This page: Courtney and Jacob Cowgill with their daughter Willa Anne at their farm near Conrad. They both grew up in central Montana and they returned to their roots to start an organic farm.
Facing page: Jacob harvests beets for the farm's CSA program.

LOCAL FARM TO NEIGHBOR'S TABLE

Couple returns to their rural roots to bring organic produce to Montana kitchens

STORY BY BETH JUDY
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‘You can’t mourn the loss of rural America if you do nothing to counteract it.’

Courtney Cowgill

In 2008, Courtney Lowery and Jacob Cowgill married in their late 20s, moved back to the area they were from, near Conrad, and started farming. A lot was riding on the move. Jacob, raised near Sand Coulee, didn’t grow up farming but became fascinated with it in graduate school at The University of Montana. He had worked on several farms and was eager to start his own.

Courtney’s story is a bit more complicated. She did grow up on a wheat and barley farm in nearby Dutton—and during her last year of college, in 2002, it failed. Her parents split in the process.

“I was reluctant to farm,” she says. “The ups and downs of commercial farming create a lot of stress. On a farm, home and work are connected. I was explicit about separating them.” She became a journalist and left Montana for several years. But she returned in 2005 to help start a business in Missoula, the online periodical *New West*. Rural issues in particular interested her—like the depopulation of small Montana towns. “I’d watched Dutton contract over the last 10 years,” she explains. “It’s sad. You can’t mourn the loss of rural America if you do nothing to counteract it.” While Jacob’s excitement about farming rekindled hers, Courtney’s desire to reinvigorate the place she was from gave his passion context.

The Cowgills’ enterprise, Prairie Heritage Farm, is three miles outside Conrad on land leased from Montana organic pioneer David Oien. I visited at harvest time, passing nothing but miles of conventionally grown wheat, the gold so blinding I scrambled for sunglasses. Huge farm equipment trundled along otherwise empty roads.

Like Oien’s farm, the Cowgills’ is organic. On Prairie Heritage’s roughly 15-acre footprint—tiny compared to surrounding vast tracts—a mixture of chickpeas, flint corn, wheat, and other crops wave in the breeze. More than 25 kinds of vegetables and herbs, 100 turkeys and six geese grow on another acre. From their small rented house in town, the Cowgills sell most of the farm’s produce through CSAs—community-supported agriculture programs. About 50 families in Conrad, Great Falls, Choteau and Augusta buy full or half weekly allotments of vegetables, giving the couple up-front capital, foreknowledge of how much to plant, and “at least a false sense of control,” Courtney quips.

The first year, they remember, everything was “fresh and new.”

This page: Courtney drops off vegetables at the Mountain Front Market in Choteau. The Cowgills do a weekly drop at the store for CSA members who live in the area. Facing page: Jacob starts his morning feeding his turkeys. The farm’s Thanksgiving CSA program provides shareholders with a turkey, onions, potatoes, winter squash and herbs.

"We didn't know what we were doing," Courtney laughs, but a slew of agricultural experiments, many successful, belie her words. Immediately, the couple began trialing 250 "heritage" or "ancient" varieties of wheat. "There are thousands of older varieties," Jacob explains. "They didn't get carried into modern agriculture, but they have valuable genetics." With names like Red Fife, Sonora and Blue Tinge, some grow taller than conventional wheat; others have handsome black seedheads. Some grew in this area in the past. The Cowgills are cultivating diversity, a tenet of organic farming. But growing heritage varieties of grain and also of vegetables and turkeys is a business decision. "It gives us a chance. We have to look for niche markets," they say, citing recent interest in such foods.

That first year, the couple worked every day of the week.

The second year, Courtney, pregnant, farmed until two weeks before delivering a daughter, Willa. From their 250 trial grains, they replanted 30. Jacob accepted a desk job to make ends meet. The couple started a Thanksgiving CSA, delivering turkeys and an array of vegetables to customers statewide, and a "grain-and-seed" CSA, whose members received 87 pounds of multiple varieties of lentils, wheat, barley and milk thistle, a liver detoxifier. "You don't have to bake bread to belong," Courtney explains. "Grain's amazing in salads, soups or as a rice substitute." Again, the focus on grains and seeds is strategic. Until they are milled, grains remain fresh, giving the Cowgills greater flexibility about where and when to sell.

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Last year, raising Willa along with crops and poultry was a whole new challenge. Jacob quit his job to farm full-time. To compensate, Courtney started working online, writing for a San Francisco-based media website. She still got to the farm, but with no good spot for Willa to nap, she felt lucky to make it twice a week. Instead, she took on more of the farm's home-based work—marketing, customer service and writing (two blogs and a weekly newsletter for CSA members, important for recipes for unusual produce). And the couple winnowed their grain trial down to eight varieties. Soon they'll be able to plant quantities large enough for mechanization. Until now, with many smaller crops, processes like planting, threshing, harvesting and cleaning required hand labor. "We're willing to do it," says Jacob. "That's one ▸

of our advantages." CSA volunteers, family and friends help when they can.

