

HARVEST *in the* HAMPTONS

UNDER SPACIOUS SKIES A FEW
BLOCKS FROM THE BEACH,
AMANDA MERROW AND KATIE BALDWIN
TEND TO AMBER WAVES, THEIR
FLEDGLING FARM IN AMAGANSETT

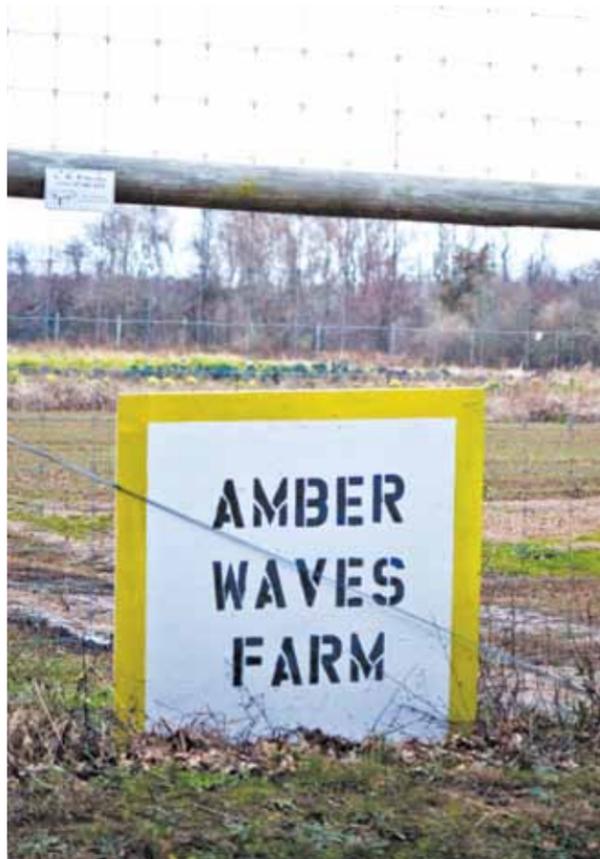
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photos by Claudia Ficca

As I drove out east on a cold, grey day to visit the Amber Waves Farm, I looked out at the bare trees and imagined what kind of beautiful bounty I would find there. When I arrived, however, the fields lay fallow and the only hints of colors came from the few patches of frozen grass and from the hardy greens under the protective cover of the thermal-sheeted high tunnel. As Katie Baldwin and Amanda Merrow graciously welcomed me, I berated myself for being such a fool. Of course, if it is winter in Amagansett, it also is winter on a farm in Amagansett.

Baldwin and Merrow are funny, gracious, accessible and warm hearted, and have degrees in foreign policy, economics and environmental policy. They started Amber Waves in 2009 in partnership with the Peconic Land Trust, a Long Island con-

servancy group that preserves working farms as part of its mission. Over the past four years, with a lot of sweat, hard work and help from their apprentices, they have developed a five-acre lot into a modern organic farm that blends seamlessly into the surrounding community. Less than 100 feet off Montauk Highway, the two-lane “main street” that winds through much of the Hamptons, and tucked behind Eli Zabar’s Amagansett Farmers Market, Amber Waves is open to anyone who wants to walk on the property and ask questions about the operation. The farmers sell their organic vegetables and eggs at local greenmarkets, operate a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program, contribute to the East End food pantries and run an education program with local schools to teach children about the origin of their food.





The women are also pioneers of sorts with their Amagansett Wheat Project, which has brought organic grain production back to Long Island. They have had three successful harvests and sell their organic wheat berries and stone ground whole-wheat flour locally.

Beyond all of this, Baldwin and Merrow represent a more profound societal phenomenon of young people choosing farm work over careers that are more lucrative and less back breaking. During our interview, I envisioned them as diplomats shuttling between two very different worlds. They can stand boot to boot with farmers from all over the country and trade information about soil, seasonal planting, chicken care and the latest tractors, or commiserate over a drought and lost crops. Then they can turn around and, in a language that makes sense to a city slicker like me, put a human face on the environmental, social, economic and political costs of our unsustainable food system. They also can explain that the kale, carrot and fennel salad I just inhaled took the Earth months to produce—without making me feel like an unappreciative jerk.

The meeting of rural and urban in the form of farmers' markets, CSAs and education programs is having a profound effect on our national conversation about food issues and health. As we become more aware of the wider impact of our food choices, we are empowered to make change, especially in the form of how, when and where we buy our food. It's great to have people such as Baldwin and Merrow expanding our options and our outlook.

Which one of you was the first to say, "Let's start a farm"?

Katie Baldwin: It was during our apprenticeships at Quail Hill Farm [in Amagansett]. I think it was in July when shit becomes really hard. It becomes obvious that you either want to be a farmer or you don't. It becomes very obvious if you want to keep up, finish the season and start another season. We both wanted to be farmers. There was not an opportunity to stay at that farm and grow into roles of greater responsibility, so we created that for ourselves.

