

GOOD STEWARDS

PHOTOGRAPHS BY FRANCESCO MASTALIA

TEXT BY WENDELL BERRY

THE FARMER LIVES and works in the meeting place of nature and the human economy. Farmers either fit their farming to their farms, conform to the laws of nature, and keep natural powers and services intact—or they do not. If they do not, they increase the ecological deficit that is being charged to the future.

Good farmers, who take seriously their duties as stewards of Creation and of their land's inheritors, contribute to the welfare of society in more ways than society usually acknowledges, or even knows. These farmers produce valuable goods, of course; but they also conserve soil, they conserve water, they conserve wildlife, they conserve open space, they conserve scenery.

All that is what farmers *ought* to do. But since our present society's first standard in all things is profit and it loves to dwell on "economic reality," I can't resist a glance at these good farmers in their economic circumstances, for these farmers will be poorly paid for the goods they produce, and for the services they render to conservation they will not be paid at all. Good farmers today may market products of high quality and perform well all the services I have listed and *still* be unable to afford health insurance, and *still* find themselves mercilessly caricatured in the public media as rural simpletons, hicks, or rednecks.

Why do good farmers farm well for poor pay and work as good stewards of nature for no pay, many of them,

moreover, having no hope that their farms will be farmed by their children (for the reasons given) or that they will be farmed by anybody?

Well, I was raised by farmers, have farmed myself, and have in turn raised two farmers—which suggests to me that I may know something about farmers, and also that I don't know very much. But over the years, I along with a lot of other people have wondered, "Why do they do it?" Why do farmers farm, given their economic adversities on top of the many frustrations and difficulties normal to farming? And always the answer is: "Love. They must do it for love." Farmers farm for the love of farming. They love to watch and nurture the growth of plants. They love to live in the presence of animals. They love to work outdoors. They love the weather, maybe even when it is making them miserable. They love to live where they work and to work where they live. If the scale of their farming is small enough, they like to work in the company of their children and with the help of their children. They love the measure of independence that farm life can still provide.

And so the first thing farmers must try to conserve is their love of farming and their love of independence. Of course they can conserve these things only by handing them down, by passing them on to their children, or to *somebody's* children. Perhaps the most urgent task for all of us who want to eat well and to keep eating is to encourage farm-raised children to take up farming. 



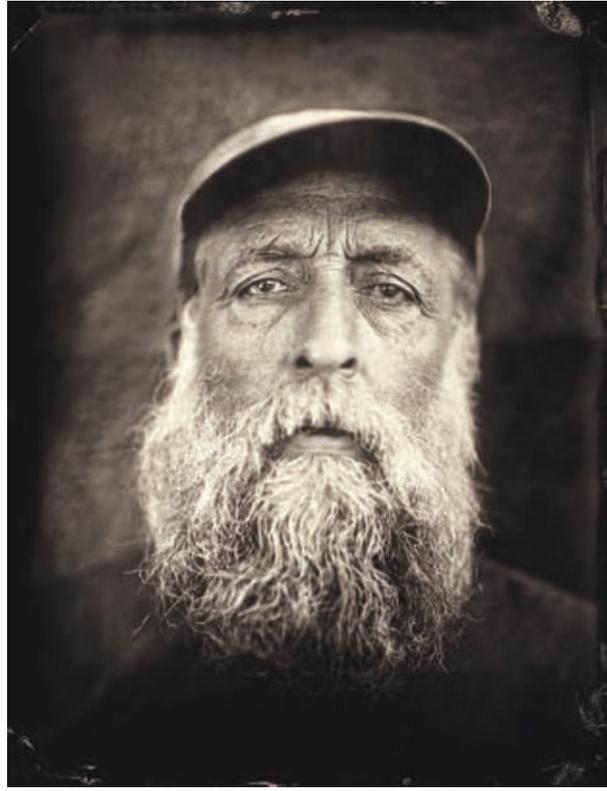
Jay Uhler
Peace and Carrots Farm, Chester, NY



