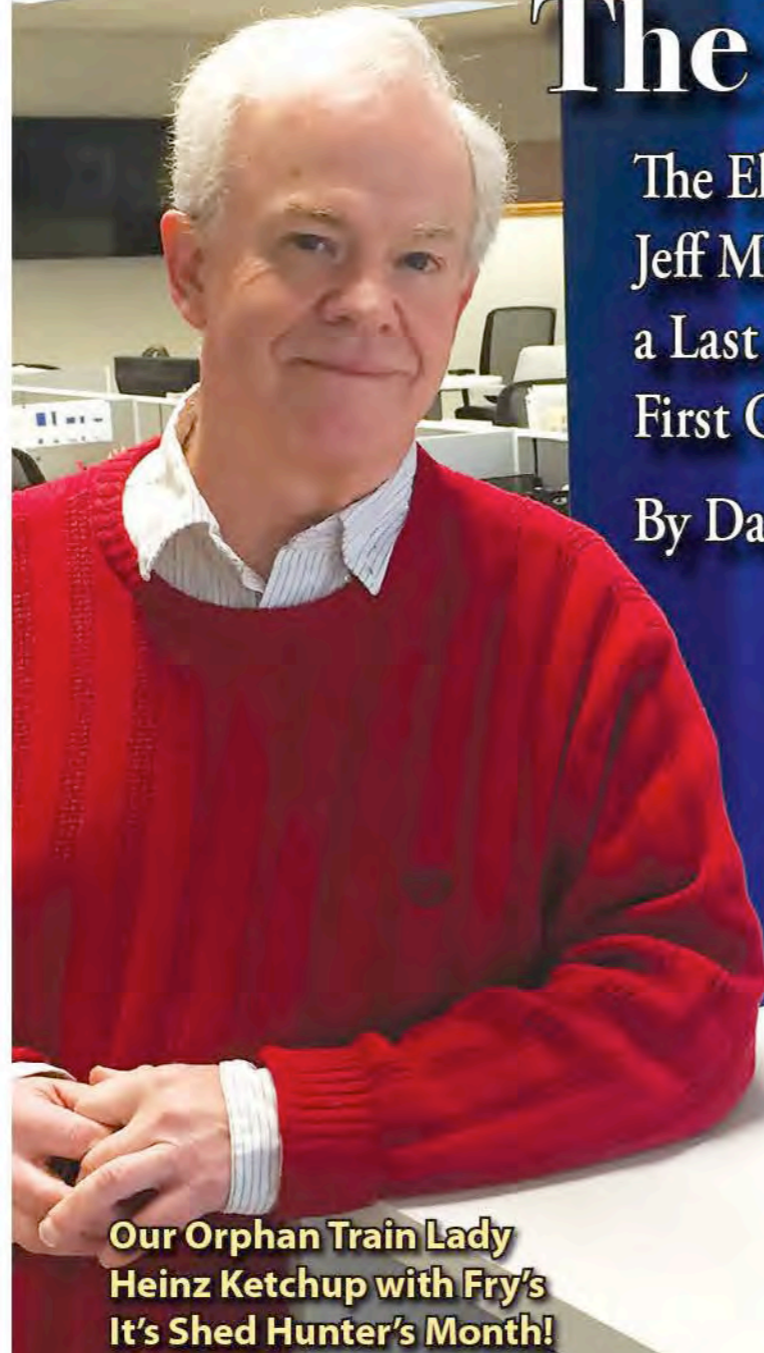


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The Last Reporter

The Elmira *Star-Gazette's*
Jeff Murray Makes
a Last Stand at the
First Gannett Newspaper
By David O'Reilly



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MARCH 2020

The Last Reporter

The Elmira *Star-Gazette's* Jeff Murray Makes a Last Stand at the First Gannett Newspaper

By David O'Reilly

After he makes the coffee and feeds his hunting dogs Malibu, R.J., and Ivy, newspaper reporter Jeff Murray starts his workday around 7 a.m.

Pen in hand, he flips on the TV, toggling between Elmira's two local stations for word of overnight fires, crimes, or car crashes. Then he pops open his laptop and skims through his emails for anything he might need to "jump on" straight from home.

