Chapter 1

The Case for Small-Scale Farming and Local Foods Ventures

Learning Objectives

- Understand some facts about the number of new small agriculture and food ventures and who's starting them.
- Learn about organizations that are supporting these types of start-ups.
- Review data on the size of the market for new local foods businesses.
- Meet the unlikely Lavender Queen, Jeannie Ralston.
- Discover compelling personal reasons to move from town to country.

Creation and Veraison

The first half of this book is devoted to the process of going from an idea to a real business plan and actually getting started. It's a time of critical change, which is why I call part one "Creation and Veraison."

What do these terms mean in the context of this book? Of course, creation is the genuine start of something from the root or the source. Creation can imply something wholly spiritual or as concrete as production and manufacturing. Creation can involve one person's ideas or a twosome, such as pollination in plants. No matter what images come to mind, when you read the word, the notion of beginning is always there.

The first half of the book covers that initial impetus, but also the evolution of a little idea into a real action. That's why the word *veraison* is also appropriate. Veraison is a wine-making term that refers to the critical time when the green grapes begin to change to their true varietal color. It's the stage at which most of the ripening takes place—when the sugars begin to materialize and the grape comes into its proverbial own—and is critical for the wine.

For your business and hobby endeavors in niche agriculture, your personal veraison is the early stage, beginning somewhere between idea and start-up. Your veraison occurs when you truly begin the long process of becoming something new.

Every one of us arrives at the precipice of creation and veraison from a different point of view and with different goals. What we share is that we are part of a growing trend. After three or four consecutive generations of leaving the farm and the kitchen in search of convenience and a faster-paced lifestyle, people are coming back to agriculture.

What is driving this trend, and where is it headed? Some statistics claim organic farming alone is doubling every year or so. So is the market for local foods and niche agriculture already flooded, or is there room for you when you get here? How difficult is it to move from urban or suburban to rural, and how different is the lifestyle? Can you really make a new business work?

What Are the Trends?

In this chapter, I'll examine some of the trends and the size of the marketplace in small farming and local foods. I'll also introduce a few organizations and associations that support these trendsetters through membership, promotion, and education. (For a longer list of organizations and groups to contact or research on your own, see the Resources section in this book.)

The list of niche agriculture and food ventures that nouveau foodies and farmers are creating is nearly endless, and is as boundless as the imaginations of the proprietors. Many niche businesses are marketed by appealing to consumers with an interest in foods labeled as natural, organic, or free-range. In fact, that segment of the food industry is about to outgrow the term *niche*. And the market is not anywhere near its zenith.

In the chart on pages 5 and 6, I've listed some common types. Clearly, there is a broad diversity of niches and business ideas. In this book, you'll meet producers and urban foodies who have started hobbies and businesses in all of these areas and more.

A field of lavender was one woman's entry into the world of small-scale farming.

Some of the terms in the chart are farming ideas that are also marketing ideas, and are commonly combined together to best meet the target customer's wishes and needs. Packaging these features can seem daunting. And if it's not based on a solid foundation and done well, marketing in small-scale agriculture can confuse the customers. Using examples of peers who have created a small farm or food business, I'll not only excite and motivate you, but also show you how to effectively bundle together these niches to create a profitable business.

Before I go too far into the facts and figures, let's meet someone who epitomizes that journey from townie to farmer in such an interesting way that she wrote a book about it. Her personal story makes a case for starting a food or hobby farm business better than any other tale I've heard. And her journey to starting a rurally based lavender business shows that no matter how you arrive in the country, there's a business idea waiting for you.

Niche Markets in Local Agriculture		
Agriculture and Animal Production	**Cooperatives and Community Organizations**	**Local Businesses That Support Small Farms**
All-natural (including no hormones, no antibiotics, no preservatives)	CSAs (community supported agriculture, a community of individuals who pledge support to a farm operation so that the farmland becomes a kind of community farm with shared risks and benefits)	Local delivery services (delivering local or organic farmers' goods)
Organic	Food cooperatives	City markets and farmers markets
Grass-fed	Buying groups or consumer buying cooperatives	Retail shops that stock local foods
Breed-specific (such as Berkshire hogs or Belted Galloway cattle)		Artisan cheeses, soaps, and handmade foods made with local ingredients
Free-range		Wine making using local fruit or purchased grapes
Nutrient-enhanced (such as adding omega-3 fatty acids or vitamin E in the feedstuffs)		
Locally raised		
Insecticide-free or pesticide-free		

