

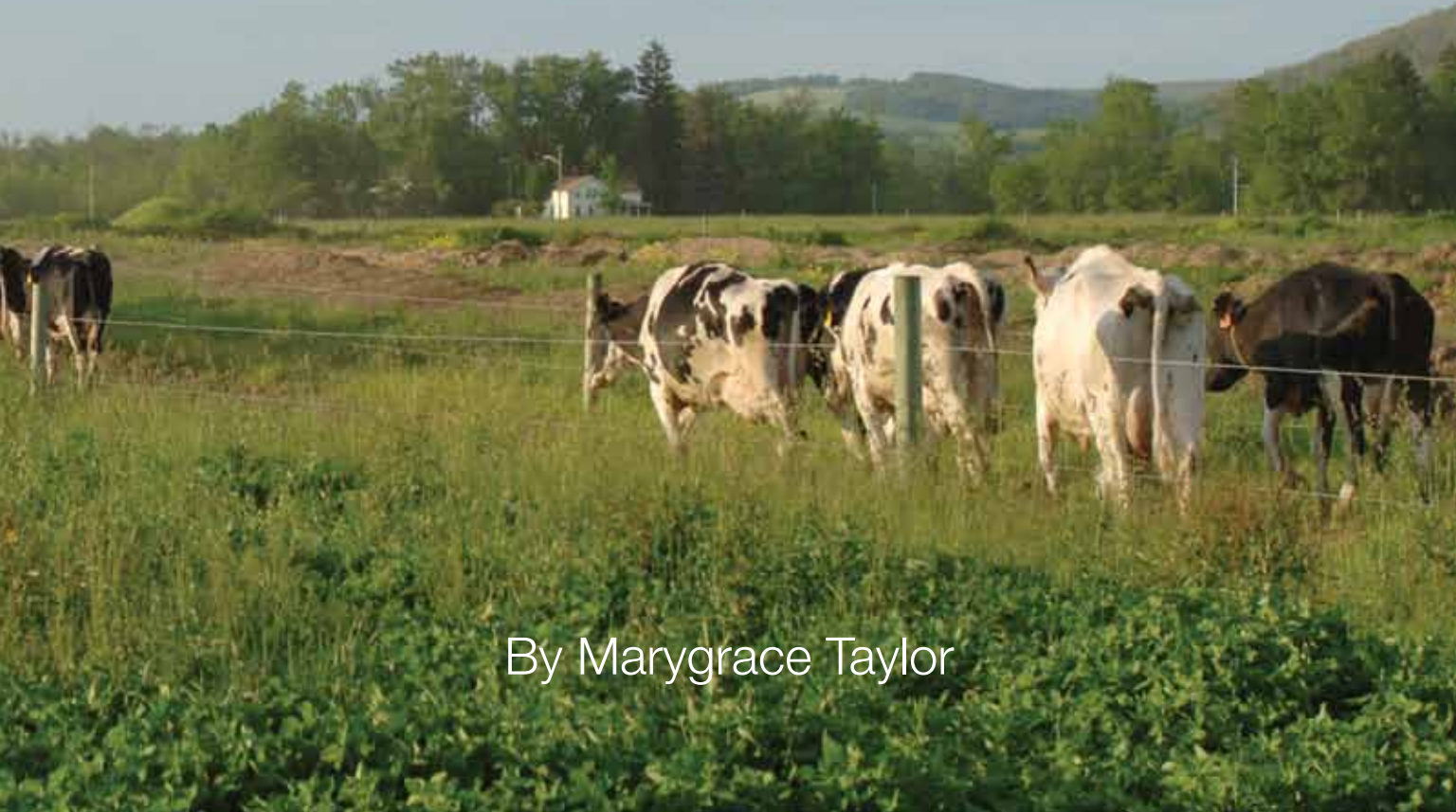
CREAM OF

How three organic farmers and their families are working to make the world a healthier, more delicious place—one bite at a time

THE CROP

When you see a USDA Organic label on your food, what's the first thing you picture? Whether it's a lush green farm or an inspector with a checklist, you're probably right on. But there's more: At every organic farm, there's a story—and for many of them, it's a story about family.

Often, the eco-minded folks who worked to produce the organic broccoli, milk, and eggs you buy are moms, dads, and kids like you and your family. They take pride in the food they grow and raise, and in *how* it's grown and raised: free of synthetic pesticides, hormones, and antibiotics, and in a way that gives great care and consideration to the health of people and the environment. Meet these three organic farming families, and the next time that little green label shows up, an even more vivid picture just might come to mind.



