

Changes Ahead for Town Government Town Supervisor and Two Town Councilpersons Announce They Will Not Run for New Terms

By Cathy Redlich

The simultaneous departures of Supervisor Art Bassin and Councilpersons David Boice and Hugh Clark, with 34 years of combined service to the town of Ancram, will significantly change the face of town government in 2024. It also sets the stage for party nominations of candidates to run for their vacated seats in the November 2023 election. Bassin is a registered Democrat; Boice a registered Republican; and Clark has no party affiliation.

As they look forward to completing their terms, all three reflected on their time in office and the accomplishments they view as most impactful.



Art Bassin has occupied a desk at Town Hall for 14 years as Ancram's town supervisor, but he now looks forward to helping his successor — whoever that might be — settle in.

Town Supervisor Bassin: "Developing a Vision for the Community"

Supervisor Bassin, who will have completed 14 years in office at the end of his term, took over the reins of town government in January 2010. The impetus to run was, in part, his experience as Chair of the Comprehensive Plan Committee, which over a three-year period developed a plan to guide Ancram's future, the bedrock of which was maintaining the town's rural character and protecting its environmental resources.

In 2009, the then board declined to adopt the plan until the town's 1972 zoning law was revised. Bassin thought this was not only wrongheaded, but inconsistent with guidance from NYS. As explained by Bassin, "New York State

advised communities that a comprehensive plan should be in place *before* a massive revision to the zoning law. That is the logical order." Moreover, "the plan reflected the input of over 450 residents and had bipartisan support." Unhappy with the board's action and determined to see the Comp Plan enacted, Bassin decided to throw his hat in the ring.

With the election of Bassin and a change in the makeup of the town board, the comprehensive plan was adopted in 2010. The knowledge Bassin had gained during the comp plan process as to the community's priorities ultimately served as the blueprint for his supervisorship. In 2019, the comp plan was once again revised to reflect the current will of the people.

Two other priorities were on the top of Bassin's to-do list: improved communications to spur community involvement, and financial discipline. The town email list, which began with 200 subscribers in 2010 now boasts 1150, or most town residents. And the Town News and other strategies to get the word out increased resident participation in town affairs. The creation of volunteer councils and committees inspired by the interests of community members followed — examples are the Conservation Advisory Council, the Financial Advisory Council, and the Agricultural Advisory Council. Hamlet planning groups were formed to address hamlet concerns.

Bassin also sought to instill strong financial discipline. The town tax bill, according to Bassin, has gone down \$200,000. The town has a surplus of 1.2 million, with \$750,000 always kept in reserve for expenditures that might otherwise require raising taxes, such as refurbishing the town pool. Bassin's

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We welcome your comments and suggestions. Send to Cathy Redlich at AncramTownNews@gmail.com

CHANGE AHEAD

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philosophy is simple: "Be careful to spend money on what we need for the community, and don't spend much on what we don't need."

Bassin's advice for the next supervisor? "Take care of your people. That is the most important thing any supervisor can do. Attract and cultivate good people, do not lose confidence in them, be patient and work with them to be better." Challenges ahead? "There are tough issues facing the town that will take years to resolve: attracting young families to our community, developing affordable housing, creating jobs, having a stable workforce. We are facing a much different economic environment looking forward five years. It will be tougher for the next supervisor than for me." What's next for Bassin? "Puttering around and playing with the dog! And helping the next supervisor if requested."

Councilperson Boice: "A Board Dedicated to Achieving Compromise"

Boice, who has been Ancram's Fire Chief for 35 years, joined the board in 2016. He ran for office, he explains, because "I have been involved in the town forever, and I am interested in the future of Ancram." Boice views the board's most important accomplishment during his tenure as its ability to work together for the betterment of the community. "In my view, the biggest achievement of the board was its dedication to achieving compromise," he says. "That enabled us to get many things done, even if we had differing views."

Looking to the future, Boice thinks the greatest challenge to town government will be "a board comprised of 50 percent new members, along with a new supervisor. I think there will be a dynamic change in the board after this election, a whole new structure. It will be very hard for awhile because Art has set a high bar." Boice would like to see more frequent interactions amongst board members outside of the monthly board meeting. "A lot of times," Boice notes, "we are asked to make a decision, but haven't had the

chance to discuss it sufficiently in advance before being forced to vote." Boice also is in favor of field trips if an upcoming vote could benefit from more information. "The five members of the board should be able to take a look and see the problems for themselves. We sometimes make decisions about things board members have never seen and know little about, like purchasing highway equipment or replacing culverts. Let's go and see what we are actually repairing or purchasing."

