

FARMING



Farm Fresh

From city life to farm life: a tale of **RURAL REVIVAL** in western New York

IN A SPRAWLING STONE HOME IN LOCKPORT, N.Y., JUST blocks from the stair-step Erie Canal locks that inspired the town's name, Rich Woodbridge describes keepsakes he found boxed up on his family's sixth-generation farm. Letters signed by President Grover Cleveland and then-Assistant Secretary of the Navy Franklin Roosevelt thank Woodbridge's great-great-grandfather for apples sent from his orchards. Dusty wooden crates bear the labels of an off-site winery operated by his great-grandfather. Receipts written in 1883 outline seed, flour and feed purchases, while others detail sales of cut ice hauled from the farm's pond to Philadelphia.

The relics suggest a thriving enterprise quite different from the 100 acres where Woodbridge, 35, spent his childhood summers. He didn't always recognize the historic significance of the property deeded in 1827 to Joel McCollum, his ancestor and one of Lockport's founders. "It's always been Grandma's house to me. It was never anything unusual," Woodbridge says.

While he and his wife, Bree, 34, have never taken the traditional path, their decision to trade international careers for an overlooked farm 30 miles northeast of Buffalo still came as quite a surprise to friends and

family. The couple met in San Francisco, where Rich, a New Jersey native, worked in market research after supervising archaeological digs in Honduras. Bree lived in Arizona before coordinating Russian business-exchange programs in San Francisco and Washington, D.C. Shortly after their wedding, she moved to Monterey, Calif., to earn a master's degree from the Monterey Institute of International Studies. Rich did the same at the University of California, San Diego, and community-development work reunited them in Chennai, India.

They were a month into their yearlong stay when Rich's grandmother passed away. Upon their return, the Woodbridges traveled to Lockport to pay their respects. Rich hadn't visited McCollum Orchards in years.

"We were driving through a residential neighborhood and, all of a sudden, this big farmland opens up. There's a 5,600-square-foot mansion standing in the middle and a barn, tractor shed, carriage house," he says. "It took our breath away."

The family's discussion of what to do with the farm continued as Bree and Rich considered their own next steps. They had applied for jobs in major cities but saw

GREEN ACRES IS THE PLACE TO BE: Rich and Bree Woodbridge and their old stone home at McCollum Orchards

potential in the farm's overgrown orchards and crumbling stone structures. In 2011, after making a six-page list of pros and cons, the Woodbridges chose McCollum Orchards in Lockport over life in a big city. "Our parents thought we were crazy," says Bree, whose father managed the University of Arizona's citrus-research farm when she was a child. "They said, 'You have no idea what you're getting yourselves into. You have careers. Go on that path.'"

Still, their families offered support. Rich's father, an attorney, is co-owner of the farm, and the couple kicked off restoration projects before they even finished unpacking. The plumbing and electrical systems in the 1830s house hadn't been updated in 30 to 60 years. Layers of lead paint covered walls and staircases. And Bree and Rich donned respirators to sort through sheds filled with goods accumulated throughout some 100 years, then reinforced foundations and rebuilt the walls of several outbuildings. They completed much of the construction by hand (with the help of parents and friends) after researching a number of renovation techniques online.

As they freshened up the farm's buildings, the young entrepreneurs also prepared the surrounding land and planted gardens. A year later they were selling more than 40 herb and vegetable varieties at a late-season farm stand on the property. This year, they are expanding that market garden, with plans to open the stand by early June, as well as reviving the heirloom pear and apple orchards that flourished under the management of Rich's grandmother and his great-grandmother before her. And last fall, Bree and Rich harvested half an acre of hops, which is used in the beer-brewing process (it lends bitterness to beer).

While New York produced the bulk of the nation's hops in the early 1900s, pests, disease and declining demand during Prohibition destroyed the market. Today, the Pacific Northwest supplies most American hops. But Buffalo, N.Y.-area craft brewers wanted a local option, so Rich and Bree began touring established farms to learn the growing process. Before long, they were using logs from their own trees to create a 21-foot-high trellis system for producing hops. They planted seven varieties, retrofitted an apple-packing shed for processing and hosted a picking party last August.

