

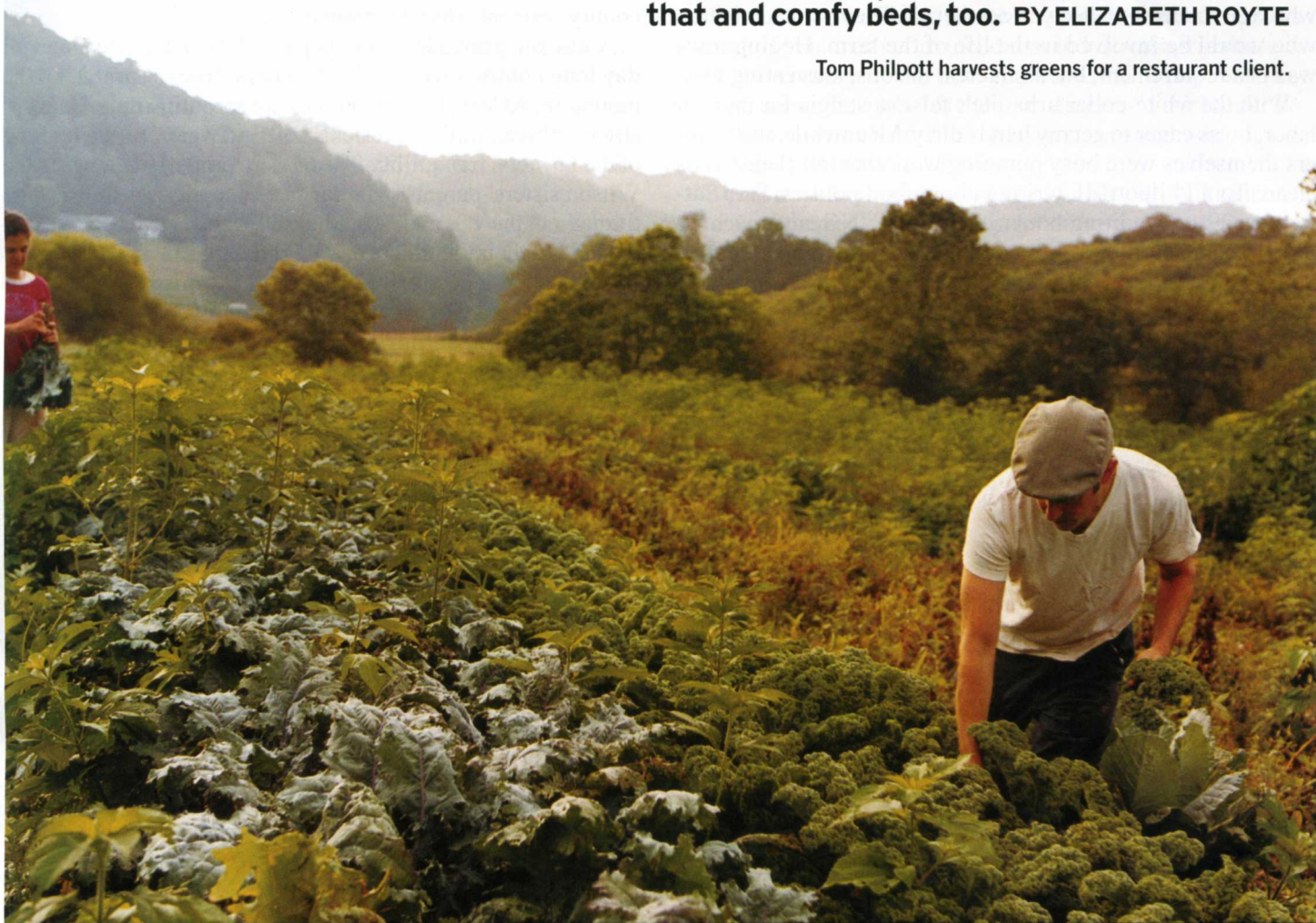
MENU

restaurants: reviews and trends

WEED IT AND REAP

Muscle-aching work, stimulating conversation, and mouthwatering food. **Maverick Farms** has all that and comfy beds, too. BY ELIZABETH ROYTE

Tom Philpott harvests greens for a restaurant client.



