

FOOD SYSTEM CAREER PROFILES



BRENT BEIDLER BEIDLER FAMILY FARM ORGANIC DAIRY

Brent Beidler grew up in Vermont with dreams of owning a dairy farm. More than 20 years ago he and his wife moved to Randolph to start their small farm. They are a completely organic farm that is different in the fact that their cows are 100% grass fed. They like staying as a small farm: Mr. Beidler says “because of the way we farm, our profit per cow is high compared to industry standards, we don't need to milk a lot of cows because our herd is right-sized for our farm.”

JENN COLBY HOWLING WOLF FARM DIVERSIFIED MEAT ANIMALS

“We started raising chickens in 1998 and have been selling poultry, pork or lamb ever since.... Ultimately, we plan to create a place for ourselves and our community where farming, food, family, and fun find a comfortable home together. In 2016, we found that place. Let the new adventure commence.” Jenn also works for UVM Extension coordinating the Pasture Program at the Center for Sustainable Agriculture.





TIM SANFORD LUNA BLEU FARM ORGANIC ANIMAL & VEGETABLE

Luna Bleu farm is a diversified organic farm in central Vermont. Luna Bleu has been growing on that land since 1993. Luna Bleu works with animals and they grow vegetables. As Tim Sanford said when we interviewed him, “I think of our farm is an ecosystem. We grow plants on the flat land. We have animals where we can’t grow vegetables on the slopes. We give the animals crops we can’t sell.”



What would you have liked to know before you started?

BRENT BEIDLER:

“How demanding farming is on a family. I did not know how much the work would affect family life, it took a while to learn that.

And the importance of waiting. I once went 17 months without missing a milking.”

JENN COLBY:

“Failure is a good thing in farming, you learn best from failure. I am a better farmer because animals have died, but not because they did well.

And for family you need at least a week off from the farm. General farming culture is working all the time, but you need a vacation. Hunting, whatever-- get off the farm, away from it all. You will be better as a farmer and person if you can get out of your headspace. You have to decide to make time, have a system, plan.”

TIM SANFORD:

“How to figure out what is worth taking a loan out for to improve the business -- and that it is not bad to take out a loan if it will make the business more profitable sooner.”

Financial Planning, Breaking Even, and Becoming Debt Free

BRENT BEIDLER:

It took 18 years to pay off the farm -- they bought the farm with a 20 year mortgage and took 18 to pay it off. Organic dairy paid enough and he made paying it off a priority, they didn't want to be in debt too long. It was profitable, but some years were more financially tight than others. Now that he has paid off his mortgage, he budgets money to pay for his daughter's college tuition.

JENN COLBY:

Jenn took time to figure out if she wanted to be a farmer. Her husband worked full time. They had a child and her husband went back to school to get higher paying work. They took a business planning class and tried different value added projects. Wrote a business plan – don't quit your day job while planning! A business plan is the best thing you can do for planning, try your farm out on paper. Then Jenn also went back to school part time and took 5 years to finish the degree - she delayed in order to do it debt free.

TIM SANFORD:

Quality over quantity -- focus on skills. Easier crops that grow better and make more money is better than growing a lot and risking a lot. Get to a comfortable size and become as efficient as possible there.

If you grow crops, you still have to sell them to make money. Understanding how sales work, being efficient, and pricing is very important.

What does your average day consist of and how many hours do you work?

BRENT BEIDLER:

“Just getting the basic chores done is the key part of every day. The rest of the time is flex time.” He does 8 hours of chores, and between 11-12 hours total. Up early for milking chores -- chore time is routine, enjoyable. It varies through the seasons. Then there is a 12 hour interval between milkings to do other stuff such as fencing, haying, coming to school, etc. The evening is the same as the morning. He can be done with work by 6:30pm.

“The hard part of dairy is it is 7 days a week. It’s a refrigerated product, so every machine and refrigerator must work without fail and so do you.”

JENN COLBY:

Something different every day. Mornings are consistent -- feed, water, and move sheep fencing every day. Up at 5:30 every day to read in the morning. There’s a lot of seasonal variety, there’s not the same level of chores in winter vs summer.

It takes between 8-10 hours but can easily go 12-13 hours. “16 hours of what you love vs 8 hours of work that you hate? There’s a huge difference.”

TIM SANFORD:

There is a lot of work, communication, and research (sort of) required. In summer it’s 10 hours a day, 5-6 hours in winter of prep work for the winter farmers market.

In addition to daily chores, Tim does tractor chores and maintenance, while his wife Suzanne does marketing. Planning is together.

Deciding to be a Farmer

BRENT BEIDLER:

Brent worked on farms when he was younger and always tried to figure out his way into farming. “I like being with animals and being around cows -- having a connection with the animals.

My grandfather had a dairy farm but my parents did not. Because I was pressured to avoid farming, I did UVM forestry my first year, but still found myself interested in farming. I left UVM and worked hard on dairy farms for three years. Then I returned to UVM and finished with a degree in agriculture. I returned to gain more knowledge and wanted to focus on learning. Having a college degree offers off-farm options for work as well.”

JENN COLBY:

“I grew up in Woodstock and wanted to be a vet, I always loved animals. I applied to two schools and didn’t get in to Tufts, so I went to UVM for animal science. I ran out of money in two years and waitressed to make money. I had a terrible GPA, wasn’t a good student. I realized I didn’t want to be a vet but enjoyed livestock and wanted to be a farmer instead. 7 years go I went back and got my Masters for my current job working for UVM extension service.

I went immediately from highschool to college because that was the assumption, which isn’t always a good fit for folks. Some things I did because I was expected to do – now I’m glad I did some of those things. Now I’m more independent in my choices.”

TIM SANFORD:

Tim did not grow up with much exposure to ag. “I didn’t set this out to be my career/goal. Experimenting, incrementally, to get to where we are now. It’s something that evolved over time.”

As far as meeting social expectations of “the good life,” Tim says, “Is it realistic and makes you happy? Then it’s a good life.”

What scares you the most?

BRENT BEIDLER:

“Having a kid on the farm and worrying about her getting hurt. The only time I ever spanked my daughter was one time my daughter came out when she was told not to when I was running manure spreader -I never would have seen her. A farm is best place in the world to raise a family, but it goes both ways.”

JENN COLBY:

Child injury; the financial commitment

What was the most daunting aspect of starting from scratch as a farmer?

TIM SANFORD:

Finding viable and affordable land. Being careful to put money in effective places. Experience is important.

What's the best part of being part of the farming community?

BRENT BEIDLER:

“The community is what has allowed us to continue as a family farm. There are a lot of local farms in the area. If a piece of equipment breaks we help each other. When we first started I tried to spread manure on a field that was too wet. I didn't know anyone locally yet. Dave Silloway came and pulled me out and another farmer was waiting to help. It's the character of Vermont -- people want to see farms working, animal, producing things.”