

# Full Field Farm

Mike & Michele Kowalski  
Journey into Farming

**NORTH CHATHAM**



Mike and his daughter, Charlotte, take a drive on their tractor.

## EARLY INFLUENCES

**Mike:** "Neither Michele nor I come from a farming or a rural background. My family was blue collar. Most of my nearest family were in the construction trades. Michele's family is blue collar, too. We grew up in cities. I was a computer programmer when we decided to go into farming."

## A GROWING INTEREST

**Mike:** "It was through a connection with food, looking for good food...and also through food justice issues. We were protesting with the [Saratoga] Peace Alliance before the start of the most recent Iraq war, and we talked to people about issues, and food came up a lot – how our food choices affect the world. I had resolved slowly over that time, 'It's time to change our lives and do what we feel is right.' I don't want to seem like it was a protest or political, because it really wasn't. It just came out of that process... We liked good food, too, and I think that's a really important part of where we're at now as well, that idea that it can't just be about food being good for you, it has to be good."

## Farming Journey

**Originally from:** Albany area (both Mike and Michele)

### Types of Training:

Apprenticeship, on-farm employment, and self-education

**Land Search Length:** 8 months

**Land Source:** Leased land—match made through Columbia Land Conservancy

## Full Field Farm

**First Year:** 2011

**Location:** North Chatham, NY

**Land Base:** 100 Acres

**Markets:** CSA and Farmers' Market

**Products:** Beef, pork, and chicken

## GAINING FARMING EXPERIENCE

**Mike:** "I started helping out [at a farm near Saratoga], and in return they let me grow some things on their land. For two years I was able to help them out, and that was my start in agriculture. [I decided] to leave my job, and I ended up enrolling at Hawthorne Valley in the Alkion [teacher training] course, and one thing led to another quickly... There was an opening on the farm—there were only three employees holding down the barn, and they were looking for some help. That was my opportunity. I was able to start at the farm as a part-time apprentice, and then within two months I was offered a full-time job."

## DECIDING TO FARM

**Mike:** "Coming from the background that I came from, my family was very satisfied when I achieved a good-paying, stable computer job, and then to leave that for agriculture was something that no one really understood. I don't know if I understood it."

**Michele:** "Our families thought we were nuts, but they warmed up to the idea. Being at Hawthorne Valley helped ease our transition into farming."

## STARTING ON THEIR OWN

Mike and Michele decided to start off on their own, and found land to lease through the Columbia Land Conservancy.

**Mike:** "There were a lot of things that I wanted to try that you can't do in an established institution."

**Michele:** "[The land's] got so much room for expansion. It's really a great property. It's just our dream property."

**Mike:** "It's a five-year lease, and we'll go from there. I have to disconnect part of my logical thinking that worries about being on a five-year lease and just do everything I do here as if I was going to be here forever... The financing, it's our savings, it's retirement. We're self-financed, which is important to us, not taking on a debt load, but it's also scary as that number dwindles. I think that if we hit our target of 40 CSA members this year, we'll be fine and we'll make it, so that's about the best you can ask for."

## RANDALL CATTLE

**Mike:** "We are working with a rare breed of cattle, the Randalls... They were the New England land race cattle that most of the farmers would have had, especially in Vermont. They've been saved by a conservation breeding program, and [we will be] putting them to work, and then breeding for that purpose."

**Michele:** "Originally, we were going to milk them all, but they're a little hard to handle at this point, and the infrastructure of the barns was worse than we thought it was going to be. We are staying flexible in our planning."

## THE VISION

**Mike:** "Right now, we are offering pastured veal, pork, and chicken for sale directly at the farm, through several local stores, and to members of our CSA. The members prepay and get a monthly share of our products. We want to have a CSA that offers good value and has clean food that people can feel good feeding to their family and friends."

**Michele:** "For our CSA pick-ups we want to also make it fun. We want people to come to the farm, so we're going to have tastings when they come."

**Mike:** "We're going to try to be known for some very good sausage, some dry-cured products. Each year we're going to add something to keep our customers coming back."

**Michele:** "We want to have our complete, diversified farm, and we really just want to make a living at it."

## FARM MANAGEMENT

**Mike:** "We need to think just like any other business thinks, while remaining anchored in our stewardship principles... [It's important to] set as your goal to have a good level of income, even if you're doing it as a lifestyle and you're not money-motivated... I'm pretty big into systems. I'm kind of lazy, in a good way. I don't want to move something twice. I don't want to haul a bucket I don't have to... The farm work part of it, you have to make as easy as possible. One of the principles that I had early on was, there are too many other things that I don't have control over, but I have a very good piece of grass here, and if I manage it right, the cows are going to take care of themselves. I keep going back to that faith, and sticking to that, and seeing it work."

## FARMERS HELPING EACH OTHER

**Mike:** "We can learn from each other and figure out how we can make new systems to make it work better. It's dependent on the farmers starting to work together...resource sharing, information sharing, cooperation on distribution and procurement of inputs, aggregating product, equipment loaning... One idea I love is a growth plan that includes the size where you spin off – the size that we're going to get to and then we're going to help someone else do this, rather than just trying to keep getting bigger."

## WHY FARMING

**Mike:** "I really like that kind of challenge [of working with farming systems]. There's no staleness there. As long as you don't try to imprint your system over and over again but you remain flexible, it's daunting but it's also very stimulating... What I want to work on is good food. I mean, I want the people, when they eat it, to have an emotional or visceral reaction to it."

## Relationship to the Land



**Mike:** "What we do in farming should leave the land at least as we found it, or better, for future generations. We've gone down a path where we've actually been losing topsoil at tremendous rates in this country. We're putting chemicals into the ground. We need to stop it...Someone's got to start thinking about the future, of what our children are going to inherit."

**Michele:** "Maybe our presence can make it better and not be a detriment, and the land can be better for the way we farm it rather than us just taking."



The Randalls are part of the original herd rescued in the 1980s by local farmer Cynthia Creech, who also keeps part of the herd.

**Mike:** "[Randalls] are tri-purpose—dairy, meat, and draft—medium-framed cows, and they do well on subsistence grazing."



**CSA:** This season, Full Field is starting its mixed meat CSA. They raise chickens, pigs, and cows, and all of their livestock are pasture-based.



**Pigs:** Mike has adapted his own style of raising pigs slowly: "All of the old books used to talk about raising livestock, it was never about fast growth. It was always about this lean, maintenance diet to allow the animals to fill their frame out, followed by an intense finishing period... when you keep [the animals] longer, there's going to be more flavor there and the animal grew at a healthier rate. We think you can taste it in the sausage." The pigs are also an integral part of land management. As Michele explains, "They're going to plow up the garden for us."



**Raising Randalls:** An important part of Full Field's operation is the preservation of this heritage breed of cattle. **Mike:** "[We are] finding a way to subsidize keeping the animals, to keep that genetic diversity around, until you can put it to work."

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