There's no need to get into exactly who bought the gas-station doughnuts; suffice it to say that doughnuts were bought. We ate a few in the car, but then someone—someone too bowled over by the beauty of North Carolina's High Country to be thinking straight—whisked the leftovers into the refrigerator at Maverick Farms, where we'd arrived for a five-day stay. Dedicated to sustainable agriculture and to reconnecting local food networks, the Maverick farmers use mostly human-scale farming techniques. Vegetables are harvested from garden patches just a few steps from the house. Honey comes from their bees, eggs from their hens, and meat from the farmers' rancher friends. Grains are purchased in bulk, and the butter, milk, yogurt, ice cream, juice, and bread are handmade on the farm or locally. In other words, Maverick Farms occupies the red-hot

center of foodie rectitude. We liked that: It's what sets the place apart from other farms that welcome visitors, and it's why my husband, Peter, and my seven-year-old daughter, Lucy, and I had made this trip. But that's also what made me sit bolt upright at 3 A.M. in my comfy bed. Our corner room overlooked the porch, and I could hear the stream splashing below, but where bliss should have reigned, an image of those doughnuts intruded—how could we have brought those industrial rings of evil into a locavore sanctuary?

I had wanted to vacation with my family on a working farm, one that supported my core food values. I was here as an agritourist, though the terms of our visit, I soon discovered, were nowhere near as straightforward as those of the agritourism served up in Europe, where travelers use working farms simply as a place to sleep, a rural B&B with the perfume of compost instead of potpourri. With its 125-year-old farmhouse, flowering fruit trees, pretty red hens, and porch swings, Maverick was a lovely place to sleep, but its farmers didn't want visitors who were interested solely in aesthetics. They wanted visitors who would be involved in the life of the farm. Hoeing rows wasn't a requirement, but an interest in conscious eating was.

With the white-collar urbanite's false nostalgia for manual labor, I was eager to get my hands dirty. Meanwhile, the farmers themselves were busy pursuing work that left their hands clean: Tom Philpott, 41, writing about food politics; Sara Saf-ransky, 29, copyediting books, attending UNC, and teaching yoga; Leo Gaev, 29, working as a metalsmith and contractor; Alice Brooke Wilson, 30, pursuing a Ph.D. in anthropology; and her sister, Hillary, 23, studying political science and history at Warren Wilson College. "All small farmers have to work outside

the farm," Philpott tells me. "We learned that almost immediately." According to a 2006 report from the USDA's Economic Research Service, 93 percent of American farm households "have negative farm operating profits, on average, and draw most of their income from off-farm sources."

Historically, landowners here in Watauga County grew tobacco or cabbage and sold the latter to the North State Canning Company, in nearby Boone. They also worked outside the home, mostly in manufacturing. But in the mid-'70s, the canning company closed, and in the '90s, domestic tobacco farming all but collapsed. With no market for their crops, farmers felt pressured to sell their land. The crunch had been a long time coming: Over a 21-year period, subdivided land within the county increased more than 300 percent. Luxurious second homes ("and third and fourth homes," says Gaev) have risen on the rich bottomlands and on top of mountain ridges, with spectacular views both of protected peaks and of other multimillion-dollar homes. Nowadays, tourism and recreation employ more county residents than farming does.

A narrow gravel lane winds past Maverick Farms, and all day long contractors' and landscapers' trucks rumble up the mountain. At least 100 new homes are sprouting uphill and upstream, threatening Maverick's soil and water, to say nothing of the farmers' tranquility. The 65-acre property belongs to the Wilson sisters' parents, who farmed specialty vegetables here throughout the '80s and '90s. Since 2002 they have been leasing the land to their daughters and their daughters' friends, whose farming experience derives from working on organic farms in Italy, attending workshops, and poring over the agriculture books and journals with which this house is crammed.



We follow Gaev across the creek on a wooden bridge and survey the herb garden, the broccoli rabe, the baby spinach, the French carrots, and the arugula. "We started the farm to protect the region's agricultural heritage, and we wanted to teach people about where food comes from," Gaev says. To that end, Maverick hosts monthly "farm dinners," community workdays, and cooking classes. It sells at the local farmers market and through community supported agriculture (CSA) subscriptions. Maverick also invites college interns to work here for credit, and it opens its doors to paying guests like us.

Alice Brooke Wilson arrives in a pickup truck with 12 flats of lettuce, kale, and chard and settles them into the creek, where their long roots trail in the current. They'll rest here until the planting beds dry out a bit. Maverick practices French intensive farming: Using hand tools, the farmers turn the soil once, to a depth of two feet, then add compost, and turn it over again. "It's a lot of work," says Gaev, with a sweet, weary smile. He and the others had recently shoveled 18 tons of chicken manure into their compost pile and onto their fields. But the soil is everything, the nurturing foundation. "Modern farming, with machines, is very disturbing to the soil," says Gaev. "It makes the soil dense and more erosion prone. Instead of rototilling the permanent beds, we pull out the dead stuff and turn it over. We plant cover crops in the off-season—hairy vetch, oats, or winter rye. That adds fertility and holds onto nitrogen."

