

A woman with long blonde hair, wearing a wide-brimmed straw hat and a green tank top with a yellow and black geometric pattern, is harvesting cabbages in a field. She is holding a large woven basket filled with several large, light green cabbages. She is using a pair of scissors to cut a cabbage. The background shows rows of cabbages in a field.

Sweet Earth Farm:
Anne Bohl & Meghan Spees

Photos and article by Jessica Rilling

In a valley less than 1/2 mile outside of Decorah's city limits, under wide brim straw hats, Anne and Meghan are quietly and quickly at work harvesting beets, cucumbers, kale and cabbage for the Wednesday farmers' market. Having arrived to the farm at six that morning, they are motivated to finish as early as possible knowing that the heavy July air doesn't wait and that temperatures for this day in Iowa will likely reach the three digit mark. But even with the humidity, bugs and relentless sun you will still find these women smiling. They are proud to be here, on this rich soil, growing quality food for their community. They have a collective 14 years of farming experience, but this is only their second year farming together on this land they call Sweet Earth Farm.

Founded in 2012 by Meghan Spees and Anne Bohl, Sweet Earth Farm is a serendipitous coming together of passion, knowledge and opportunity. Located only 1/2 mile from Decorah and less than five miles from their stand at the Winneshiek's Farmer's Market, the 2-acre farm is bursting with vegetable variety, color and freshness. Over 75 varieties are grown here using sustainable practices and no chemicals. Produce is harvested within 24 hours of the farmer's market – which makes for not only the best flavor, but also the most nutrients. Sweet Earth Farm also raises about 200 heritage breed chickens each year. The hardy breed, called Freedom Ranger, are pastured on the farm and fed non GMO grain. Their moveable pen allows for fresh pasture, lots of clean air, insects galore and extra vegetables from the farm.

Anne and Meghan had known of each other through mutual friends in Wisconsin, but it wasn't until 2011, when both were rooted in the Driftless Region, that they struck up a partnership and started looking for a piece of land to farm. With lots of knowledge but very little capital, the pair had to both work hard and be creative. They found a couple, Larry and Diane Grimstad, who were willing to rent a portion of their property for the new endeavor – no small favor considering the price of tillable land in Iowa. They learned how to build fences, barter for the use of large equipment, and do market research for the region.

When asked which of their produce sets them apart, they agree that their Salad Mix and Asian Greens Mix are especially great. "We've developed an efficient way to clean and process large quantities of greens quickly, so for us," says Anne, "the ready-to-eat bagged lettuce is our preferred method." Sweet Earth Farm likes to offer four varieties in their salad mix – two red lettuce varieties and two green. Their Asian Greens Mix includes red mustard greens, green mizuna, red mizuna and tatsui. Green beans and yellow beans are also high up on their list of favorites. The beans are small, tender and packed full of good taste, much different from the standard grocery store variety.

"We believe wholeheartedly that local food brings people together and nurtures a healthy, vibrant community."





For the women of Sweet Earth Farm, the farmer's market is a special place. Not only an uplifting social setting to see and catch up with friends, but a valuable community experience, a place where farmers and customers can connect and learn from each other. Anne and Meghan love talking with their regular customers, getting to know their tastes and preferences, but also are excited to see new faces. "The market is a place that encourages creativity," Meghan says, "It's a place to find things you won't find at the grocery store and to talk to a person who knows how to use it."

Their stand at the market is as lovely as them, beautifully organized with bushel baskets and antique wooden crates, and you can tell immediately that these two women both enjoy the aesthetic of food and are proud of their harvest. The artistic setting is important to them and even for the Cedar Rapids' market, a market which requires them to wake up at 3am, they take the time and effort to make the Sweet Earth Farm stand special. "We want our own personalities to be evident in our display," Meghan says."

The 2013 season is the first season for Sweet Earth Farm's CSA. The Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) model appeals to Anne and Meghan for many reasons and they hope to expand this component of their farm in the coming years. "It is truly a commitment to Sweet Earth Farm," says Anne,

"and CSA members almost always get more than what they paid for. We are going to do calculations at the end of the season, but already it looks like our CSA members will have saved hundreds of dollars on their produce compared to just buying it at the farmer's market each week." For this first year, Sweet Earth Farm capped the shares at 40 households. They hope to partner with other local farms in the future so they can offer more of a whole diet CSA, one with things like honey, meat, mushrooms, flowers, etc.

Originally from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Anne Bohl traveled and farmed in many places before settling in Decorah, Iowa. After college, her two-year apprenticeship in upstate New York at the 400-acre Hawthorne Valley Farm is the experience that she says gave her both the introduction and subsequent foundation for farming. Following this apprenticeship she participated in a program called World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOF) where she worked and learned on five farms in New Zealand and one farm in the state of New Mexico. She came to Iowa in 2011 for a seasonal staff position with Seed Savers Exchange, an organization with which she still works in the winter months in customer service. The 2012 farm season found her working alongside Eric Sessions on his Patchwork Green Farm just north of Decorah.

Meghan Spees grew up in Mukwonago, Wisconsin, about thirty miles southwest of Milwaukee. Like Anne, after college graduation her passion for farming and travel connected her with the WWOOF organization. Meghan worked through WWOOF on two farms in Ireland. She continued her farm education by working for the Community Supported Garden at Genesis Farm in New Jersey, the Michael Fields Agricultural Institute near East Troy, Wisconsin, the LotfotL Farm in Wisconsin and the Patchwork Green Farm north of Decorah, Iowa.

Sweet Earth Farm produce is sold at the Decorah and Cedar Rapids farmer's market and through the Sweet Earth Farm's CSA. When there is an especially bountiful harvest of a vegetable variety you may find it at the Oneota Coop in Decorah. To place an order for chickens contact the farm. You can learn more about Meghan and Anne, their farming season and their vegetables by following them on Facebook or by visiting their website www.sweetearthfarmdecorah.com. They welcome questions and can be reached on their farm phone at 563-277-0079. ■