(continued)

Agriculture and Animal Production	Cooperatives and Community Organizations	Local Businesses That Support Small Farms
Bird friendly, predator friendly, or fish safe (among numerous other ways of indicating that no wild animals have been harmed in producing these products)		
Sustainably or biodynamically farmed (grown in a way that views the farm as a self-sustaining organism)		

Jeannie Ralston, an Unlikely Small Farmer

I spent a fair amount of my time chuckling at Jeannie Ralston's lack of understanding of the rural lifestyle as I read her 2008 book, *The Unlikely Lavender Queen: A Memoir of Unexpected Blossoming*. It's a sometimes funny, sometimes bitterly personal, and sometimes painful story. When Jeannie moved to Texas from New York City to follow her new husband's ambitions, it was obvious she had no clue about country living.

She was still trying to adjust to country life and motherhood when her spouse insisted they start a lavender farm. Jeannie is married to Robb Kendrick, an internationally acclaimed photographer who travels extensively for his work. Although lavender was his interest, not hers, she knew she would end up running the farm. "I have an immense respect for people who make their living off the land, but farming was so foreign to me it threatened the image I had of myself," she wrote.

In her book, Jeannie recounts her initial disdain at planting lavender, harvesting, and then marketing the flowers to local stores (not to mention her limited tolerance of the oppressive Texas heat). The more I read, the more I saw her as the ultimate townie—the antithesis of me. And that's exactly why I wanted so much to interview her for this book.

Jeannie went from city to country kicking, screaming, and crying, and yet found out that she loved the life and loved her rural small business. Jeannie discovered things the hard way and learned a lot of lessons through trial and error.

Like me, she is both a small farmer and an author. What we don't have in common is how we arrived at our place in the world. I'm a farm girl many generations back, looking to carve out my own small farming niche while writing for the likes of *Country Woman, Beef Today,* and *Farmworld.* Jeannie, a city slicker, writes for the *New York Times, Allure, Parents,* and *National Geographic*.

Jeannie Ralston, her husband, Robb Kendrick, and their children.

Jeannie's story is compelling, but the real reason I asked her to be part of this book's first chapter is because it is not entirely unique. If you're reading this book, you've got at least something in common with Jeannie, whether it's a strong desire to begin a hobby farm or a strong desire to find a good use for your energies while living in the country. Either way, the migration to local foods and niche agriculture is growing faster than anyone predicted.

How Big Is This Market?

After generations of leaving the country for cities and suburbs, Americans are coming back to the country—or at least to a rural-esque lifestyle. And they are seeking something more than to simply live in the country; many families want to experience a bit of the rural life by raising small flocks of animals or growing large vegetable gardens in town. These individuals are starting small local foods businesses, farmer and consumer cooperatives, and farm-fresh delivery services. Mail order and Internet-based food businesses and new farmers markets are appearing every year.

Farmers Markets

Since 1994, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has been tracking farmers markets and publishing a directory every two years called *The National Directory of Farmers Markets*. Growth in the number of markets

A group of shoppers enjoys a fall farmers market. The number of farmers markets is increasing just about everywhere.

has not been explosive, but it has been steady. While many commercial sectors seem to expand and contract through various economic conditions and the political parties in office, the number of farmers markets in the United States continues to grow every year.

From 2006 to 2008, the USDA reports that the number of markets increased by 6.8 percent, from 4,385 in 2006 to 4,685 by August 2008. That means that since 1994, when the USDA officially began attempting to keep track of market numbers, more than 3,000 farmers markets have been added across the United States. (I say "attempting" because markets change so often, and while the USDA encourages participation in the surveys it uses to keep the directory up-to-date, there is no requirement to participate, nor is there a requirement to register with the USDA to open a farmers market. I personally know of several markets that aren't included in the USDA's directory, even though the USDA works with state departments of agriculture and farmers market associations at the local level to collect information.)