The lack of outside participation in town government by residents is a problem, Boice says, noting poor attendance at town board meetings. He is also concerned about the dramatically aging demographic of the town with people buying up houses and moving to Ancram permanently, creating a shortage of affordable housing for young families. Boice, who grew up in Ancram, remembers how different things were: "When I was going to school there were multiple buses to transport all the kids to school, and we fielded our own Little League team." Boice laments the fact that all communities in our rural area are dealing with losing young people who are needed to serve in positions such as our volunteer fire department and town government." What's next for Boice? With some hours freeing up, he looks forward to spending more time with family, while continuing to lead the volunteer fire department so critical to the town.

Councilperson Clark: "The Future Doesn't Just Happen"

Clark, who has served on the board since 2012, says he has "long operated on the principle that the future doesn't just happen; it is created by what we as individuals either do or don't do." Prior to running for office, Clark had been a member of the Comprehensive Plan Committee, and served for two years as Chair of the Zoning Revision Committee. At the time he decided to run, Clark "was heavily immersed in the town already, so I thought I might as well go all the way in setting the town's direction and aligning our resources to ensure the Comprehensive Plan was implemented." Clark says that he

"particularly liked the approach that Art Bassin took in the early days of his term, focusing on open dialogue between board members and the community, and understanding that improving the town is not a spectator sport but one that relies heavily on volunteers."

Clark describes himself as "the conscience of the town board" because of his insistence on "letting the sun shine in". He believes in strict adherence to "the letter and spirit" of NYS's Open Meeting law, which requires that "public business be performed in an open and public manner and that citizens...be able to attend and listen to the deliberations and decisions that go into the making of public policy." Pub. Off. Law § 100. Previously, according to Clark, "a lot got discussed behind closed doors", but during his time in office "there have been very few executive sessions, and only when governing law permits." Currently town board meetings are open to in-person attendance as well as attendance on ZOOM.

A hallmark of Clark's time in office has been his heavy involvement in revising the 1972 Zoning Law. He is particularly proud of the Ridgeline and Steep Slope Protection Overlay which "protects topographically prominent and scenically important ridgelines and steep slopes as part of the larger Comprehensive Plan objective to maintain and protect the rural, scenic character of the Town." Hugh emphasizes that the Comp Plan "has been and should continue to remain our North Star." He notes that it "is the one well-researched and well-developed document that reflects the will of the town. Everyone had the opportunity to participate both initially and again in 2019, and it is truly a consensus result."

Clark offers these words of advice for the new supervisor and town board: "Know the Comp Plan and implement it. Anybody who plays in town government doesn't necessarily have all the knowledge, experience and humility to ask the right questions. Under Art Bassin's management, we have consistently moved toward meeting town goals and keeping taxes low while maintaining a healthy reserve. The notion that every good thought requires a buck doesn't work. We don't have bucks enough for all of that! A proposal deserving of the bucks is one that rises above all competitors."

New Committee for Respectful Behavior Is Here to Help

By Cathy Redlich

Jaclyn Ryan, Co-chair along with Isalyn Connell of Ancram's newest committee, wants to make clear right away that the committee's core objective is to support and educate town employees and volunteers; it is not to wag a disapproving finger. "We are here for anyone needing guidance or advice surrounding conflict resolution, professionalism, or understanding the principles of DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion)." The formation of the CRB was initially recommended by the town attorney in response to some complaints related to behavior in town governance. Ryan says the seven committee members bring a wealth of relevant experience to the task, including backgrounds in corporate training and development, human resources, education, DEI, and leadership.

The committee's priority mission is to update the current NYS mandated training for town employees and volunteers, which is currently lagging well behind industry standards and fails to address issues that may well arise in our town. Ryan emphasizes that "often people are just unaware of what they can or cannot say in the workplace", so best-in-class training programs are key to bringing the town up to speed with larger towns, cities and businesses. The Committee is working now to find training providers, vet content, get cost quotes, and create a budget to present to the town board. "Better training benefits everyone," says Ryan. "For employees, it is good for career development, makes them more suitable for promotion, and more employable in general."

