NOFA Summer Conference Intensives Offer Skills for Body, Farm & Climate

by Nicole Belanger

The 41st annual NOFA Summer Conference will be held August 14-16, 2015 at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Presenters representing all seven NOFA state chapters will be offering a weekend of hands-on learning. Participants will gain new skills, make new connections, and enjoy the immersive Summer Conference experience. See www.nofasummerconference.org to learn about work exchange, affordable accommodations, and group registration, as well as the 144 main conference workshops and Children’s and Teen Conferences. Registration is now open.

This year’s pre-conference intensives take place on Friday, August 14, with four half-day seminars and one full-day seminar. Half-day sessions will cover topics including herbs, carbon farming, pastured poultry, and beekeeping. They run from 9:00 am to 12:30 pm, leaving time to attend the first set of main conference workshops beginning at 2:00 pm on Friday. Dr. Natasha Campbell-McBride – one of the two keynote speakers for 2015 – offers the full-day seminar, Healing your body with the GAPS Nutritional Protocol, from 9:00 am to 5:30 pm.

In 2015, we’re returning to a workshop schedule with two slots on Friday, three on Saturday and three on Sunday. We’re also breathing new life and energy into the Saturday afternoon Country Fair, including music, games, skill demonstrations, contests and more.

Pastured Poultry: From Brooder to Bag with Ken Gies
Ken Gies and his wife own and operate a poultry hatchery in Upstate New York. Gies buys in eggs from several suppliers, hatching a total of about 80,000 hybrid layers, turkeys, and broilers. The birds are certifiably organic, fed organic grain from day one. The Gies’ prove out the genetics of the birds, raising 50-100 birds a year for their own use.

In his seminar, Gies will cover the basics from when chicks arrive: brooding, troubleshooting, introducing birds to pasture, feeding rations, and monitoring birds in the field. He will also discuss a persistent new strain of Avian Influenza and how small-scale growers can manage to get disease out of their systems. Part of the workshop will be devoted to the hands-on construction of low-cost equipment, including pens, feeders, waterers, and nest boxes. Processing will be briefly discussed, and there will be a demonstration of shackles building (a shackle is a device which holds the bird by the feet and suspends it in the air) and bleeder cones. The shackles that participants build will be for sale at cost.

Shortly after moving to New York from Canada in the late 1990s, Gies connected with the Northeast Pastured Poultry Association (NEPPA). Formed collaboratively by Heifer International and others, NEPPA’s mission was to expand the base of pastured poultry producers in the Northeast and create a regional hatchery. Though Heifer typically works internationally, the organization determined that the region was in need of economic bolstering and supported the project.

A SARE feasibility study determined that the hatchery could be profitable in five years (though it actually took 10). Once developed and up and running, NEPPA disbanded, having (continued on page 12)
Thanks so much for the supplement to The Natural Farmer! – Jack

Hi Jack,

With nature, not trying to dominate it. It is a privilege to make more converts to sanity with this issue. Finally got started reading the winter Natural Farmer and wanted to let you know how wonderful it is. Thank you for examining this issue with such clarity and unashamedness. Your little editorial is spot on and I hope you and more converts to sanity with this issue. Thanks for continuing to raise the bar for all of us. Blessings,

Joel Salatin

Hi Jack,

Your kind words mean a lot to me and I appreciate your taking the time to write. More and more people seem to be getting the message about farming with nature, not trying to dominate it. It is a privilege to be involed in learning about and spreading this information! – Jack

To the Natural Farmer,

In the Summer, 2014 issue of The Natural Farmer, page A21, there is an article by Donald Sutherland and Jack Kittredge called “The Cigiscenic Hybrid Seed Consortium”. This article mentions that agricultural business interests might soon take over the organic seed market. This is a part of a larger trend. The supermarket where I shop in Wallingford, CT, has organic produce and organic packaged foods, but they come from thousands of miles away. I say to myself: “That is not what I mean by ORGANIC.”

The brave souls who started organic farms 20 or 30 years ago are having trouble competing with large-scale organic production. Organic consumers have fought back by supporting CSAs and local organic markets, but I think there is one more thing we can do. Why not have a new category of organic called “artisan organic” or “legacy organic” or “heirloom organic” or “vintage organic”?

Let’s take the example of fresh “Romaine hearts”. I can buy conventional for 14 cents an ounce or organic (from California) for 29 cents an ounce. As an organic consumer, I would be willing to pay 34 cents an ounce or 37 cents an ounce for “artisan organic” and that might bring local producers into the market. This would not have to be a separate certification process, but rather just a few questions about 1) total annual revenue, 2) number of full-time employees, and 3) total number of acres under cultivation.

This would create a market niche for people who work hard on their own labor to create healthy food for their own communities. Organic consumers have come forward to support organic agriculture, local CSAs, and local organic markets, so why not take the next step?