We amble past the radishes, some of which we'll eat that night. "Time to make sorrel soup," says Safransky, with a glance at a patch that had overwintered and bolted. Later, I'll plant lettuces while she and Gaev painstakingly transplant infant leeks—the width of a grass stalk—into a raised bed. I'll help

move a cold frame and assemble block-and-board shelves in a greenhouse. I'll harvest watercress from the creek, and every morning Lucy will go out to the henhouse to collect eggs. Peter and I will spend a few hours running string between metal poles for the sugar snap peas. We try several different methods. None seems ideal, and we wonder if the farmers will take the whole thing apart after we leave.

Through it all we eat the freshest of local foods, simply prepared: pasta with that broccoli rabe and garlic; cress and beets; trout with parsley pesto; chocolate ice cream. And we talk—nonstop. About Wal-Mart's potential impact on organic farmers; about Michael Pollan's books and about the theories of cantankerous farmer Joel Salatin. We talk about the elitism of the organic-food movement and the Maverick farmers' uneasiness with a socioeconomic order that lets them charge \$40 a pound for their watercress and \$30 for "handcrafted" greens. Yes, they recognize that it's the owners of second homes who are both creating a market (in local high-end restaurants) for their goods and pressuring farmers to sell the land that grows the food. If you aren't convinced that industrial agriculture is killing our country by the time you leave, the Maverick farmers aren't doing their job. "At the farm dinners," I ask them, "do you talk to guests about what they're eating and why, or are you content just to serve ...?"

Philpott leaps to answer before I can finish. "We talk to them. We lecture them. They don't get out of here without hearing the Talk." Then someone quotes from Pollan: "The more knowledge people have about the way their food is produced, the more likely it is that their values—and not just value—will inform their purchasing decisions." >

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THE VEGETABLES ARE HARVESTED FROM GARDEN PATCHES JUST A FEW STEPS FROM THE HOUSE, HONEY COMES FROM THEIR BEES, AND EGGS FROM THEIR 13 HENS.

Hillary Wilson, Sara Safransky, and Leo Gaev prepare garlic.

The ironies and contradictions—half the Mavericks are from somewhere else, and all except the Wilsons are new to farming; if they want to eat, those outside jobs are mandatory; they believe in microgreens for the people, but they can't afford to put those greens in their CSA boxes—lend a sense of doom to this agricultural voyage. The farmers speak freely and happily about the vexations of food and farming. Preparing the soil by hand is exhausting. Transplanting hundreds of sprouts is tedious. The interns can be troublesome, and possibly the agritourists, too. (Though they did tell us, as we cleaned up after dinner one night, that we were the best agritourists they'd ever had. Did they say that to everyone?) Cooking good food is never a vexation, but the politics behind it can be. I wonder if the running conversation acts to distract the Mavericks from the arduous labor and their worries about staying afloat. Or maybe it's psychological balm. *I'm not just a struggling farmer; I'm part of an essential movement!* Deluded or not, we are happy here—and so comfortable that we don't want to leave.

Except for the \$6 million question, which nags at us for days. No, not about the doughnuts—they never come up. Rather, What will our bill look like? The carefully worded information sheet in our room says, "We all work cooperatively together, and since we're not a hotel or B&B, there are no servants." Dinners are BYOB, our room is \$90 a night, and we know that help-

ing in the fields will take \$7 an hour off our tab. But what about the food we've eaten? And what is washing the dishes worth? After toiling in the fields with the Mavericks, helping to make dinners, and breaking bread with them, how can one possibly sneak off to play the piano while the farmers scrub pots? As it turns out, our bill is straightforward and more than fair: a mere \$435 for four nights. Possibly our labor was traded for their wine, though I suspect we drank far more than we dug.

"We don't require that people work," says Gaev, "but we hope we're attracting the sort of people who want to. We want them to be interested." The farm doesn't advertise, and the website's directions to the property are purposefully vague. "I want potential visitors to call so I can get a feel for them," Gaev continues. "We don't want high-end guests with a lot of expectations," clarifies Philpott. "We want people who can take care of themselves." I imagine excruciating editing sessions for the website every time someone who doesn't get it, or perhaps is just uninterested in what they're supporting with their food purchases, slips past the gatekeepers.

Eventually, I forget about the doughnuts. And something even better happens after Peter and I finish with those pea strings. We settle on the patio with Philpott and Gaev, under the flowering buckeye, with the creek babbling away, and sip hard cider they'd put up last fall. Then I remember the potato chips in our car—horrible, wonderful salt-and-vinegar chips we'd bought for a hike, and I don't mean the organic kind made by hand in a kettle. Sheepishly I pass them to Gaev, who tears into the sack with gusto. "People think we don't eat this stuff," he says with his mouth full, "but put it in front of us and we'll jump right in."

"I love these," says Philpott, stretching across the table for the bag. "They are *so* good."

For a RECIPE, see page 131.