Code of Conduct

The Committee began by developing a Town of Ancram Code of Conduct, which has been added to the employee handbook. The Code applies to town employees, anyone holding a town office, volunteers engaged in town activities, and residents seeking town services. Its scope extends to activities taking place in town buildings, off-site locations where work is being performed, as well as at town-sponsored social events. The Code



and accompanying Incident Report can be found on the town website at:

<https://www.ancramny.org/manuals-policies-procedures/>

If You Believe the Code Has Been Violated

Formal reports of Code violations should be filed on the official CRB Incident Report and submitted to the Chair of the CRB by email at CRBChair@ancramny.org or dropped off in a sealed envelope addressed to the CRB at town hall. The CRB will notify in writing the person reported against of the allegations made against them, and will conduct a thorough, sensitive, and unbiased investigation to determine the report's validity. If the nature of the complaint so warrants, the CRB may ask the town board to authorize an outside investigator or other third party.

Ryan emphasizes that the report will be kept confidential to the extent possible, but notes that in an investigation involving personal interviews and hearings, and in order to ensure the rights of all parties, complete confidentiality cannot be assured. Reports may be filed anonymously, but says Ryan, "it will greatly hamper the committee's ability to be of assistance since follow-up questions are often needed to

proceed." If, however, the incident report pertains to something more general—for example, a claim that people with poor hearing are precluded from fully participating in town board meetings—the CRB could address the issue without needing to know the person's identity. And finally, informal inquiries to the CRB can be made by contacting the CRB chair.

What Happens After the Investigation?

The CRB itself has no disciplinary role or power. It serves as advisor to the town board and, when it has concluded its investigation, will submit a report and recommendations to the board. These recommendations can range from no action required, to additional training, to removal or suspension, but it will be up to the board to decide whether to adopt, reject or modify the CRB's advised course of action.

"What is most important for people to understand," says Ryan, "is that the CRB's objective is to help town employees and volunteers learn new skills that will help them negotiate the reality of the current workplace culture. We are here to ensure that no one feels distress coming to a town event, coming to work, or interacting with colleagues. As a town, we want to find out how we can do better."

Memorial Day 2023 Honors Ancram Veterans

Photography by B. Docktor

Ancram celebrated Memorial Day with its annual parade, a town tradition that brings out residents to enjoy the spring weather and greet neighbors and friends. Ancram photographer B. Docktor, a familiar presence at town events with her camera in hand, generously shared these images from the day.



Veteran Jim MacArthur, Ancram's former highway superintendent, pays his respects to the men and women who lost their lives serving in the U.S. military.



Volunteer Fire Department member Devon Ruegger with his son Devon Ryder Ruegger share a solemn moment.



The Taconic Hills Central School District Band provided music for the celebration.



Ancram Veteran Ron Van Tassel with fellow veteran Dave Silvernail seen behind



Friends and neighbors gather on the upper and lower porches of the historic Simon's General Store to view the Memorial Day parade. The restored store is now the home and studios of James Kennedy and Bob Bachler.



Ancram VFW members seated on a trailer lead the way as town residents line the parade route.

Ancram's Strategic Investment Committee Recommends, and Town Board Approves, Grants for Affordable Housing and the Ancram Opera House

By Bobbie Slonevsky

Will Weiss would never be mistaken for a leprechaun. Nonetheless, as chair of Ancram's recently formed Strategic Investment Committee (SIC), he and his committee members are charged with recommending to the town board uses for a substantial pot o' gold. Unlike those tiny Irish folk, though, they are happy to see the town's pot o' gold be distributed to benefit Ancram in ways big and small. Here's why.

Over the course of 2020 and 2021, the town saw its financial reserves increase dramatically. First, because Ancram's leadership and employees managed the town's revenues conscientiously and prudently. And, second, because so many more people spent time and money in Columbia County during the pandemic, thus generating unexpected sales tax revenue. So, what now?

Ancram's Financial Advisory Committee, a key player in overseeing the town's budgets and expenditures, came to the joyful conclusion that the level of cash reserves was way higher than needed. What's more, the committee suggested, some of it could be used for projects that would benefit the town. And so was born the SIC... to study the possibilities and recommend worthy goals.

