



casual spot in Lower Nob Hill, in 2012 and the Square, a North Beach tavern, in 2014. If business was brisk at all of the restaurants, the chefs figured, they would gobble up enough produce to justify planting a field of greens instead of relying on big local wholesale produce distributors like Cooks Company or GreenLeaf. So in 2013, when McNamara and his family found a house attached to 83 spectacular acres at the top of the Santa Cruz Mountains, they christened it Dark Hill Farm and got to work. At the time, the chefs didn't know that they wouldn't renew Sweet Woodruff's lease three years later. Or that the Square would stumble almost as soon as it opened. Or about myxomatosis.

**WHAT DRIVES** a chef to start farming? It's not a desire to work harder or sleep even less. And it's not for the publicity. The pursuit is just too hard and too expensive, particularly now, when restaurant economics are what they are, small farmers are struggling with rising labor costs, and the farm-to-table concept has become so overused that it obscures the inherently remarkable feat of conjuring food from dirt.

If anything, chefs are driven by dreams: dreams of direct access to the best ingredients, of closing the circuit between the land and their restaurant, of having a place like upstate New York's Blue Hill or Sweden's Fäviken or Healdsburg's Single Thread, restaurant-farms where dinner doubles as an agrarian master's thesis. Numerous Bay Area restaurants have culinary gardens or greenhouses, including the French Laundry, Flour + Water, Napa's Oenotri, Saison, the Perennial, and the Restaurant at Meadowood, while countless others have direct partnerships with small farms. Chef Matthew Accarrino, for example, collaborates with the Yountville farmer Peter Jacobsen, who also supplies the French Laundry, to grow produce for SPQR. The San Francisco Zen Center's Green Gulch Farm, located near Muir Beach, has supplied Greens with most of its organic fruits and vegetables ever since the vegetarian restaurant opened

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## Farm to Fallacy

Deep down, every chef secretly wants to be a farmer. But when they actually act on that desire, reality bites—hard.

BY REBECCA FLINT MARX

It started with a garden, but you could also say that it started with a desire for control. When Matt McNamara and Teague Moriarty began planting seeds in McNamara's parents' backyard in Los Gatos, they were excited by all of the ingredients they could suddenly get for Sons & Daughters, the serene little Michelin-starred restaurant they had opened near Union Square. This was seven years ago, back when farm-to-table restaurants were already very much a thing but, as Moriarty says, "little clamshells of pristine microgreens and flowers weren't easy to come by."

For the next two or so years, the chefs coaxed edible flowers and obscure herbs like yarrow and salad burnet from the soil, eventually adding beehives, edible snails, and Buff Orpington chickens to the mix. The arrangement worked: Even with the hiring

of a full-time gardener, the finances penciled out, and the money McNamara and Moriarty saved on food costs allowed them to lower the price of their seven-course tasting menu from \$135 to \$96. Plus, they now had access to some superb ingredients, grown to their precise specifications. Things were going so well that McNamara began talking about trading up: He was spending more time at the garden, and he and his wife and their two (and soon three) young children were ready to leave the city. Buying land "would be a good investment," Moriarty recalls his partner saying. "We could move the backyard garden to more actual farm production."

The idea made sense for another reason: The chefs were in the process of expanding their holdings from one restaurant to three, opening Sweet Woodruff, a fast-



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in 1979. Michael Tusk, the chef-owner of Cotogna and Quince, partners with Peter Martinelli's Fresh Run Farm in Bolinas; as part of the arrangement, he sends his staff to the farm to participate in harvests and produce deliveries, and also sells weekly CSA-style boxes of excess produce to staff and guests at Cotogna.

And for a decade, one of the most famous chef-partner relationships in the country could be found in the Santa Cruz Mountains, where Cynthia Sandberg's 22-acre Love Apple Farms grew a biodynamic bounty for David Kinch's Manresa; the exclusive partnership shaped Kinch's inventive cuisine and burnished his reputation as a culinary pioneer. Although Sandberg and Kinch went their separate ways last year—Sandberg told the press that she wanted to focus on new projects—Manresa, which now gets its organic produce from other local farms, continues to be emblematic of the kind of close, harmonious relationship many chefs dream of having with a farm.

But a restaurant with its own farm, one that is actually the property of the restaurant's chef or owner, continues to be a much more rarefied conceit. In addition to Single Thread, there are a couple of other notable examples in the North Bay: In Sebastopol, Handline and Peter Lowell's get about 50 percent of their produce from Two Belly Acres Farm, which is owned by the family of Natalie Goble, Handline's chef and co-owner. Over in Healdsburg, Shed, a café and market, gets about half of its specialty flowers and heirloom produce and herbs from HomeFarm, the 20-acre plot of land that belongs to Shed owners Doug Lipton and Cindy Daniel. In Sunol, the brothers Dennis, David, and Daniel Lee own a one-acre organic plot called Namu Farm, where a farmer named Kristyn Leach grows hard-to-find Asian vegetables and herbs for Namu Gaji, the Lees' equally hard-to-pin-down Mission restaurant. And up in the Capay Valley, Dennis Leary, the owner of the sandwich shops the Sentinel and the Golden West and a small fleet of San Francisco bars, farms 40 acres he bought in 2012.