Guy Jones
Blooming Hill Farm, Blooming Grove, NY



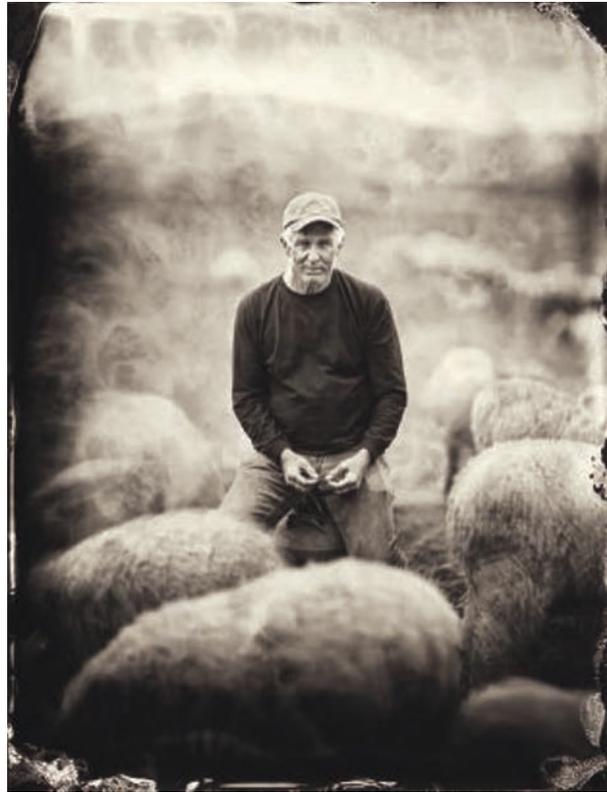
Ashley Loehr
Sparrowbush Farm, Hudson, NY



Ray Bradley
Bradley Farm, New Paltz, NY



Lynn Faurie
B&L 4E Farms, Milton, NY



Eugene Wyatt
Catskill Merino Sheep Farm, Goshen, NY



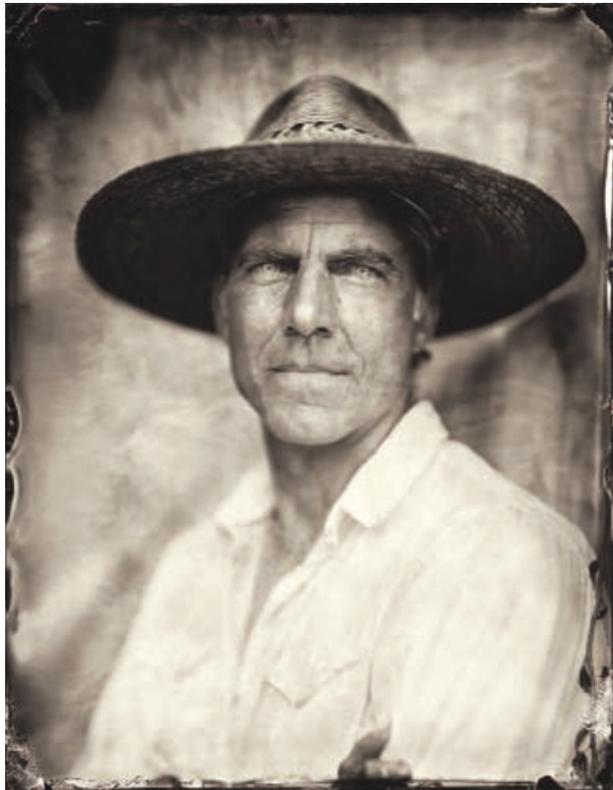
Jacob Diaz
Slow Roots Farm, Kingston, NY



Chris Harp
HoneybeeLives, New Paltz, NY



Talitha Thurau
Edgwick Farm, Cornwall, NY



Chris Regan
Sky Farm, Millerton, NY



Kelly O'Hearn
Hawthorne Valley Farm, Ghent, NY

ABOUT THE PHOTOGRAPHS

NEW YORK'S HUDSON VALLEY is a hotbed of the local, organic, sustainable food movement. The combination of its rich agricultural land, deep farming heritage, and burgeoning farm-to-table scene inspired Francesco Mastalia to photograph over one hundred of the valley's farmers and chefs. His primary focus was on men and women who farm sustainably, using natural methods of pest control, minimal tilling, and other strategies for enhancing the health of the land and its

future capacity to grow food. In making these photographs, he used the wet-plate collodion process, a technique developed in the mid-nineteenth century that typically involves five- to fifteen-second exposures and requires the glass plates to be processed on site. The mixture of hands-on farming methods with an old-school photographic technique has yielded a body of work that feels as sun-drenched as a late summer field and as age-old as agriculture itself. — *Eds.*



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