



Andy Grant

The Risings and Fallings of Grant Family Farms: A Tale of Two Visionaries

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY BILL GIEBLER

I'm sitting face to face with a sculpture of the Hindu deity Ganesh, across a dining table stacked with bills and papers. To my left, a neon EAT sign sits atop a jukebox, and to my right, in a high-ceilinged living room, five canvas wings of a ceiling fan lazily move the August air.

Behind Ganesh, outside tall windows, banana trees wave in the warm wind in the atrium where we'll soon have lunch. Opposite the atrium is a tall indoor botanical sanctuary and aviary and, beyond that, an acre of green grass adorned with ponds, other sculptures and a vastly impressive vegetable garden.

Under the table, leaning against my right leg, Bubba—one of six dogs who circled us as we walked the property—rhythmically grinds at a bone.

Behind me, as I type, swig San Pellegrino and sip Zinfandel, Andy Grant is pulling together a lunch, demanding I stay put. Fresh cucumbers, tomatoes, avocados will become a salad while various leftovers sizzle in a large pan. Fresh sautéing garlic fills the air.

I'm at Grant Farms in Wellington, 20 miles north of Fort Collins. The farm is busy with Wednesday activities as workers pack cartons and cases of Owl Canyon free-range organic eggs, and others load hundreds of shares for the community-supported agriculture (CSA) harvest subscription program into a refrigerated truck trailer: shares of eggs, veggies, microgreens, mushrooms, canned goods and fresh fruit from partner farms (though the plums in Grant's orchard look like they'll be ready for next week's harvest).

The CSA has 500 members—a lucky 17 of whom get the magical "Kitchen Share," a greatest hits collection of the other shares that includes eggs, meat, veggies, microgreens and pickled wax beans or smoked peach jam (Western Slope peaches slow-smoked over peach wood and cooked into a delectable spread).



Overall, this scene—small, local farm capturing the interest of foodies while representing a micro-percentage of local food distribution—is not uncommon amid our growing appreciation for farm-to-table cuisine and farmers’ markets. Grant is yet another family farm eking out a living in a food system dominated by Monsanto, Walmart, factory farms and food subsidies.

In fact, Grant Farms is oddly—and misleadingly—“normal.” The average age of US farmers in 2013 was 57; Andy Grant is 56. And with 21 million farm workers on 2.2 million US farms, the average farm apparently employs 10 workers; Grant employs “less than a dozen.”

But there is nothing normal about Grant Farms. In addition to being a community-supported system, Grant is a certified organic farm and is a family farm that bends traditional views of family. Each of those distinctions places Grant among less than 1% of US farms.

Further, my misleading statistics tell nothing of the actual story of farming in the US today, where fewer than 1% of farms account for 63% of sales of agricultural products, while a quarter of all farms produce less than \$50,000 per year. The darlings of farm stands, farmers’ markets and CSAs are simply not typical of today’s agribusiness.

But perhaps the most surprising thing about Andy Grant’s farm is that just one year ago it employed some 250 people. Then Grant Family Farms (GFF), this was a farm that between 1997 and 2007 had built a remarkable international organic food distribution network, shipping kabocha squash to Japan and vegetables to Florida, New York, Mexico, Canada and more.

Grant’s goal was for “organic food to be affordable for anyone ... to bring healthy organic food to Whole Foods and Walmart.” But somewhere in there—shipping their organic wares up, down, left and right—Grant realized “what a [messed] up system this is!” This was the crux of his inspiration to move to a CSA model.

That first year, 2007, they had 126 members. “It blew up to 1,000 the next year,” says Grant. The CSA continued to grow year after year—with a reflexive reduction in cross-country shipping.

Here’s Grant, quoted in this magazine in 2009: “We need to get past the notion of the poor-but-happy farmer and the idea that organic farming is a romantic, not-for-profit endeavor ... We can be sustainable because we can be profitable.” By the summer of 2012 GFF had reached a peak of production and had replaced a quarter of its broad distribution with the CSA (tallying 5,000 members). Grant Family Farms was the largest CSA in the country—and growing.

Yet, by Christmas the farm was in bankruptcy, with 200,000 pounds of produce rotting in coolers and thousands of chickens being euthanized in order to spread limited feed money across remaining animals. Grant Family Farms was being split, parceled, sold and closed.

Starts and Stops

“I’m just a mess.” Grant started our interview in the near whisper of a broken man. “I’m really depressed, losing the family farm of 61 years, and losing my dad—two weeks ago—who I farmed with my whole life.”

I’d arrived just past 10am and waited as Grant finished up office activities. I busied myself looking at the framed works on the office walls. One newspaper article from 1992 showed a handsome young Grant among a pile of pumpkins. Others—posters—showed David Grisman and Judy Collins as featured artists at the annual fall Harvestival, an on-farm event that grew to host 10,000 people.

Grant started the story at the beginning. His father, CSU atmospheric science professor Lewis Grant, started a hobby farm in 1953. That farm evolved over the years through various names and iterations of family farms as Andy entered adulthood and gradually took over the operations.