If nothing's going on, he kisses his wife, Carol, goodbye and drives ten minutes to his newsroom, housed since 2015 in a one-story building on E. Church Street across from Elmira City Hall. Emblazoned across the office's plate glass windows are the words *STAR-GAZETTE*. Since 1907, that's been the name for news in this historic city.

In bygone days its sprawling newsroom in the old Baldwin Street headquarters never slept. But when Jeff, sixty-one, unlocks the rear door and steps inside around 8:15, it is he who flips the lights on each day to bring the paper to life.

He's the only news reporter left at Elmira's only daily newspaper.

"I'm the everything guy," he says with a rueful smile as he sweeps a hand around the modern blue-and-gray newsroom. Twenty-eight empty desks gaze back. Once humming with reporters, editors,

photographers, and advertising salespeople, the room is empty—save for the short, gray-haired "everything guy" in the rumpled red sweater.

This month marks Jeff's twenty-fifth anniversary with the *Star-Gazette*, the very first newspaper in the giant Gannett chain. And nowadays it's up to him to cover this city of 30,000 people while keeping an eye on the rest of Chemung County—and pleasing bosses he rarely sees.

"Yeah," he admits. "It's kinda lonely."

His editors are in Binghamton and communicate with him via interoffice texts. The pages are laid out at Gannett facilities in New Jersey or Arizona, and the paper is printed in Rochester. "But I'm a gregarious, friendly guy," he says. "I'm used to working in a newsroom with a couple of dozen people, with lots of noise and activity going on." Gone are the pizzas on election nights, the holiday parties, the friendships. "I do miss that," he admits.

Today the *Star-Gazette* has a daily print circulation of little more than 6,000, down from 17,000 a decade ago and 32,000 in 1997. Sunday circulation has tumbled, meanwhile, from 45,000 to 9,500. With so many people getting news, opinion, and entertainment for free online, plummeting readership has squeezed nearly every daily and weekly newspaper in the nation—

sometimes fatally.

More than 2,000 newspapers have shuttered their doors since 2004 as the car dealerships, department stores, supermarkets, and jewelry shops whose advertising sustained them for more than a century began following readers to the Internet. There they can reach targeted audiences, mostly through Google search or Facebook: the "duopoly" that dominates online advertising. For nearly a century newspapers in the "golden age" of print journalism—*Star-Gazette* included—enjoyed a local monopoly, charged handsomely to advertise in their pages, and made millionaires of their owners.

Alas, those bygone profit margins of 20 and 30 percent are what paid for the army of reporters who profiled the new football coach at your kids' high school, reviewed the community theater's production of *Guys and Dolls*, described last night's thrilling stickup at the gas station, sat through a crushingly dull late-night council meeting to explain the latest tax hike, and grilled your county executive on why the new water treatment plant was a million dollars over budget. *All in one day.*

"When I started in March, 1995, the total staff [at the *Star-Gazette*] was about 250," Jeff recalls. "The office was on Baldwin

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David O'Reilly

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Reporter continued from page 7

Street and was huge. It took up a block and half. The press room was two stories, and we had the news, advertising, circulation, and human resources all in one building.

"In the news department we had at least ten reporters doing news in Elmira. Our bureau in Corning had two or three reporters, and we had another one in Wellsboro. We had part-time stringers all over the Twin Tiers, probably four or five editors, three full-time photographers and one part-time, and two graphic artists. (It's a measure of the *Star-Gazette's* influence that in 1968 it coined the now familiar term "Twin Tiers" to describe the border region of north-central Pennsylvania and south-central New York where it circulated.) We also had two opinion page editors, probably a half-dozen layout people, copy editors, five or six on the sports staff, and at least four in features. It was a full-service newsroom," he says, and also the paper of record, regularly filling out weekday editions of thirty-two pages and Sunday editions of eighty pages or more.

But Jeff also remembers "very well" the day the paper began cutting news staff.

"It was 2005. Our editor came out and announced that the most recently hired reporter had to be let go. She was practically in tears, and we were all in shock. We said 'No, no! We'll give up this, we'll give up that!' We had no idea this was just the beginning.

"Then, a year later, a couple of more people were let go and we were all looking over our shoulders, wondering 'Who's next? Will it be me? What will I do?'"

Several cubicles around him still bear evidence of his coworkers' abrupt departures. A calendar above one desk shows each day of 2017 crossed out with a red X—until February 11. The rest of the year is blank. At another sits an abandoned Canon Rebel SLR camera.

