



a farmers market story

The Trials and Joys of One Farm Family

by **Christine Barbour** photography by **Tyagan Miller**



The Birtles Family: Sarah McGee, baby Clairra, Teresa, Emily, and Jessica.

It's 8:30 on a sultry Saturday morning, and the Farmers Market is already humming with energy and good spirits. Eager to beat the heat, we Bloomingtonians are cheerful marketgoers even at this hour. We wander the aisles, weighing fat purple eggplants in our hands, choosing the reddest tomatoes, trading gossip

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with friends, listening to the music and the chatter. Colors are intense, smells enticing, and stomachs begin to growl, teased with savory samples of pungent cheeses, sips of cold thick yogurt, and the seductive crunch

have been up late—sometimes all night—on Friday, harvesting and packing up crops to sell at market. Some of them have driven a couple of hours or more to get here from farms as far away as Greenville and Vincennes.

They know the drill. These farmers have done it many times, not only in the hazy, humid mornings of summer, but also in the chill, drizzly spring rain, and the crisp, frosty dawns of autumn. Calling greetings, working efficiently, like carnival hands they set up the tents and awnings, the tables and racks, the baskets, and the bounty that transform a parking lot into the noisy, boisterous kaleidoscope that is the Farmers Market.

Creating a niche for themselves

Teresa Birtles pulls her van into the lot at



of a just-picked green bean.

Shoppers arrive at the Bloomington Community Farmers Market in waves. The early birds come and go quickly, intent on scoring the best berries, asparagus, peaches, corn. They are already home by the time the next leisurely wave makes its way to the Bloomingfoods' trailer for a cup of coffee. Late sleepers and families follow, and the buzz increases, only to subside by market's close, as the stragglers appear, mad at themselves for not waking earlier or just hoping for a bargain.

But the very earliest arrivals, showing up while most of us are still tucked in our beds, are the farmers. With daylight savings time, it is still dark, even at the height of summer, when the first pickup trucks and vans pull into the quiet Showers parking lot. Already tired, many of them from a full week at the day jobs that subsidize their lives on the land, these farmers

6:15 a.m.—a little later than she had intended, but it is a long drive from Bedford, where three generations of Birtles women work a piece of land they call Heartland Family Farm. At 45, Teresa glows with health and optimism. She farms with her daughters—21-year-old Sarah McGee, creative, adventurous, and new mom to roly-poly Clair; Jessica, who at 17 has a shy, serious smile and a good-natured willingness to put working on the farm ahead of teenage pleasures; and Emily, a seven-year-old with limitless energy, a toothy grin, and a talent for becoming best buddies with everyone she meets.

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and sell produce that is cheaper, albeit less delicious. That small farmers persist in trying is, trite as it sounds, often a labor of love.

This Saturday the Birtles van eases up to their booth space and the girls start unloading—cartons of eggs in palest greens, blues, pinks, and browns; lovely, delicate floral bouquets assembled by Sarah; and tubs of vegetables in the rich, vibrant palette of late summer—deep purple and fuchsia eggplants, juicy tomatoes in red and orange, and a technicolor

can do well. The key to what they do at market is to pay attention to what people want, engaging them, asking questions, offering choices, tempting them with samples of a bean, or an herb, or a lettuce. By listening carefully, they have been able to create a niche for themselves: producing specialty vegetables for market customers and restaurants keeps them in business despite their small size and limited resources.

Because they are paying such close atten-



tion they are able to notice when someone

turns away, unable to pay the prices they ask. Teresa has taught the girls to offer them something at a reduced price or slip a few extra handfuls of beans or some extra peppers into the sack of those who seem down on their luck. She figures they might sometimes get it wrong, but it's worth it for the times they are right.

blitz of peppers spilling from wooden baskets. This bountiful display is no accident. The winter before deciding to sell her harvest in a serious way, Teresa had read book after book on farming and marketing. A single mom cleaning houses for a living, she was eager to raise her children in the farming life she had loved as a child, so she stayed up late at night, relaxing in the bathtub by reading and evolving her own growing and selling strategy.

She didn't formulate that strategy alone. Teresa has always believed that her kids have valuable perspectives to contribute, so she regularly solicited their opinions on what would become the family business. They'd sit around the dining room table with seed catalogs, choosing the crops, figuring out a game plan and how best to present their harvest.

