

# The Rocky, Inspiring Story of Five Female Farmers Who Changed the Way We Eat

BY JILL WARREN LUCAS

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID HUPPERT, KATE MEDLEY, DEBBIE ROOS, CAROLE TOPALIAN

**E**liza MacLean was stomping through her muddy Saxapahaw farm, going through the daily rituals of tending her plump heritage breed hogs, when she suddenly found herself at a loss for words.

“Oh my God,” she quietly exclaimed, sounding nothing like the Valley Girls she knew growing up in California. “There is a huge barn owl in front of me that takes my breath away.”

Such moments contribute to the enormous satisfaction MacLean derives from dedicating long hours to raising pigs, cows and other animals at Cane Creek Farm, which she created in 2002. In January, with support from a single employee, she was shifting operations from Snow Camp to a few miles down the road in Saxapahaw, a once-sleepy village that’s become an epicenter for organic and sustainable food and drink. Her mature Ossabow Islands Hogs and signature crossbreeds spend their final days here before being processed at the nearby Left Bank Butchery.

“This place is the whole nine yards,” says MacLean, 49, a former veterinary technician who switched to full-time farming after earning a master’s degree in environmental toxicology from Duke University. She’d fallen in love with the area and saw an opportunity to raise her young twins in a wholesome, forward-thinking environment while meeting a growing demand for humanely-raised meats.

Clockwise from top left: Betsy Hitt: Peregrine Farm; Flo Hawley and Portia McKnight: Chapel Hill Creamery; Eliza MacLean: Cane Creek Farm; Cathy Jones: Perry-winkle Farm

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— Cathy Jones, Perry-winkle Farm



There's not much to the new farm right now except the promise of fresh spring forage, but MacLean plans to build a barn for the animals and a house for her family. "I want us to become the Triangle's largest producer," she says. "I plan on working and growing here until I just can't do it anymore."

MacLean's commitment resonates with other area women who have dedicated their lives to either grow food using sustainable practices or work to get fresh produce and processed proteins to consumers. Buyers range from our region's top chefs (notably, Andrea Reusing of Chapel Hill's Lantern restaurant) to countless concerned home cooks who understand that foods created with a reduced environmental impact often come with higher purchase prices.

**THE SO-CALLED "SISTERHOOD"** of women business owners participating in the state's diverse foodways was the subject of a January New York Times article, "The North Carolina Way." As Reusing observed of the Piedmont, "There are more high-quality farmers per capita in these 50 square miles than maybe anywhere else but Northern California. If you cook here, you are automatically part of that network."

According to the 2012 U.S. Census of Agriculture, nearly 6,500 North Carolina farms reported a woman as the principal operator. Close to 19,700 of the state's 50,216 total farms included at least one woman as an operator.

In 2002, similar data reported just 5,356 farms with a woman as the principal operator. Almost 17,000 of the state's 53,930 total farms that year included at least one woman operator.

Many of our region's young or second-career female farmers look to four women in particular as approachable role models: Betsy Hitt, who has farmed since 1981 with husband Alex Hitt at Peregrine Farm in Graham; Cathy Jones, who is marking her 25th year with husband Michael Perry at Perry-winkle Farm in Chapel Hill; and Portia McKnight and Flo Hawley, who have produced award-winning cheese at Chapel Hill Creamery since 2001. Each is a longtime member of the Carrboro Farmers Market.

Determined to have an outdoor job and live close to the land, the Hitts spent their early married years living in a tent on a patch of their 26-acre parcel.

"It wasn't to be romantic," Betsy Hitt says with a wry laugh, recalling that 18 percent interest rates nearly strangled their early optimism. "The banks wouldn't loan us money so we started with 17 shareholders. On the good side, we had very little debt."

Hitt, 58, worked the fields solo in the early in the years while her husband worked their side business as a painting contractor. "If you're trying to do it without a partner who is directly involved, it's hard," says Hitt, who started with cut flowers before Alex Hitt expanded operations to include specialty vegetables. "You're the one

out there at 4 o'clock in the morning doing things that must be done."