Hard Work and Humor

Since January 2022, the group has met monthly. They have considered funding for many, many ideas, which seem to fall into two categories: those things that are needed and those that are desired. Or, in the whimsical description of the committee itself, they are looking to dispense *aspirin* to remedy a problem, and *vitamins* to improve what is already good.

An example of aspirin? The \$35,000 grant to further the cause of workforce housing. It's no secret that rents and home prices in our neighborhood have skyrocketed in the past few years. How can Ancram attract a stable workforce

for critical jobs like the highway department crew, or volunteer firefighters, if they can't afford a place to live?

The problem is complex. There is an Ancram Housing Committee that is exploring various options and may have uncovered a workable plan. In north-west Connecticut, some small towns have created a Housing Trust. This is a non-profit organization that can: (1) attract support from private individuals, either in the form of cash or property; (2) oversee residential design and construction; (3) establish below-market pricing; and (4) manage the process of applications and eligibility parameters.

With the Town Board's approval, \$35,000 has been allocated by SIC toward creation of an Ancram Housing Trust. While it may not be a big number, the thinking is that donors will feel more comfortable and perhaps more generous if they know there is a commitment from the town as well.

An example of vitamin therapy? The funding given to the Ancram Opera House. This theatrical hotspot is already in the midst of a \$750,000 campaign to upgrade its existing facility and renovate the house next door to create a much expanded Ancram Center for the Arts.

AOH runs a successful story-telling program for several grades of students at Taconic Hills middle school. Presently the program takes place at the school. AOH envisions the creation of a community room in the new house to accommodate teachers, parents, and students in the program, as well as for AOH's many other robust community programs. The cost of the room has been estimated at \$135,000. SIC recommended, and the Town Board approved, that the town put up half the money, \$67,500, while the remaining funds be raised privately.



Other Potential Awards on the Horizon

On the heel of these two awards, others are already under serious consideration. A dose of aspirin may be prescribed for additional solar generation of electricity, as well as for initial steps to improve a skimpy water supply.

Solar panels on the roof of the Town Hall now defray some of the town's cost of energy—but not all. What's more, the town will likely own more electric vehicles in the not-too-distant future. Solar panels on the roofs of the town garage and salt shed could provide needed electricity less expensively and more sustainably. And the timing couldn't be better. Through the recent federal infrastructure legislation, New York State is providing grants for localities' solar panel expansion—so Ancram's funding burden would be limited.

Less straightforward is the plight of some residents living in the center of the hamlet where Route 7 meets Route 82. Their water access is inadequate, but it is unclear how the town can help. SIC is developing a modest recommendation—pay a hydrogeologist to examine the data that have been collected and propose next steps.

Vitamin therapy is also still in the mix, but somewhat less explicit. The town owns a substantial amount of land that is utilized to a degree. The question is

might it be utilized more robustly? For example, the field behind Town Hall features a playground and is a haven for birds and pollinators. But could more be done? Blass Field, too, is the site of the town pool and summer camp. It gets tremendous patronage for six weeks. But would constructing a pavilion or a pickleball court serve a larger population and therefore heighten the area's vibe as the center of town?

More Brainstorming, More Benefits

SIC will continue to meet each month, continue to identify needs and wants, and continue to do the difficult job of prioritizing. Committee chair Weiss points out that the ideas laid out above have all come from the community and SIC remains open to suggestions from anyone as to how the town's discretionary funds can be leveraged for a better future. Drop off your proposal at the Town Hall or convey it through the Town Supervisor.

And what of the funding pool? Can it be expected to remain ample? Ancram residents' ability to pay their property taxes and the Ancram portion of Columbia County sales tax have held up in 2022 and 2023. Pandemic transplants to Columbia County are probably here to stay. And, in Weiss's opinion, even if the nation suffers some economic reversals, the county is likely to attract more second-home owners, retirees, work-from-home nomads, and visitors (*i.e.*, generating more sales tax). Good conditions for replenishing that pot o' gold.

Ancram's Strategic Investment Committee

- Will Weiss, *Chair*
- Carol Falcetti
- Suzan Flamm
- Steven Irving
- James Kennedy
- Steve Olyha
- Ann Rader
- Peter Scola

Why Landscapes are Never Done

An Interview with Ancram Landscape Architect Jamie Purinton

By Suzan Flamm



Dan Sternberg and Deb Cooper in Millerton wanted their house to blend with the surrounding meadow and be free of lawn maintenance. Purinton designed a magical landscape where meadows come right up to the house, patio and decks.