Amanda Merrow: We wanted to be here.

KB: This place is a magical combination of farmers and fishermen and vintners and cheesemakers. We knew this was a special place to be growing food. The access to New York City was appealing to me as well. You feel removed enough, you can work the land, but you have access to an urban environment.

AM: I couldn't imagine transporting myself after that apprenticeship year to work on a farm in the Catskills or the Hudson Valley. I had gotten to know what the soil was like here, the climate, the environment, the weather. You get a taste of that, but then you know there is so much more to learn. So it became "let's create our own little space within this place."

Does Amber Waves receive government subsidies? How do you feel about subsidies in general?

AM: We don't. That whole discussion about food subsidies in this country is a really interesting one. We spend a lot of time telling people not to eat garbage, then the government subsidizes corn and soy production. We set up Amber Waves as a nonprofit organization so that the farm could stand alone. We wanted the farm to be board controlled and stay where it is in the event we ever decide to pursue other projects. We didn't want it to be Amanda and Katie L.L.C. We wanted Amber Waves Farm near the sidewalk, with a board of directors, community run, as its own project. Because of that 501c3 [nonprofit] status, we are able to accept grants from family foundations and private foundations and we are eligible for some government grants. We just got a grant from the State of New York because of our work with local food pantries.

KB: It just so happens that there is a very large population here that is underserved in terms of access to fresh food. It sometimes seems like that doesn't exist here, but it does. But as far as food subsidies, we are always having conversations with our customers and the farmers' market visitors about price. We are able to tell the story of this food and how much labor went into growing that carrot or tomato from seed to the time we sell it. But sometimes that is not enough. So then [the conversation becomes about] food subsidies and why the price of food, either fresh or processed, is what it is. I think we need to move in the direction of having food policy that at least meagerly subsidizes farmers who produce fruits and vegetables [on a smaller scale].

AM: There was a shift in subsidies recently so that growing genetically modified corn for ethanol production became more profitable than growing organic corn for certified organic animal feed. For our purposes, that meant a 50-pound bag of chicken feed went up from \$18 to \$25 a bag.

KB: Overnight!

AM: Every time there is a shift, you think, "Oh, food will be cheaper." But then you see a price increase in food and eggs and in other things. Our food policy is just very confusing and there is a huge lobby behind food subsidies driven by Cargill and Monsanto and these huge agribusinesses. It's on a whole different plane than what we are doing.



How many hours a day do you work?

AM: It varies by the season. All of May, June, July, August and September, we start around 7 a.m. and finish anytime between 7 and 9 p.m. That's on the premises. Then we have to do our office work and bookkeeping after those hours, so it's easily 15 hours a day during those months.

Seven days a week?

AM: We try not to do farm work, more than just chores, on Sundays. Someone still has to feed the chickens and water the plants, but we try not to do restaurant deliveries and planting. We didn't do that the first two years. We are more productive during the week if we give ourselves a day.

KB: It allows you to press the reset button, sit on the beach, read a book, clear your head ...

AM: Go on a date! Like there is time for boys, but you know...

What's the reaction of boys who find out you are farmers?

AM: We don't get very far out of our farmer group, so most of the boys we know are farmers and they know that we are too.

KB: But otherwise, very surprised. Not necessarily intimidated, just curious.

I guess you don't really fit the farmer stereotype.

AM: I don't even say farmer anymore because all people hear is "pharmacist." And you have to say it again and again. Then people look at you like, "What do you mean?"

What are the unexpected challenges you have faced? Were you ready for them?

KB: Not ready. Not ready at all!

AM: Everything we've faced that has been an unexpected challenge has also had a really gratifying result. Managing our friendship in terms of the business partnership has been a rewarding and educational thing that we have to do every day. We have both put time into making sure our friendship and working relationship are really healthy at all times, with brutal honesty and respect for each other.

It's like a marriage.

KB: I think the most challenging part is that farming is like the fashion industry. You need to be working two seasons ahead mentally, but you're physically two seasons behind. So it's July, but we are already seeding the greenhouse for winter greens. Having to map out an entire year of farming while still physically executing the very specific tasks of the day is extraordinarily challenging. But it gets easier and easier each season because you work in terms of record keeping and you know what you did on what day, which helps to plan the next season.

AM: A couple of years ago, I would have answered the question by saying the biggest challenge is having the patience to wait for your ideas to actually come to fruition. Now we have wheat in the barn and we have wheat in the ground and we have equipment, but the first few years we didn't and we would make a mistake and then we would have to wait nine months to fix it. That patience of not having the right equipment, having to depend on other people, having said we were going to do something and not being able to deliver, and then feeling "Oh my god, this is taking forever!" was very frustrating.

KB: It takes four months to grow a carrot. We are bad at growing carrots. We just are. We haven't mastered it. We don't weed them at the right time, we don't thin them at the right time. It



is mind boggling and difficult. Wheat berries are nine months. Fennel — forget it! We had such a bad experience with fennel. But kale? Love it!

