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Celebrating Local Foods, Season by Season

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Day of the Dead

ALMOND BUTTERS • HARD CIDER • THE RURAL SOCIETY • ANDERSON ORCHARD
FLYING J FARM • ANTIOCH COLLEGE • HEIRLOOM PUMPKINS

Flying J Farm

Farmer and advocate Richard Jensen and his philosophy of restoration

By Nancy McKibben • Photography by Catherine Murray

Pilot. Farmer. Retired OSU professor. Sustainability advocate. Richard Jensen of Flying J Farm in Johnstown, aka “Farmer Dick”, has packed a lot into his 72 years. Fit, trim, and tanned, only the wrinkles that fan his keen blue eyes divulge his age, which is itself a good argument for the kind of life he espouses: one that is rooted in the earth and its rhythms, that gives back more than it takes, that begins with restoring human health, and ripples out to restore the environment and the community.

Seeds

Born in 1942 in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, Dick “grew up poor,” his mother widowed and on welfare. At age 9, “I talked Mom into planting beans so I could sell them for six cents a pound,” after realizing that he was picking them for the farmer for only three cents a pound, an early lesson in farm economics.

His mother married a farmer when Dick was 12, and he and his brother milked their stepfather’s 12 cows in return for one-quarter of the milk check. But Dick’s dream was to fly a plane, not run a farm.

A physics major at the University of Wisconsin at Eau Claire, Dick graduated and immediately obtained a pilot’s license, followed by a master’s in aviation and a PhD in aviation psychology from the University of Illinois. Dick then taught aviation psychology, a field in which he pioneered, at The Ohio State University from 1979–2001. In the meantime he married, had three children, and divorced.

Dick raises grass-fed, chemical free beef, rotating their pastures for better land management.

Restoring Health

In 1983, Dick’s sister died at age 37 of colon cancer. Already a runner and marathoner, Dick decided to “do something about the way I ate.” At first, he grew vegetables at his Upper Arlington home, but by the mid-90s he was searching for a farm to buy. “I was ready. I thought it would be healthier and less stressful.”

The Flying J, with its 250 rolling acres of woods, lake, fields, and stream, is in many ways a grand experiment in healthier living.

“It’s a miracle I ever got this place,” Dick says. “It was more than I could afford, but the previous owner held on to it for me, because she liked my plan to grow organically.” Fortunately, “my previous department chairman was on the board of Heartland Bank,” which okayed the loan.

Today Dick raises chemical free, grass-fed beef. His own diet is plant-based, and he eats beef perhaps once a week. His dietary advice is tempered. “Every individual is different as to diet, and every diet won’t work for everybody,” he says, “but everybody could eat more fruits and vegetables.”

He grows lots of them. In the greenhouse, an intern has arranged a lush still life of the farm’s many-colored produce on a table: apples, peaches, plums, cherries, sweet potatoes, watermelon, three types of beans, brassicas (kale, cauliflower, broccoli), potatoes, blueberries, onions, beets, chard, turnips, sweet corn, cucumbers, edamame, peas—the list is long and amazing in its variety. “Health comes from eating all the colors of the rainbow, which is why we grow different varieties of the same vegetable.”

Dick grows his produce organically, and he prefers to sell “to the people who eat the food” at the Granville and Westerville farmers markets. The exception: friends John and Kimberly Skaggs feature his beef at the Wexner Center’s Heirloom Café.

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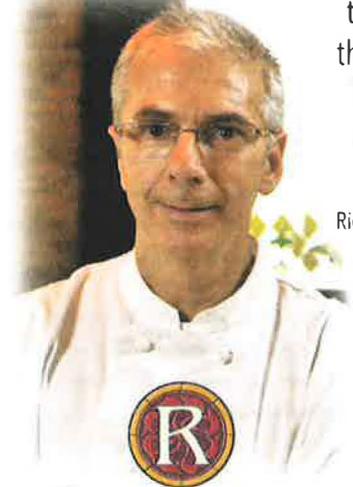
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Restoration and Experimentation

When Dick purchased the Flying J, it was "beaned out"—fields sucked dry of nutrients after years of soybean monoculture.