Alan Eddy, Wallingford, CT

Dear Alan,

Thanks for your suggestion. I think most supermarkets that carry organic food in the northeast would probably qualify for your new category if it is based on small size, as you seem to be proposing. Speaking as an owner of one of the farms which might qualify, I think the bigger issue for most of us is that selling through retailers is often just not pracitcally given our scale. Where CSAs and farmers’ markets and roadside stands work for us because we can move relatively small quantities of produce (no huge boucheris of something or less) produced for a few weeks during the year, this is harder in most retail operations, where they want larger deliveries (often pallet loads) and want them for longer seasons. The retailers, of course, charge you for the privilege of giving you larger orders by paying you significantly less per item than we have in our market for the original 29 cents it is usually better to sell it there. But others may be in different situations and be juggling different priorities, so thanks for your idea and maybe some folks will want to act on it. – Jack

Dear Natural Farmer,

It is possible to have an extra copy of The Natural Farmer mailed to me? If so, please tell me the cost and I will send a check and you can send the copy. I would include the membership dues at the same time if you could tell me what it is. It is the B section that I want – The Real Cost of Food. It is so needed. I know people who do not inform themselves on cost of price and they buy chemical food because life is hard and thinking is hard. Reading labels is hard. Avoiding big factory farms (organic or not) takes research. I have in mind friends without computers who have few sources of reliable reporting. They buy food grown on chemical farms and believe they cannot afford to change. I want to lend out The Real Cost of Food to people who just might learn from it.

You do a splendid job with clear and truthful writing and I am grateful if you think it wise to download and have it printed here, I’ll do it that way. I don’t want to cause you trouble.

We have two small stores and two supermarkets with (partly) organic food in Great Barrington (near

(continued on page 4)
Dear Eric and Anna,

Thank you very much for the very generous gift for the matching offer! We will well on our way to raising another thousand dollars to help support the print version of the paper. I should report that the NOFA Interstate Council seems committed to keeping the paper going and we are trying to work on ways to put it up as a searchable, downloadable online resource as well as in print for the NOFA members who do not want to be consuming paper. I am very optimistic that we can have both versions viable soon, and supporting each other.

I like your project of calculating the land base required to provide necessary fertility and energy for the food-producing agriculture. I have not seen any work on this question and it is clearly important. As you know the caloric yield of agriculture has gone from a significant gain in pre-modern times to something like a 10 to 1 loss, currently. So I'm sure that it takes conventional agriculture 10 calories of energy to produce one calorie of food. Since most of those energy calories come in the form of fossil fuel, we are obviously in for major changes. Either we will continue to have fuel and burn it, thus overheating the planet and bringing on catastrophic weather, or the fuel will run out or we will agree not to burn it, and we will have to return to an agriculture based on draft animals and manure. If you, or anyone else, would like to put pencil to paper around anywhere. Thank you. – Ann Clay, Arlington, VT

Dear Leanna,

Thanks so much for your generous donation. Julie and I are very moved by the amount of appreciation readers are expressing and donations they are sending to help keep publishing the paper version. It is really up to the NOFA chapters collectively to decide, but expressions like yours go a long way to indicate to them how deep the support for keeping the paper version alive is. – Jack

Dear Jack and Julie,

It's our privilege to send $500 to the TNF matching gift fund. As we live off the web, we would like to keep receiving the print version of your fine newspaper TNF. I like your project of calculating the land base required to provide necessary fertility and energy for the food-producing agriculture. I have not seen any work on this question and it is clearly important. As you know the caloric yield of agriculture has gone from a significant gain in pre-modern times to something like a 10 to 1 loss, currently. So I'm sure that it takes conventional agriculture 10 calories of energy to produce one calorie of food. Since most of those energy calories come in the form of fossil fuel, we are obviously in for major changes. Either we will continue to have fuel and burn it, thus overheating the planet and bringing on catastrophic weather, or the fuel will run out or we will agree not to burn it, and we will have to return to an agriculture based on draft animals and manure. If you, or anyone else, would like to put pencil to paper around anywhere. Thank you. – Jack

Dear Jack and Julie,

Thank you for your kind words. They make a big difference to me. I generally overprint a few of each issue for the continuation of the print version of The Natural Farmer. Kind regards. – Margot Dilmaghani

Dear Jack,

If you, or anyone else, would like to put pencil to paper around anywhere. Thank you. – Ann Clay, Arlington, VT

Dear Leanna,

Thanks so much for your generous donation. Julie and I are very moved by the amount of appreciation readers are expressing and donations they are sending to help keep publishing the paper version. It is really up to the NOFA chapters collectively to decide, but expressions like yours go a long way to indicate to them how deep the support for keeping the paper version alive is. – Jack

Dear Jack and Julie,

The Nelsons moved to Philadelphia in 1956 and lived in Powelton Village, a culturally diverse and historic neighborhood. They spent four months at Koinonia Farm in Americus, Georgia, which had come under attack for refusal to discriminate based on skin color. Shots were fired into the community during the Nelsons’ stay in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Juanita was arrested several times due to activities connected with tax resistance and civil rights protests.