They realized early on that there are a lot of people who can out-produce them. Their farm is small, their labor force is limited, and they aren't mechanized, so they focus on what they

A life devoted to growing things

With her blonde bob, pink cheeks, and pretty clothes, Teresa looks deceptively suburban. But she is earthy and nurturing to her fingertips, and she was claimed by farming early on. Her first memory is of walking in her grandmother's garden at the age of two, picking potatoes. She still remembers "how the soil smelled," she says, "and how it felt between my toes.... That's how I grew up. We ate the food we grew, my grandmother saved seeds, my dad saved seeds. They made their own maple syrup and canned everything."

Although she was raised in rural Sellersburg, a year and a half into college she married and moved to Louisville, only to realize that she would never be a city girl. She persuaded her husband to move their young family back to the country where she begged a patch of ground from a neighbor and began a garden.

Home schooling her kids, being outdoors, and growing things was her life. They'd go on long walks in the woods—she, Sarah, Jessica, and the oldest child, brother Ben—identifying plants and birds, living by the motto, “If it has a tail pull it,” every curiosity pursued, every day an adventure. “Home schooling involves all aspects of your life,” she says. “We were really interested in geography and history, and why people felt the way they felt and how they lived their lives and how they ate and how they looked at the world.” When the opportunities arose, Teresa filled her house with refugees from other countries and with international students.

After her husband left and a brief, second marriage collapsed, that idyllic life became impossible to sustain. As the primary support of her children—Emmie was an infant, and the other kids were all still at home—and with no marketable skills, Teresa was cleaning houses, usually four a day, with Emmie on her back, then racing home to meet the others, now in public school, cooking their meals from scratch and trying to preserve remnants of the life that they had loved.

She says now, with wry understatement, “It was quite an interesting time.” After a whole

winter living that way, she decided, “This is insane.” She wanted something to do that would allow her to be with the kids, where they could work together as they had done all their lives.

And so, in the winter of 1998, she went online to read up on farming and discovered the Bloomington Farmers Market. She says, “I called [market director] Marcia Veldman and said ‘You know, I’d really like to sell some produce, and I think I can make some money.’ And she said, ‘Well, sure.’” Teresa laughs now,



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imagining what a kick Marcia must have gotten from her naïve enthusiasm.

But Teresa wasn't just naïve, she was determined—despite the fact that she had no farm and no money to buy one. She approached a family she knew who owned a dairy farm and asked if they'd let her farm a piece of their land. They agreed, offering her a two-and-a-half acre plot.

With the help of Sarah, Jessica, and an old tiller, she turned the plot into a market garden where they did—and still do—everything by hand, even the watering. With no irrigation system or nearby access to water they fill large garbage cans from the hose at home, then drive the six miles to their garden, scooping the water out with buckets to water their crops.

In season, the pace is frantic

A first-time visitor to the farm could be forgiven for driving right past the metal gates, chained shut to keep the dairy herd from wandering out into the road. Weathered barns and buildings high up on the hill are permeated with the sweet, slightly sour smell of fresh milk and dried hay. The field the Birtles women work is beyond the barns, the pathway rutted and studded with a few cowpies that Emmie (whose job it is to collect them) has missed. If you take a vehicle up to the field and leave it outside the garden gates, it will be well licked by curious cows before you return.

At the beginning of the season, tiny, tender green plants are dwarfed by large expanses of unplanted dirt. There is not much to harvest for market yet; Heartland's early spring production consists largely of the eggs from the 175 Araucanas and Golden Cross chickens they raise back at their house, micro-greens planted in the greenhouse that was built just this year by Amish friends, and sprays of spring blooms.

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After weeks of rainy weather, however, the garden starts to fill. A Friday night harvest in the cold drizzle of mid-May yields salad mix in reds and greens, spring onions with amethyst bulbs, and long, rosy radishes, almost translucent in the evening light. Bin after bin is filled with vegetables, some earmarked for the chefs at Roots, Limestone Grille, tutto bene, Restaurant Tallent, Nick's, the Bloomington Country Club, and Scholars Inn, and others for community-supported agriculture. Everything else is destined for market. All is carted back to the house where it is washed before



being stowed in the van for the morning drive to Bloomington.