"I'd like to think I'm irreplaceable," Jeff jokes about his last-man-standing status, but there's a whiff of anxiety behind the smile. *Star-Gazette* employees were never unionized, he says, and seniority guarantees no job protection. "Somehow I just kept dodging the bullet. I don't know why."

His colleagues have a good idea. "Jeff always took on lots of assignments and never complained," explains George Osgood, who retired in 2008 after thirty-two years as the paper's Tioga County reporter based in Wellsboro. "He's workmanlike, objective, he covers the bases. He has the respect of everyone he works with."

The *Star-Gazette's* doors stay locked these days. The rare visitor must stand in bushes and rap on the front windows to be let in. "We used to have a receptionist," Jeff says. Still, he is not entirely alone here. At 11 a.m. most mornings, Gannett's regional print planner, Keith Kraska, enters through the rear door, says "good morning" as he passes by, and sits at his desk in silence. At 3:30 p.m. the paper's longtime sportswriter, Andre Legare, arrives, says hi, and hunkers down at his desk. Their relations are not hostile, says Jeff. "We just have different jobs."

Since its first appearance in March of 1995, the name Jeff Murray has appeared in the *Star-Gazette* 14,855 times by last count, either as a byline or in invitations to readers to contact him. Mere productivity doesn't define him, however. In 2016 the New York State Associated Press Association awarded him first prize in enterprise reporting for his account of the 2006 death of trooper Andrew Sperr, shot and killed by a bank robber. "An incredibly

moving article that kept me glued to the computer screen with tears in my eyes," wrote one judge. "Excellent writing and coverage."

The last reporter works for a huge corporation—the Gannett Company publishes 260 daily newspapers in the U.S., including *USA Today*, and more than 300 weeklies, making it the nation's largest news publisher by circulation. These are turbulent times, however, for Gannett. In November, Rochester-based GateHouse Media acquired the struggling chain for \$1.4 billion and changed its own name to Gannett—an iconic name in the industry ever since a teetotaling young newspaperman, Frank E. Gannett, acquired the *Elmira Star* in 1907 and merged it with the *Elmira Gazette*. Two cents and eight pages long, the new *Star-Gazette* was the first newspaper in the giant chain.

His longtime chief operating officer became Frank Tripp, a young reporter at the *Gazette* when Gannett bought it. (Tripp once interviewed Mark Twain, the city's most famous resident.) In 1917 he was made the paper's head of advertising, bought 25 percent interest in the burgeoning Gannett chain in 1922, and succeeded Gannett as chairman upon his death in 1957. (Tripp promptly reversed Gannett's chain-wide ban on ads for alcohol.)

Tripp's grandson, Ted Marks, remembers a red telephone in his grandfather's Elmira home that rang when lifted at Gannett's headquarters in Rochester. "A voice on the other end would say 'Good morning, Mr. Tripp. This is Rochester.'" Now seventy-eight and owner of Atwater Estate Vineyards on Seneca Lake, Ted doesn't read the *Star-Gazette* anymore because "there's no news" of the Finger Lakes. But two decades ago, while president of Corning's Chamber of Commerce, he found Jeff to be "a wonderful reporter."

"Honest and trustworthy," he says. "That's very important."

Mike Reed, the GateHouse CEO who now heads Gannett, grew up in Elmira and delivered the *Star-Gazette* as a boy. What that augurs for it or any other paper in the chain is uncertain, however. Under his leadership GateHouse had "shrunk newsrooms while pursuing shareholder value, in part by consolidating operations in regional hubs and merging newspapers," *The New York Times* wrote of the merger. With the CEO now predicting he can effect cost savings of \$300 million or more, "job cuts, in newsrooms and other areas, are likely," the *Times* predicted.

Gannett did not respond to a request from *Mountain Home* to interview Mike Reed, but the merger's aftershocks may already be trembling the lonely newsroom on E. Church Street.

On a recent Tuesday, Jeff has plans to cover a press conference at Elmira College announcing a student fundraiser, and has invited a writer from *Mountain Home* to join him. This will be an opportunity, they both suppose, to see him working his beat.

But the veteran newsman is in for a surprise. At 9:30 a.m. a tan rectangle appears on his computer screen. It's a memo from Matt Weinstein in Binghamton, his immediate editor.

