Nurturing Interdependence
Food Drives our Work and Creates Change

This spring as we prepare the soil in our gardens and fields to grow food that nurtures us, I find myself reflecting on the ways we can continue supporting each other. The work of growing local food and the people who produce it in this place have been my inspiration through the challenges of the last two years. We have seen the positive impact our work at The Center for an Agricultural Economy (CAE) has in our local community, the state and region. While enormous pandemic response efforts were catalyzed, at CAE we also continued preparing for our future. CAE is exploring the feasibility of large community investments that will support our working landscapes.

CAE celebrated the 10th anniversary of the Vermont Food Venture Center (VFVC), a facility that provided the foundation for so much of our growth and success. Long before my time as Executive Director, I was fortunate to be the first client using the space to support the expansion of local food production on my own farm in Greensboro. I have seen first hand how these resources have a positive impact on our working lands and maintain the relationship between our farmers and communities. Ten years ago I could not have imagined the depth and breadth of our work.

I am excited about what CAE is doing to foster discovery and connectivity through food with our community and educational partners. In the Recipe for Human Connection class at Hazen, students support each other, learn to make soup from ingredients they glean from local farms, and share it with the community. At Atkins Field, we continue building connections through learning, the farmers market, and community gardens. We’ve also seen how destigmatizing food access initiatives allow people equitable opportunity to local nutritious food and a greater connection to our farms.

Our work is rooted in listening to people and generating possibilities, which will lead us in new directions towards food sovereignty.

Food drives our work and creates change. It is our center, and it sustains the livelihoods of our farmers and the land they steward. CAE is working with over 200 rural and small farms across Vermont to provide affordable and equitable services to distribute, process and market the food they produce. As a lifelong farmer who has transitioned to new enterprises myself, I understand the importance of offering a variety of services to food businesses of varying stages and scale to sustain their viability.

Being rooted in rural Vermont provides the opportunity for numerous interconnections. The connection between people and food grounds our work and gives us a sense of place and belonging.

Thank you to our amazing and dedicated staff. You are an inspiration to many and thank you to our board of directors for your guiding support. We are very grateful, and thankful to everyone who supports and contributes to our work and partners with us to make the stories within this report possible.

Jon Ramsay
Executive Director
Our Team

CAE is made up of an incredible team of knowledgeable, compassionate, and dedicated people.

Their belief in and passion for local agriculture is always evident but has been further crystalized in the past few years. The impact of the care our team puts into their work and cultivating relationships can be seen around the state, despite pandemic related challenges. Witness a child hold a worm they found in the soil at Atkins Field, or a producer get their yogurt into a new store in Southern Vermont, and you see our work in action.

CAE Staff (current in 2022)

Reeve Basom
Place-Based Education Coordinator

Brenden Beer
Farm Connex Delivery Driver

Michael Bellizzi
Farm Connex Delivery Driver

Kristin Blodgett
Deputy Director

Will Bunten
Farm Connex Delivery Driver

Silene DeCiucies
Farm Business Planner

Bob Duggan
Farm Connex Delivery Driver; Community Orchard Manager

Bethany Dunbar
Community Programs Manager

Jeffrey Ellis
Farm Connex Delivery Driver

Connor Gorham
Facilities Manager

Corey Hennessey
Farm Connex General Manager

Zach Hoppe
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Kevin Hudnell
Financial Manager

Stella James
Farm Connex Dispatch and Logistics Coordinator

Becca Jordan
Development & Communications Coordinator

Maureen Keefe
Just Cut Production

Daniel Keeney
Farm and Food Business Advisor

Don Maynard
Farm Connex Operations Manager

Josh Peets
Just Cut Team Leader & Grow Your Own Coordinator

Jon Ramsay
Executive Director

Linda Ramsdell
Bookkeeper

Lylee Rauch-Kacenski
Communications Manager

Neal Renaud
Farm Connex Fleet Coordinator & Primary Delivery Driver

Lotty Roozekrans
Just Cut Program Manager

Kate Stephenson
VT Farm Fund Manager

Neil Urie
Farm Connex Delivery Driver & Admin Coordinator

Katrina Vahedi
Development Manager

Federico Viconi
Farm Connex Delivery Driver

Meghan Wayland
Food Sovereignty Organizer

Fawn Wells-Maxfield
Just Cut Production Manager

Hayley Williams
Hardwick Farmers Market Manager

CAE Board of Directors (current in 2022)

Helen Beattie
Co-chair

Meredith Davis

Emily Maclure

Blair Marvin

Peter Merrill

Andrew Meyer

Treasurer

Ben Nottermann
Secretary

Margie Prevot
Co-chair

Fan Watkinson

(Cover photo) Students replace plastic on the greenhouse at Hazen Union High School. Photo by Reeve Basom

(Facing Page) Our CAE team poses with a Farm Connex truck in front of the Vermont Food Venture Center. Photo by Kent Shaw

Designed by Peltz Creative
Cultivating Abundance for Everyone

CAE’s programs take root in the relationships between people, food, and place. We believe an equitable food system is one that fuels rich relationships and thriving, empowered communities. Our approach is grounded in understanding community needs and collaborating with local, regional, and statewide partners across sectors for long-term transformation and resilience.

