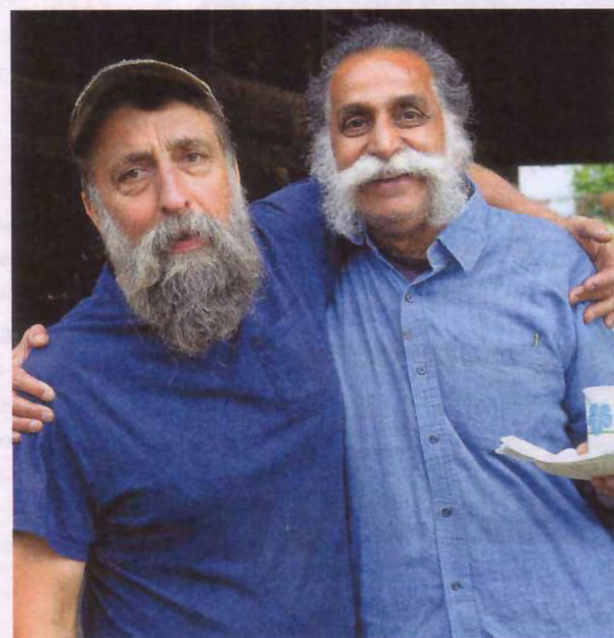




Photograph: Top left and top right, Michael Hartan Turkell. Bottom left, middle, and bottom right, Etienne Frossard

AGRARIAN IDOL

Ex-chef Ray Bradley excels in a (muddy) new field.

BY REGINA SCHRAMBLING

Lately the celebrity chef is starting to be supplanted by the celebrity farmer, to the point where “Agrarian Idol” will undoubtedly be headed soon to big screens in home kitchens everywhere. Ray Bradley would be the leading candidate for the premiere episode, but probably no one would scoff harder at the very notion. There could not be a farmer less likely to set boot on the set of a reality show.

Gruff and gray-bearded, he shows up from New Paltz at Grand Army Plaza on Saturdays looking as if he just finished picking his exquisite baby pattypanns and hyper-fragrant lemon verbena in a mud storm. To citified eyes, his cap appears encrusted with grime, his jeans could stand up on their own; if his T-shirt is still white everyone remarks on it.

But what he pulls out of his beat-up truck is as Greenmarket-famous as he is: a few dozen eggs from free-range chickens; exceptional pork, bacon and sausage from his Large Black pigs; mud-encrusted heads of hard-neck garlic; bunches of tulips or hydrangeas, and an ever-changing array of rough-looking, intense-tasting vegetables, herbs and berries. Every year he adds more, whether honey or chestnuts or preserves he makes himself.

Unlike so many farmers in the food pages and glossy magazines who boast of planting baby beets to order for top chefs, Bradley grows only what he likes to eat. And while he counts the likes of Dan Barber among his clients, he caters to cooks who do all the sourcing and sautéing themselves, without a cast of thousands. He can advise anyone on what to do with his sorrel or fava beans or pork ribs. As he puts it: “I cook the shit myself.”

Given his un-*GQ* grooming and no-words-wasted attitude, Bradley, 58, is the unlikeliest choice to be the George Clooney of the Greenmarkets, but he has no end of groupies. Those who know only his produce and products gravitate to his funky stand for unlikely perfection—his torpedo shallots look like something the barn cat dragged in but have phenomenal flavor; his legendary heirloom tomatoes are equal parts misshapen and sublime. Those

who want to claim an inside connection will sidle up and tell other shoppers: “You know he was a chef at Bouley....” Plus I’ve met more than one woman who fantasized about moving to the country with this dusty diamond in the rough and been devastated to learn he’s in a long-term relationship, with a Tribeca dweller.

Bradley shuns the mobs at Union Square, instead selling at Grand Army Plaza and a Friday market on West 97th Street in Manhattan. He spurns the white tents and plastic tables that are ubiquitous at Greenmarkets, preferring to set his jewels out on wooden tables and bins with chalked prices on marble slates. He follows organic farming methods but no longer bothers to jump through hoops for the certification that would permit him to use the “O” word (although some of my friends call him “the organic guy” because he looks the part).