Ancram may be a small town, but it counts among its residents individuals who have used their time and exceptional skills for the betterment of our community. Jamie Purinton is an outstanding example. About six months ago, after serving as Chair of Ancram's Conservation Advisory Council for thirteen years, Jamie Purinton stepped down from that role. The Council, created by the Town Board in 2010, serves as an advisory body to Ancram, providing an environmental perspective on land-use proposals, comprehensive plans and stewardship of natural areas. Jane Meigs, a member of the group since its inception, has assumed the leadership position.

Town News met with Jamie at her home shortly before she resigned as chair to talk about her work as a sought-after landscape architect in the Hudson River Valley and about some of the Council's achievements during her tenure. During our conversation, which has been edited for length and clarity, we discussed why it helps to let a place speak before rushing to change it, how her work on the Council and as a landscape architect both draw on her

reverence for nature – and how her love of bluegrass music brought her to Ancram.

Jamie is the co-author with Matthew Potteiger of *Landscape Narratives: Design Practices for Telling Stories* and the editor of *Voices of the Land*, a volume of essays and photographs. Among other places, her work can be seen at the Mountain Top Arboretum Rain Gardens and Education Center in Tannersville, NY.

Q: Can you tell us something about landscape architecture?

Sure. Landscape architects work on a range of projects, including small properties and campuses, and town and regional planning. It's about designing space, evaluating a location, sometimes collaborating with an architect to site buildings while taking the environment, weather, drainage and existing natural resources into account. What's already there – streams, wetlands, forests that need protection? Are there invasives in the landscape or are you lucky and it's never been disturbed so you have an intact native plant community? If the

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Jamie Purinton, landscape designer, musician, author, and Ancram volunteer extraordinaire is guided in her work by the principle of "doing the right thing for the land."

LANDSCAPES

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job involves a new structure, my goal is to site it so there's as little impact as possible on the environment. I nudge people to think not just of themselves, but of the community around them. Maybe a new house can be placed down from a ridge, or the color can be softened to lessen the impact. And, if possible, it's good to slow down, take stock of what you have, let a place speak to you while you camp there for a while.

I work for people and serve their needs, but I'm working for the environment at the same time. Happy to work for the birds. I come from a family of conservationists and was a little environmentalist at a young age. My parents taught me to serve others, to make the world a better place.

Q: What's a basic day like for you? For example, today?

In the morning I walked a field so I can design interesting pathways to be bush-hogged, and I marked some trails. Then I had to go to a different job to meet a mason to lay out walkways and steps, and to talk with the fence installer about the gate. After that I went to a site where 80 trees and shrubs were being planted. I laid out some native shrubs along a stream, and the plants for an herb garden. Then I went to another job and met with the excavator about the layout for an entry to a new parking area. I have good working relationships with a lot of very capable people. A good team is key. I draw plans and make many decisions in the

field, but I need talented gardeners, masons and builders to work together and execute on plans.

Q: Is there a site you've worked on that was particularly meaningful to you?

The new educational center at the Mountain Top Arboretum in Tannersville, in the Catskills. The structure includes wood from twenty-one trees sourced at the arboretum itself. We put in gardens around the building to collect rainwater, filter it through plants, and allow it to seep back into the water table rather than all of it running into streams. It's beautiful and it serves a purpose. People see it and learn how they can create a rain garden on their own property with native plants.

I continue to consult on this job, like on many jobs, because landscapes are never done. Ever. They constantly evolve. For example, trees grow and create shade and now the environment and planting underneath has changed. I'm in a field where I'm constantly learning. There's an infinite amount to know.

Q: What's your dream job?

Any job can be a dream job. It can be little or big. It will be a good experience as long as I have a shared philosophy with the client and they're willing to learn about the environment and want to do the right thing for the land.

Q: Can you tell me about a landscape that you admire?

I love idiosyncratic landscapes that people create just by living in a place, vernacular landscapes that aren't super fancy. Just like a home that doesn't feel like a designer was there but feels like it came from the people living in the space. I like places that have a little soul; interesting, curious places that evolve because people are resourceful. We're in an environmental crisis and we have to act accordingly in using land. But I'm also very interested in where people come from, what has meaning to them, what they like the smell of. I want to know what happened in a place because we may want to reveal that. Was there an Indian settlement here, or an old homestead? Can we keep any vestiges of that? Places evolve because of interesting people or events that happen there.