By Marygrace Taylor

THE EARLY ADOPTERS: Cobblestone Valley Farm

When Paul Knapp's great-grandfather started farming in 1896, the organic way was the *only* way. It wasn't long, though, before the rise of industrial farming would change how many farms produced their food in an effort to raise yields and eradicate pests. But the Knapp farm never used pesticides heavily, so organic farming wasn't a huge stretch. For more than a decade, Paul, his wife Maureen, and their three sons (Blaise, Casey, and Evan) have been committed to producing dairy very much like Paul's great-grandfather did. "Organic is the way nature intended, and these days it's doable in a way that often exceeds conventional agriculture. Why do it differently?" says Maureen.

Since 1980, Maureen and Paul, who met in college, have been working together on the farm. By the mid-nineties, they were gearing up to bring Cobblestone Valley Farm back to its organic roots. Maureen had started reading more about organic farming, and the philosophy meshed with the family's outlook: The Knapps were already using homeopathic remedies instead of conventional medicine to treat their own ailments, and had a lightbulb moment when they realized they could use similar methods for their cattle. They also began other organic practices, like allowing the cows to graze on rotating fields. The farm became certified in 2000. "For us, it just makes sense. Why would we farm in a harmful manner to anybody involved if we can do it in a way that isn't harmful?" Maureen says.

The Knapps now keep 80 organic Holstein dairy cows, plus 10 acres of pick-your-own organic strawberries and 150 organic chickens, turkeys, and pigs. It's a major commitment: "There isn't a lot of time off or time away, since the cows need to be milked at least twice a day," says Paul. On a typical day, the couple wakes up at 5 a.m. to start up to five hours' worth of chores, like feeding the cows, milking them, cleaning up their waste, and cleaning the barn. After that, they spend a few hours on various smaller projects (like spreading compost or repairing machinery), then head back to the barn for a second round of milking, feeding, and cleaning.

Besides managing these full days, the Knapps and other organic dairy farmers have a new problem to handle: In 2011, the USDA loosened regulations on genetically engineered (GE) alfalfa (a major staple in dairy cows' diets), making it easier for GE alfalfa to contaminate organic alfalfa through cross-pollination. "As organic farmers, we do everything we can to assure that GE pollution doesn't come to our farm, but there's always wind and pollen drift that can't be planned for or controlled," says Maureen. "That's the scariest thing—and I wish the government would step up and protect organic farmers from GMOs."

While the Knapps might feel underrepresented in the fight against GMOs, they still do have a voice in the world of organic dairy as farmer-owners of the cooperative and national brand Organic Valley. "We're able to have a say in some of how Organic Valley runs, and get to come together with other farmer-owners at annual and regional meetings," says Paul. "Being part of the camaraderie [of organic farmers] is a cool experience."



The Knapps (and dog Domino) live and work on an organic dairy farm.

DID YOU KNOW?

- The average organic dairy farm has 82 cows; the number of cows on the average conventional dairy farm is nearly twice that, according to a 2009 USDA report.
- Organic dairy cows are more likely to munch on the food they were designed to eat—grass. Sixty-three percent of organic dairies feed their cows on pasture at least half the time, compared to 18 percent of conventional dairies.
- Other major dairy brands, like Stonyfield Farm and Horizon Organic, get their organic milk from family farmers, too.



The Johnson family's organic garden has outgrown their backyard

THE COMMUNITY ADVOCATES: Johnson's Backyard Garden

How does someone go from growing vegetables in his backyard to feeding an entire city? If anyone can figure out the answer, it's Brenton Johnson. In seven years, he's turned a few rows of broccoli and carrots into a farm that grows 1.5 million pounds of vegetables, flowers, and herbs. Johnson's Backyard Garden (JBG) supplies over 200 restaurants and several grocery stores in Austin, Texas, plus all of Austin's farmers' markets and more than 2,000 CSA members. At this rate, it won't be long before Johnson reaches his goal of growing 20 million pounds of vegetables a year—much of them for people who couldn't otherwise afford fresh, organic produce.

Johnson started gardening in 2004, and it wasn't long before his backyard plot ended up yielding more than his family of six could eat. So on the weekends, they started selling the surplus veggies like broccoli, collard greens, and carrots at a local farmers' market, asking people to pay whatever they thought the produce was worth. "The first time we sold \$100, then \$120 the next time, and more each time after that," says Johnson. By 2006, JBG was delivering boxes of fresh vegetables to a 30-member CSA they'd formed by word of mouth and distributing a weekly newsletter.