With Wally, Juanita began her farming life in 1970 when they moved to the city of Phoenix, Arizona, where they farmed the 260 acres on skin color. Shots were fired into the community during the Nelsons’ stay in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Juanita was arrested several times due to activities connected with tax resistance and civil rights protests.

With Wally, Juanita began her farming life in 1970 when they moved to the city of Phoenix, Arizona, where they farmed the 260 acres in the back yard. It was all an eye-opener to see how much we were living our own small utopia in the city and the wilderness, the city and we decided to find ways to shrink our farm’s footprints.

I am not sure how to calculate the real cost of conventional food production using this total land use measure because it is so difficult to determine the fossil footprint of tractor fuel and chemical fertilizer. In putting together the Supplement, did you come across any information on the number of acres-years of biomass that are required to produce 1 gallon of gasoline? – Ann Clay, Arlington, VT

Dear Jack,

Juanita (Morrow) Nelson, 91, died peacefully following a period of declining health on Monday, March 9, 2015, at Poet’s Seat Health Care Center in Greenfield, Massachusetts. She was a lifelong activist who was an early proponent of the local food system and of non-violent resistance to the United States military.

Juanita graduated in 1941 from Cleveland’s Central High School and attended Howard University in Washington, D.C. She served as secretary of the university’s NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) and experienced her first arrest for civil disobedience while protest- ing an army recruitment segregation in the nation’s capital in 1943, she enrolled in Western Reserve University, majoring in journalism, and worked as a reporter for the Cleveland Call & Post. In that role, she met her lifelong partner, Wally Nelson, while working on a story about segregated conditions in the jail in which Wally was awaiting trial as a conscientious objector. Juanita worked with CORE (Congress of Racial Equality) on both local and national levels.

In 1948, Wally and Juanita refused to pay taxes for war and military preparations and helped found Peacekeepers, a pacifist group that took its name from the biblical Beatitudes: “Blessed are the peace-makers…. “The group advocated non-payment of any war tax and received permission from the town to build an outhouse.

Their 1974 move to Woolman Hill, site of a Quaker conference center in Deerfield, MA, brought the Nelsonto their first winter farmers market in Massachusetts, date unknown. The couple also became involved in the local food movement and started their own small wholesale produce company.

For the last several years, Juanita lived with a series of close friends, including Eveline MacDowell of Maine, Kastanopolous, and, most recently, Betty Corner, Randy Kohler, and Kip Mooeller.

Juanita was pre-deceased by her partner Wally Nelson and her brothers Charles Morrow and Oscar Morrow, Jr. She is survived by many nieces, neph- swestern Oregon, and in Ohio, and is in a large national and international family of friends and fellow travelers.

End-of-life arrangements are being handled by the Eternal Blessings Cremation Service in Gulfport, Florida.

Memorial donations may be sent to the Valley Community Land Trust, Box 152, Greenfield, MA 01302, and to the Wally and Juanita Nelson Scholarship Fund at Greenfield Community College, c/o Robin McDonald, 175 Providence St., Greenfield, MA 01302.
News Notes

compiled by Jack Kittredge

Organic Production Enhances Milk Nutritional Quality by Shifting Fatty Acid Composition

Over the last century, intakes of omega-6 fatty acids in Western diets have dramatically increased, while omega-3 intakes have fallen. Resulting omega-6/omega-3 intakes have risen to nutritionally undesirable levels, between 10 and 15, compared to the more optimal ratio near 2.3. A study, however, conducted by the Bee Informed Partnership in collaboration with the Apiary Inspector Association of America and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) reported results of the first large-scale, international study of bee population health.

The study was conducted by the Bee Informed Partnership in collaboration with the Apiary Inspectors of America and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). Preliminary results indicate that U.S. beekeepers were hardest hit in the summer of 2014, with an average loss of 27.4 percent of their hives compared to the 19.8 percent the previous year. According to the USDA, U.S. beekeepers reported 42.1 percent of the total number of colonies managed from April 2014 through April 2015, much higher than the 34.2 percent from the year prior. The court was not convinced, noting that there were no other states with conflicting labeling laws. The Court was also not convinced, noting that there were no other states with conflicting labeling laws. The Court was also not convinced, noting that there were no other states with conflicting labeling laws. The Court was also not convinced, noting that there were no other states with conflicting labeling laws. 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Chipotle Removes All Food Containing GMOs

The Organic Trade Association (OTA) has distributed a description of its "organic checkoff" program through the USDA. The push for an organic checkoff program, much like those already set up by the beef, pork, dairy, avocado, Christmas tree and nearly two dozen other agricultural industries, has been on since a provision contained in the 2014 farm bill allowed for its creation. OTA lobbied for the farm bill measure.

Unlike other checkoff programs, however, an organic one would be the first marketing program for a production method, not a specific commodity, and tasked with covering everything from organic apples produced in Washington state to imports of organic olives from the Middle East. That means promoting a broad range of products. Also, the program would face issues of how to talk up organic without implying it is healthier or at all better than its conventionally grown counter parts. Checkoff program claims, according to USDA rules, cannot disparage other commodities.