Skip the Elmira College announcement and work on enterprise stories, videos, etc., Weinstein writes. *Need to focus on subscriber-only content rather than press conferences and news releases.*

Jeff is stunned. He's already scaled back on stories like business

See Reporter on page 10



Public partnerships: Jeff Murray works with the community and community leaders to get their stories to the public. (From top) Elmira Mayor Dan Mandell; with Dave Panosian discussing the store's 100th anniversary.



(2) David O'Reilly

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Star reporter: Jeff Murray plays a crucial role in his newspaper and in sharing the community's news.

Reporter continued from page 9

briefs and road closings that seemed important to the community but weren't getting much readership—even an outdoor column he'd loved to do. But press conferences have long been a staple of community news coverage. "This kind of throws off my day," he says.

He writes back to say he'd planned this day around the news conference.

Not trying to be difficult but we need to go in the direction corporate wants us to go, Weinstein replies, then assures Jeff that his feature on a local shoe store, Panosian's, celebrating its 100th anniversary that ran this morning is just the kind of story that "corporate" is looking for. *Story already hit our goals for premium views,* writes Weinstein. *That excellent makes people way above very happy.*

("Premium views" are stories only paying subscribers can read on a website. It's a way papers entice non-paying readers to subscribe.)

Jeff writes thanks, that he understands. His feature story on the Panosian founders—who met a century ago in Elmira after fleeing the Armenian genocide and opened a shoe store—is just the kind of tale readers enjoy. But the city has a lot of news that needs his attention, and he gazes at the messages in silence. "This is a major adjustment," he says, and compresses his lips for a moment. "That last line about 'people way above' tells you this is not just coming from Binghamton," he says, "but McLean," Gannett's corporate headquarters in McLean, Virginia.

Later that morning he pays a return visit to the enormous shoe store, which boasts an inventory of 9,000 shoes, and runs into another quirk of newspapers struggling in the digital age. Owner Dave Panosian is a major advertiser of the newspaper—"their readers are my customers"—but "I didn't see it yet," he says of the article, "but some people called to say it's really good." Jeff explains

that it's appearing only online for now, as a premium view, but will appear in print later.

"So you have to be a subscriber to see it?" Dave asks.

"Well," Jeff says with a laugh, "they have to be able to pay my princely salary."

A young reporter from WENY-TV, a local station, is there with a video camera to do his own story. "I'm a big Jeff Murray advocate," he says, adding that he looks to Jeff for story ideas. They chat as Dave waits on a customer. Jeff confides in the TV reporter, Brandon Menard, that his editors just waved him off press conferences in favor of unique content.

"They're really changing day-to-day focus. They just want breaking news and enterprise," he tells him. "Nothing in between."

"Wow," says Brandon, twenty-five. "That's frustrating. That sucks."

It's now about noon. Jeff says he's heading back to the office. "So long, buddy," Brandon says. "I hope they let you do more." He then starts taping his own interview with Dave Panosian, who points out a stuffed moose head on a rear wall wearing a black eyepatch. "We had it at our former store on S. Main Street," he says, "and in the '72 flood the water went all the way to the second floor and washed him out into the street." Family members found him buried in debris and

See Reporter on page 12

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Reporter continued from page 11

missing an eye. They cleaned him up and gave him the eye patch.

It's a poignant reminder of the vital role the *Star-Gazette* has played in the life of the city for more than one hundred years. Reporters and photographers covered the great storm of June 22, 1972, reporting that "more than half of Elmira's 46,000 residents had been evacuated as the Chemung River poured into the city," even as the storm damaged or ruined the presses and newsroom. *Star-Gazette* writers have spent decades chronicling the deadly aftermath of now legendary Hurricane Agnes. The city's tax base suffered, unemployment rose, and crime and drugs moved in.

The city is enjoying a "resurgence," as evidenced by the recent decision of Lake Erie College of Osteopathic Medicine to create a campus in the city. "We still get a bad rap," Mayor Dan Mandell says in an interview at his City Hall office. "There's still this perception of high crime, that we're a dangerous city. But that couldn't be further from the truth" when compared, he says, to some neighboring cities.