"Chemicals destroy the life in the soil—the worms, bugs, molds, fungus, mice that drill holes, leave castings. By allowing them to live, you restore the land." To that end, Dick plants cover crops like buckwheat (the neighbors' bees are delighted), rests his fields, rotates the pasturing of his cows, uses drip irrigation, and keeps woods and water cow-free

Another product of restoration is the lake, which was "totally algaed, ugly, and smelled." Dick first tried grass carp, then tried dragging out the algae mechanically. Only after he followed the Granville Feed Mill's recommendation to add a probiotic product to the lake to establish good bacteria did the water clear. Today it is stocked with largemouth bass for fishing.

Restoration extends even to the farm buildings. Dick remodeled and lives in the original farmhouse, once the John Denty residence (and mill). The present Farm Market building was "falling off its foundation and bowed in the middle," and once housed pot-bellied pigs. Hard work and the help of interns (see sidebar) accomplished miracles. Four years ago, snow collapsed the cow barn, since rebuilt on the same concrete pad. It now boasts a 48-panel solar array.

Dick strives to use what he has. The farm's fallen ash, oak, hickory, and sugar maple built the Lake Barn. Its windows are recycled and the cast-iron stove was purchased for a song at a farm sale. A windmill provides running water, the toilet composts, and solar panels deliver electricity.

The farm's 100 acres of managed woods fuel the outdoor furnace, which heats the house, the garden barn, the greenhouse, the water in the house year-round, the water in the barn when the solar panels are not working, and the biodiesel processing tank. Yes, Dick even produces biodiesel for his tractor, using waste vegetable oil from Dennison University's food services.

Restoring Community

But self-sufficiency is not insularity. Slow Food Columbus's annual Farm-to-Table Dinner is a seven-year Flying J staple. And each August, 20 Dennison University freshman enjoy a sustainable pre-orientation week at the Lake Barn, cooking outdoors and working on the farm. Likewise, high school seniors from The Graham School in Clintonville can opt to do their senior "walkabout" program here.

Dick also sponsors speakers and workshops on sustainability topics. And he especially wants to provide a place for city families to relax and learn about the rhythms of rural life through seasonal festivals: Maple Syrup, Mushroom Gathering, and Fall Fest.

In 2013, Dick planted hazel, hickory, and pecan trees along the Lake Garden, an experiment in permaculture, but also a gift for the future and an expression of his philosophy of restoration. "I believe that happiness and health comes from doing something for others that in no way, even for goodwill or politics, benefits you. That's why I planted the trees." 🌿

(Find out more from Farmer Dick at The Flying J Farm, 5329 Van Fossen Rd., Johnstown, Ohio 43031, 740-967-4030.
flyingjfarm.com. rjensen1942@embarqmail.com)



Clockwise from top right: Retired OSU professor Dick Jensen brought Flying J's fields back to life after years of soybean monoculture. Dick promotes a plant-based diet for health and wellness. Interns Robbie Winearls from Great Britain (left) and Marisa Smith from Texas enjoying some coffee before the long day at the farm begins. Flying J grows a variety of vegetables, encouraging a plant-based diet. "Chemicals destroy the life in the soil—the worms, bugs, molds, fungus, mice that drill holes, leave castings. By allowing them to live, you restore the land."

Restoring Global Community

"I had so much help from people when I moved out here," says farmer Dick Jensen of Flying J Farm. Like the farmer who sold him his original cows and calves. Like the Ohio Soil and Water Conservation Department, who not only advised him, but funded a high-tunnel greenhouse. And he has been happy to give back that help.

His interns, 50 of them since 1999, are vital to this philosophy. He chooses them from helpX.org [see below], and they come from around the globe, for weeks or months, providing new friends and farm help for Dick, and innumerable intangible benefits (and room and board) for the interns. Below, some of their thoughts.

Marissa from Texas, who ditched a traditional corporate job in Austin for travel and service: "It's been illuminating being on the farm and really, really connecting to where the food comes from, and how much work it is doing organic farming."

Robbie, a British student from Sussex University: "I wanted to be self-sufficient. I learned to drive a tractor, I did harvesting and marketing."

Xavier, a 40-year-old computer programmer from Barcelona: "It's hard, but it fills me up with happiness. This experience marks a before and after in my life."

HelpX.org describes itself as an "online listing of host organic farms, non-organic farms, farmstays, homestays, ranches, lodges, B&Bs, backpackers' hostels, and even sailing boats who invite volunteer helpers to stay with them short-term in exchange for food and accommodation."