But an organic checkoff program comes with some other difficulties. Small farmers — a good chunk of organic producers — might be priced out of the new program's decision-making process. The checkoff framework calls for all growers with "gross organic revenue of greater than $250,000" to be assessed 10 cents for every $100 in net organic sales. For operations that fall under that $250,000 threshold, the assessment is voluntary. But only those who pay can vote in the checkoff. Of the approximately 14,000 USDA-certified organic farms, as many as 70 percent would fall under that $250,000 threshold, according to Ed Malby of the Northeast Organic Dairy Producers Alliance.

Patty Lovera, an assistant director at Food and Water Watch, is concerned about the program. "The way checkoffs for other commodities work is that many organic farmers are wary of such an arrangement where their dollars are being controlled by giant food processing companies." Checkoffs have contributed to the disappearance of family farms, noting that hog producing farms have fallen by about 70 percent since the introduction of the pork checkoff, and reductions have also been seen in dairy and beef farms since their programs took effect, she wrote.

But the rules really couldn't be written in a different way, said Missy Hughes, general counsel for Organic Valley and president of the OTA board of directors. "We've really tried to explore as many options as we can" but the law "requires that you have to have to have a vote," she said. The $250,000 threshold was chosen because that is the limit for USDA's definition of a small farmer, she explained, adding that setting different payment levels for smaller farmers would come with its own pitfalls. "When you start talking about paying at a level that's nonsensical, you pay a nickel and then you get to participate, that just becomes a problem on its own," she said.

What's more, the $250,000 in gross profits line isn't an exemption, but rather a level under which the assessment becomes voluntary, said Laura Batcha, OTA's executive director. "If you choose to participate, you get the full governing rights, you get to vote," Batcha said, adding that small farmers who responded to the surveys from OTA on the checkoff are on board with the program. "Nobody would be excluded from participating," she said.

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The Natural Farmer

Summer, 2015

Groups Challenge USDA Over Sunset Rule Change

Organic stakeholders have filed a lawsuit in federal court maintaining that the USDA violated the federal rulemaking process when it changed established procedures for reviewing the allowed synthetic and prohibited substances used in producing organic food. A coalition of 15 organic food producers and farmers, consumer, environmental, and certification groups alleged the court to require USDA to reconsider its decision on the rule change and reinstitute the agency’s customary public hearing and comment process.

Under the law, a review of these materials takes place on a five-year cycle, with a procedure for revisiting it if needed. Plaintiffs in this case maintain that the USDA’s organic rule establishes a public process that creates public trust in the USDA’s organic label, which has resulted in exponential growth in organic sales over the last two decades.

At issue in the lawsuit is a rule that implements the organic law’s “sunset provision,” which since its origins has been interpreted to require all listed materials to cycle off the National List of Allowed and Prohibited Substances every five years unless the National Organic Standards Board (NOSB) votes by a two-thirds majority to relist them. In making its decision, the NOSB is charged with considering public input, new science, and new information on available alternatives. In September, 2013, in a complete reversal of the accepted process, USDA announced a definitive change in the rule that had been operating under since the inception of the organic program without any public input. Now, materials can remain on the National List in perpetuity unless the NOSB takes initiative to vote it off the List.

In a joint statement, the plaintiffs, representing a broad cross-section of interests in organic, said: “It’s one of the worst agencies in terms of direct industry influence in how scientists are handled,” said Jeff Ruch, executive director of PEER, in describing USDA’s protection of scientists. “There’s not much of a political buffer between big agribusinesses and managers at the agency. In our work, we’ve found that scientists in the agency that are producing studies that are drawing industry concern often find their careers complicated.”

USDA employs thousands of scientists involved in a broad array of work on plant production, livestock, food safety and the environment. The department prides itself on being one of the world’s premier research institutions and has a vested interest in ensuring the credibility of its scientists. Thus, such allegations challenge the department’s scientific integrity.

PEER is filing a petition to force USDA to beef up its policies on scientific integrity. The petition seeks to get USDA to adopt some of the best practices for scientific integrity used by other federal agencies to protect scientists from having their work suppressed or altered.

source: DTN.com, March 26, 2015

Petition to USDA Demands Changes in Scientific Integrity Policies, Procedures

USDA needs to strengthen its internal rules to better protect the department’s scientists from outside political and industry pressures over their research, a group alleges in a petition to the department. The group, Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER), charges that USDA scientists “routinely suffer retaliation and harassment” from managers and private industry for research that conflicts with agribusinesses.

“It’s one of the worst agencies in terms of direct industry influence in how scientists are handled,” said Jeff Ruch, executive director of PEER, in describing USDA’s protection of scientists. “There’s not much of a political buffer between big agribusinesses and managers at the agency. In our work, we’ve found that scientists in the agency that are producing studies that are drawing industry concern often find their careers complicated.”

