as ABC, it is a noteworthy—and healthy—juxtaposition to have the calm cadence of the cows be central to the frenetic activity that pulsates around it. The farmers acknowledge and appreciate the animals for making them mindful about their own mental busyness and any impending impatience, which they must leave outside the barn doors when it’s time to work with the herd.

In his modest, unassuming way (which belies a mischievous sense of humor), Peter, when asked, concedes that the cows are the heart of ABC Farm, and his comprehension of this was formed out of a very special, very poignant incident last year, when he was able to observe the strong connection between children and the animals. In particular, he was moved by how powerfully one child visiting from a nearby grade school was impacted by “his cow.” Each of the students in the fourth class chooses a cow, and it becomes “his” or “hers” for that year. The children then regularly come to the barn and curry the animals, help feed hay, and generally follow them through the school months.

One child was singular in his devotion to his animal, checking on the cow and her calf whenever possible, very frequently going to the barn (with his mother) outside of the set-aside school times. The incredible immersion and interest the young boy took in the life and well-being of an animal touched Peter. (The youth’s mother later expressed to Peter on what an important part of the family’s life the cow had been and how the “assignment” had turned out to be a seminal factor in their son’s childhood.)

Beyond the fact that the cows create the manure that gives the soil fertility and that they produce milk for our dairy processing plant, it was this recognition—that these amazing creatures, with whom we share our land and days, impact human life so deeply, on such tender and individual levels—that brought the magnitude of his responsibility to light.

And just how will Peter be filling his days as herdsman? If you guessed by starting them early, you’re on the right track! More days than not, Peter will be up and in the barn well before dawn, doing about 75 to 80% of the fourteen milkings per week. This is important not

only in terms of ensuring that the shifts are covered (two people do each of the two daily milkings), but also—and even more—so that he can get a feel for the cows and their overall well-being. By virtue of observing them daily and at length, as well as by the intimate physical contact with them, he can assess their general thriftiness as a herd and individually. Any changes in condition or vigor will be readily detected.

In the summer, the milkers' morning starts at 4:30. About 2 hours are needed to milk the 60 or so dairy cows. During the warmer months and growing season, when the cows are out to pasture all day (except for when they come in to be milked), there are virtually no barn chores to do, but the farmers' and apprentices' time is taken up by bringing the cows in and out from the fields, changing or repairing fencing, haying, and working in the vegetable gardens. During the late fall and winter, the cows are in the barn most of the time, so cleaning it and feeding the cows three times per day consumes many of the long days' hours. The day usually doesn't end until about 6:30 p.m. Yes, it's a long day of hard work!

Beyond the hour-by-hour and day-to-day care of the cows, Peter will also be responsible for making decisions regarding their broad-spectrum care: where they live, what they eat, when they eat, their breeding and calving schedule, and their living environment. There are seven or eight different groups of animals on the farm (e.g., milking cows, dry cows, and assorted age groups of young stock), each with its own specific needs. Although Peter isn't necessarily in charge of or doesn't implement each of the requirements associated with every cow or group, he must have thorough knowledge of them and know what is going on at all times.

Additionally, the herdsman works with the dairy manager to ensure that the milk quality is optimal so that it yields high-quality dairy products. Healthy cows on a top-notch diet produce premium milk for drinking and turning into cheese, quark, and yogurt. He also works with Robert Charles, the farm manager, in regard to the forage crops, questions of manure management, herd decisions, the recently-formed beef herd, and overall herd management.

Peter's interests in sports has not been damp-

ened in the years intervening since his school days, and this farmer continues to work out regularly and maintain a fitness schedule that couch-potato and athlete alike would envy (as if tossing those huge bales of hay around isn't enough!). Rain or shine, several days a week you can find him running on the rural roads around the farm (look for his signature red wool cap!) during his lunch break (again, you'd think he'd fill his exercise quota by running after adventurous heifers who find a downed fence line like a hawk finds a mouse!). And when he's not rooting for the Toronto Blue Jays or the Buffalo Bills, his time and interests lie in being with his family as much as possible, writing, and following current events through *The New York Times* and *The New Yorker*.

All of at ABC Farm are delighted to have Peter as a committed member of the Farm and look forward to his valuable and thoughtful contributions! They are thrilled he's part of the Farm and farming teams.... and who knows, maybe they'll even start a soccer team for him to captain!

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