While farming can be a heartbreakingly fickle pursuit, Hitt says she never considered another path. "It's you and the unknown weather," she says, "but that's different than you and a corporate structure or a person who turns out to be unreasonable boss."

**HITT IS AWARE** of only a handful of local women farmers who managed to launch and maintain successful operations without a male partner. Perry-winkle's Cathy Jones believes more capable women will continue to join their ranks.

"The typical image of a farm is the guy on the tractor and the wife doing the books," says Jones, 65. "Increasingly, that's not at all typical for this community."

Like many of today's young or second-career farmers, neither she nor her husband grew up farming. Jones previously dabbled in a range of male-dominated careers, from carpentry to being a sports official.

"I didn't let my sex or gender keep me from doing what I wanted to do," she says. "I don't think any of the women farming in our community look at it being something radical. There's really nothing out there that says 'men only.'"

Jones toiled alone the first few years while her husband built a career as a master stonemason. They built their reputation on being one of the first sellers at the Carrboro market to offer unusual varieties of vegetables.

"The name of the game is attracting people to your truck," she says. "There's always the quest to offer something different."

In the past decade, Jones has moved toward cut flowers while her husband added free-range poultry. She credits the combination of rich, productive land and access to progressive markets for their enduring success.

"We've been sitting in a sweet spot all these years, which is why it worked for Michael and I," Jones says. "The fact is, farming is a crap shoot. The November freeze hit us hard. We don't have hoop houses so we haven't had a lot going on here this winter.

"It's OK, because I really do thrive on the seasonality of our job. People ask me, 'Why are you a farmer?' When the days are long, I have lots of energy and work sunrise to sunset. In the winter, it's nice to hunker down, hibernate and read," she adds. "We raise what our land and our schedules can handle. Not everyone who farms can say that."

**CHAPEL HILL CREAMERY'S** owners agree that farming is all about finding the right land in the right location. McKnight works directly with a closed herd of 30 dairy cows and about 25 pigs, the latter of which consume a flood of whey left from processing Hawley's award-

winning cheese. Reusing takes two butchered pigs each week for use at Lantern.

“It seems like most dairy herds are run by men, but I think it comes more naturally to women,” says McKnight, 62. “The cows are female and milking is a female-oriented activity. It’s very nurturing.”

McKnight adds that there is a strong bond among women growers and processors, who are more inclined to share advice than aggressively compete. “I guess we’re unusual characters, so we’re drawn together,” she chuckles. “There are still a lot of stereotypes in farming. There are a lot of strong women farmers in our area, but that’s not common everywhere.”

McKnight cautions women business owners to fully evaluate their resources — including finances, physical ability, experience and a back-up plan — before committing to an independent operation. She’ll never forget how devastated a peer was to lose her farm when she became sick and unable to care for her animals.

**A SUCCESSFUL FARM** eventually generates another looming business concern. “Succession planning is a very popular topic with farmers in our age group,” says Betsy Hitt. “Everyone feels some responsibility to their resource. I don’t know of anybody who just wants to stop, but it becomes pretty evident when you’re having aspirin for breakfast that it’s time to slow down.”

Hitt says careful planning has ensured that they won’t have to sell their beloved farm. “It’s taken us 30 years to finish the house, so I’m not going anywhere,” she chuckles. “We plan to stay here and garden, just on a more manageable scale.”

McKnight and Hawley, who only added staff in recent years, also are steering Chapel Hill Creamery toward a future run by others.

“Flo and I have been able to step back quite a bit in the past year because we’ve got such good people right now. Neither of us is really working full time anymore, which almost feels like retirement,” McKnight says. “It’s a little strange for us, but it’s also great. It’s good to know that this will continue long after we’re done.” *eP*

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Jill Warren Lucas is a regular contributor to *Edible Piedmont*.

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