

14 local simple fresh



Russell Lee/Farm Security Administration

Peaceful Belly farmers Clay and Josie Erskine think real peace begins with a belly of healthy food. Their 60 acres on Dry Creek in Ada County grows mostly heirloom vegetables and shuns genetically modified seeds.

1 Return of the Family

FARM

by Todd Shallat with Angie Zimmer

Big Ag's corporate farming wreaks havoc on the safety of food. "Big Ag[riculture] will kill you to for a profit," writes Jane Smiley in *The Huffington Post*. "Seventy percent of the ground beef sold by super-markets includes 'pink slime,'" reports Dianne Sawyer. "Dog food is causing human illnesses." "U.S. food waste worth more than off-shore drilling." "Kellogg's recalls 28 million boxes of Fruit Loops." "Nitrate-contaminated water from fertilizer use linked to thyroid cancer in humans." "Argentina study links herbicide Roundup to birth defects."

Janie Burns of Nampa—farmer, free-range lamb rancher and a leading voice for sustainable farming in the Treasure Valley—likes to begin with those scary headlines in her PowerPoint warnings about the commoditization of food. "The farmers," Burns explained, "are captive into a large-scale commodity system in which they take the price that they're given. You take a cow to the auction to be sold and you don't really have a choice on what

16 local simple fresh



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Caldwell's flour mill recalls the 1940s when Canyon County farms had easy access to nearby processing plants.

the auction price is that day. You're going to take what you get."

Burns was raised among row crops and Angus cattle on her family's Ontario farm. "But don't hold it against me," she smiled. An English major at the College of Idaho, she also studied geology and began asking questions. Why, she wanted to know, were there so many vegetables listed in the seed catalog yet so few vegetable choices in the supermarket? How, she wondered, did farmers manage weeds before pressurized tanks of Roundup? And why, in a valley so rich with farmland, was so little food locally grown? Questions led to experimentation with an organic garden in Murphy. In 1991, she found 10 acres south of Nampa and branded it Meadowlark Farm. Today, she raises mostly chickens and sheep. A hay barn leans into a pasture with a ram and 55 ewes. Lambs lounge among the chickens in clover. Martha the sheep dog stands guard. "Our philosophy is that healthy



Nampa farmer Janie Burns is a pioneer of the locavore movement. “I’m selling more than the meat,” said Burns. “I’m selling the values.”

soil grows healthy grass, which grows healthy animals. We try our very best to provide an environment that gives the animals optimum health. They have clean water, fresh air, shade and shelter, nutritious food and exercise. We never use growth hormones.” Burns and a business partner also promote responsible farming at their energy-smart poultry processing plant in New Plymouth, the first of its kind in the state. Soon, with USDA approval, chickens, turkeys, ducks and geese will be sold nationwide.

“I’m selling much more than the meat,” said Burns. “I’m selling the values—the managing the vegetation, the integration with the whole farm.” The London-based World Society for the Protection of Animals has twice lauded Meadowlark Farm for its treatment of livestock. “Animals that are treated well just pragmatically are better,” Burns continued. “I think [humane treatment] speaks to our soul. There’s a very fine line between feeding animals poorly and treating humans poorly. There’s something emotional perhaps we can’t measure that’s important to me in this.”

18 local simple fresh



Meadowlark Farm

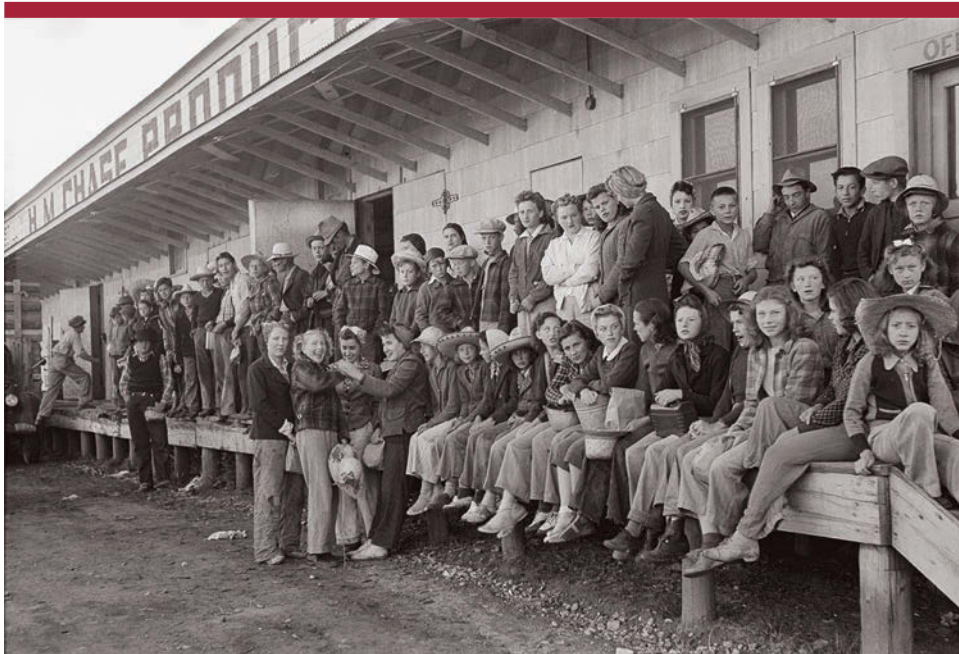
The Western meadowlark, yellow-breasted and perched on a fence post, embodies the organic values and methods of Janie Burns and her small-acreage farm.