And Bradley is not interested in competing with everyone harvesting either predictable corn or trendy pea shoots. He sells one variety of potatoes—Carola—because those are his favorite. He will have haricots verts when every other stall is heaped high with plebeian green beans, the most delicate bunches of lettuce when romaine is busting out all over, callaloo before neighboring stands have spinach. He gets \$8 a pound for those shallots, and no complaints about the price. (As one of my neighbors gushed, “Oh, they’ll change your life.”) And his garlic is famous not just for its fat, easy-to-peel cloves and balanced flavor but because so many of his patrons pitched in to help harvest it when he first started growing it.

Bradley’s heirloom tomatoes also have a cult following, for good reason: In peak season he’ll have them in a rainbow of colors, from green to yellow to almost purple-red, laid out on tables like Elizabeth Taylor-sized gemstones. He grows them huge and sweet for slicing raw but also cultivates plum types for cooking and tiny husk tomatoes, or ground cherries, that he seduces shoppers into buying by offering tastes.

His connections with his followers are almost organic. An art-

Bradley’s exceptional pork and rough-looking, intense-tasting produce are almost as beloved as he is. Hardeep Maharawal was a regular until Bradley asked him to help at the stand; the two are believed to have the most awesome facial hair in the entire Greenmarket network.

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Photographs: Etienne Frossard

ist who lives on the Upper West Side, Anne Watkins, painted the watercolors that adorn his barn and hang under his canopy in Brooklyn, depicting his chickens and pigs and his black dog, Gracie. His right-hand man at markets, the charismatic Hardeep Maharawal, was a regular at Grand Army Plaza until Bradley asked him to come to work; the two are believed to have the most awesome facial hair in the Greenmarket network. (The rest of the week the mustachioed Indian works at an accounting firm in Midtown.)

More recently, some of his younger devotees have been working on turning him into a cyber-star, in return for pork and potatoes. Heather and Brad Thomason of the Bad Feather design firm, who are also regulars at Grand Army Plaza, somehow persuaded this digital Neanderthal to let them design a logo and a Web site and maintain an e-mail list to alert customers to what he'll be bringing to market. To get the information from a guy who wears no watch and owns no computer and even resists the telephone (he has one in his greenhouse), they say they almost need to communicate by smoke signals. Or at least through "the lady I'm with," Iris Kimberg, who ran a network of physical therapy clinics before selling them for a major profit and who clearly knows from marketing.

This year he is selling pureed winter squash he cooked and froze to prolong the season; before that he started drying peppers to make highly regarded paprika and turning his strawberries into jam and his cucumbers into pickles. This summer he is staging a series of farm-to-table dinners at his spread in New Paltz for 40 people at a time, with wines paired by his friend Daniel Johnnes of Daniel Boulud's restaurant group.

Bradley acceded to all this uncharacteristic 21st-century promotion because "I'm barely keeping my head above water." Adding to the costs of planting, cultivating and harvesting his many crops is the huge load of getting them to market: gas, insurance, market fees. And that was especially true after the fungus that wiped out nearly his entire tomato crop two summers ago. He scrambled to plant alternative crops while his cadre of Samaritans designed buttons with his uncharacteristically smiling face on them to sell, although they could not make up for those fields of lost income—or combat his impulse to just hand the buttons out.

As old friend Mara Peteritas, the graphic designer at Bouley, says: "There are not too many people like him. He wants nothing to do with commercial success—he would give food away." (A writer friend of mine confessed that he kept her fed during a recent barren patch in the freelance life.)

Both the \$55-a-head (\$75 with wine) farm dinners and his growing line of paprika and pickles are a return to cooking. Bradley and "Dave" Bouley grew up together in Connecticut; his early jobs in food included dishwashing and scooping ice cream. He went to forestry school, but in 1976 moved to Florida with a friend who was a sous-chef and got a job peeling carrots; when the fry cook was fired, Bradley was promoted. He cooked on



Furry farmhand. Bradley's dog Gracie, above, rides down with him to sell at the Prospect Park Greenmarket each Saturday.

Shelter Island and at the Polo in Manhattan with Bouley, Thomas Keller and Daniel Boulud before teaming up with Bouley at Drew Nieporent's Montrachet in Tribeca in 1985.