“I was an organic rebel,” Grant recalls, “when dad didn’t want to do that. I was this weird little queer farmer on the northern border of Colorado, and I didn’t want to use chemicals because I’d grown up with them ... seeing dead dogs and birds on the property.

“So it’s mournful,” returning to his father’s unexpected death, “to lose not just the land and the soils that we worked so hard to build, but to lose my father to argue with.”

Later, outside, I met Felipe Munoz (“one of the best—if not the best—vegetable grower in Colorado,” Grant said) as he packed CSA shares into the refrigerated truck. I met Liliana Lara as she packed eggs into cartons into cases into pallet stacks. I’ve worked on small farms before, and the efforts and chipper busyness seemed in line here. Still, the farm is a shadow of its not-so-distant glory. “200 people is not working now,” says Lara. “All the people is sad because we don’t have work.”

“With a \$4 million payroll, boom! gone,” says Grant, “what’s the economic consequence to Northern Colorado?”

Next I saw the laying chickens—most of which were crowded into a single barn, by choice: “Chickens are funny,” Grant laughed gesturing to all the open land available outside the open barn. “They can roam all the way out there, but they crowd inside most of the time.”

Grant’s chicken program is unique in utilizing retired laying hens from high-volume organic facilities. A spent hen is one whose laying has slowed. It’s a matter of days, typically, between being labeled “spent” and becoming canned soup. Grant intervenes and brings them here for his, shall we say, slow eggs.

Two emus approached, exhibiting a hissing territorial behavior around the interloping dogs walking with us. “That’s part of why they’re here,” Grant explains about the large birds, “to keep the foxes

and coyotes away.” Another reason, I suspect, is to eventually adorn the Grant dinner table.

And maybe this is symbolic. The GFF story is indeed a battle of territories, henhouse guarding and fine food. Grant speaks openly about the various starts and stops of the farm, the prior bankruptcies and the pinnacle year when GFF sat as one of the largest organic farms in Colorado, the largest CSA in the country and a diverse and growing model of organics, distribution and possibility.

But impossibility, too. GFF was a \$12 million business with \$10 million in debt. They had sold the season’s 5,000 CSA shares, but the farm infrastructure was in such disrepair—including the trucks to deliver those shares—that status quo was not an option.

This is when Grant teamed up with Localization Partners (LP), a for-profit subset of Boulder-based nonprofit Local Food Shift. With substantial investment capital and hired investment and big-ag expertise, LP-meets-GFF seemed a match made in heaven.

Instead, what happened with Grant Family Farms was a “complex and tragic situation,” says LP’s founder Michael Brownlee. “And it’s still unfolding. It’s still too early to tell the story,” he says. “It hasn’t shaken out yet and nobody knows where it’s going to wind up.”

Re-Localizing Food Supply

On a bitter cold January morning after a deep snowfall, my old Subaru pulls me up a slippery, winding unpaved stretch of Boulder’s 19th Street to Michael Brownlee’s office. I gather my things and crunch across a styrofoam snowpack parking lot in nostril-aching cold. He greets me at the door with a hint of a smile framed in white beard below steady eyes encircled in small roundish wireframe glasses. A deliberate man in his 60s, white hair pulled back in ponytail, he offers me a glass of water and leads me up the stairs to a conference room.

The walls are lined with posters for events hosted by Brownlee’s grassroots nonprofit organizations, an evolution culminating in today’s Local Food Shift. Here is a man with a long and growing list of world-saving that needs doing.

Brownlee, who relocated from Arizona in 2002, recalls the conversation that got this all moving: “I was ... with [spiritual teacher] Marshall Summers. It was a very casual, pleasant conversation and all of a sudden he got real serious and looked at me and said, ‘So what do you know about peak oil, and what are you doing to prepare?’”

Summers “wasn’t just talking about peak oil, he was talking about the convergence of global crises manifesting in fossil fuel depletion, economic instability and environmental degradation.” Brownlee became active in local nonprofits looking at “the various aspects of our local situation: food, energy, water, economy, transportation. All the different things that needed to be re-localized.” Food was the gateway issue.

“We felt that localizing our food supply was the most important—and most urgent—of all of the various issues,” he says, “and it, fortunately, impacted all the other areas. It was the best way to address energy, it was the best way to address greenhouse gas emissions locally, it was the best way to bring stability into the local economy over the long term, and on and on...”

Thus began the goal to grow 25% of our food locally by 2020—up from 2%. Enter Localization Partners, a Brownlee co-founded for-profit investment group inspired by the Slow Money movement. Among Slow Money’s tenets is investment in “food, farms and fertility; to connect investors to the places where they live, creating vital relationships and new sources of capital for small food enterprises.”

So inspired by this confluence of local food wisdom and Slow Money principles, a single investor provided a \$1.5 million loan. Shortly thereafter, LP set its sights on a struggling Grant Family Farms. An organic farm of this size, with well-established traditional and non-traditional distribution capabilities, could indeed play a leading role in meeting local food shift targets. Yet, GFF was functioning with antiquated infrastructure and running a \$10 million debt.

A keen match: eager food-shift investment group and burgeoning yet cash-poor farm. Funding from LP, it was believed, would not only straighten out the farm, it would allow for massive and rapid growth—and become a model for Slow Money style “foodshed” investment across the Front Range.