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source: DTN.com, March 26, 2015

The Natural Farmer

Summer, 2015

Studies of occupational exposure to glyphosate in the U.S., Canada and Sweden, which they wrote showed “increased risks for non-Hodgkin lymphoma” along with a positive trend for some ailments in mice in separate studies. Though the researchers noted “limited evidence” that glyphosate was a carcinogen for humans, they classified it as probably carcinogenic to them, according to the article.

The assessment followed a meeting this month among 17 experts representing 11 countries, who evaluated the cancer-causing potential of glyphosate and four other pesticides. The research agency, which hasn't previously classified glyphosate, monitors global cancer cases while trying to identify causes and responses.

Northern Organic Farmers Association (NOFA) Summer Conference

Agriculture Symposium: Carbon Farming: Regenerative Agriculture for the 21st Century

By: Mr. James Stedman

Carbon Farming: Regenerative Agriculture for the 21st Century

The story of a farm: Growers can communicate their use of carbon farming and regenerative agriculture. Stedman is also the organizer of the internationally acclaimed Carbon Farming Course, training participants in a wide variety of carbon farming techniques. Some of which are appropriate on some landscapes. Stedman aims to broaden the conversation about the market for carbon farming research, monitoring and markets. Among others, he explores three ways to think about the market potential for this type of agriculture: 1) Traditional markets: These markets are complicated and the rules thus far (though he sees potential for this to change) typically favor large-scale forest management projects over agricultural practices. 2) Markets are created and help stabilize the global climate by sequestering atmospheric carbon in soil and perennial plants. The same practices also regenerate depleted natural resources (like soils) to increase the natural health, diversity and vitality of our landscapes.

Creating Herbal Remedies for Digestive Wellness with Brittany Nickerson

NOFA Summer Conference: Herbal Seminar: The Benefits of Medicinal Herbs in the Diet

By: Brittany Nickerson

Herbalist, health educator and food activist Brit- tany Nickerson operates an herbal education and consulting business, Thyme Herbal, based in North Amherst, MA. She uses herbalism to engender skills that help people connect with nature and their own physical and emotional selves.

Nickerson’s seminar is geared specifically to those that struggle with digestive health or are looking for alternatives for achieving digestive wellness. The seminar will focus on individual herbs and their uses. She aims for participants to have a user-friendly and empowering experience, learning how to integrate knowledge of herbs into everyday life using simple home remedies like herbal teas, syrups, tinctures, vinegars and honeys. Attendants will taste healing herbal ingredients throughout.

Brittany teaches from the plants as they transition with the seasons, linking plant seasonality with a body’s needs and a greater understanding of the environment. Through Thyme Herbal, she teaches courses like the Art of Home Herbalism and others geared towards individuals personal and professional development. Herbal education is at the core of her work, even when doing private consulting.

“I’m a teacher. I love teaching, and I’m very passionate about it.”

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Summer, 2015

The Natural Farmer

The seminar will be ideal for beginning and intermediate beekeepers. Pollinator and insect iden- tification, anatomy and common behavior will all be covered, as will common diseases, pests and tips to minimize the risk of Colony Collapse Disorder (CCD). Sanne will describe commercial keep- ing operations that move hives across the country pollinating major crops and the risks to moving bees into commercial orchards. Sanne will share her own experiences and lessons from other beekeepers so participants can choose the approach that best suits their interests and needs.

Most people purchase an unassembled hive to save money. Attendees will team up to construct a wooden Langstroth hive, a common used hive style. This hands-on experience will help partici- pants anticipate construction challenges and prepare them to construct their own hive for many years of use. The assembled hive will be auctioned off at the end of the workshop.

Kure-Jensen will teach the assembly of a stockyard to save money. Attendees will team up to construct a wooden Langstroth hive, a common used hive style. This hands-on experience will help partici- pants anticipate construction challenges and prepare them to construct their own hive for many years of use. The assembled hive will be auctioned off at the end of the workshop.

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The Art of Natural Cheesemaking
by David Asher
July 15, 2015, $34.95, 288 pages
review by Rachel Scherer

Are your curds and whey subverting the dominant paradigm? The premise of David Asher’s book is that while bakers, brewers, and produce fermenters have found their way to incorporating wild microorganisms into their formulary, cheesemakers are still largely dependent on freeze-dried cultures produced industrially.

The book’s foreword by Sandor Ellix Katz, author and evangelist for food fermentation, serves to introduce and/or remind the reader that fermenting milk is an old and honored way of preserving this nutrient dense food as yogurt, kefir, or cheese. From there, Asher’s introduction makes it plain that the revival of home and artisanal cheesemaking in the US and Canada (his Black Sheep School of Cheesemaking is located in British Columbia) has uncritically accepted the use of industrial cultures, and neglected the rich history of cheesemaking with wild cultures.

This book is laid out much the same as other books on home or small-scale cheesemaking – chapters on milk, cultures and other ingredients, equipment, and aging, followed by chapters with step by step recipes. The differences between this book and the others on my shelf are in the extensive discussions of the way ingredients we commonly use are produced to yield very controlled and reproducible fermentations, and how to move from them into a natural ecology of cheese with more room for improvisation on the part of the maker and of the fermenting curds.