What is good for the soul, said Burns, is also sound economics. At Meadowlark Farm she pioneered a wholesale marketing service called the Idaho Organic Cooperative. Gradually she prospered by precisely labeling meat with her logo and contact information and by answering questions and giving tours. Active in the Idaho Pastured Poultry Association, she is also a founding vendor of Capital City Public Market. Via the Treasure Valley Food Coalition, where Burns serves on the board, kindred spirits promote community gardens, community kitchens,

preservation of farming landscape and the valley's unique sense of place.

"Local food is more than just local food," according to the coalition's promotional video. "Local food is about stewardship of local resources and building a community that's prosperous and resilient." The Treasure Valley Food Coalition is also about statistics. "The average distance from food to plate is 1,500 miles," says Burns in her PowerPoint presentation. "It takes 10 calories of fossil fuel to produce 1 food calorie. There are three days of food supply in grocery stores; 63 percent of the Boise metro population is overweight or obese."

The obvious solution, for Burns and her coalition, is a return to the decentralized farming of the 1950s when the bulk of the valley's food was locally grown. From 1950 to 2007, said Burns, the number of farms in Idaho decreased by nearly 40 percent. The number of farms for Idaho's signature crop, the potato, had a 94 percent decrease. What used to be thousands of small potato farms in Idaho is now merely a few hundred very large farms. Statewide trends were exaggerated in the Treasure Valley as suburban hous-



Russell Lee/Farm Security Administration

Teenagers line up to work in the pea fields, Canyon County, 1941.

ing competed for land. In 1950, for example, Canyon County supported 57 acres of strawberries on 54 small-scale farms. Only one farm remained by 2007. Eighteen farms in Canyon County grew 60 acres of carrots. All that remains some 60 years later is a single acre of carrots on four struggling farms. With the decline of small farming came the loss crop diversity. As farmers sold out to subdivisions and Simplot, crops became pesticide-laden commercially engineered monocultures—less diversified and more vulnerable to whims of the global market and agricultural blight.

Once in a valley of diversified farming there were multiple streams of income: corner neighborhood dairies, gristmills, local markets for local produce, butcher shops connected to farms and small food processing centers. No longer. Fewer farms in the credit pool have globalized food and increased the risk for community bankers. Farming's purchasing power shifted away from Main Street. Now some 98 percent of the food consumed in the Treasure Valley is trucked in from other places. Locally raised cattle and poul-

20 local simple fresh



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Technology increases the yield of farming. More farming on less acreage displaces the family farm. Pictured: a turn-of-the-century Idaho barn.

try are rare. Little if any country-grown food reaches the nation's tax-subsidized school lunch programs.

With the monoculture of crops comes the deterioration of the valley's small-farming infrastructure. "The packing houses, the processing facilities for the meat, for vegetables, storing those things, the canneries, the flour mills—all those things that used to support our economy and feed ourselves have vanished," said Burns. "See the kind of hollowed out towns. You don't have to be a genius to see that there's just no money in rural Idaho. Those rural economies that once depended on agriculture, their money is somewhere else."

The goal for Burns is not to ban long-distance farming. More fundamentally, she wants to see a shift in values and with it a healthy return to

organic methods and community pride in healthier food. Open-air public markets bode well for the valley's future of local food coalitions. In Idaho since 2006, the number of public markets has more than doubled from 26 to about 60. None has been more successful than Boise's downtown farmers market where Burns sells most of her lamb. There on Saturdays, discriminating consumers want to learn as much as they can. How was the animal treated? Where was it processed?

Burns applauds the questions. "We should think about what we're eating," said Burns, who prefers informed consumers. "Everything we put in our mouths makes a statement about our values and what we want our world to be like. So if we are eating junk, well, maybe that's the kind of world we want, but if we make conscientious choices about paying fair wages to the people who grow that food for us or making sure the environment is well taken care of, we start making the right choices." Through the lens of local, said Burns, we learn to value the organic connection between the health of our bodies and the health of our farms.

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