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'Sorry, I Don't Sign Squash'

Small Farmers Seek Big Deals To Raise Profile, Profits; Fending Off Garden Groupies

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Lee Jones of Milan, Ohio, has been invited to appear on TV shows ranging from CNN's "Business Unusual" to Al Roker's "Roker on the Road." He sells \$15 T-shirts with his logo printed on them and is working on a book about his life. He sends a newsletter out to 1,500 fans and has a trademark on his favorite outfit.

Mr. Jones's claim to fame: He grows vegetables. With a client roster that includes four-star chefs and high-profile foodies -- such as Leslie Wexner, chairman of Limited Brands -- he sells arugula for as much as \$60 a pound and heirloom tomatoes for up to \$16 a pound. "It's part of building the brand," says Mr. Jones.

MEET THE FARMERS

See a [list of farms](#)⁰ around the country that consumers can visit in person, and what's available on the farm now.

Get ready for your close-up, Farmer Brown. Hoping to reap a bigger piece of the \$27 billion gourmet-food pie, some ambitious local growers are signing up book agents, calling Hollywood producers and even appearing on baseball-style trading cards with their pictures and stats. (One sample card, produced by a restaurant in Boston, features Nunsuch Farm of South Sutton, N.H., which makes

goat cheese and is run by a former nun).

Farmer Andy Griffin of Watsonville, Calif., is staging poetry and cookbook readings with chefs to get the word out about his beans and squash. In Portland, Ore., apple growers Ken and Irene Bergren were picked to appear in a commercial directed by documentary maker Errol Morris and are planning to join the Screen Actors Guild.

The small farmer is the latest profession to get a celebrity makeover -- à la hairdressers, gardeners and chefs. Just 10 years ago, agriculture's biggest real personality was Frank Perdue, the now-retired chief executive of Perdue Farms, the closely held chicken company. That started to change a few years ago when a few farmers got a taste for publicity as trendy chefs -- spurred by the organic-food craze -- began listing the names of their suppliers on menus.

Another factor helping move farmers out of the barn and into the limelight is the boom in farmers markets. In the last two years alone, the number of such markets has expanded 15% to 3,600, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. With more customers getting to know the people who harvest or slaughter their dinner, there has been

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Chef's Garden Inc.

Farmer Lee Jones, of Milan, Ohio, chats with a television crew at his Culinary Vegetable Institute

a rise in farmer groupies and farmers who want them.

"We have to do something to retain sales and attract new sales," says Mr. Griffin, the Watsonville vegetable grower. He says business is up 50% since 1998 when he started his newsletter about farming and politics, called The Ladybug Letter. A recent article traced the history of the cantaloupe, citing everyone from Lawrence of Arabia to President Bush.

This year, dozens of farmers inundated PBS producers for a spot on "Chefs A'Field," a show where chefs learn about livestock and produce from growers around the country. Tim Stark, a tomato grower in Hamburg, Pa., promotes himself as the "tomato guy" and last year was featured in Gourmet magazine (for the second time)

talking about his \$9-a-pound Trinidad peppers. William Niman and owners of the high-end, Oakland, Calif., meat supplier Niman Ranch -- a name that first came to the public eye several years ago on restaurant menus -- just made a deal with Ten Speed Press for a book of profiles of the farmers who raise their livestock.

Then there are the Bergrens of Portland, Ore. When a Chicago casting agency sent an e-mail out to the Beaverton Farmers Market, inviting growers to an audition for a Quaker Oats commercial, the Bergrens immediately signed up. Instead of her trademark apple apron and apple earrings, Mrs. Bergren decided to go simple in a flowered jumper -- her husband wore jeans -- and impressed the casting crew with stories about their orchard. Out of 1,500 auditioners, including actors, they got the parts.

The Bergrens were flown to Los Angeles by Quaker Oats, wined and dined in Beverly Hills, and introduced to Mr. Morris, the director of "The Fog of War" and "The Thin Blue Line." The commercial, for a new oatmeal product made with apples, is on hold until next year. (A current version just uses their voices.) Now, the couple is planning to join the actors' union to help them score bit parts in movies. "We thought it would be a fun thing to do when we retire," says Mr. Bergren.