Food and Agricultural Cooperatives

The concept of a cooperative has been used in rural communities for millennia, as farmers and citizens of small towns helped one another with

everything from protection to harvesting to medical care. While this kind of community has all but faded into history, food cooperatives and community-supported agriculture (CSA) are reversing that trend.

CSAs are a type of cooperative. They're usually formed by one farmer or a group of farmers who then sell shares in the CSA to the public, making those shareholders members of the cooperative. Members of the CSA receive food items and agricultural goods regularly; many go out to the farm to pick up their produce, herbs, meats, and other goods every week during the summer.

Sources vary about the exact date, but in the mid-1980s the concept of the CSA was brought to the United States from Europe, where these organizations had been growing for almost 20 years. Growth here has been steady, as with farmers markets. The National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service reports that there are almost 1,100 CSAs; other trade groups record a number closer to 1,500.

Expansion has been rapid since 1999. While CSAs are scattered across the nation, the burgeoning hotbeds seems to be on the two coasts and in the upper Midwest, in states such as Wisconsin. These areas, according to the Robyn Van El Center (a nonprofit educational center that supports the development of CSAs), each have between 4 and 10 percent of the nation's CSAs. Geographical and size data for CSAs in the interior of the continent seems a bit hit-or-miss, so estimates are really just that. Additionally, an estimated 10 percent of CSAs are organized as nonprofit groups. I believe unprecedented growth in this niche is coming soon as consumers seek ways to become involved in small farming and as the interest in locally raised food continues to expand. That's why I have devoted chapter 4 to exploring this local foods and sustainable agriculture model. I've also assembled a large group of resources in the appendix that will provide you with contact information for many of the groups listed throughout the book.

Natural and Organic Foods

Any book about opportunities in local foods and small agriculture would be incomplete without a discussion of how natural and organic products have fueled the growth of all market segments. In fact, I could write a whole book about just these two segments—another time, perhaps.

When talking about food trends, we need to start by understanding the difference between *natural* and *organic*. In 2001, statistics from the USDA Certified Organic program showed that up to 75 percent of Americans surveyed thought *natural* and *organic* were the same things. They are not. The simplest way to distinguish them is that food labeled as USDA Certified Organic must meet the standards set forth in 2002 by the Organic Foods Production Act. These include a stringent set of criteria for feedstuffs and other production practices.

How Does a New York City Writer Become the Texas Lavender Queen?

"This is all Jeannie Ralston's fault." That's what the residents of Blanco, Texas, say about the increased taxes and traffic, and Jeannie laughs when she repeats the remark. Blanco is where she and her husband, Robb Kendrick, founded Hill Country Lavender in 1999, and it's true that a steady growth in property values and tourism has bloomed in what is now the official Lavender Capital of Texas (a distinction Jeannie fought hard to obtain from the state legislature). Blanco has become an agritourism destination based around lavender.

Jeannie also helped start the annual Lavender Festival that draws thousands of tourists and lavender growers each June. And she hosts workshops to teach budding entrepreneurs the tricks of the heavenly scented trade. "It's not just about me and my husband," she says. "The town saw this as an opportunity and used lavender as a part of its image; they just embraced it."

While she found her rhythm in the undulating purple haze of her lavender fields, Jeannie didn't start out to become the Lavender Queen. Her business started out as a kind of obsession of her husband's. The family spent some time in Provence, France, where Robb was photographing for *National Geographic*. Jeannie loved Provence and the fields of lavender, calling them a "mélange of Van Gogh colors." But it was purely an abstract interest. Robb, however, had other ideas. He spent his free time in Provence asking a local farmer about how lavender is grown. When they all returned to

Natural is a much broader term. It is usually not governed by any specific labeling requirements, though Country of Origin Labeling (COOL) regulations, which went into effect in March 2009, may change that. COOL makes labeling the country of origin mandatory on most fresh meats, including beef, chicken, pork, goat, and lamb, as well as on other perishable agricultural commodities such as produce. Because labels are now required for these products, there may be additional requirements for label claims as this legislation gets implemented over time. (For more information on COOL, check out www.countryoforiginlabel.org.)

Market Growth

Once considered niche markets, natural and organic products have gone mainstream. In 2007, the organic market yielded a startling $20 billion in annual sales, up from less than $1 billion in 1990, according to the Organic

Texas, he put out his first few plants and tested the hardiness of various varieties in the local climate.