These wet spring harvests are the last leisurely moments the Heartland family will have until late fall. As summer heats up, the

pace of farm life gets frantic. New sections of the field are tilled, baby plants from the greenhouse are transplanted (360 eggplants in just one late May day), and old, spent spring crops are turned under and replaced. As the farm hits its stride, the girls try to keep up with the tedious job of picking countless beans and the rapidly ripening tomatoes, eggplants, and peppers. Teresa's time is divided between working on the farm in Bedford and driving to Bloomington, where she still cleans houses and makes deliveries to restaurants—her two centers of gravity connected for the moment by

a construction-plagued highway that lengthens the travel time and eats up her day.

It can be a grueling life. Teresa says the girls “love it and they hate it both. Same as me. There are times when it's 95 degrees and it's exhausting and it's just us, but I never have had one of them say, ‘You know, I really don't want to go to market, don't get me up.’ Never. They tell their guy friends, ‘I don't date on Friday nights. Sorry. If you want to see me, come to market.’ And that's their own choice.”

For the children, there will be changes

It is clear that they value this life they have chosen—one that gives them the chance to be outdoors and to be together. But they know that this, too, will change, and in time the kids will scatter in different directions. Benjamin, who went on a high school exchange to Siberia, returned to go to college at Purdue and do a tour in Iraq; this summer he will marry his Siberian sweetheart. Sarah moved to Colorado, came home, and began a family of her own.



Teresa Birtles' Favorite Recipes

“I am not a gourmet cook,” says Teresa Birtles. “I am a country cook.” She might accompany this roast chicken with sweet corn pulled off the stalk, shucked, boiled for about five minutes, and slathered with fresh Amish butter; with picked and washed green beans, put in the pan with some good green olive oil and sea salt; or with heirloom tomatoes, sliced and served as is.

ROAST CHICKEN

1 4-pound chicken
Salt
2 carrots, peeled
2 celery stalks
1 medium sweet onion, quartered
Olive oil, good quality
Freshly ground pepper, to taste
Sea salt, to taste
5 or 6 sprigs of fresh rosemary
Oven cooking bag

Soak the chicken for 3-4 hours in a brine made of 2 tablespoons of salt per cup of water.

Preheat oven to 350 degrees.

Drain the chicken and pat it dry. Put carrots, celery, and onion inside the chicken and truss it. Rub the chicken all over with olive oil, sprinkle with sea salt and freshly ground pepper. Lay rosemary sprigs on top of the chicken, put the chicken in an oven cooking bag, and close the bag.

Bake the chicken for about 1 1/2 hours.

Serves 4.

CHOCOLATE CREAM PIE

A Birtles family favorite, adapted from the 1976 edition of the *Better Homes and Gardens New Cook Book*.

1 cup sugar
3 tablespoons cornstarch
1/4 teaspoon salt
2 cups milk
2 1-ounce squares of unsweetened chocolate, chopped
4 egg yolks, slightly beaten
2 tablespoons butter
1 teaspoon vanilla
1 9-inch pastry shell, baked and cooled
Whipped cream

Preheat oven to 350.

In a saucepan, combine sugar, cornstarch, and salt. Gradually stir in milk and chopped chocolate. Cook and stir over medium-high heat until bubbly. Continue to cook for 2 more minutes.

Stir a moderate amount of the hot mixture into the egg yolks; immediately return egg mixture to the saucepan. Cook 2 minutes, stirring constantly.

Remove from heat. Stir in butter and vanilla. Pour mixture into pastry shell. Bake at 350 degrees for 12-15 minutes. To prevent skin from forming on surface, put waxed paper directly on hot filling.

Serve chilled, with whipped cream.

Jessica dreams of being a *National Geographic* photographer, and Emmie wants to be an explorer—two professions that are sure to take them far away. Teresa, too, imagines meeting new challenges, chief among them sharing her hard-earned experience by finding a way to help other women become self-sufficient in farming or artisan food production.

But those plans are for the future. Right now it is summer and there are not enough hours in the day for dreaming. And so Saturday morning, like all their fellow growers, the Birtles women will rise early after a very short night and make the long drive into Bloomington with a van full of produce. Calling greetings, working efficiently, the farmers will once again set up the weekly carnival for us. We will arrive early, we will straggle in late, we will laugh and chat and buy. And when we have carted off our vegetables and eggs and flowers, the farmers will tear down the carnival, and the space will be an empty parking lot again. ✨