Q: A "curious place with soul." That sounds like the landscape around your home. Thanks for the tour by the way.

You're welcome.

Q: It seems that your volunteer work on the Conservation Advisory Council and your professional work are both motivated by your love of the natural world. What are some of the things the Council has done during your tenure?

My volunteer work and my professional work are all motivated by my concern for

the environment and by my desire to serve that cause. The Council has been extremely busy since its inception, when I was first appointed Chair.

For example, we've educated residents about the benefits to birds and wildlife of delayed mowing in the fall, and of night lighting that's friendly to both people and wildlife and that doesn't pollute the sky. I think I'm most proud of the biodiversity map we created with Hudsonia [a NYS organization that protects the natural heritage and also trains environmentalists]. The map shows the significant habitats in our town, it shows what's precious. It was twenty years in the making and was a huge enrichment for the town and for my work life. It's posted on the Council's website and anyone can consult it before making changes to their property that might impact one of those habitats. It's available to the town's planning board to help guide their works. And it is an evolving document as more unique habitats are identified. The Council's webpage, at <https://www.ancramny.org/conservation-advisory-council/>, is very comprehensive and shows our work over the years. My time with the Council has been educational for me and I hope for others. That's important to me, educating others. I'm still on the Council as a member.

Q: Now tell me about the bass leaning against the wall

Before we moved to Ancram, my husband and I used to come here to attend the Grey Fox Bluegrass festival [now re-located in Oak Hill, NY]. The festival was a major event, on the beautiful Rothvoss farm, and we would camp on a hilltop and see all the beauty and it just sang to us. So we moved to Ancram in 1998. I play guitar and sing in the Bash Bish Bluegrass Band. Now I'm learning to play the bass.

Volunteers like Purinton make Ancram a very special place to live, but more volunteers are needed. Whether you are a full-time or part-time resident, your participation is critical.

Take a look at the committees listed on the town website and see if one interests you. Or email abassin@ancramny.org with questions about serving the town. And the Ancram Town News is always happy to welcome writers to our team!

SUMMER 2023 ANCRAM OPERA HOUSE

June 24 - 7:30pm



AT HILLTOP BARN, ROELIFF JANSEN PARK,
9140 NY State Route 22, Hillsdale

July 9 - 4pm



AT ANCRAM OPERA HOUSE

July 15 - 7:30pm



AT HILLTOP BARN, ROELIFF JANSEN PARK,
9140 NY State Route 22, Hillsdale

July 22 - 7:30pm



AT THE CIRCA 1799 BARN
105 SIMONS ROAD, ANCRAMDAL

Aug 10-13 and Aug 17-20



SECRET LOCATIONS LOCATED NEAR
ANCRAM OPERA HOUSE

Little Forest Farm

Ancram Couple Ventures into Mushroom Production

By Susan Arterian



Julie McGanney and Frank Grisanzio have brought mushroom farming to Ancram. Among the varieties they grow outdoors are shiitakes (seen here), oyster, and comb tooth. Indoor-grown varieties include black pearl and lion's mane.

It's exciting to be learning a new style of farming that requires a longer-term perspective—to be thinking seven or nine years out, rather than the end of the growing season,” reports Julie McGanney, who, with husband Frank Grisanzio, own and operate Little Forest Farm, a mushroom farm nestled in eight wooded acres in Ancram.

Julie is a former speech therapist who was about to pursue a doctorate in her field when, ten years ago, she discovered farming. She followed her passion, first at a large-scale organic vegetable farm in Charlottesville, VA; then at the Queens Botanical Garden managing a one-acre educational farm; and most recently at Full Circus organic farm in Pine Plains. “I love being outside and working with interesting people on a crew,” says Julie, “And it’s so very tangible— you plant and you harvest.”

Frank is new to farming. He grew up in Southeastern Massachusetts, has degrees in English and creative writing, and worked for many years for the Authors Guild and the Authors Registry. While he has little time these days for writing and poetry reading, he is now enthusiastically applying his editing skills to weeding and invasives management, and to writing copy for the Little Forest Farm website.