Students in the REACH! afterschool program working in the garden at Wolcott School. Photo by Elizabeth Rossano
People

Generating Opportunity in our Region.
We invest in the livelihoods of farmers and food workers by providing resources for them to thrive.

Vermont Farm Fund
We maintain a revolving loan fund that provides timely, no-fuss access to capital for businesses in crisis, startup, or growth.

Farm & Food Business Advising
We offer specialized support and assistance to meet the unique needs of farmers and food producers.

Food

Building a Hub for Local Food
We provide critical infrastructure and business services for rural food producers of all sizes.

Vermont Food Venture Center
We rent commercial kitchens and storage space to farms and food businesses while providing complimentary technical assistance.

Just Cut
We process local vegetables into ready-to-use cuts for institutional kitchens throughout Vermont and the region.

Farm Connex
We deliver goods for producers whose operations are too small, too rural or too perishable to work with traditional distribution services.

Place

Centering the Community
We nurture the relationships between food access, community resilience, and environmental and social justice.

Community Space at Atkins Field
We steward a 15-acre field and forest property with wide open gathering spaces and vibrant community programs. Atkins Field is home to an open-air community pavilion, Hardwick community gardens, Hardwick Farmers Market, a community orchard, bicycle pump track, trail networks, and granite relics.

Place-Based Education
We co-create programming with school and community partners to integrate meaningful place-based learning into our rural education system.

Food Justice
We organize and amplify the voices of those impacted by injustice in order to move toward greater food sovereignty in the Northeast Kingdom.
Bridging Access to Local Food

Produce to Pantries

Local food networks are nimble, flexible, and adaptive, this allows them to meet the needs of the community in ways larger, centralized systems cannot. The pandemic has illuminated many ways that the industrial food system doesn’t work to feed and nourish everyone. After participating in the national USDA Farmers to Families Food box programs in 2020, our CAE team asked,

“How can we localize this effort? Can we use our existing relationships and infrastructure to involve local small-scale farmers and our local pantries to meet the needs of our communities?”

The answer is Produce to Pantries, a partnership between CAE and the Hardwick Area Food Pantry (HAFP). We buy produce from local farms, which is distributed at HAFP’s three sites in Hardwick, Albany, and Craftsberry. Not only does this get quality, locally-grown produce to more households – we intentionally seek small-scale and emerging farm partners to build equity among small farmers in our area. It is truly an example of neighbors feeding neighbors, and communities looking out for one another.

For new farmers like Hayley Williams of Feel Good Farm (formerly Pachamama Farmstand), growing for the program was a chance to explore a wholesale market and build her skills.

“It was a confidence booster and felt invigorating to be able to take what felt like a large quantity of garlic and sell it through a local contact that was ultimately going to do good.”

– Hayley Williams, Feel Good Farm, Produce to Pantries Farmer

In 2022, she will participate again to expand her sales and income in a way that feels balanced with her capacity. “The time and the use of the land will ultimately have a benefit and is going to people in need in a way I feel really good about on a soul level.”

Program co-creators Lotty Roozekrans and Meghan Wayland were intentional in stocking culturally appropriate food. They collaborated with Albany Food Pantry volunteers and Morningstar Meadows to secure local black beans for farmworker food boxes. Pantry-goers have noticed the increased quality in produce, and according to Kris Coville of the Craftsberry pantry, “the program has helped pantry-goers ‘feel they’re part of something important.’”

WHAT BRINGS YOU HOPE FOR THE FUTURE?

“It’s grassroots programs which support the local community economically, and an understanding that we all need to support each other.”

– Bill Half, Harvest Hill Farm, Produce to Pantries Farmer
“My name is Donna, I am 77 years old and live alone. The farmers with the big hearts who care for the community make me cry. Everything is so clean and fresh. More often than not, I personally would not be eating as well [...] the fruits and veggies are beautiful and CLEAN. I thank all the magical creatures who...make my life and others’ worthwhile.”

– Donna, Hardwick Area Food Pantry Client

1,600 lbs. of black beans
locally sourced for migrant farmworker food boxes

Local sourcing under 20 miles
Participating farms average less than 20 miles from the pantries they support

4x increase in fresh produce budget
Budget for fresh produce at the HAFP is increased 4x, to $3,000 a month

$50,000 spent annually at local farms

1,140 lbs. of produce each week
Each week: 1,140 lbs. of produce at 3 sites serves 14 towns

4,356 people received local produce
FOOD JUSTICE

Nourishing the Whole Community

Grocery Vouchers
The grocery voucher program started in 2020 to complement the Hardwick Area Food Pantry’s emergency services. In 2021, 527 $50 vouchers went out into the community through area food pantries. Those vouchers supported six local markets and supported the agency and autonomy of neighbors to choose food that fit their family's needs.

