



The Hunt Family Farm

Getting it right
for six generations

by Matt Kelly

Throughout their 175 years on the land, the Hunts have built a rich history of perseverance, stewardship and innovation—while helping to define the core values of local organic farming.

In 1840 the Hunt family first put down roots in a hillside on the west bank of Keuka Lake. It was exactly the kind of farm you'd find drawn with pen and ink in an Eric Sloane book. The family began clearing the land and built a log cabin as their home. They had a few cows, some pigs, sheep and chickens. They had small mixed orchards and planted a wide variety of crops: small fields of hay, oats, wheat, beans, barley, buckwheat, rye and corn. They had a large garden.

And then the fire happened. It destroyed the cabin and everything they owned except for a clock and a small black walnut tray. But the Hunts still had their lives and their land.

Today that same spot of earth is covered by six acres of grapes being grown organically. The farm is now 170 acres and includes 40 total acres of grapes, 26 acres of organically grown vegetables, a winery that produces 20 different varieties, a wind turbine, a geothermal system, forest-grown mushrooms and 200 meat birds.

It's the work of six generations of Hunts who knew how to handle change and care for the land upon which they've built their lives.

The Grapes and Wine: Art and Joyce

In 1973, Art and Joyce Hunt moved back to Art's family farm. The land was being minimally maintained by Art's elderly uncle, Norman, and a single hired hand. The cows had long ago been sold off. There were just 18 acres of Concord and Niagara grapes. Norman was thrilled to have another generation who wanted to move back and help. But Art and Joyce knew little to nothing about running a farm.

"Both my uncle and the hired hand were excellent teachers," says Art. He and Joyce learned how to plant and grow a wide variety of grains and dry beans. They started a garden for themselves, with both vegetables and fruit. They learned to cut down trees for wood and handle all of the old farm tools laying around. "I became quite adept at restoring old buildings and old equipment."

Perhaps most importantly, Art and Joyce put nearly 50 acres of grapes into the ground, eventually selling them to the biggest wine producer in the area: the Taylor/Great Western Wine Company. Just like every other grower in the Finger Lakes.

But growing grapes isn't like growing cucumbers.

Opposite page (left to right): Hunt family members Caroline (with Amelia), Jon (with Will), Suzanne, Art, and Joyce.

Right: Caroline Boutard-Hunt putting cabbage into the ground with farm hand Shanna Fiorucci.

Below: Will helping Jon lay drip tape.

All photos by Matt Kelly

Grapes require an investment of time, energy, acreage and money over several years before they ever produce their first crop. A grower has to put all his eggs in one basket. So when Coca Cola bought Taylor/Great Western in 1977 and moved all of its operations to California, local grape growers were decimated: the local market for grapes completely vanished.

So Art and Joyce used the moment to learn yet another skill—wine making—and started a small farm winery. For years, Art made weekly trips down to New York City to sell their wine, helping to rebuild a market for Finger Lakes grapes and wines, one bottle at a time. Eventually, they turned the small farm winery into Hunt Country Vineyards.

They accomplished all of this while rehabilitating a dilapidated farmhouse with sagging ceilings and a family of raccoons inside, and starting a family of their own.

The Soil and Food: Jon and Caroline

In 2009, Jon Hunt—Art and Joyce’s son—returned to the family farm with Caroline Boutard-Hunt and started Italy Hill Produce. Which they had never planned to do.

“Jon and I both just really enjoy growing food,” says Caroline. They both also went to Cornell University for degrees in agriculture, and come from



farming families. “Our own vegetable garden kept getting bigger and bigger each year. We had to decide: do we scale back, or begin selling some of our crops?”

So they started selling: fresh market vegetables, potatoes, Concord grapes, grape juice, a local variety of popcorn, organically raised meat birds, mushrooms. Caroline sells their produce at the Canandaigua Farmers Market and through a weekly “subscription” service at the farm.

But the funny thing about organic growing is this: it’s not as much about the vegetables as it is about the soil. Caring for the soil in a way that makes it better than when you found it—better not just for you, but for everyone after you as well.

“Our major interest at this point is to promote the long-term viability of the soil, which is our most critical resource.” Jon says this as both a vegetable farmer and winemaker. Each of their vegetable fields is on a three-year rotation: covered for two years with a biomass producing cover crop and then tilled every third year for growing. It’s not a quick process for maximizing agricultural production.

“We’re not going anywhere,” says Caroline. “We’re totally focused on making the family land the best it can be.”

The Sun and Power: Suzanne

Just this summer, Suzanne Hunt—Art and Joyce’s middle daughter—came back home from Washington, D.C. She brought with her a decade’s worth of experience on environmental issues: founder of HuntGreen LLC, senior advisor to the Carbon War Room, project manager and lead author of the book *Biofuels for Transportation*, and a speedracer in zero-emissions road rallies across Norway and Central America. She has stories to tell. But there is one that’s particularly important to her right now.

“When the Chesapeake Energy Company wanted to dispose of fracking wastewater in Pulteney a few





Art and Jon Hunt working on a baler.

years back, it was a direct threat to my family's well-being and livelihood," says Suzanne. It was a threat to every farmer's way of life. "But you can't demand an end to gas drilling and dependence on fossil fuels if you don't replace those systems with something else. You have to fill the void with something that works."

So Suzanne is taking the family farm solar. "We're installing a roof-top system of over 300 panels that will allow us to be even more self-sufficient in our energy use."

She's also working the Finger Lakes like it's located inside the Beltway—creating the structure, the financing and the relationships needed to help every winery in our region go solar if they choose. Maybe every farm in our region, too. A bold strategy, for sure.

The Future and Change

Art thinks a lot about bold strategies and the impact of a changing climate on the future of the family's land. "We need to determine strategic moves now. If there's more drought, should we build more ponds? Which varieties of grapes will tolerate that? Should we strive to be more self-sufficient like our ancestors, or aim to produce specialty crops as part of a more connected system?"

Nothing can be taken for granted by the current or future generations of Hunt farmers.

"We definitely have a new generation coming up," says Caroline. "Our kids—Will and Mellie—and their cousins will all have the chance to become involved in the farm someday." But the Hunts want

this next generation to take on the farm through an honest choice, without pressure or expectations from those who came before. "It should be a privilege, not a burden."

"I hope whoever takes over after us is able to adapt the farm and make it a success," says Jon.

Because change is the only constant. Weather rolls in from the west, heavy clouds make you pause and wonder what's coming next. Rain keeps you from cutting and baling hay, strong rains knock it to the ground before you can even get to it. Balers break down and need fixing. Markets and consumers are fickle. Technology and tools are only as good as their users.

In the end, it's people that make a farm. It's people that determine exactly how fruitful this earth is allowed to be. Six generations of Hunts have gotten it right so far. And their story is far from over.

Matt Kelly is a writer living in the Finger Lakes. He works with Fruition Seeds in Naples, Small World Food in Rochester and Lakestone Family Farm in Farmington. Matt writes regularly at BoonieAdjacent.com.



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