By the second summer of trials and plantings, Hill Country Lavender was in business. Jeannie was the proprietor who hosted people on weekends to pick blooms right off the plants. Eventually, she began adding a variety of products to complement the lavender bouquets, and suddenly she and Robb were conducting workshops. When summer arrived each year, Jeannie found herself busy—and liking it. When a tourist cooed about how wonderful her life must be living on a lavender farm, Jeannie recalls in her book, "Though it was true I had never had such a dream, I was beginning to see why others might."

However, she resists the notion of "the heroine moves to the country and everything is perfect." Making the transition was difficult for her, required a lot of work, and wasn't the first choice of careers for a successful freelance journalist. Still, lavender and her small farm played an important role in bringing Jeannie back from a bout of depression and certainly gave her something to write about.

It took years, but Jeannie's lavender business became the dream she never planned. "I had endured, toughed out the isolation, the demands of a perfectionist husband and had found real peace," she wrote. "I felt that, like the lavender, I was a nonnative transplant that had somehow thrived."

Trade Association (OTA). These numbers exploded to $24.6 billion by the end of 2008. And that's just the beginning. The Agricultural Marketing Resource Center (AgMRC) estimates that the natural and organic market is set to double *at least* every three to five years.

Organic and natural products encompass everything from tissues to coffee, but it's food sales that consumers are driving with their dollars. Organics are the fastest-growing sector of the food and beverage industry. Yet, according to the OTA's web site, the nonfood segment represented $2 billion in annual sales by the end of 2008. And it is the nonfood segment that seems to be growing the fastest; sales of nonfood organics grew by 26 percent in 2006 over the previous year, while organic food products saw an aggressive 20.9 percent growth. All in all, the OTA reports that in 2008, 69 percent of adults bought organic products at least occasionally, with 28 percent buying weekly.

Out here in the country, we know from the number of interested consumers that producing natural and organic products makes money, and our market is in no way saturated. Sure, the mega retailers like Whole Foods Market are pocketing most of the consumers' dollars, but at the local level there is room to grow because consumers want to buy from companies and people they know.

On my own farm in central Indiana, we entered the natural products market in late 2003 with the formation of Aubrey's Natural Meats, producers and purveyors of beef and pork raised without added hormones or the use of antibiotics. Our animals are also raised outside on pastures. Everything is raised locally; for us that means in our home county.

Why the Demand?

Many producers want to know why consumers have such a strong interest in organic products when our traditional food system has, in their view, served the customer very well for generations. This is a touchy subject with farmers, with eaters, and with anyone who wants to combine both into a lifestyle.

The reasons are varied, and I believe that individuals make their food choices for very *individual* reasons—some serious, others less so. Some reasons are:

- Perceived increase in food safety
- Perceived health benefits
- Allergies to certain chemicals
- Desire not to consume pesticides, insecticides, or added hormones
- Desire to better the environment
- Desire to support small farmers
- Preference for the quality or uniqueness of some organic products that are not offered in any other form

The message underlying all these reasons is really important for farmers to hear: Consumers want choice, and they want producers to listen to their needs.

The Local Foods/Slow Foods Movement

The average food item travels 1,500 miles before an American consumes it. That's a long trip! So is local the new natural? It's a question I recently attempted to answer for myself and the readers of the column I lovingly pen

for Food Trends, a section of *Indianapolis Dine* magazine, where I try to draw parallels from farmer to foodie.

But what does *local* actually mean? Well, that's as relative as defining the term *natural.* Some would say local means foods produced within a certain regional radius of the consumer—say 50 to 150 miles. Others describe local foods as those produced within a tri-state area. Still others consider local eating to be more micro than that, breaking it down to eating only what is in season and can be obtained fresh locally.

So which has the bigger market: naturally raised foods or foods the consumer buys locally and eats seasonally? Are they related or mutually exclusive? Is one more important than the other? Which is better?

It's actually becoming a bone of contention as a growing number of educated consumers argue that eating local is the most sustainable and least expensive model and yields the smallest carbon footprint. The debate has been fueled by the book *The 100-Mile Diet: A Year of Local Eating,* written by Canadian couple Alisa Smith and J. B. MacKinnon, and others like it.