Asher’s recipes for the most part acknowledge a starting point from a yogurt, kefir, previous whey batch, or moldy cheese already in existence, and then propagating the resulting culture to make it totally local to the experimenter’s own kitchen. The process is not unlike maintaining sourdough starter or making pain au levain with a chunk of dough from the previous rising. My personal experience with starting cheeses with whey from the previous batch have been very successful in creating a distinctly different flavor profile than inoculating with freeze-dried culture each batch. Unfortunately, as a small scale commercial producer, I know from experience that the regulatory agencies in Massachusetts would not approve my longstanding yogurt and kefir cultures from a colleague’s Uzbek grandmother, and since they require all fermented milk products sold to the public to begin with FDA approved cultures, there is a long haul ahead to get traditional natural cheesemaking approval. This is discussed quite frankly in the book, and David Asher admits to being a “guerrilla cheesemaker”.

The book fails in one matter that is common to many of its neighbors on the bookshelf: there is no discussion of how milk from different species and/or at different points in lactation requires different handling. The only differences attributed to milks are raw vs pasteurized/homogenized. Having only ever used raw milk, and often using non-commercial cultures, I was disappointed by the broad strokes used to characterize the foundational product, the milk.

That being said, this book is wonderfully written and therefore a pleasure to just read. As a technical manual the clear explanations seem easy to follow, and I look forward to trying the recipes. There is much here to learn for experienced as well as new milk fermenters.

Altered Genes, Twisted Truth: How the Venture to Genetically Engineer Our Food Has Subverted Science, Corrupted Government, and Systematically Deceived the Public
by Steven M. Druker
published by Clear River Press distributed by Chelsea Green
2015, 511 pages, $21.95
reviewed by Jack Kittredge

This is an important book. Druker, a public interest attorney, sued the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in 1998 to get to the bottom of why and how the agency made the determination that foods derived from genetically modified organisms (GMOs) were “Generally Regarded as Safe” (GRAS) when there was clear scientific evidence that they could not be regarded as safe. The memos and internal documents he uncovered, along with the other evidence presented in this book, tell a chilling story of how business interests have corrupted our political leaders and many within the science community.
The story begins in 1996, when Drucker became interested in the effort, just beginning to be commercialized, to restructure the genetic basis of the world’s food supply. The decision by the FDA to allow these foods onto the US market was key to the success of this technology, and he wanted to understand how that happened. His suit resulted in the turning over of thousands of documents from the FDA. An analysis of these documents revealed that the scientists within the FDA had issued strong warnings that genetic engineering of foods entailed significant risks, and they should undergo serious long term safety tests before being released to the public. Yet those warnings had been ignored and overruled by the political appointees at the head of the agency.

The bulk of Drucker’s book is a narrative of how this new technology, guided by commercial interests and an ideological rejection of regulatory caution in favor of “regulatory relief,” came to be so successful. It is written as a page-turner, a narrative telling the story of people — how some of those people became so focused on victory that they were willing to cut corners and conceal the truth. Of course this is an old story, but it is one with important lessons for today’s citizens.

The record of President George H. W. Bush’s “Competitiveness Council,” headed by Vice President Dan Quayle, and its efforts to sidetrack the government’s regulatory scientists, is a sorry one. Yet it is the drama repeated now in virtually every gathering of establishment scientists or publication in which biotech companies advertise.

Anyone who disagrees with the dominant paradigm — in this case that GMOs are safe — is automatically driven from the community of respectable scientists. This inquisition does not proceed by burnings at the stake, but by funding cuts, rejection by peer reviewed journals, failure to get tenure, even termination. Who, in that environment, has the strength of character to continue to pursue independent studies where they may lead? Far easier to follow the herd
and either avoid the topic entirely or forego your integrity and make sure your studies don’t ask the critical questions.

This is the real value of Druker’s book. It shows us how science, the modern era’s last remaining bastion of unchallenged authority now that church and royalty have been debunked, has itself been consolidated.

But, like all efforts to canonize doctrines that fly in the face of common sense, the dogma of ‘GMOs as safe’ is already collapsing. Polls show even gullible Americans are no longer fooled but want labeling so that, once labeled, they can refuse to buy them. Despite the chilling morality tale Druker recounts, the conclusion is going to be a reaffirmation of faith in people.

Less Medicine, More Health: 7 Assumptions That Drive Too Much Medical Care
by Dr. H. Gilbert Welch
published by Beacon Press, 2015
$24.95, 218 pages
reviewed by Larry Siegel

I do not read books on matters medical. Until. Having conducted more than half my life guided by the philosophy that less is more, I was drawn to Less Medicine, More Health like a bee to nectar. I was not disappointed. Fair warning: if you are comfortable with conventional medical care, with its plethora of diagnostic tests and pharmacological solutions, do not, I repeat, do not read this book. If, however, you harbor, with me (healthy) reservations that all is not healthy in the health-care world, then this book becomes a must-read. Dr. H. Gilbert Welch has turned the prevailing assumptions that drive medical care on their ears. I have the notion that were the author to appear before a jury of his peers, he would be judged a heretic and burned at the stake.