Food Sovereignty
In April 2021, CAE hired a Food Sovereignty Organizer, Meghan Wayland, to coordinate these meals, and to continue to explore what food justice means in our community. Their position partners direct food access with community organizing to ensure that in getting healthy local food to local people, we are listening first and building power together. Goals are co-created with community partners to work toward systems change and a world where programs like Everyone Eats are no longer needed. Meghan also serves as one of CAE’s liaisons to Northeast Kingdom Organizing (NEKO), and helped launch NEKO’s Food Sovereignty and Environmental Justice campaign. The purpose of this team is to organize to fight injustices in relationship to food, land, climate change, systemic racism, and extractive economies.

“I wanted to write a note of appreciation for the meal that I got this past Wednesday. When I went to pick it up, the chef looked me in the eyes and said something nice. It may have even just been “have a good night” but it was a moment of connection so profound for me. This program means a lot to me. Thank you.”
– Bianca, Everyone Eats Participant

Everyone Eats
In 2021 CAE continued our work as a hub for the Vermont Everyone Eats program, whose mission is to bring the community (eaters, farmers, and restaurants) together to address food needs, and support each other through the pandemic. In April of 2021 the statewide program acknowledged 1 million meals served, and by December, had served just under 2 million meals. Through our hub, CAE supports weekly meals in Albany, Craftsbury, Hardwick, Glover, Orleans and surrounding towns. Since the start of the pandemic, our Hardwick Area Hub has served over 50,000 meals which — at $10 per meal — has resulted in roughly $500,000 to local restaurants and over $150,000 to local farms.
What Gave You Hope in 2021?

“Organizing. Learning from and acting in solidarity with Black, migrant, and Indigenous-led land and food justice projects. And people rallying with a lot of heart and time to keep the NEKO family together in the face of major change.”

– Meghan Wayland
Food Sovereignty Organizer

“Town partners, gardeners, and neighbors’ reaction to challenges of vandalism at Atkins Field showed me that we are not alone and the community has a beautiful core of willing friends ready to work together to improve public spaces for everyone.”

– Bethany Dunbar
Community Programs Manager

VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT

A Bright Star in the Community

CAE nominated volunteer Céline LeBlanc for a Hardwick Humanitarian Award. Céline volunteered to coordinate the Hardwick restaurant meal project at the beginning of the pandemic, which later merged into the statewide Everyone Eats program. Céline was the friendly voice on the other end of the phone or email signing people up, arranging deliveries, coordinating with restaurants, troubleshooting, handling complaints, and just in general checking in with people about their day. Social isolation has been a huge issue during the pandemic and Céline’s willingness to spend extra time with people has been an incredible gift to Hardwick and the neighboring towns. She is a founding member of the Northeast Kingdom Organizing’s Disability Justice League, a community organizing issue team that brings people together to work on challenges facing residents with disabilities. We feel truly grateful to have Céline in our community.

(Facing page) Village Restaurant owner Lynn and her team prepare meals for the Vermont Everyone Eats program. Photo by Kent Shaw. (This page) Céline LeBlanc poses with the Hardwick Humanitarian Award she received for her work coordinating the Hardwick area Everyone Eats meals. Photo by Bethany Dunbar
WHAT BRINGS YOU HOPE FOR THE FUTURE?

“I love witnessing young people discovering how much the earth loves them and how much they love it back.”

– Reeve Basom
Place-Based Education Coordinator

PLACE-BASED EDUCATION
Growing Community Connection

For CAE’s Place-Based Education programs, 2021 was a year focused on the need for connection and healing, honoring food and land as powerful partners in cultivating care, curiosity and hope. Our partnership with OSSU’s REACH! after-school and summer program really blossomed and proved a rich context for youth- and food-centered community building. Planning and planting school and community gardens in the spring; tending, tasting, cultivating through the summer; harvesting, cooking and sharing in the fall - REACH! kids were busy through the growing season. At the Hardwick REACH! summer camp, kids walked down to the community gardens at Atkins Field to help grow and harvest produce to share with the community. Peas, garlic, lettuce, kale, and mixed herb bundles were picked, cleaned, weighed, portioned, delivered to the Hardwick Area Food Pantry, and of course tasted by these young gardeners.

Students in the REACH! Program harvest leafy greens at Atkins Field. The vegetables went to the Hardwick Area Food Pantry to feed the community. Photo by Reeve Basom

Photo by Elizabeth Rossano
COMMUNITY SPACE AT ATKINS FIELD

Atkins Grows Together

The Hardwick Community Garden was founded in 2005 as a way for neighbors to grow their own food. The gardeners gathered in July 2021 to share food, create a mission statement for the garden, and explore their dreams for this collective space. They created a spiral shaped community herb garden. CAE staff trimmed back the orchard to make it more accessible, and added a beehive. Events at Atkins Field included an expanded Pollinator Festival in June which included the Hardwick Farmers’ Market and Honeybee Steel Band. In August we celebrated Open Farm Week with demonstrations, heritage tomato taste testing, woodworking, oxen, basketmaking and baby goats. A community cider pressing event in the fall was added to our schedule with help from Sterling College students and the Small Farm Guild, which provided the cider press.