Small-scale local eating has become a huge market. Packaged Foods, a food market research group, estimates that the market for local foods was valued at about $5 billion in 2007 and is expected to grow to $7 billion by 2011. (Other facts and information can be found at www.foodroutes.com and www.eatlocalchallenge.com.) One of the leading organizations that helped spark the trend is Slow Food USA. The group's name has become synonymous with the slow food movement—the lifestyle surrounding the enjoyment of healthy food while making the connection to family, community, and culture. Slow Food USA was founded in 1986 and now has 80,000 members from 100 countries. There are more than 70 local chapters in the United States. The group seeks to influence changes in food policy, production practices, and market forces so that they ensure equity, sustainability, and pleasure in the food we eat.

Agritourism

Basically, agritourism means making your farm a vacation destination. I cover the topic in detail in chapter 6, but meanwhile, AgMRC reports the following annual values for agritourism in these states:

- California: $51.8 billion
- Colorado: $2.2. billion
- Hawaii: $33.9 billion
- Vermont: $19.5 billion

The Economic Impact on Rural Communities

Rural economic revitalization, development, and jobs are big issues for people who live in communities with fewer than 20,000 residents. As farms have consolidated and big box stores have driven local retailers out of business, small towns and the farming communities that support them have been struggling for a generation. Local leaders worry about everything from quality of education to brain drain, when promising young people depart to find better-paying jobs in larger metropolitan areas.

One of the tremendously important aspects of the small farm and local foods movement is the impact these new twists have on jobs and income all across America. Small farms don't compete with large growers, so neither group should feel threatened. Both are needed to produce the foods and fibers that consumers want and create the jobs small towns need.

Jeannie Ralston is an example of a rural economic developer, although she certainly never thought of herself that way. It's just the natural by-product of starting a rurally based venture.

"I always felt if there was a bigger group doing something, then everybody wins and it [in this case, lavender] becomes more of an attraction," Jeannie says of her time spent organizing people to help develop Blanco, Texas, into a tourist spot.

Jeannie found that working with her neighbors created business. "The cooperation part is huge," she says. "You can't do it all on your own. Go and work with other people, other farms or crafts. Find something that represents the area. The other guy down to road is your partner, not your competitor."

Rural enterprises are creating new rows in old fields, adding millions of dollars to local economies each year. How do you start bringing the dollars to your hometown? Begin with the motivation—even before the know-how, advises Jeannie. And be willing to stick out the tough times. "It depends on the town you're in, if they're willing to embrace it. It can be a slow process. If it is something new, there may be resistance, but with diligence and patience you can help people see it can be a way to help the town."

AgMRC also estimates that agritourism has some economic impact in every state. About 2.5 percent of all farms in America receive some kind of income from hosting guests to the farm. That translates to more than 52,000

Agritourism means vacationers come to your farm, often for the day. This is the patio and deck at Ravens Glenn Winery. (You'll meet the owners in chapter 10.)

farms in America. Some states are big leaders in agritourism; in Vermont, one-third of all farms have at least some agritourism business.

Trends in Suppliers

With the growth in demand has come a growth in supply. When it comes to supplying farm products, that generally means groups of people moving to the country. But being in the country, by itself, doesn't make a person a farmer. The trends also show an increase in the desire for education and networking to support new agriculture business ideas.

Trade Associations and Conferences

We are a people who learn, and we love to congregate with those of like mind. Trade groups, conferences, and organizations that support new farmers and local foods host meetings that in some cases are standing room only. Membership in many new groups is also growing at a fast clip.

Much of the growth in conferences and resource materials is at the state and local level, so facts are often supplied by micro-groups such as a county cooperative extension office in a local region rather than by large, national organizations that track data across many states. Every group I

investigated for this chapter reports that they are growing. Here are a few national examples.

The 2008 Organic Farming Conference, hosted by industry-leading organization Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Service (MOSES), had 2,400 participants, up from 90 just ten years ago. Most of the farmers who go to the conference are making the transition from traditional agriculture to organic. It also attracts people who are new to farming.

The Ecological Farming Association, also known as Eco-Farm, is considered the world's largest mainstream organization committed to furthering natural, organic, biodynamic, and sustainable agriculture practices. Eco-Farm's education programs have reached more than 50,000 participants during its 26 years.