David Paul Morris/Getty Images

Farmer Andy Griffin



David Paul Morris/Getty Images

Customers lining up at Frog Hollow Farm's stand in San Francisco

All of this activity hasn't exactly boosted the boutique farm business into health, though there are signs things may be improving slightly. According to the Department of Agriculture, small-farm household income has plateaued at an average of about \$67,000, and many small farms are still struggling to stay in business. But the small farms are failing at a slower pace. In 2002, the number of small farms decreased 0.65%; in 2003, the decrease was 0.4%, leaving the country with a little more than two million small farms. That's partly because more outsiders are starting new farms and because of recent changes in inheritance taxes that make it easier to pass on property.

Training Classes for Chefs

Yet some individual farmers are seeing benefits. Mr. Jones, the

Milan, Ohio, vegetable farmer, says his business is up 20% this year. He has a new "Culinary Vegetable Institute," where he leads \$375 seminars on growing, cooking and the history of heirloom vegetables; he's also launching a \$1,450 day-long media-training class for chefs. In Oakland, peach grower Al Courchesne also says business grew a fifth last year, mostly after a push to show up in person at as many community meetings and events as possible. Now, fans wait in half-hour lines at his stand at the Ferry Plaza Farmers Market in San Francisco for peaches that cost \$3.60 a pound. It's "guerrilla marketing," says Mr. Courchesne, who has a degree in anthropology.

Things have worked out almost too well, with customers complaining Mr. Courchesne isn't focusing enough on the fruit these days. "He's grown too much," says Joan Mocine, a 62-year-old paralegal from Oakland, Calif. She says that Mr. Courchesne's farm, Frog Hollow, has been producing lower-quality fruit and tarts in the past year. "If they're good peaches, I'll sell my soul to get them, but the nectarines were always hard, the peaches were really bland," she says. (Mr. Courchesne disagrees, saying his peaches this year were "the best ever.")

Grumpy Growers

Others say the newly famous farmers are raising their prices and focusing more on merchandise than their produce. They also think farmers are less accessible and grumpier than the past. "I don't think the fans are the type of people [the farmers] want to be with," says Loughan Campbell, an underwriting analyst in New York City, who notices farmers at the local Union Square Greenmarket getting irritated by shoppers who take samples rather than buy the cheese, berries or vegetables.

Lines at that greenmarket now start as early as 6:30 a.m. -- even avid fans rarely showed up before 8 a.m. in the past -- with women bearing gifts like hand-knit sweaters and homemade cakes and pies for their favorite farmers. "When I go out and tell people what I do, they're always like, 'Oh my God, I have such a crush on the farmer with the black beard!'" says Gabrielle Langholtz, a New York greenmarket manager. "We should call it the meat market instead of the greenmarket."



David Paul Morris/Getty Images
Frog Hollow farmer Al Courchesne

Meet the Farmers

With small farms looking for new ways to increase business, some are going beyond the U-Pick concept and offering tours to visitors (for free, or sometimes for a fee). Below, a few farms around the country that consumers can visit in person, and what's available on the farm now.

FARM	CROP/HERD	COMMENT
Bobolink Dairy Vernon, N.J. cowsoutside.com ¹	Dairy cows, plus a newly purchased Irish "Kerry" bull named John	Grass-fed raw milk cheeses and wood-fired oven bread (the medieval rye starts at \$2 a pound). Every other Sunday, the owners teach \$40 cheese and bread-making classes (registration required.) Farm visits and public tastings are free.
The Chile Man Purcellville, Va. chileman.com ²	Mostly chili peppers, but also tomatoes, cilantro and basil	A former computer marketer, "Chile Man" Robert Farr started his farm in 1998. Farm visits are free; there are peppers, flowers and tomatoes in the field until mid-October.

Fairview Farm Bridgehampton, N.Y. (631) 537-6154	Corn, broccoli, red cabbage, fingerling potatoes	There's a \$9 entrance fee (adults) to visit the farm's corn maze (in the shape of a lighthouse); it's \$1 to shoot corn cobs from a cannon.
Full Circle Farm Carnation, Wash. fullcirclefarm.com ³	Carrots, tomatoes, potatoes, lettuces	Farmers Wendy Munroe and Andrew Stout host 20-25 open farm events a year (hayrides; tours). Group visits only; fee depends on activity. Business has tripled since 2002, to \$1.2 million.
The Philo Apple Farm Philo, Calif. philoapplefarm.com ⁴	Eighty varieties of apples, from Golden Delicious to Arkansas Black	To see the apple harvest up close, visitors can book a \$200-\$250 a night room in one of the farm's guest cottages. There's also a \$350 weekend cooking course.

--Amir Efrati

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- (1) <http://www.cowsoutside.com>
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