Grow Your Own

This year Grow Your Own offered 11 workshops, held under the pavilion. This food independence partnership with the Hardwick Area Food Pantry is led by community members. Topics included sourdough bread, pruning, wild edibles, fishing, and seed starting. The ages of participants ranged from 30 to over 65, and half said that their food access has been affected by the pandemic. The majority of participants learned something useful and will use these new skills at home.

STUDENT SPOTLIGHT

A Recipe for Human Connection: a Student’s Perspective

Co-taught by CAE staff and community partners and housed within the Pathways program at Hazen Union High School, A Recipe for Human Connection provides students with the opportunity to explore their connections to food. Through shared recipes, story-telling, harvesting, cooking, and visiting local businesses, the class creates a space for everyone to develop similar interests and work towards a common goal. In his last year at Hazen, Colton Courtemanche found new joy and relationships through taking this course. After recently moving to Vermont, he was able to come out of his bubble by collaborating and helping others with their recipes. “This class made me feel safe, it’s given me a sanctuary to come and be my true self.”

“Food is like a mutual friend. Everybody has a connection to food and that helps us connect to each other.”

– Colton Courtemanche

Food can be a powerful tool to bring people together. Colton’s favorite experience was visiting Harvest Hill Farm, where he was given an insight into the production of vegetables at a local farm. He enjoyed learning how food systems function while developing some of the skills and tools himself.

One day, Colton could see himself on a farm growing his own fruits and vegetables. He is passionate about addressing issues of nutrition and hopes he can provide people with more affordable and healthy food. “I’m learning how to do more of what I love...I get so much experience that I never would imagine I could have even done... What gives me hope is the impact that I can make on my family, my friends, my peers, everybody.”

Through A Recipe for Human Connection, Colton was able to learn more about food and broaden his aspirations. He continues to work with local businesses and explore his interests through hands-on opportunities. By expanding the education system beyond the classroom, place-based education impacts not only the students but the larger community. Together, we can create a space to come together around food and gratitude.

Hazen Union High School student, Colton Courtemanche, weighs onions with farmer Bill Half at Harvest Hill Farm. Photo by Reeve Basom
Take a look!
We are so excited to share with you our new CAE brochure. See how we are growing community.

175,629 lbs of raw produce processed in 2021, up 42% from 2020 and 28% from 2019

Filling a Gap: Connecting Farms to Institutions

In 2021 the Just Cut farm-to-institution program increased our capacity to source and process local vegetables for sale in regional hospitals, schools, and stores. Now in its 7th year of operation, Just Cut purchases from 19 regional farms, using “good faith agreements” to make sure that farmers have a guaranteed sale at a known price and volume, and we can use that information to plan accordingly. The production team got out of the kitchens and into the fields to visit two of the farms we have good faith agreements with: West Farm, in Cambridge, grows carrots and beets for the program, and Sparrow Arc, in Guildhall, grows potatoes. The team enjoyed meeting the farmers, and seeing where these vegetables take root before coming to CAE.

JUST CUT

(This page) West Farm, a diversified farm at the Vermont Land Trust “Brewster Uplands” property in Cambridge, VT. Photo by Elizabeth Rossano. (Facing page) Holly Simpson and Angus Baldwin of Three Crows Farm & Ferments and West Farm. Photo provided by Three Crows Farm & Ferments

NURTURING INTERDEPENDENCE
Growing Together: a Story of Farms and Ferments

It’s common that businesses and farms will work with a few different parts of CAE, but rare that a single family has two separate agricultural businesses that both utilize CAE’s resources to help them grow and expand.

Holly Simpson and Angus Baldwin are that rarity. After years of farm jobs for Angus and sales jobs for Holly, the two started Three Crows Farm in 2011, renting land on the Brewster Uplands property - 634 acres in Cambridge owned by the Vermont Land Trust. A “side hustle”, Three Crows started as a ¾ of an acre market garden and quickly grew into three acres focused primarily on wholesale accounts. In 2015, they took the opportunity to move to West Farm, a former dairy on the property, and convert it into a 10 acre wholesale vegetable farm.