When the entire yard was taken over by vegetables and Johnson's four kids had nowhere left to play, he and his wife, Beth, decided to look for more growing space. They moved to a 20-acre plot—and a few years later, took over a 200-acre historic farm.

Johnson sees an even bigger picture: "I didn't want to just be a farm for people who could afford to pay for our vegetables," he says. JBG recently began providing free CSA shares to a local shelter for troubled families, provides weekly vegetable donations to the Salvation Army, and runs a program that offers a share of vegetables in exchange for five hours of volunteer farm work. The farm is also working with the University of Texas law school to form a nonprofit that will preserve farmland in Austin to grow food for underserved populations. "I like the idea of really having an impact on the local community," says Johnson. "With the nonprofit, people in Austin can make donations so that land can be bought and preserved and we can grow food to feed everyone. People need more organic food, and there's no reason why it shouldn't be local."

DID YOU KNOW?

- Tomatoes are the most commonly grown organic vegetable, followed by potatoes, found an Organic Farming Research Foundation survey of nearly 6,500 organic farmers.
- Organic produce farmers manage pests and weeds in a variety of ways: Natural insecticides (like soaps or oils), trap crops (crops planted to attract species), and overhead sprinklers keep bugs away from harvest crops; straw mulch helps suppress weeds.
- Organic fruits and veggies get the nutrients they need through natural fertilizers, like compost and compost tea (a liquid version of compost that can be sprayed on crops), instead of synthetic fertilizers. Farmers also plant cover crops (such as rye or vetch plants in winter) to help bring nutrients from deep within the soil closer to the soil's surface.



THE NEWCOMERS: Swartz Organics

Bernie Swartzendruber had been working in the Detroit construction industry for 30 years when he had mini stroke in December 2010—and a major wake-up call. Realizing the need to make immediate changes to his diet and lifestyle, he told his wife, Debbie, and their four kids that he needed to stop eating unhealthy, processed foods.

Soon, the desire for cleaner food for his family mushroomed into a dream to produce healthier food for other people, too. Swartzendruber already kept a small number of cows on his property in rural North Branch, Michigan, so he got in touch with Global Organic Alliance, an international certifier, to get his farm certified organic.

For many farms, it can take up to three years to transition to organic, since land must be pesticide-free for at least that long before it's eligible for certification. But Swartzendruber could verify that pesticides hadn't been used since at least 2001 (when his family moved there), so an inspector was able to visit almost immediately. Swartz Organics was born in 2011, and in its first season, raised 500 poultry chickens and one calf. Instead of eating grain, the chickens and cows are rotated on four acres of pasture, where they graze. And to avoid antibiotics, Swartzendruber pays close attention to the animals' surroundings and behaviors to help keep them healthy.

The new job hasn't been easy: Swartzendruber works construction in Detroit (a 90-minute trip from North Branch) three days a week, and plans to continue until he can make the jump to farming full time. There's also the large volume of paperwork and detailed record keeping for organic farms. It's a challenge, but "helping consumers realize it's important to know how their food was raised—that's a challenge I enjoy."



James, 11, is one of four kids in the family who runs the newly certified Swartz Organics

DID YOU KNOW?

- Nearly 500 farms were certified organic in 2011, bringing the total number of U.S. organic farms to 17,600.
- Farms can achieve organic certification through state or private certifying agents, which are accredited by the USDA's National Organic Program.
- More farmland than ever is going the organic route. As of 2008, nearly 5 million acres of U.S. farmland had become certified—compared to only about 935,000 acres in 1992.

How organic helps families

Organic food is grown without the use of pesticides—and when it comes to kids' health, that's crucial. Organophosphate pesticides can cause brain and nervous system damage during fetal development, infancy, and early childhood since babies' and children's smaller bodies are still developing and take in more air, food, and water relative to their body size than adults. In a study by the Center for Environmental Research and Children's Health (CERCH), organophosphate pesticide levels in children were found to increase with age, as well as with higher fruit and vegetable consumption. CERCH research indicates that fetuses and infants can be exposed to pesticides in the womb and through breast milk, too. Conventional fruits and vegetables, meat, and dairy are the obvious offenders, but also watch for packaged foods like applesauce, popcorn, and corn chips, since kids tend to consume those snacks frequently, says the Environmental Working Group.

How organic helps the planet

Just how much does organic farming benefit the environment? The Rodale Institute studied the issue for 30 years and published the results in a new report. Compared to conventional farming:

- ▶ Organic farming uses 45 percent less energy
- ▶ Organic farming generates 40 percent fewer greenhouse gases
- ▶ Organic farming yields just as much food—and even more during drought years