The overriding premise of the book is, in the words of the author, “...as a society, we have overstated the benefits of medical care and underplayed its harms.” He then proceeds to document, quite convincingly, the benefits that are overstated and the harms that are underplayed. Each chapter addresses one of seven assumptions: All risks can be lowered. It’s always better to fix the problem. Sooner is always better. It never hurts to get more information. Action is always better than inaction. Newer is always better. It’s all about avoiding death. No. No. No. No. No. No. And no.

Using personal observation resulting from his twenty-five years as a primary care practitioner and first-hand accounts by friends or acquaintances, the author has provided compelling arguments to support his assertions. There are (quite necessarily) statistics and references to studies, but the author’s assertions are not mixed in them. Quite the contrary, Welch has injected a healthy dose of the personal in his accounts, resulting in, for this reader, a book far
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Hydroponics in Organic?

Introduction

by Steve Gilman
Interstate NOFA Policy Coordinator

Vermont organic farmer Dave Chapman has been spearheading the charge against the National Organic Program’s (NOP) allowance of hydroponic crop production — growing crops in liquid nutrient solutions — to qualify for the USDA’s organic certification label. Maintaining that organic growing is and always has been fundamentally soil-based, Dave has rallied growers, enlisted farming groups and set up farmer and consumer petitions on a website called http://www.keepthesoilinorganic.org/

NOP Deputy Administrator Miles McEvoy maintains there’s nothing in federal guidelines for organic certification that specifically excludes hydroponics or aquaponics (fish-based) production if those operations use certifiable organic inputs as the basis for their nutrient solutions. NOP has been ignoring, however, recommendations made in 2010 by the National Organic Standards Board (NOSB) which voted 12 to 1 to exclude hydroponics from organic certification.

Instead of addressing the NOSB recommendations and going to final rule-making, McEvoy has simply allowed a number of the larger certifying agents to go ahead and certify hydroponic crops (while not identifying them as hydroponics).

Further, some foreign operations in Mexico, Holland and Canada are able to sell in US markets under the USDA’s Organic seal. As an organic soil-based greenhouse tomato grower who invested in a two-acre greenhouse operation, Dave lost his markets when Whole Foods switched suppliers to a 35 acre indoor hydroponic greenhouse tomato operation in Mexico, certified by California Certified Organic Farmers (CCOF).

Responding to the mounting criticism, the NOP recently issued a notice in the Federal Register calling for nominations to a Task Force to “to assess the diversity of these soilless production practices and advise on what specific practices may or may not be supported by the current USDA regulations.”

The NOP, however, restricted the nominations to “experienced hydroponic growers” only, with no representation for opposing views. When challenged, the NOP declared this omission an “oversight.”

Letter from David Chapman

Hello all,

It has been a year since I last sent an update. I was swept away by the farm last March, and it left me little time for working on this issue. Since then the petitions have slowly grown in numbers with no help from us, and are presently hovering around 1200 signatures. Clearly we have barely touched the organic customers yet. I confess that I was discouraged about petitions after talking with Mark Kastel from Cornucopia last Winter. He said that no number of signatures would move the NOP, and that our only real hope was political pressure from our Senators and Representatives. Our Vermont delegation has given us their support, but so far to no avail. I have heard that Cornucopia is planning to have a front page article on the hydroponic issue in their Spring newsletter.

There has been some other progress since I last wrote. The National Organic Coalition passed a resolution of support for the NOSB recommendation last year. The NOC is a broad coalition of organizations, and getting the members to agree on anything is a major victory. I have posted their resolution on the website.

I have also posted the open letter to Miles from the Agrarian Elders. Last year we managed to reach all but two of them to sign a letter of support.

I was approached by a reporter from the Wall Street Journal recently. He is interested in pursuing a story on this issue. He needs to find a good hook to sell it to his editors. Any ideas?

As many of you know, Miles McEvoy came to Vermont in February to speak at the NOFA Winter Conference. I attended two sessions with him, plus we had a chance to talk together afterwards. The take home story from it all was that Miles is NOT going to act on the NOSB recommendation. There is no change there. Miles: story is that the NOSB recommendation is too vague to make a rule. He also said several times that he is helpless to effect a change or to offer real leadership on this issue. He kept insisting that he did not have the power to block hydroponics growing from certification.

When I asked Miles for an example of how the NOSB recommendation is too vague, he said that one example is that it didn’t define soil, so how would the new rule come up with that definition? I suggested that most of Europe, England, Canada, Mexico, and Japan have all successfully addressed that challenge, and that it wouldn’t be too difficult to examine their language and come up with good wording. That hadn’t occurred to him.