In a 2012 Slow Money blog post, Brownlee wrote: “This farm was too important to let it disappear. To take this on, we organized Localization Partners ... and Jim Ott took the lead in what would eventually become a massive turnaround operation.”

The turnaround, however, would be short term. Over the course of 2012, the money flowed in, Ott gained full operational responsibility of GFF, and the farm eventually crumbled to a memory and a long unemployment line.

Too little, too late? Poor philosophical match? One way or another, the combination that was Localization Partners (investment capital and executive management) and Grant Family Farms (decades of farming and distribution experience—and two prior bankruptcies) culminated in a third bankruptcy, 100 wasted tons of never-delivered CSA vegetables and a highly contentious and well-publicized chicken controversy.

Tough Place to Farm

“People think, ‘There must be something really wrong up there that they have so many bankruptcies,’” says Grant. “Now, the thing that’s really wrong is trying to grow food in Colorado. That’s what the Colorado consumer needs to realize. In the good years farmers need to make enough that they can weather a really vicious climate here



Grant Farm.



... and if anyone will go back into the 2000s, they'll realize it was the most epic drought in Colorado."

In fact, 22 federally declared disasters hit between 2002 and 2006, and vegetable growers don't qualify for the subsidized crop insurance that rescues commodity farmers: those growing wheat, corn and even tobacco.

In 2007 and 2008 it was hail. "Woe is me, y'know? I can handle hailstorms. They're depressing but..." Grant trails off. The bottom line is, "It's hard to grow food in Colorado and there needs to be enough upside for future agriculturalists [to] make enough money that when there is hail or there isn't enough water, they can survive."

That is part of why Grant is so fond of the CSA model. In the standard distribution model, "We throw one-third of our stuff away before it's ever packed because it's got this defect or that defect. What a wasteful system!" he says. "With the CSA, after the hails we wrote letters: 'Sorry, your zucchini's gonna have some marks on it this week, but it's fully great zucchini.'"

Thus, Grant applied their volume experience to the CSA model and grew it to run from "Colorado Springs to Casper" and as far west as Aspen.

"A pretty fuel-intensive distribution network as CSA's go," I comment.

But still a fraction of traditional distribution, Grant reminds me. And "the idea of the three-blocks-away CSA is romantic, but those people have to get other jobs and/or they're living in poverty.

"Our model ... was to put as many pickup points out there as possible so it was as convenient as possible. No one's going to drive 15 miles and 30 minutes to pick up a dozen eggs, it's a waste of carbon resources."

And they were good at it, he insists. "Even in 2011 the CSA netted \$1.3 million. So as everyone judges us for 'they did this wrong or that wrong,' the CSA was incredible! It just got mired and buried with other farm debt and ... players that came in and siphoned out every penny from the farm." So it's really misleading ... but the financials will show of our farm, the CSA was fabulously profitable."

'A Crazy Tragedy'

"All that happened in the end was totally unnecessary. It's such a crazy tragedy."

Those are Brownlee's words, but could be Grant's.

About appointed manager Jim Ott, Brownlee says, "Jim's a treasure, but by his own account made a fundamental error. In all of his turn-around operations in the past, his cardinal rule was: 'Never bring along the guy who got the ship into trouble.'" Grant is where he is today, Brownlee says, "because of self-sabotage. We set up a pathway

for their future, and there's only one reason they didn't choose that path and that is Andy's pride."

Looking Back, Looking Ahead

"Are we writing this story of the past, or are we writing a story of hope for the future?" Grant asks me, a bit exasperated. "If we have any chance of becoming resurgent farmers, there has to be a story of a future, of a hope."

Hope is more than a word for Grant, who grows decidedly more animated as we begin to talk about the development of the new Grant Farms CSA. It's a habit.

"We're taking this opportunity to retool a little bit," he says. "To look at what we're doing right that made us really good money, and where we could be a little more service oriented."

Moving On

A year after the GFF bankruptcy filing, the reemerged Grant Farms sent a letter of gratitude to 2013 CSA members, announcing plans for "an even better 2014," and the addition of five new pickup locations. Sixty miles south, Michael Brownlee is working hard to take Local Food Shift national, a seeming irony he acknowledges with a smile as he hands me an impressive prototype issue of his magazine.

Both parties seem eager to move on with greater works, unburdened by the weight of this painful history.

"There is a huge story in here that is significant from a number of levels," Brownlee acknowledges. Why did this impressive farm fall apart? I wonder. And what does this say about these men, about small farms and large CSAs and giant dreams, about organic agriculture and Slow Money? What does it say about farming in Colorado?

The story will continue to unfold, and its lessons will rise to the surface over time, answered publicly or privately, somewhere—just not on these pages, not yet.

Bill Giebler lives and writes in Boulder. He recently won the 2014 Grand Prize 'Solas Award' for Best Travel Story of the Year by the editors of the *Travelers' Tales* book series. His work on food, travel, health and sustainability has appeared in *Organic Spa Magazine*, *Green Living Journal* and on GaiaLife and MSN.