A project of the Vermont Land Trust, West Farm’s mission is to “ensure that good, nutrient dense food is available to all”. Through wholesale accounts with schools and institutions, and a community CSA, they are doing their part to ensure their community is fed. Now in their 6th season contracting with Just Cut, they are one of the program’s biggest suppliers. In 2021, the farm grew 26,000 pounds of carrots and beets for Just Cut, 24% more than the previous year. CAE’s Farm Connex trucks deliver the produce to CAE’s Vermont Food Venture Center, where the vegetables are processed before being delivered to institutions across Vermont and into neighboring states. Angus has found that Lotty and the team are flexible and easy to work with. West Farm’s cold storage renovations over the last two years have allowed us to work with them during the winter and spring, when it is harder to source local produce. In 2021, CAE also sourced vegetables from West Farm for Produce to Pantries.

A big fan of fermented vegetables, Holly learned to make her own kimchi in 2009. For the next decade she made small batches of ferments and sold them at The Farm Store in Jeffersonville. Three Crows Farm & Ferments, a nod to her and Angus’ original farm, now has three main products as well as seasonal flavors, and uses vegetables from West Farm. In 2018, Holly started a ferment CSA, and then in 2019 began selling at the Morrisville farmers market.

In 2020, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the two found themselves without childcare for their son, Roland. Holly left her “day” job to care for Roland, and took the opportunity to start scaling up and professionalizing her business. Holly joined the 10-week business planning class taught by CAE and the Center for Women & Enterprise in the fall of 2021. Through support in the class, Holly worked towards her goals of landing more accounts, professionalizing her labels, and deciding how to grow the business.

Holly and Angus find meaning in making and growing food for people. Holly is happy to be building her business, and contributing to a regional food system that is able to feed the community. Angus has “an appreciation for producing good food at good value while doing my best to take care of the land. I continue to farm because I continue to believe that there’s a need, a very large need, in our community for quality, nutritious food.” Together, they are working to continue the tradition of producing nutritious food for the community they love, with love.

“One of the things I really like about working with Just Cut is there’s a very positive and proactive attitude. Things don’t usually go perfectly in production or agriculture and so we have been able to kind of piece that together, work with them, and really be able to maximize our yields in terms of what we’re producing for them.”

– Angus Baldwin
Manager of West Farm
In 2021 we supported over 75 businesses with vital services ranging from in-depth business classes, to creating business plans, new product development, and marketing support. We are working with more dairy farms than ever, and especially small dairies that have an important role to play on the Vermont landscape long-term but are pinched by unaccommodating commodity markets and rising costs of production. Our work with these businesses is supported by both the Vermont Farm & Forest Viability Program and also the NE-SARE program which funded us with a grant to support a study of costs of production with a cohort of small dairy farms in our region.

How much does it cost to produce 100 pounds of milk on a small, conventional dairy in Northern Vermont?

Our farm business planner, Silene DeCiucies, recently completed a dairy cost of production study with 7 dairy clients. With funding through the NE-SARE (Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education) program, the study focused on conventional dairy farms milking fewer than 100 cows who primarily grow hay as their main feed source, utilize pasture, and feed purchased grain. These farms are most vulnerable to changes in the industry and a large portion of the dairy farms in our service area. Silene worked with each farm to collect past financial and farm data to determine the costs to each farm to produce 100 lbs of milk or a “hundred-weight” (cwt). Through our work with dairies we found that many didn’t have the time to sit down with their financials to determine their own cost of production (COP), that it was often a helpful process, and that farms of this scale had no benchmarks to compare their production systems to. Participating farms were compensated and received free access to an independent nutritionist and/or grazing consultant who looked at their rations and feeding systems. Feed is the single largest expense for these farms, so a second opinion on feed or grain rations can make a big difference in the bottom line.

This project highlighted the reality that these types of farms are not adequately compensated for their product. The average cost of production for these 7 farms was $23.37/cwt, and does not include owner labor, owner’s draw, or family living expenses. The average price these farms received from their milk buyers was $18.51/cwt. With an average yearly production of 1.1 million pounds, that equates to these farms incurring approximately $53,853.66 in costs over what they are paid. If small farms are to continue to exist in our rural landscape, the issue of pay price (how much farmers are paid for their milk by their coop) needs to be addressed. We need to start thinking more creatively— with new markets and processing facilities, explore alternatives to commodity grain markets, restructure hauling costs, look at a pricing structure that values the ecological, environmental and social benefits of small farms...All ideas should be on the table. At CAE, we hope to use this work to engage with more farms and stakeholders in Vermont dairy to keep ideas flowing and lines of communication open. We encourage you to do the same!

Read the whole article about the dairy cost of production study

Dairy cows at Plante Farm in Morrisville, VT. Photo by Silene DeCiucies
4 Ways to Support Local Dairy

1. Buy direct.
Check in with your neighboring farms about purchasing raw milk directly off the farm. Many farms sell raw milk legally through Vermont’s 2 tiered raw milk program, and this keeps your dairy dollars as local as possible. Contact Silene (silene@hardwickagriculture.org) if you need help finding a raw milk farm near you!

2. Support local food.
Check in with your local dairies about other products they have for sale such as beef, produce, veal, maple, compost, or mulch hay. Your local farms are most likely producing many of these products at a very high level of quality, and this is another way to keep dollars local and support alternative income streams for dairy farms.