But the *Star-Gazette's* radically reduced coverage of government can be "frustrating," says the mayor, now in his second term. "They don't cover things like the ribbon cutting we did at the Cultural Center. And Jeff's not available after hours any more to cover our council meetings. But I understand that. He still gives us coverage, and he's doing yeoman's work every time I see him."

Jeff is modest about his work—work that he loves. "I can't say I've changed people lives or the way government does things," he says. Yes, there are the solid investigative pieces, like his expose some years ago of mismanagement at a publicly owned flight museum that led to big changes. "But I think the stories I like doing best are the human interest stories, where people share something personal and I spin it into a good narrative." He never wanted to do anything else but be a news reporter, he says.

"Jeff's the perfect example of a community reporter. He can do anything," says Kevin Hogan, the paper's executive editor. Kevin, who also oversees the *Ithaca Journal* from the *Binghamton Press & Sun-Bulletin*, where he is editor, defends Gannett's scaling back of news staff as unavoidable. But he notes that its newspapers and their websites contain abundant, well-reported regional news generated by the chain's statewide network of papers and bureaus.

Back in the newsroom, Jeff is tapping out a story he's assembled—from a news release and a phone call—about an abandoned homeless camp that authorities discovered on the banks of the Chemung River, with 300 pounds of debris left behind—"It's all I've got for today"—and ships it to Binghamton at 3:08 p.m. "OK, that's done," he says before getting on the phone to set up an interview, photo, and video—he'll do them all himself—at a local animal shelter.

Kevin says boots-on-the-ground reporters like Jeff Murray are crucial to community papers like the *Star-Gazette*. "He knows the [Elmira] community and they know him. He can jump in and cover a trial, or turn out a great human interest or enterprise story, or write about fishing and hunting, which is right up his alley," says Kevin. "It doesn't get any more valuable than that."

David O'Reilly was a writer and editor for thirty-five years at The Philadelphia Inquirer, where he covered religion for two decades. He and his wife, Birnie, moved to Wellsboro last fall.

MOUNTAIN HOME

Pennsylvania & the New York Finger Lakes

Land of Milk and Honey

David and Marla Nowacoski Shorten the Supply Chain to the Farm Next Door

By David O'Reilly

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Land of Milk and Honey

David and Marla Nowacoski Shorten the Supply Chain to the Farm Next Door

By David O'Reilly

Once upon a time less anxious than today—when the viruses worrying most Americans were merely on computers—David Nowacoski sold his interest in the investment firm he'd run for seventeen years, then found himself at a crossroads.

"I'd worked in corporate all my life," he would later recall, "and for the first time I didn't have to put on a suit and tie." Yet he was already restless.

He and his wife, Marla, poured themselves coffee and strolled out to the deck behind their Columbia Crossroads home in Bradford County. It was the first of April, a time of new life and beginnings.

To the left of their eighty-eight acres was his parents' retired veal farm, where he'd grown up before heading off to Penn State. Down the road was their church, where he taught Bible classes. Beyond that was Marla's parents' farm, and before them the eleven-acre lake where their three kids swam and fished for bass and catfish. He'd carved it out of thicket and swamp with a bulldozer.

"What are we going to do now?" he wondered aloud to his wife. Best friends since fifth grade, both were forty-eight.

"Well," Marla replied. "We have to eat."

David thought about that, started to nod, then broke into a smile. He does that a lot. "Yeah," he said. "We know how to make food. Let's *make food!*"

Seven years later, almost to the day, the odometer on his red

Dodge Caravan is turning 112,707 miles as David, gripping the steering wheel with blue nitrile gloves, creeps up a winding road somewhere between Wellsboro and Mansfield.

It's early April, three weeks since the corona virus scare has shuttered schools, restaurants, and workplaces across Pennsylvania and New York. His tired van is filled this Saturday morning with thirty-three red Igloo coolers, each wearing a name tag, and filled with the bounty of fifty-five farms and food producers from across thirteen Twin Tier counties.

Inside, bumping with him over these roads, are frozen bags of free-range chickens, cartons of organic eggs, glass jugs of organic milk, homemade shortbread cookies, organic sauerkraut, ravioli, pork shoulders, grass-fed beef steaks, whole-grain waffle mixes, maple syrup, lentils, beans, kale, mushrooms, cheese curds, salsas, wild-caught Alaskan salmon, chocolate Easter eggs, and, yes, locally made hand sanitizers for these troubled times.