Miles acknowledged that there is a lot of opposition to “organic hydroponics” in Vermont, but he doubted that people in the rest of the country cared. What about the National Organic Coalition? What about the many people from all over the country who signed the petitions? What about the organic standards from rest of the world? What about the recommendation from the NOSB? The USDA still stands virtually alone in the world in their rejection of organic. Perhaps Miles has been spending too much time in Washington, and has lost touch with the rest of the organic community?

Miles’ response to the dissent of so many of us in the organic farming community is to form a “task force” to come up with clear language for rule making. Apparently going back to the NOSB isn’t good enough. But when I pressed him on the mission of (continued on page B-22)
the task force, he said it was simply to look at the issue with fresh eyes, getting strong input from all interested parties. As it turns out, the actual announcement in the Federal Register for the task force states clearly that “Candidates for the hydroponics and aquaponics task force should have 3 years of demonstrable work experience in hydroponic and aquaponic production in any of the following roles: Producer, researcher or scientist, consumer representative, conservationist, systems designer, organic inspector; or accredited certifying agent. Candidates with demonstrable knowledge of organic production or certification procedures are preferred.” Good heavens! It seems that they only want people with at least three years experience in hydroponic growing to be part of the task force. Even if they make an exception allowing someone like me, I will be a lonely minority voice on the task force, when in fact, hydroponic growing is a very minor and highly controversial part of the organic community. This is like forming a task force to consider the issue of GMOs in organic growing, and then limiting participation to Monsanto employees.

The truth is that the NOP does not agree with the NOSB recommendation, so they are creating a NEW advisory board to come up with a more acceptable answer. If the real issue was that the NOSB recommendation was too vague, Miles could simply send it back to the NOSB for clarification. The NOSB has already spent years of work on their recommendation, including a long period of public comment. The intent of their recommendation is quite clear. It is also clear that the NOP does not agree with the NOSB intent. So their solution is to create an advisory board that will come up with a more agreeable recommendation.

Having said all that, I am coming to the sad truth that we are losing the organic standards. Organic as redefined by the USDA is changing into something new. The new definition is driven by money rather than beliefs. And most sadly, this weakening of organic integrity is coming under a Democratic president (whom I have contributed to and campaigned for). I hate to say it, but we really were doing better with the NOP organic standards under Bush!

So what to do? Our farm is forced to be involved with USDA organic certification, regardless of my beliefs. But rather than it being something that I am proud of, certification is turning into another task to be completed in order to satisfy the requirements of the supermarket chains, much like GAP certification. I will continue to work to reform the organic standards, but I think that the term organic will no longer serve as a way of letting our customers know how we farm. We are NOT growing in the same way as the hydroponic growers in Mexico. And our customers want to know that. If “Certified Organic” no longer shows the difference, do we need to find another way of identifying what we do? Believe me when I say that this is not a direction that I wish to go in.

When I began farming organically in 1981, there really wasn’t any economic incentive. Very few people cared about organic, even though it had been around for 35 years. The first two years at the farmers market, I got as much grief from customers as support. Back then organic was a way of farming that was intertwined with a way of living. Now, at the same time that organic farming succeeds wildly in the marketplace, it is abandoning some of the core principles that made it so popular. I am seeing a growing movement of farmers who are organic, but not certified. They are mostly smaller farms that are selling locally. Many of them have signed the petition. Perhaps it is time for some of us to find a new name for old practices. “Organic” is just a word. Sir Albert Howard’s first two books never used the word, but the principles were already clearly established. We can keep the principles and find a new word. Certainly no matter what we do, “certified organic” is an economic powerhouse that will continue to grow.

I met a nice young guy at the conference who worked for the Organic Trade Association. He was trying to bring some of the many smaller organic farms in the country into the OTA to join in their “Got Organic” marketing campaign. But I am stuck by the growing distance between my farming practices and the organic standards. If the organic standards no longer represent how we farm, why would we help promote “organic” farming to our customers? After a lifetime of believing in and supporting organic farming, I find myself wondering how I can find a new term to signify how I farm. “Organic farming” is now the property of the USDA, and it looks like they really don’t care what we think about that. Have we turned the henhouse over to the foxes for supervision?

There are divided opinions about participating in the “task force” I will probably reluctantly agree to join Miles’ “task force” if invited, even though I don’t meet the requirements. Based on the public notice, I will not be permitted to join. Even if I AM permitted, who else has been blocked from participation? All the other organic growers. Given the radical position of allowing hydroponic growing to be certified as organic, wouldn’t a more balanced approach have most of the task force consisting of representatives of the majority view, with perhaps one representative of the “organic hydroponic” group?

Probably the best we can hope for from the USDA is some kind of identifying word on the organic label for “Hydroponic Organic.” I think the deck is pretty well stacked against us, but I urge all of you to volunteer for the “task force” as well, even though none of you qualify as having enough “organic hydroponic” experience! This is a thankless task. I would also like to hear back from any of you with your thoughts about this (rather lengthy) letter.

Best to all,

Dave Chapman (davechapman52@gmail.com)