3. Support our working landscape.
We live in a beautiful state with plentiful grass that is transformed into high quality milk and dairy products by our local farmers. We have a working landscape that is largely maintained by dairy, and by hardworking farmers who choose to get up and produce food for us every day. Find a local farm or store where you can buy your favorite local ice cream, yogurt, cheese or chocolate milk!

4. Get to know your local farmers.
The dairy industry is very complicated and many dairy farmers are caught in the middle of an antiquated federal pricing system that does not factor the care and effort that dairy farmers put into their farms. All farms are different, with different land bases, debt, infrastructure and cows. Dairy receives a lot of media attention so form your own opinions by getting to know your local farmers and then asking questions.
CLIENT SPOTLIGHT

Behind the Taps at Mount Cabot Maple

Founded in 2005, Mount Cabot Maple produces a limited amount of single sourced organic syrup each year from trees that have been supplying sap since the 1800’s. Fast forward to 2020, when Morgan Hill, who grew up on the land, had the privilege and opportunity to purchase the business from its founder. With Sophie Earll, her partner in all things, Morgan and Sophie now own and operate Mount Cabot Maple together. As their new label proudly states, the business is “Women Run. Queer Crafted. Family Owned.” Only 30 years old and in a predominantly male industry, the two are figuring out how to navigate the trade, create the business they want, and forge ahead together.

At its peak, the forest once had 8,000 taps. In 2016 & 2017, it was devastated by an infestation of forest tent caterpillars and healthy trees decreased to 3,000, resulting in a 62% decline in syrup production. The forest is now back up to almost 4,000 taps, but Sophie, a certified arborist, says that in her lifetime, the forest might never be at the same capacity it was before the blight. They are working harder for every single tap, and constantly thinking about the way the environment affects the ecosystem and their livelihood. As the next generation of maple sugarmakers on Mount Cabot, they strive to help the forest recover and thrive. Even though they are at the mercy of mother nature, and so many things can fail at any time, Morgan and Sophie are drawn to the work. The quality of life, the challenges and demands of sugaring, and the land itself continue to pull them in.

“The gushing of sap right now is so rewarding. It’s just so satisfying. Actually making the syrup is incredible, it’s such a weird, magical process.”
– Morgan Hill

CAE provided business support through a partnership with the Agricultural Viability Alliance to pilot an initiative that would allow for New York and New England Agricultural Service Providers to develop a broader community of professional practitioners of farm business support. This initiative allowed CAE business advisors to expand the geographic area in which they work to include farmers in New Hampshire, such as Mount Cabot Maple.

Sophie and Morgan spent much of 2021 working with CAE’s Farm Business Planner, Silene DeCiucies, and Farm and Food Business Advisor, Daniel Keeney. Morgan says “It’s been truly indispensable just to know that there is someone we can ask questions, and that they care, is huge!” Now that they are at the point where they understand how the business is doing and their profitability, they can focus on a longer term business plan and strategy. Sophie feels like “we’ve been part of this network of farmers and people in a similar industry. CAE has given us this understanding into the economics of actually running a farm business.”

For Sophie and Morgan it’s about more than just their business and the two of them on the land. They envision a space for people who haven’t traditionally had access to land; where all can feel safe, and for a place where connection to each other and to the land is fostered. Two years into operating the business, they feel confident, knowing they can tackle problems and do the hard work. Overall, they feel hopeful knowing they have what they need, resources they can tap, and the ability to share their space with others.

Learn more about Mount Cabot Maple

Morgan Hill of Mount Cabot Maple boils sap in their sugar house in Lancaster, NH. Photo provided by Mount Cabot Maple
Celebrating a Decade of Innovation

2021 was the 10th year of operating the Vermont Food Venture Center! Jan 6, 2012 marked our grand opening, and since then we have served and interacted with hundreds of farm and food businesses on a wide range of topics. Our services include kitchen and storage rental, cross-docking services, consultations, site-assessments, 1-on-1 advising, business planning, food safety planning, workshops and more.

10 YEARS OF SUPPORT FOR SPECIALTY FOOD ENTREPRENEURS

125 businesses rented storage space

23,359 hours of commercial kitchen rentals

355 Recipes crafted in our kitchens

135 businesses rented kitchen space

WHAT GAVE YOU HOPE IN 2021?

“That despite the ongoing stress, fear and uncertainty caused by the ongoing pandemic - we were able to show-up for work every day with a very tangible (if sometimes complicated) goal; and seeing the results of that work on the shelves and in the (largely) persistent health & nourishment of our communities.”

– Corey Hennessey
Farm Connex General Manager

“Connecting with food and farm businesses in-person. So many other things in life have grown distant, but the VFVC was still buzzing along which gave more opportunities to connect, communicate and work with people directly.”