The restaurant got wild reviews right away. Then, Bradley recalls, "Bouley wanted his own place, and Drew found out and canned everybody." So Bradley went on to help build Bouley's eponymous restaurant, but he vowed: "If this thing turns out like every other restaurant—day in, day out—I'm gonna find something else. I wanted to start my own business growing stuff." He first grew herbs on land in Connecticut, started growing more with a Hudson Valley native named Frank Wilklow (whose brother, Fred, is a star of many Brooklyn Greenmarkets), moved to Costa Rica for a bit and then met Kimberg, who suggested he work for himself.

After a couple of stops and starts, he planted himself near New Paltz on rented acreage and, in 2000, bought his current spread, complete with a falling-down barn. Today the farm looks like him, or at least like one of those carefully calculated wildflower gardens. There is order in the rows of beans, tomatoes, carrots, shallots and hydrangeas, but compared with the precisely squared-off and manicured fields you see from 30,000 feet in flyover country, the place could pass for an overgrown field.

Even the recently renovated barn looks not quite ready for the *Times Magazine*. He is barn-proud of its new wood and a fresh paint job and that kitchen for canning, but it is clearly a workspace. It does, however, house a sort of wall of fame just inside the entrance, a narrow alcove hung with framed profiles of him from newspapers and magazines. (It seems odd for him to store his mementoes so exposed to the Hudson Valley elements, until he volunteers that he's a former hoarder who lost it all to arson several years ago, not only personal belongings but restaurant equipment he could really use today. "Now I don't save nothin'," he says wryly.)



The farm is just a few minutes' drive from downtown New Paltz, a serious tourist stop on the Hudson River. There he takes in cats that would otherwise be euthanized by the local vet and raises chickens only for eggs (don't think about the pigs). His three Mexican farmhands live in a big new trailer he bought for them and head home in November for the winter. He himself "used to quit by Christmas; now I've gotta keep the place going—I can't stop for a couple of months or I won't survive."

He lives nearby. When Iris Kimberg comes up from the city, he cooks and she washes dishes. And what's on the menu? "Mostly meat and potatoes, scallops, pasta." For seafood, he barter with his friends Alex and Stephanie Villani at Blue Moon, who also sell at Grand Army Plaza.

On Fridays and Saturdays he's up at 2:30, has the truck loaded by 3:30 and is on the road in time to pull into the city by 5:30. Each day he will turn around and drive all the way back. His routine is well known among his regulars. "Whenever I'm getting ready to go to bed, I remember Ray's just getting up," says Jeff Zoldan, an office furniture dealer in Brooklyn for whom Bradley recently revived his forestry-school skills in chopping up a fallen tree.

Despite how scruffy he looks, watch him for a couple of hours and you see what a savvy stylist he is, constantly arranging and tidying. Bundles of gorgeous baby lettuces are laid out in his polished wood bins only a few at a time, the rest kept chilled and crisp in coolers. His signs are all chalk on old roof tiles from his stonemason grandfather's roof (the front is one season, the back another). And his esthetics are subtle: Other stands may be selling sunflowers, but from dirty plastic buckets. His are in galvanized tin

Barn again. Bradley cooked with David Bouley, Thomas Keller and Daniel Boulud but traded his toque for a farm near New Paltz. This summer he'll host a dinner series there.

buckets, with only a few bunches at a time on display.

Among chefs, Anna Klinger of Al di Là is a regular, and others buy Bradley's pigs' feet and hearts. But while restaurants are his past, he avoids making them his livelihood.

"Restaurants don't pay," he says. "They all want 30 days, 60 days. You gotta have people to keep on 'em." And the profit margins for chefs would be rather slim on produce priced as high as he needs to sell it.

So he spends his time advising how to use hyssop (in pastis) or answering a question about which of his four types of cucumbers are good in salad ("I like to use them all"). Bradley tells one man to use garlic scapes to make pesto and nods approvingly when he responds: "I grill 'em."

As Heather Thomason says, "Everyone wants to talk about food because Ray was a chef. Everyone wants to know the chef who's a farmer."

For all that "Top Soil" cachet, though, it comes down to what he sells. A neighboring vendor who may remain anonymous put it well, "He's just like his vegetables: all crusty and dirty on the outside, but you cut them open and they're amazing." ●

Regina Schrambling is a longtime food writer in Manhattan who bought from Ray Bradley for donkey's years before getting to know him. He finally broke the ice after taking pity during the tomato season she spent coming to the market on crutches.