"There's an additional depth of having a farm and, for the cooks, of having that magic of seeing that radish or turnip come back four months later," says Perry Hoffman, the chef at Shed, who once planted a huge culinary garden for Yountville's Domaine Chandon estate when he was the chef at the restaurant there. But actually running

a farm is a far cry from procuring your goods from one—or from a DIY vegetable patch. "Chefs tend to have a couple of raised beds to plant herbs—that's gardening," Hoffman says. "That's a whole different thing than farming."

Sometimes, McNamara says, he'll meet chefs who grew up on farms and he'll ask them when they're going to start their own. "They look at you like you're a crazy man," he says. "Like, 'Why in the world? Do you know what it's like waking up every day at seven and caring for animals and vegetables when you didn't get home from work until 1 a.m.? That's not humanly possible.'"

**PART OF McNAMARA** and Moriarty's inspiration for Dark Hill Farm came from the relationship between Manresa and Love Apple Farms; Dark Hill was likewise created primarily to feed Sons & Daughters, which,



**Top:** Lettuce rows at HomeFarm, run by Cindy Daniel and Doug Lipton, co-owners of Healdsburg's Shed café.

**Bottom:** Teague Moriarty and Matt McNamara, the city chefs who dreamed of farming.

the thinking went, would in turn subsidize the farm. The chefs weren't interested in selling to other chefs; the whole point was to grow what they wanted specifically for their restaurant, and in doing so to have the farm and Sons & Daughters become symbiotic organisms. At the peak of production, Moriarty estimates, Dark Hill supplied about 80 percent of the restaurant's produce, or "as much as you can without getting your onions and potatoes." McNamara and his team of two full-time farmhands grew more than 100 different fruits, vegetables, herbs, and edible flowers, and also started breeding rabbits and chickens. The farm's output dictated the menu in the same way that a pair of shoes can dictate an outfit, but though Moriarty (who ran the day-to-day at Sons & Daughters while McNamara oversaw the farm) enjoyed the challenge of finding different ways to use up ingredients, he also found himself beholden to it. "It was like, OK, we have to have rabbit on the menu two times, so how are we going to do this?" he says. "It wasn't about making dishes that made the most sense conceptually and as an arc of flavors on a tasting menu."

And then there was the Square, which was having its own problems. McNamara and Moriarty had intended it to be a sort of elevated American tavern, but their North Beach customers weren't taking kindly to the concept, or to the 15 percent service charge (to distribute tips equally between front- and back-of-the-house staff) that the chefs had initially

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instituted. Business was slow, which meant that produce was languishing in the walk-in; the situation became, in Moriarty's words, "Like, wow, how many things can we really do with tomatoes here?" A few months after it opened, he and McNamara transformed the restaurant into a bar with four flat-screen TVs, and while the Square has managed to stay open, its customers, Moriarty says, "don't give a shit" about the provenance of the tomatoes in the panzanella salad.

Losing business at the Square meant losing money on the farm: Excess produce was going into compost or being fed to the animals, and the approximately \$20,000 McNamara and Moriarty were spending every month on rent, utilities, water, labor, soil, and seeds was becoming unsustainable. Whatever they planted cost three times the amount they would pay for the same ingredient at market price, and so the question became, McNamara says, "Should we plant this? Does the quality taste that much better? Broccoli, no. Tomatoes, yes."

And, of course, there was nature. The drought, the mudslides, the bugs that would eat the key component of a well-planned dish. The unknown creature that attacked the farm's three goats, leaving two with broken necks and large head wounds, along with a baby that, Moriarty remembers, "was just cowering in the corner and shaking." And finally there was the myxomatosis, a usually fatal viral infection carried by wild rabbits. Every few years it surfaces in California, and last year it appeared on Dark Hill Farm via a mosquito bite. For three months, McNamara tried in vain to quarantine his almost 600 rabbits and nurse them back to health, but despite his efforts, he ultimately had to have them all slaughtered. "These were my rabbits, and that was very tough," he says. "To have them get sick from a local mosquito—it's one thing if it's my fault, but it's a mosquito. And that's one of the tough things about farms that you have to go through."

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**DENNIS LEARY IS** reminiscing about the tomato seeds he planted last

March, the ones he thought would make him "the first guy in the city" to have nature bestow a tomato upon him that summer—that is, until a rainstorm drowned them all. He planted a second round. A month later, a windstorm came along. "I ended up going to a garden center and buying some scraggly-ass tomato plants," he says. "So I spent two months on something that's a total failure. That was one of 50 things I failed at."