Julie and Frank met in 2018 and had been living in Astoria, Queens. They were both ready for a quieter setting than the city, and their dream of keeping a homestead grew into a small farm. In 2019, they started looking for property around Columbia County, where Julie had spent time over the years. Within a few months, they fell in love with a log house on forested land on Cottontail Road, and by 2021, Little Forest Farm had begun operation.

The Challenge of Forest Farming

“Being in the woods, we knew the land wasn’t suited to growing vegetables on a large scale, so we had to learn how to forest farm,” says Julie. They have since been learning by doing and by taking courses and workshops on everything from chainsaw safety to mushroom cultivation. They’ve found advice, inspiration, and encouragement in places like Cornell’s Siuslaw Model Forest in Acra, which holds demonstrations of outdoor mushroom production, and Hortus Arboretum and Botanical Gardens in Stone Ridge, which grows many rare and fascinating plants, including cold-hardy fruit and nut trees. They also worked with the Columbia Economic Development Corporation, which helped them draft a business plan and encouraged them to focus on mushrooms as a niche market.

Going into their spring 2023 season, Julie and Frank have fenced in a patch of 80 blueberry bushes, two beds of strawberries, and a variety of vegetables. Their mushroom laying yard holds about 200 shiitake logs that are fruited in weekly batches, alongside oyster and comb tooth mushrooms that are cultivated in stationary totems and stumps. Inside their new indoor growing shed are housed a variety of mushrooms, some of which can be difficult to grow outdoors, including black pearl, lion's mane, pioppino, and chestnut, a crunchy, nutty mushroom that's adorned with soft, white spikes.

To create space for a planned grove of shade tolerant fruit and nut trees, they regenerated a portion of their woodlands in consultation with Annabel Roberts-McMichael of Tend & Gather and Trevor Roush of Foliage Forestry.

Wisdom for Aspiring Farmers

Julie and Frank offer this advice to aspiring farmers: "Talk shop with other farmers; see how other farms operate; get experience working on someone else's farm; and seek out encouraging advice. Farmers are generous about sharing knowledge, about both farming and the business of running a farm."

You can purchase Little Forest mushrooms locally at Chaseholm Farm on Chase Road, or at Little Forest Farm's stand at the Millbrook Farmer's market on Saturdays from 9AM to 1PM.

Frank has shared this recipe that features one of the mushrooms they'll be selling at the Saturday Millbrook market.



After a year in the shade, the logs are soaked in water for 24 hours, and within a week or two, fruiting begins.



These logs have been inoculated by drilling and filling holes with shiitake spawn, after which the holes are waxed over. The logs will then sit in the shade for about a year before being ready to fruit.

Frank's Recipe for Black Pearls in Butter-Lemon Sauce

Black pearls, aka black king trumpets, are a hybrid oyster mushroom that are similar to king trumpets (which you could also use for this recipe). They have large meaty stems and small caps, both of which are edible and delicious. They are best pan-seared and pair beautifully with flavors you might use when cooking seafood (e.g., lemon, garlic, and butter).

This recipe works well in an enameled cast-iron skillet, but any non-stick will do the trick. Eat these with a grain of your choice or fresh bread, on top of pasta with extra butter, or with a side salad. Enjoy!

Ingredients

- ½ lb black pearl mushrooms, cut into bite-sized pieces or medallions
- Olive oil
- Salt
- Black pepper
- Paprika
- 1 tbsp butter
- 3 cloves minced garlic

- Juice of ½ lemon
- 2 tbsp parsley, roughly chopped (or other leafy herb, like basil)

Instructions

1. Toss mushrooms with just enough olive oil to lightly coat.
2. Season mushrooms with salt, black pepper, and paprika.
3. Preheat skillet over medium-low. Oil pan with thin layer of olive oil.
4. Add the mushrooms to the hot skillet.
5. Cook without moving the mushrooms for around 2-3 minutes until they get a golden brown sear.
6. Toss mushrooms and let sit again for 2-3 minutes to get another side seared. When golden, toss mushrooms and stir occasionally until mushrooms start releasing water and become tender. Push mushrooms to one side of the pan.
7. Turn down heat. Add butter and garlic to the empty side of the pan. Cook until garlic is fragrant, about 1 min.
8. Turn off the heat. Add parsley and lemon juice. Mix with butter. Toss mushrooms in the sauce.

**Town of
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Historic Farming Community Moving Forward



Spring in Ancram brings new life to farms, fields, and home gardens. Photo by B. Docktor.