Urban and Suburban Transplants

According to population data and real estate agents, young people, retired couples, and aspiring Generation Y entrepreneurs are all moving to the country. In October 2008, the *New York Times* reported that despite the impending recession, the financial bailout bill bedlam, fears inspired by the credit crunch, and a hotly contested election, migration to rural areas from urban communities remained strong. So strong, in fact, that it appears to have officially bucked the trend of urban migration that has prevailed in the United States since the Industrial Revolution.

In fact, this hot new trend is not really all that new. Back in 1980, the U.S. Census reported that small towns and rural areas experienced faster growth than urban and suburban areas. In the housing market, trends in favor of country living remain strong and have for nearly two decades—although there have been short-term spikes and dips. The federal government reports that housing prices in rural areas tend to appreciate more rapidly than housing prices in metropolitan areas.

I always get a kick out of it when people tell me, "You don't *look* like a farmer." I think it should be apparent by now that even I don't know what a farmer is supposed to look like. **Stereotypes be gone;** the city has gone country and country is now cool.

The move from town to country is even more pronounced in areas that are considered high-amenity, such as places with gorgeous natural scenery or regions that lie within 20 to 30 miles of big attractions such as theme parks and popular festivals.

Of course, not all these rural transplants are starting small-scale farms. Not every rural person is a farmer. In fact, according to the USDA, just

below 2 percent of our nation's population resides on an agricultural enterprise.

How many of those farmers live on small-scale farms? It depends on how you define a small farm. So indulge me in presenting just a few more facts and figures.

As of 2007, the USDA reports there were 2,076,000 farms in the United States, with an average size of 449 acres. Despite the growth of small, hobby, and lifestyle farms, that number is down from a 1990 high of 2,145,820 farms. An acre is about the size of a football field, but while that may seem like a lot of land if you live in an urban area, it is not a lot of land in terms of commercial-scale crop or animal production. At 449 acres, a farm of that size would be considered medium to small by aggie standards—though for producing locally raised foods sold direct to consumers, it would be quite large. The size is all in how you look at it.

The USDA's agricultural marketing service reports that 94 percent of all farms are small farms—that is, operations with gross receipts of less than $250,000 per year. (Remember, gross receipts are the money you take in before you deduct the costs of doing business. It doesn't mean most small farmers make that much in profits.)

A whopping 40 percent of all farms are considered lifestyle or recreational, with some 834,000 plots of land dedicated to hobbyists. I should note, however, that these numbers seem somewhat inflated to me because the official USDA definition of a farmer is an "agricultural producer," and to be considered an agricultural producer one need only market $1,000 or more of agricultural products per year. So it doesn't take much to get started, at least as, shall we say, a quasi-farmer.

The Human Reasons for All This Growth

I could cite lots more facts and figures on the growth in both demand and supply for small farms and local foods businesses. But I prefer to leave the hard data collection to web site content managers and the cooperative extension service. It's not that the data isn't important. It's just that, for me, numbers are not enough to make the case for starting a new business venture or even taking up a serious hobby. I am a writer, after all, not an economist, so streams of statistics impress my sentimental mind less than what I hear when I listen to people talk and look at the expression in their eyes.

So why are people coming back to the country and taking up farming? And why are they finding plenty of customers to buy what they produce? Let's look first at what's driving the demand.

Who Is Driving the Demand?

When I began getting serious about putting together a demographic picture of my customer base, I found myself almost at a loss. I discovered that my customers could be broken out into several categories.

- **Sentimentalists:** They grew up around agriculture and miss it, or are one or more generations removed but had a relative in agriculture.
- **Foodies/gourmets:** They love all things delectable, delicious, rare, haute cuisine, or otherwise fancy when it comes to foods and other products.
- **Environmentally conscious:** They believe buying local is especially important for reducing the effects of large-scale production, transportation, and distribution on the environment.
- **Health conscious:** They have food allergies or believe they will derive health benefits from eating local or nontraditionally grown foods.
- **Bulk buyers/price shoppers:** They buy in volume—such as half a side of beef, which wouldn't be carried in any store—to save money.
- **Vegetarian converts:** They became vegetarians because they did not like the way meat animals are raised or felt modern meat production methods made meat unhealthy; free-range and other less intensive animal husbandry techniques have won them back.