"I know there's opportunity in chaos," David remarks to a visitor from *Mountain Home* along for today's delivery run. It's the ninth and last run of the week. "But we got hit so hard again this week. We've sold out all our eggs—300 dozen—all our milk and cream, and most of our bread's gone."

Home deliveries across 1,700 miles of rural roads every week is not what David and Marla bargained for when they resolved in 2013 to "make food." Nevertheless, they got up at

See *Honey* on page 8

In safe supply: David Nowacoski (facing page) drives 1,700 miles a week to deliver goods from Twin Tier farms and food producers to those shut in by COVID-19.

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Honey continued from page 6

4:30 this morning to resume packing. Sixteen-hour workdays are now normal, because the pandemic has turned their idealistic business model—to connect local organic farmers and natural food producers to their communities and their customers—into a mission. No more do they sit in their big, white truck at eleven, far-flung, designated drop points in the Twin Tiers, waiting for customers to come collect the farm-fresh products they'd ordered online. It's door-to-door delivery now to more than 300 homes a week, up from seventy-five before the virus scare. And their high-minded mom-and-pop operation is overwhelmed.

"We're just getting slammed," says David. "We cannot source fast enough."

Still, the name of their business fits better than ever: Delivered Fresh.

Across the nation, small farmers who retail their own produce are reporting "off-the-charts demand—demand beyond what they can supply," reports Andrew Mefford, editor of *Growing For Market* magazine based in Skowhegan, Maine. Because of the coronavirus "a lot of people are not wanting to go to grocery stores," he tells *Mountain Home*. "But they want to be reassured there's food production in their own back yard in case the supply lines are disrupted. So, even as most businesses are screeching to a halt, there's unprecedented interest," he says, in "locally grown."

Kim Seeley, owner of Milky Way Farms in Troy, the organic dairy producer for Delivered Fresh, agrees. "After fifty-two years in the dairy business, people finally know I exist," he says. He stopped using pesticides two decades ago, after his eight-year-old son nearly died from eating a chunk of it. His advocacy for organic milk angers some conventional dairy farmers, he says. "But what are we doing poisoning our food supply?"

Delivered Fresh has "done a good job educating the public" about organic and natural foods, says Kim, "and allows us to reach a larger area." A lot of new customers, too. This week's order for 100 bottles of milk has depleted his supply.

David's tailored suits from his days at snazzy big investment firms like Merrill Lynch in Princeton and Bay Ridge in Binghamton (he managed qualified trusts and pension plans) gave way long ago to farmer togs. Today he's in a mustard-colored canvas work jacket, blue jeans, and a baseball cap that proclaims "WindStone Landing Farms," their separate (and equally demanding) poultry operation. On his iPhone's GPS, a crucial new "route optimization" app costing \$300 a month is sending him this way and that down dirt roads, past dairy farms—"that's a Jersey-Holstein mix," he says of a splotchy-looking cow—into pricey developments, through modest neighborhoods in crowded boroughs, and up steep rises that drop sometimes onto breathtaking valley views.

"Look at that. It's just so beautiful," he marvels at one pastureland vista of rolling green off Hills Creek Road. Moments later he spies the next home on his route. "Ah. This lady is so awesome," he exclaims as he comes to a stop. "She grinds her own grain to make bread and—oh, did you hear that?" He laughs. "My stomach's growling." He's been running for seven hours on two fried eggs.

Grateful home-bound customers have been leaving

See Honey on page 10

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Honey continued from page 8

sandwiches, cookies, granola bars, and water bottles, some with touching notes. "Thank You for helping to save lives!" read one last week in Towanda. It was signed "Love" with a hand-drawn heart. "Thank you Delivered Fresh for working extra hard during these crazy times to bring us food. Stay Safe," read a post-it note in Ulster. But another house wore a grimmer sign of the times: "If you think you have been exposed don't come in. We are compromised."

David and his newly hired drivers never come in. These "crazy times" demand extra precautions, and he has imposed strict delivery protocols.

"Here's the sequence," he'd explained earlier. "The driver comes to a stop. You open your door and leave it open. Then glove up. Find the cooler, take it to the customer's cooler, and transfer the contents. Close the lid. Sanitize the lid and anything else you touched. Now, the door [of the truck] is still open because you don't want to touch the handle with your gloves. So you step inside the van. Discard gloves into the trash can in the vehicle. Then sanitize your hands and close the door." Customers are also asked not to converse with the drivers, who began wearing masks in mid-April.