– Connor Gorham, Facilities Manager
Adriana Munch, the mastermind behind Green Mountain Peanut Butter, is the definition of a driven, independent woman. Wanting to improve her English proficiency, she packed up her bags and left sunny Costa Rica to arrive in snowy Vermont in the winter of 2013. Splitting time between the sun and snow for the next 3 years, she fell in love with Vermont (especially its winters) and became a permanent resident in 2016.

It was her father who introduced Adriana to peanut butter and it quickly became a family favorite. After much peanut butter consumption, the family realized that it was filled with additives and so Adriana started exploring ways to create her own.

After settling in Vermont full time, Adriana turned her focus to developing something that she could share with others. Peanut butter is relatively easy to make but good peanut butter takes more patience, “you have to make sure the peanuts get crushed and heated just enough to release the oils, then you can add your flavor components.”

Looking for a place to produce, Adriana found the Vermont Food Venture Center online and began production in March of 2021. Adriana remembers “it was a Thursday when I released my website... and I had a lot of mixed feelings. But people started to buy. I was sitting in my room packing up orders thinking ‘I don’t know these people and they’re buying my peanut butter!’ It’s a dream come true.”

The first year of any business comes with a steep learning curve and Green Mountain Peanut Butter’s first year was no exception. Adriana set out with a plan to scale up quickly and release a new flavor of peanut butter each month. After a few days of production and trial and error, she settled on a production run of 200 jars per kitchen rental and 4 new flavor releases a year. Throughout this experience, she has felt so supported by CAE in navigating the challenges of setting up a business “Everyone has been very supportive. At the beginning there was a lot of support and as time went on, they continued to be a resource. I cannot ask for a better place. They’re always there to help me.”

Her desire of “wanting to run a business, not have a business run me” has allowed her to fully enjoy the process of developing her brand. Getting started, she told herself that “if after a year in business, we’re still in business, then it’s meant to be” so she’s taking it as a sign and forging ahead with plans of growing the business with a focus on providing “the product you deserve.”

Learn more about Green Mountain Peanut Butter
Reliable Product Delivery for Small Farmers

Farm Connex has provided safe, reliable and responsive delivery services to Vermont food producers - even through the most difficult points in the ongoing COVID crisis. This is a testament to the care, dedication and conscientiousness of our frontline team of drivers and staff. Our ‘first and last mile’ service provides needed assurance that producers can get their products out into the world regardless of their size, their location, or product perishability - and even in times of uncertainty.

Keeping Fridges Stocked with Yogurt

Sweet Cow Farm is a family business who has made traditional style whole Jersey milk yogurt for over 13 years. They started out at local Farmers’ Markets, and envisioned selling and distributing to food stores and coops throughout Vermont and New Hampshire, but were unable to do so because of delivery costs and the lack of distributors in their area until they found Farm Connex.

They initially began working with Farm Connex in 2019, before switching to a larger distributor who promised to get their yogurt into southern locations which were outside of Farm Connex’s territory at the time. Not long after, the company ended up dropping those southern accounts anyway. Sweet Cow was able to return to Farm Connex last year and resume a pickup and delivery arrangement which included the accounts that they were forced to drop through the other company.

“As a rural farm, the opportunity to work with a delivery service like Farm Connex has meant that we can continue to make our product available to our customers and grow and expand our territory if we choose without any interruption of service.”

– Diane Wyatt, Owner, Sweet Cow Farm

Learn more about Sweet Cow Yogurt

Delivered $8 million worth of local food

25 routes weekly

100 clients

Delivered to 12 of VT’s 14 counties & western NH
Located in South Hero VT, Pigasus Meats produces pork and free-range chicken. This 170 acre pastured system is currently home to approximately 1,600 chickens and 150 pigs. Founded in 2013 by Kelsey and Phelan O’Connor, the farm is run with the well-being of their animals and land as top priority. Phelan enjoys continuously looking at ways to improve land management styles. Although agriculture can be demanding and tedious work at times, Phelan and Kelsey have overcome many traditional challenges of working on a farm by taking advantage of a variety of available resources such as the Vermont Farm Fund (VFF) and Farm Connex. Pigasus is a recipient of a VFF Business Builder loan. The loan helped the farm add infrastructure in anticipation of the arrival of their first set of chickens in 2017, and acquire a guard dog to ensure the safety of those hens. The loan also helped facilitate the purchase of a commercial-grade egg washer, which enabled them to handle eggs from two thousand birds, without having to hand wash everything.

This past year, the farm began using the no-till drill co-managed by CAE and The Lamoille County Conservation District, which has allowed them to effectively plant thirty different species of seed mixes into the pasture. These mixes not only function as forest crops but also create a home for pollinators and other natural wildlife.

In addition to their commitment as good stewards of the land, Pigasus Meats strives to provide access to quality food in the greater Vermont community. In the past, transport was limited by distance and space in their delivery vehicle. They now work with Farm Connex for all their deliveries, and as a result they have more time to spend, exploring different markets and providing greater access to high-quality food.