In 2011, Courtney reported, "We were better at stepping away one day a week. We don't want to burn out, physically or mentally."

Jacob stands among wilted, brown leaves. It's September 5, and frost the night before killed squash and other vegetables in their patch plus the buckwheat crop that was doing so well. "We expected 40 degrees; it was 32," he says. Suspicious, he had covered the squash before going home, but the covers blew off. The nearest weather station isn't close enough for exact predictions; Jacob wants his own digital station. Besides the sting of immediate losses, however, the frost highlights a bigger problem. Leasing land outside town, they "can't look out the window and see how things are doing," Jacob says. "Ultimately, living where we work, especially with a high-labor farm, is critical."

Despite her original wish to separate farm and family, Courtney agrees. Plus, she says, "We're craving permanence. Farming's a long-term thing. It's about building the soil, crop rotations every seven to nine years. It's funny to feel rootless." So they're looking to buy land and a house. But "there are fewer properties within a beginning farmer's reach," she says. Part of their problem is size. If they just grew vegetables, an acre or two would suffice, but grain requires about 100 acres—an odd, small parcel in their area. And houses on land that size are often priced too high for non-farmers. The couple has considered many solutions. Courtney laughs, remembering a singlewide trailer Jacob would have bought for $1,500 except "I began sobbing the minute we left." Another time, they almost bought 80 acres. "I know the pioneer women did it," Courtney continues, "but I couldn't see how we'd handle raising kids, building a homestead and a business and farming." They backed out. "Tenancy," she concludes—a problem she knows other young farmers face, too—"is something we're going to have to solve."

Small size has advantages, though. "Lack of land means lack of debt," Jacob points out. Also, "farms used to be this size," so the equipment the Cowgills need is still around—and cheap. Their combine cost $250. "It's a different realm from farmers around us. That's unique," he says, "and encouraging." Customer response is also encouraging. "We hear, 'How wonderful to eat a carrot you don't need to peel' and 'We love kale even though we thought we wouldn't.'"

"The thing about this system," says Courtney, "is food is special again—to be worked for and celebrated. It's not just convenience and efficiency. But it takes real commitment on both parts. It's a lot easier to go to the store, pick what you want, pay and walk out. And sometimes it's cheaper.

"Rural people want good food, too," she maintains. "In Conrad, we're not that far from the time when most food was cooked from scratch and preserved and cared for. Rural America is a natural place for a food movement." It's also natural because it's needed. Much of rural America, according to scholars, is a "food desert." Good food may grow there, but it's paradoxically hard for locals to get their hands

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Courtney Cowgill

on, to actually eat. The Cowgills aren't against modern agriculture. "Modern ag is Montana," Courtney says. "Shipping wheat overseas works because people there need it. Right now, we need farmers who can feed the world and also ones who can feed their neighbors."

"I think what the Cowgills are doing is great," says Jill Owen, owner of Choteau's Mountain Front Market, which sells Prairie Heritage produce. "I hope they can stay at it; I keep cheering them on. They sometimes get anxious, you know, being young and wanting things to happen quicker than they do."

Around Thanksgiving, I checked in with Courtney and Jacob again. Twelve guests were coming to help slaughter the turkeys, then the couple planned to drive the birds to CSA members around the state. It's important to meet their customers, the Cowgills say, "so they know where their food comes from and we know where it goes." In contrast, Courtney remembers, as a kid, "what we grew got put on a rail car and shipped we didn't know where. We took the price the elevator was giving. The loss of control hit farmers hard."

Still, thinking of the task ahead exhausted her—the butchering, which invariably coincides with frigid temperatures, the intensive hosting and feeding of workers, the grueling road trip in iffy weather. "By the time all that's done," Courtney explained in an e-mail, "all we can do is slump on the couch and forget it's Thanksgiving."

But afterwards, she admitted the turkey-killing weekend was wonderful. "It's a terrible task, but it's community-building. It's a real Thanksgiving atmosphere. There's great food and music—we had a fiddle player and a concert cellist who were complete strangers when they arrived." And she and Jacob made a point of sitting down and enjoying the food they had grown. "Too often we're working so hard for other people's food, we don't get to enjoy it ourselves."

Theirs is not the typical American Thanksgiving. Fortunately, Courtney says, "I feel Thanksgiving many times a year. We feel it in spurts." And that weekend before—its gathering of community, good food, music—"made us feel maybe we're on the right track after all." **M**

Beth Judy is a regular contributor to *Montana Magazine*.

This page: Jacob gathers bins while harvesting produce for the farm's many CSA customers. Facing page: Courtney helps Jacob harvest rows of garlic at the end of summer on their Prairie Heritage Farm.