

## Farm Girl Farm succeeds under transplanted farm girl Laura Meister

### *On the farm*

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Editor's note: The following is the third in a series of Berkshire County farms.

EGREMONT - Laura Meister first came to the Berkshires to study documentary filmmaking. One of her early projects was a series of short films about small local farms.

Disheartened over all the time she was spending indoors to document the farmers working all day under the sun, she took a job for one morning a week at Indian Line Farm, primarily as an avenue for getting outside. Soon Laura found herself helping an intern at the farm get started on her own CSA.

Finding herself more involved with the operation than she had planned, when her partner in the project fell ill that summer and missed months of work, Laura took over the reins, and Farm Girl Farm survived its first season.

That was four years ago, when the CSA aspect of the farm had 40 members. Now Farm Girl, on Pumpkin Hollow Road, boasts 80 members, some of whom barter working in the fields for a discount on veggies. The focus is on a wide variety of green and heirloom tomatoes, with many other crops throughout the year. All are rotated on about 2 1/2 acres of land beside the Green River, the primary source of irrigation pumped to an array of elevated sprinklers in the fields.

Fertilizer comes in the form of organic horse manure from Allen Farm in Sheffield. Farm Girl Farm rents the space from resident Michele Lelandais, who benefits from the tax breaks and free veggies all season.

"It's definitely been a steep learning curve," Laura said - but she never considered giving up.

"It's like growing vegetables is some kind of virus," she said. "That year it consumed me, and it hasn't let go since."

Trying to function within a triangle now common in small-scale farming, utilizing the CSA concept, farmers markets and restaurant supplying, Laura had trouble in the beginning knowing how much of what crop would be ready on a certain day.

"Now my instincts are much better," she said, washing bright green arugula she had just harvested, destined for Cafe Adam in Great Barrington.

"Luckily, the chefs around here are really flexible," Laura said. "They'll take pretty much whatever I've got and use it in a special that night."

Her niche with the CSA is a focus on amounts of food more manageable for individuals rather than catering to large families, something that helps reduce waste while filling a gap in the market. Farm Girl relies on other farms for survival, engaging in a constant give-and-take with local farmers and friends eager to help a colleague succeed in the maverick business. Unable to penetrate the bustling Saturday Great Barrington Farmers Market, Farm Girl has a regular table at the new Wednesday market at the Nutrition Center.

Right now, Farm Girl Farm has only one full-time employee, a cheery woman named Ruth, who has returned from last year and really understands the system. Two interns will be arriving soon, young people eager to learn about farming. They will receive free housing and a regular stipend in exchange for their hard work.

"The first year I didn't have much to teach the interns, since I was learning everything as I went," she said.

Laura didn't have to add that now there are many things she can teach - including how to spin-dry a batch of fresh baby arugula in a electric open air apparatus resembling a clothes dryer with no walls.

"Every day is different," Laura said as she packaged the greens in a plastic cardboard box. "And there's so many variables and challenges, all the time."

Alexander Olchowski is a novelist and screenwriter currently gaining certification to teach high school English through MCLA. Originally from the Berkshires, he now lives on a farm in Lebanon Springs, N.Y.

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