It's a broad group, I know. As you might guess, many of these categories overlap. But they all exist. And to be honest, at first I was perplexed that I couldn't come up with one or two categories into which I could stuff all my customers, allowing me to craft what I imagined were market-savvy customized messages. But I can't.

I spent two summers evaluating the data I gathered from voluntary customer surveys that led me to these groups. Finally, one market morning as the summer waned and pumpkins replaced sweet corn as the wait-in-line-for-an-hour produce of choice, I finally got it. The marketplace answer I'd been looking for was staring me in the face: *This trend toward smaller farms and local foods is drawing very different types of people together.* Their backgrounds are as diverse as the reasons my customers buy from us. It's a simple and yet profound insight.

Who Is Meeting the Demand?

As I've already mentioned, moving to the country has been a steady demographic trend. In addition, all sorts of people who already live in rural areas,

or in the suburbs and even cities, are turning to small-scale farming as a way to make or supplement their income.

Jeannie shared some ideas with me about why people are so attracted to the farming life. "First of all, it's the beauty and the peace," she says. "When you're in the city, you never really see the stars."

I wouldn't argue with that. There is nothing more pristine than a cold December night when my husband and I head outside at about midnight to check on the mama cows and their babies. The ground is lit by the shimmering stars set in their deep navy blue canopy. Yes, the stars are certainly one of the big advantages.

I wondered if there are more men than women driving this lifestyle revolution. Jeannie doesn't think so. "I think it's equally split; both men and women have a desire to move out." However, their reasons for doing so may be different. "The propelling force for men seems to be that they're tired of high pressure and have a desire for physical work. It's the idea of playing with tractors. Women seem to like being outside and having more space where they can have fresh air and get the kids outside and maybe have a nice garden."

Of course, these are generalizations, and it can be hard to generalize about decisions that are so personal. But Jeannie did say that she sees several broad groups of people in her lavender seminars.

A winter's dawn seen from my own back door.

Jeannie's Personal Transition

"If you're used to going to an office every day, this can be a big transition," Jeannie cautions newcomers to the small farm lifestyle.

"There is great romanticism about the country life that's shown in movies and written about in books, as if it's ideal. But things are not that simple. You're rather away from things (like shopping, restaurants, and services), so you're probably expected to do more for yourself." Jeannie remembers the time she was home alone when the water pump went dry—a big deal in Texas!

"Plus, I think there are things to deal with internally," she continues. "You've got to be able to be by yourself, and you might have to deal with feelings of isolation. These are good things to learn, but it's a transition. There are accommodations you have to make."

Jeannie urges other people who are thinking of starting a small farm business to really make sure they are ready to change their lives. "Ask yourself, are you an adaptable person? You'll have to get settled in; it won't happen right away."

Jeannie also urges country newcomers to consider that moving from one set of local norms to another, even if it's only a few miles, can be considered a switch of cultures—and that's never easy. "In the beginning, I was very judgmental," she admits. "I would say that if you travel outside the U.S., you'll understand that it is a separate culture and respect that." She advises new farmers to treat smaller communities and farming areas the same way they'd treat any new culture. "This all existed before you came here; respect people's ways of doing things."

As for Jeannie, "I'm more comfortable now in both places. I could live in the country or the city now. This feeling is very rewarding for me. When I was in New York City, I just thought of myself as a city girl. I was limiting myself to this one type of world, and it was the only one that was valid for me. But knowing you have the confidence to be self-reliant, that comes from living in the country."

Retirees make up what she thought would be the largest demographic moving out to the country. "They want to keep their days full and interesting and new, and I think they also want to have something productive to occupy themselves," she says.

