



TRACEABILITY HIGH ALTITUDE AGRICULTURE

Farming above the street tree line.

BY SASKIA CORNES

GREENPOINT—Not many farms have downstairs neighbors, much less a million-dollar view over the Midtown skyline, but Ben Flanner and Annie Novak, the 20-something farmers of the Eagle Street Rooftop Farm, are redefining *urban farming*.

Flanner, a former e-trade marketing manager with exactly zero experience farming, spent the winter devouring books about sustainable agriculture and plotting an escape from his office job. He considered leaving New York for a full-time farm apprenticeship, but became even more taken with idea of creating his own farm experience in the abundant open space between Brooklyn and the sky.

So he cold-called Lisa and Chris Goode, owners of Goode Green, a Manhattan-based green roofing company, after he saw their 6,000-square-foot, two-story rooftop garden in a glossy magazine. Would they be interested in starting a partnership to build green roofs with summer squash instead of sedums, livestock instead of lawns? The Goodes, fresh from an Outstanding in the Field dinner and inspired by Jim Denevan's work connecting diners to farmers, were perfectly primed for just such an offer.

"We were thinking almost the exact same thing," recalls Chris. "I was sort of skeptical that Ben had no experience. But he had a plan, a model of how to do this and actually break even or make money. This wasn't about public policy, this was about a business plan."

Once Flanner found Annie Novak, an experienced farmer and

gardener—and children's gardening programming director at the New York Botanical Garden—the rest came together in less time than it takes to grow a carrot. The four partners met in January and by March a crane was lifting 200,000 pounds of soil onto the roof of a stage-and-lighting company on a desolate stretch of Greenpoint.

It hadn't taken much for the Goodes to convince Tony Argento to be part of the experiment—owner of Broadway Stages, he had contacted them about installing a green roof on the warehouse. For about the same cost, and with the same benefits—reduced heating and cooling costs due to the insulating effects of roof gardens, and bigger-picture ecological benefits like the reduction of storm water run-off and CO₂ absorption—he could watch a 6,000-square-foot farm spring up three stories above the street, and eat the freshest imaginable baby greens, eggplants and heirloom tomatoes.

Instead of their usual purchase of wildflower mixes and drought-tolerant plants, the Goodes gave that portion of the budget over to Flanner and Novak, who used it to buy vegetable seeds and set up an irrigation system (and a scarecrow). They sculpted lightweight green-roofing medium and compost into agricultural rows, planted over 30 kinds of vegetables, from rainbow chard to Freckles lettuce, and now sell their harvest to Marlow & Sons and Anella, with plans to expand delivery service "anywhere we can get to on a bike without stressing ourselves," says Novak. (Hops scrambling up a brick wall are even earmarked for Sixpoints.)



Airy Acreage: Eagle Street Rooftop Farm came together in less time than it takes to grow a carrot.

So the Goodes got a new client, Argento got a green roof and some great grub and Flanner and Novak get two things most young farmers can only dream of: space to farm with no start-up costs, and neighbors eager to buy their harvest.

Flanner and Novak estimate that they'll be lucky to make \$6,000 this summer—not exactly a living. "In a practical sense, we'd like to make money," admits Novak. Turning a real profit, she says, would "make it a lot easier for Ben to keep doing this, for people to want to keep going with this initiative. And I think it could work. We're growing great stuff and we're growing a lot of it."

"We want to see green roofs everywhere," she continues, "and it's not just me and Ben and Chris and Lisa making this effort—it's loads of people, who have all kinds of jobs. Last weekend we had over 60 people volunteer. So many people are well-intentioned, and when they get well-informed, that's what's really going to push this forward."

Other Goode clients have expressed interest in getting rooftop farms, and although the first season is still unfolding, it's clearly not pie in the sky.

"It's an experiment," says Flanner. "Maybe it's viable. Maybe someday we could have six fields like this one in rotation, five with crops and one that's fallow, with chickens on it. Who knows?"

As the saying goes, if you can make it here, you can make it anywhere. ●

Eagle Street Rooftop Farm, at the corner of Eagle and West Streets in Greenpoint, welcomes volunteers most Sundays, 9–5. Contact rooftopfarmer@gmail.com.

Saskia Cornes writes about food and farming in 17th century England and 21st century New York. She's really looking forward to this season's peaches.

Photograph: Matthew LaBarbera

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