Kale is the machine that just cranks out year round?

KB: Exactly. Love it.

AM: It's funny because some of our friends—I am thinking of Alex and Ian who have Balsam Farms, the farm around the corner—they have like 30 restaurant accounts, 50 acres, mega equipment, 20 tractors, a huge crew. Ian will come to me and be so frustrated because he's like, "We just cannot grow kale!" And we're like, "Okay, man, I don't know what your problem is!" [Laughing.]

A chicken and the egg question: What do you think led to the popularity of farmers' markets in recent years? Is it more organic farms, therefore more products, or the changing food/eating habits of city populations? Both? Neither?

KB: I think it's totally consumer driven. We see this at farming conferences. We're part of the Northeastern Organic Farmers Association, so we can see how some farmers are trying to adjust marketing strategies to get into the Union Square Greenmarket [in Manhattan]. I think that as adaptable as farmers are, this is not a wave of organic farmers pushing their lifestyle and food on urban people. It's been the other way around.

AM: The consumers have requested and gotten what they want, but some things have been farmer driven. Like kale. Farmers have said, "This is going to become part of your life because this is easy for us."



“We are bad at growing carrots.”



KB: Or this is what grows in your region and you should be eating this.

AM: Right. There are some things that we really push on the market, like Asian greens. I don't think any of the consumers were like, "We need the bok choy!" But once they got into it ...

Do you feel that city folks idealize farm life and agriculture as bucolic perfection? If so, does that frustrate you?

KB: They definitely do, but it brings them to us. When people are like, "Your life must be so great," we answer with, "Our life is great, but it's hard." And there are parts of it that people really nail by saying, "Your life must be tough, but you get to do what you want," and that's totally true. It doesn't bother me.

AM: All summer long, people at the farmers' market say things to us like, "Oh my god, you have no idea how hot it was in the city this week." And we're like, "Yeah, it must have been so hot in the city." I don't know what they think we are doing out here. [Laughs.]

KB: But this is also a really unique place to be farming. It's a resort type environment, you have a limited season in terms of generating revenue for your business, and your clientele is some of the most food savvy and critical around. They know what they want! Sometimes you just have to tell them, "Nope, tomatoes are not ready yet." You want what you want, but you can't yet have what you want.

AM: You know, to echo what Katie just said, selling to New Yorkers is unlike selling to any other people in the world, especially the people who find themselves out here. They just assume that you will do it well, you will do it on time, it will be beautiful and it will taste perfect. The standards that most people expect keep us on our toes.

KB: Very much so! It's not annoying for someone to have a bucolic ideal of what we do because we think what we do is really fun and interesting and beautiful. If someone can't visit a farm, perhaps they visit the farmers' market and can talk to the farmers or farm workers, who will paint a realistic picture for them. Putting a face on the food is something that is currently happening. It all boils down to a greater appreciation for your environment and for the food that you are putting in your mouth. It makes for more of a whole systems approach to eating and sustaining yourself.

More and more organic farms are run by women. What effect do you think this will have on the business of farming?

AM: When I look at the apprentice wall at Quail Hill, I realize there has really been a groundswell of women quietly getting involved in farming for the past 20 years.

KB: Growing food is a very nurturing process, just as preparing food is. I think being an organic farmer is an attractive profession for a woman.

AM: Around the world, it's women who are doing the farming, especially in the developing world.

KB: More and more women are getting into farming, which we see in our apprentice program.

The average American farmer is now approaching 60 years old. What does that mean to the future of farming?

KB: It represents a major shift.

AM: There is knowledge that needs to be passed on, otherwise it will be lost.

KB: You need a mentor, I am convinced of it. Our mentor is around the corner, thankfully, which is probably why we have been as successful as we have been. We call on him weekly and now he calls on us, which is great. To have a mentor/mentee relationship is absolutely the way to go right now.

Do you see a larger role for digital technology and social media in farming as far as connecting to a consumer base and branding?

AM: That's an interesting question. We are lucky because we are in a place where the demand for our product is high so we do not have to advertise. We fill our CSA without trying and people out here visit farmers' markets regularly. But we are working on having a better social media presence. It's hard to translate the experience of your day on a farm onto a computer screen.

KB: I really tried to Instagram, but the silt loam was getting into the smart phone!

AM: I can see the shift. I can see the shift in workshop titles at conferences. There are people who really don't understand how to get involved with their online presence and social media and advertising and now there are workshops geared toward "How to Meet Chefs" and "How to Advertise on Facebook." Things that for us are [snaps fingers] easy. It's a generational thing. Farmers know they have to do it.

KB: I had convinced myself that social media didn't matter because the work—the physical work—is so much more important. But I totally disagree with myself now. Once we can get ourselves outside of our five-acre farming bubble, people actually do want know what we are doing today. There is a lot of information to be shared. Most farmers are just going through their farmer motions, but everyone would benefit from sharing that information.