“We really try to farm in conjunction with the ecosystem that we’re a part of. And we see livestock as a way for us to positively impact the natural world. We are making decisions based on what’s going to be best for the animals...soil...plant communities...water quality...basically every part of the natural system.”

– Phelan O’Connor, Pigasus Meats

Phelan is excited to expand his passion through Pigasus Meats. When asked what gives him hope, he responded “finding other people that are passionate about managing farm systems in a productive way that produces high-quality food. With an eye on access to everyone regardless of economic background.” Although the expansion of sustainable agriculture and food is a multifaceted issue, there are a lot of brilliant people and services working to help.
Access to Capital for Vermont Businesses

Over 2 million Dollars Loaned

The Vermont Farm Fund (VFF) is a non-profit revolving loan fund for local farmers and food producers that we established in 2011 through a collaboration with Pete’s Greens. Since that time the fund has grown to over $750,000. In 2021 the fund hit the milestone of $2,000,000 in loans, and that number continues to climb.

Loans for New Businesses

To meet community need and demand, VFF has launched a new loan program for start-up farmers and food businesses. The New Producer Loan provides access to no-hassle, friendly-term loans up to $20,000 at a low 3% interest rate. A true revolving loan fund, as the community of recipients pay back their loans, funds are replenished for the next cycle of borrowers. The New Producer Loan was developed in response to increasing demand from farmers who were starting new enterprises or moving onto new land, and needed capital to fund infrastructure improvements or equipment to get up and running. Over the past three years the VFF has partnered with the Vermont Land Trust’s Farmland Access Program to support farmers in that program with access to capital, and the launch of the New Producer Loan will open access up to farmers and food producers across the state.

A Transition in Leadership

We would also like to take this opportunity to announce a transition in leadership, as Kate Stephenson prepares this summer to depart her role as VFF Program Manager. Kate has thoughtfully stewarded the Vermont Farm Fund since 2016, and her dedication, leadership, and support for local farmers has been vital to the Fund’s successes. We offer her our deep gratitude and wish her well as she dives deeper into running and growing her own business.

Kate will be succeeded by Kristin Blodgett, a long-term CAE employee and current Deputy Director, who will bring financial management experience and extensive institutional knowledge to the role. This seamless transition of leadership assures that the Fund remains a vital tool for growing and supporting a diversified local farm and food economy. The VFF has made tremendous accomplishments these past 11 years, and we look forward to the next decade of growing Vermont farms and food businesses.

Learn more about loans or donate to the fund

WHAT GAVE YOU HOPE IN 2021?

“We are incredibly grateful for the support we received from the Vermont Farm Fund. Financial assistance is difficult in the startup stage of business and the VFF was able to give us what we needed to have a healthy beginning. Their funding programs are designed to truly sustain the projects they invest in holistically. We hope to continue to work with the VFF throughout the lifetime of our business and encourage others to utilize this valuable resource available to the Vermont farming community.”

– Jane MacLean, Sweet Roots Farm
Expenses by Department

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Revenue by Category

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<td>Rental Income</td>
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Thank You

To our staff: Thank you for your unwavering commitment to the work and each other in the face of so many unknowns. Your dedication is admirable, and the care and passion every person brings to the work is apparent. We take the work seriously, and learn how to have fun along the way. Thank you for the groan-worthy puns, shared meals, and farm field trips, that keep us going. Thank you to our Middlebury student intern, Ava Moseley, for help interviewing clients and contributing profiles to this report.

To Our Volunteers and Supporters: Thank you to the diverse and passionate people who make up CAE’s supporters. Your partnership and trust in CAE are the foundation of our success. The challenges of 2021 are surpassed only by the ways that you have shown up for CAE to sustain these programs. As a community-based nonprofit, we rely on both your voices and your donations to keep our programs running year after year.

Ways to Support CAE

If a vibrant local food system rooted in our rural communities is important to you, there are many ways you can support CAE:

Share your enthusiasm with a friend!
You are the best qualified person to speak to why this work matters to you.

Consider a recurring gift.
Monthly gifts of every size can have a great impact on our programs.

Gifts of stock.
Direct gifts of stock to CAE are not subject to capital gains tax.

Make a lasting legacy.
By remembering CAE in your will or estate planning, you can sustain this work into the next generation. A clear directive helps your family understand your wishes, and thoughtful planning can prevent tax burdens.

Donate to CAE!
Reach out to our team to learn more.
Katrina@hardwickagriculture.org

Support our partners.
We cannot do what we do without an amazing network of community-based partners who also operate in the greater Hardwick region. Please consider supporting them directly:

Learn more about The Hardwick Area Food Pantry
Learn more about Northeast Kingdom Organizing

We honor the people and stories of the land on which we live and work. We honor the land as our partner and teacher. CAE exists on unceded land of the Abenaki People. Please consider learning the story of the land you are on, including indigenous stewardship, past and present. Follow this link to an interactive map to learn more: native-land.ca