Jeannie was also initially surprised to see so many younger people, in their child-rearing years, moving to the country and wanting to start more of a vocation than an avocation. Many young families desire the lifestyle

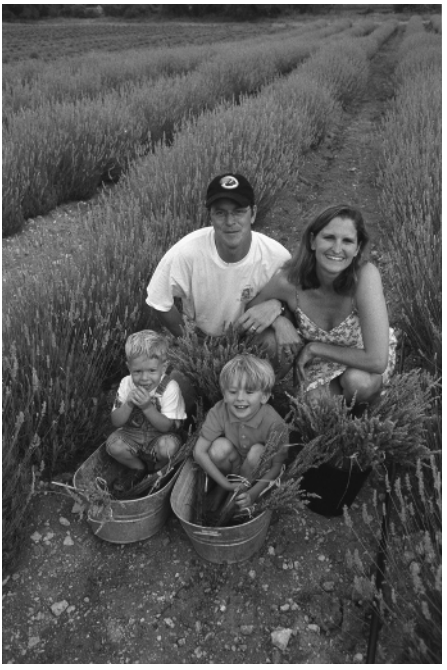
that rural living offers but realize early on that they can add income that will supplement their main earnings. "People don't want to feel put out to pasture, especially those in their working years, and they don't want to feel like they are retired or wonder what they're going to do in the country," she explains.

She also saw a certain number of country converts who wanted to resurrect a fond memory of Grandpa's farm or summers visiting friends on the farm.

We both agreed that these very human motivations are driving a genuine trend, not simply a fad. "One thing for me is just how many people continue to be interested in our lavender-growing seminars; I'm amazed at how they fill up," says Jeannie. "Most of these people are from the city or at least a suburban area—that's how I quantify the continued interest."

Making the Transition

As cities sprawl out into the country, overtaking farmland, there is a natural curiosity among the urban urbane to experience the rural. But things don't always go smoothly. "When suburban meets rural, it creates conflict," says Jeannie. "Blanco itself [is now an agritourism area] and it has really changed. In Texas there are fewer huge ranches and more smaller plots that people can buy and do small-scale farming."



Jeannie, Robb, and the kids in their lavender patch.

While the influx of city folks might make some farmers and ranchers uncomfortable, it works the other way, too. Moving to the country is not always idyllic.

In her book, Jeannie writes about her first experiences in rural Texas. "As we drove into the town of Blanco and saw the courthouse and the Bowling Club Café with the convention of pickups parked out front, I was even more depressed." Yet just a page later, her own veraison was already beginning: "You couldn't have told me then that I would soon feel

Planting Seeds for the Future

In 2006, Jeannie sold her lavender farm to a young woman named Tasha who had worked for her. But the sweet-scented herb is still part of her life. Jeannie continues to be involved in the Lavender Festival in Blanco and offers seminars on lavender growing.

In 2008, she also launched the Seed Campaign. "If people buy my book via my web site, www.jeannieralston.com, the money from the commissions I make on its sale will go to a variety of charities," she says. She adds that what she makes from those sales is "found money" and "it just feels better to give it back."

the exact opposite, and I would never have believed the part lavender would play in my about-face."

Summing Up My Case for Small Farms

In the end, why do people want to buy products from small farmers? I'm inclined to believe there are powerful socioeconomic ideas at work that have significant weight when we look at consumer trends. For example, many consumers believe it is important not only to know where food comes from but also to reassure themselves that it is wholesome. This is a serious message they are sending to federal regulatory agencies and also to lifelong agricultural producers.

There is also a lighter side to this trend. Could it be that we've decided shopping for food—at least for local, gourmet, or otherwise interesting foods—is fun? I think the foodie trend is a hobby that we willingly spend our "extra" money to feed. I have to say, if I have to choose between browsing a farmers market on a breezy morning or slogging through a big box store with everyone else in a 50-mile radius, my pick is obvious.

There may be something, too, in our desire to reach out to other human beings in a high-tech, otherwise increasingly impersonal world. Is there something in the hearts of suburbanites that tells them that at least once their children should shake the hand of the person who literally made their dinner? Is this movement to small farms and local foods getting us back to our roots? I think so, and I'm all for it.

It's important to realize that traditional agriculture is not bad or evil; we need large-scale production to *immediately* feed a huge and hungry world.

But small-scale farms, tended by devoted and loving farmers who have a strong desire to make this their lifestyle, should be able to feed those farmers, their communities, and those customers who want a choice.

Jeannie's Best Practices

- Learn the rural etiquette from your neighbors and the community.
- Be understanding and respectful of cultural differences.
- Get involved locally.
- Start a new venture as supplemental income, not as your entire cash flow.
- Enjoy the lifestyle as well as the business opportunity.
- Don't be prissy; be game for adventure!