Ten pounds of harvested centennial hops

went to Community Beer Works, a Buffalo nanobrewery that sells small batches of beer to area pubs. Brewer and co-owner Rudy Watkins says the local hops gave his American pale ale more pine and mint character than those sourced from across the country. But, he adds, it's about more than taste. "There is something super cool about knowing that your hops, or anything that you would buy at a farmers market, come from right nearby. You actually can meet and build a relationship with the people who grow those things," says the suburban-Buffalo native.

Lockport local Julie Blackman fosters many such food-based relationships. Like Rich Woodbridge, she is a sixth-generation farmer building on her ancestors' agricultural foundation. Her parents still own the

Bountiful Buffalo

Sample the Niagara region's freshest flavors at these 10 stops.

McCollum Orchards sells more than 40 vegetable and herb varieties at its farm stand between June and October. www.oldfarmnewlife.com

Bistro Europa prepares dishes featuring regional produce, seafood and meat. www.europabuffalo.com

Blackman Homestead Farm offers apple and pear "u-pick" September through November. www.blackmanhomesteadfarm.com

Blue Monk serves up European pub fare and local beer. www.bluemonkbflo.com

Community Beer Works produces craft beers poured only in the Buffalo region. www.communitybeerworks.com

Elmwood-Bidwell Farmers Market features local products, cooking demonstrations and entertainment from May to December. www.elmwoodmarket.org

Farmers & Artisans carries fresh and prepared foods from nearly 50 New York vendors. www.farmersandartisans.com

First Light Farm & Creamery is known for small-batch cheeses crafted from goat and cow milk. www.first-light-farm.com

Niagara Wine Trail is a downloadable self-guided-tour map that helps visitors explore this emerging wine region. www.niagarawinetrail.org

Singer Farm Naturals specializes in cherries and garlic. www.singerfarmnaturals.com

160-acre Blackman Homestead Farm; in 1971, they first welcomed guests for seasonal "harvest-your-own" (or "u-pick") visits in the property's apple orchards. Following a 20-year career in physical therapy, Blackman returned to farming. She since has introduced a line of pie fillings, fruit butters and sauces made from her family's harvest.

As she got acquainted with neighboring producers, Blackman found that many wanted to sell their eggs, meat and other products even after seasonal farmers markets had closed. In response, she and local baker David Setzer opened Farmers & Artisans in 2009. This past January, the store, which carries staples, specialty items and prepared foods from nearly 50 New York producers, expanded into a more spacious location in Snyder, between Buffalo and Lockport. Whether they supply herbs, milk or other goods, Blackman's vendors recognize the value of niche production. "There seems to be a younger group willing to take the leap," she says. "They see farming as a viable way to make a living."

Edible Buffalo magazine editor and publisher Lisa Tucker co-founded the not-for-profit Field & Fork Network to connect producers, chefs, institutional food buyers and consumers in an eight-county zone surrounding Buffalo. She calls the region "an untapped jewel in terms of food," citing the diversity and quality of products coming from some 7,500 area farms. "More and more folks want to go out and pick their own apples or blueberries. As they do that, they become more connected to what farming means," she says.

In addition to offering fresh produce and future "u-pick" options at McCollum Orchards, the Woodbridges want to share the area's agricultural heritage with visitors. "You save a farm by farming it," Bree says. "This soil has been supporting farming continuously for over 200 years, which is pretty special." She and her husband also appreciate being able to plant their own roots while preserving the Lockport land for future generations.

"We saw a real opportunity here not just to start our own business and save the property," Rich says, "but also to be members of this community and have a real sense of place." ❧

RENEE BRINCKS is a freelance travel, food and lifestyle writer and frequent *American Way* contributor. She splits her time between San Francisco and rural Iowa.