In the five years since he bought 40 acres next to Cache Creek in the Capay Valley, Leary has become exceedingly comfortable with incessant failure. "In farming, you fail so hard and fail so utterly," he says. But if anything, that's only encouraged him. He loves solving the myriad problems that arise. He loves "all this cool shit you can grow," like the Trinidad scorpion peppers he was thinking of planting before realizing that he needed to take a different approach: "I told myself, realistically speaking, based on your history of failure, how much do you think you can accomplish this summer before you get overwhelmed?" he says.

Leary still can't say what, exactly, drew him to farming, although "obviously," he says, "I'm a glutton for punishment." He's not interested in "the whole farm-to-table program"—and if he was, he says, "I wouldn't talk about it. People are sick of talking about it." While he acknowledges that a restaurant with its own farm carries certain bragging rights, he also knows it doesn't make real economic sense, at least for his restaurants: The cost of repeated failure is too high.

But there's an urgency to farming that's familiar to anyone who has cooked in a restaurant, the sense that you'll never accomplish everything you need to, and that your work is never done. He likes this about it. "You have to use your body and senses, but there's a gambling kind of risk," Leary says. "And layer upon layer of different kinds of education." It's an alluring proposition, particularly for the kind of chef who thrives on both adrenaline and obsessive quests for knowledge—and who understands that the only thing you can really control on a farm is how you react when things inevitably go wrong.

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ber, when chef Kyle Connaughton and his farmer wife, Katina, opened Single Thread in Healdsburg, the restaurant's five-acre farm was already working in harmony with the kitchen, supplying it with 70 percent of its produce. Although the Connaughtons knew that the farm, which borders the Russian River, had the potential to flood, they weren't expecting the three and a half feet of water that drowned it during the winter's heavy rains. Though they were able to harvest a few of their crops and use them in the kitchen, much of what they salvaged succumbed to root rot after several harvests. "Nature," Katina says over email, "is very humbling."

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**LOOKING BACK,** Moriarty says, the myxomatosis happened at a good time. He and McNamara had been on the fence about how to move forward with the farm, and Moriarty had grown frustrated by the constraints and lack of consistency its produce imposed on his menu at Sons & Daughters. Also, there was the press, or the lack thereof. Though McNamara and Moriarty say they didn't start their farm to get coverage, they were both disappointed by the media's lack of interest in it. Seemingly every other restaurant in the Bay Area was claiming (often falsely) that it had some kind of special farm partnership, or passing its rooftop garden off as a farm, but here the two of them were, "putting in a fortune to do a real farm," Moriarty says, "and people didn't get it." They also grappled with how to explain their efforts to Sons & Daughters' customers without lecturing them. "You're going to get one table a night that's interested in that stuff," Moriarty says. "But, I mean, I wouldn't want to hear it."

And so last fall the chefs began negotiating what amounts to a sole custody agreement: Moriarty would give up the Square and become the sole proprietor of Sons & Daughters, while McNamara would own the Square and the farm. Both stress that the split was an amicable one, and that it's given each of them the chance to focus on their respective passion projects. The Sons & Daughters kitchen,

says Moriarty, is "where I was happy." McNamara, meanwhile, has been bitten by the same bug that had its way with Leary: He prefers to spend his days at Dark Hill, which he refers to as his "little baby." He's got 250 chickens, 200 orchard trees, almost 52 hogs, and a zeal for life he didn't possess when he spent all of his waking hours under fluorescent lights in a restaurant kitchen. "You're almost a vampire there," he says. "You might not know what season it is, you're working so hard."

Something else farming has given him? A surpassing disdain for anything calling itself farm-to-table. McNamara can expound at length on greenwashing, on chefs who pass off the Ohio-grown heirloom tomatoes they bought from a supplier as the products of a local farm, and on customers and journalists who take what these chefs say at face value. The upshot of it all, he says, is that the farm-to-table trend is actually hurting small local farmers, who are being forced to sell their crops to restaurants at reduced market prices in order to compete with the big produce suppliers who now offer the kinds of specialty "farm-to-table" produce once found only on small farms. "Their name gets used as a PR element," McNamara says, "and they get nothing in return."

While he's thinking of selling Dark Hill's produce to some chef friends, McNamara is more interested in figuring out how he might sell to the local community; he finds it more satisfying to connect with engaged regular people than with chefs who are too overworked to ask him how he got his egg yolks so orange. He still grows a lot of produce for Sons & Daughters, but Moriarty is also free to go elsewhere for his ingredients—meaning that now, he says with a touch of irony, "we can focus on the food."

He's happy with what he and McNamara accomplished, and happier still with where Sons & Daughters is now. He wouldn't even rule out doing it all again, but only on a farm with a small, Fäviken-style hotel-restaurant on the property. He doesn't consider himself disillusioned. "It was just a huge, huge learning experience," Moriarty says. "Like, there's a reason no one does this." ■