Now he starts that sequence. He steps outside, leaving the van door open. He finds the customer's nametag on a red cooler, then lugs it and a large spray bottle of sanitizer to the front stoop. A white cooler awaits—with a bulging ZipLoc bag on top. David grins broadly, makes a thumbs-up with his gloved right hand, transfers his foodstuffs into the customer's cooler, sprays the top and latch, and returns to the van. He pulls off his gloves, sanitizes his hands, and reaches for the plastic bag.

Inside are three small, golden loaves of homemade bread. "Thank you Delivered Fresh" reads the note with it. "I really appreciate the service." He pulls open the bag, pops a piece of grain-flecked bread into his mouth, and closes his eyes in delight. "Soooo good," he murmurs, and shares a piece with his passenger. It is light yet deep flavored, as good as bread gets.

A few finger-presses to the pricey new route optimization program on his

iPhone tells the family its order is delivered, brings up the next address, and informs his office of his location. Then he starts the engine and eyes the screen. "Where the heck are we going?" he asks its jiggling blue line, which settles down and points him up a hill. The iffy cellphone service out here has failed him and his drivers multiple times, so he now carries maps, an old Garmin GPS capable of picking up satellite, and a printed list of every customer's latitude and longitude precise to nine decimal points.

"How does Santa do it?" he jokes.

The next house is a big one up a gated drive, with two kids playing on a plastic swing set and their dad close by, shoveling topsoil onto raised beds. He keeps his distance but asks David if he saw his email offering to sell him blueberries.

"I saw it but didn't have time to read it," he answers. "I've been up since 4:30." The man says he can grow about 1,000 pounds a year. "Do you use any chemicals—fertilizers or pesticides?" David asks. No, the man says. "Well," says David, "I'll try to get back when I have some time," and with a wave heads down the drive.

"The power of branding and distribution that Delivered Fresh offers is hard to quantify," says Fred McNeal, owner of Farmer Fred's market in Monroeton and a grower of organic corn and pastured beef. He was one of the first wholesalers to carry the Nowacoski's poultry, and they sell about eighty pounds of his beef each week. "They probably represent just two to three percent of my business," says Fred, "but that's incredibly impactful because they give our highest quality products much higher name recognition and distribution."

"They're putting our products into hands we never could have reached," says Beth Ward, who makes her Maple Hollow line of botanically infused soaps and creams and lotions at her family's farm outside Troy. She grows and distills much of her own chamomile, bergamot, calendula, prunella, yarrow, roses, marshmallow and other botanicals. "We've seen our sales double" since the corona scare began, she says.

Delivered Fresh has also become a business lifeline for Liz McLelland, who for ten years has been turning out "baked goods with a British flair" at her farm near Mansfield. The quarantine has obliged her husband, a cabinetmaker, to lay off his employees, and she's closed the store where she's long sold knitting yarns and her Yorkshire Meadows line of treats. But orders from Delivered Fresh have surged, she says. She likes to imagine the house-bound seeking comfort in isolation by "binge-watching *Downton Abbey*" while snacking on her shortbread cookies, scones, and lemon curd.

Family farms have dotted the hillsides and fed the people of the Twin Tiers for generations, but they've seen a long decline in recent decades with the rise of agribusiness and especially big dairy. Might COVID-19 instill a new appreciation for local farms—and give a dramatic boost to old-fashioned farm to table?

Perhaps. All across the country, people are waking up to the true cost of distant supply chains and mass-produced food. But small-scale, farm-grown nutrition brings its own cost. Organic carrots and bell peppers from Delivered Fresh are \$2.91 and \$3.08

See **Honey** on page 12



Passing promise: David Nowacoski's deliveries make the trials of pandemic seem diminutive. Notes and goodies from thankful customers (top) display the importance of his work. Kim Seeley (middle), the organic dairy producer, praises the educational impact Delivered Fresh has offered the community. Beth Ward (bottom) and her family show off many of the botanicals used in their products.



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Honey continued from page 11

a pound, for example, and whole organic chickens run \$7.12 a pound—three to four times the cost of conventional birds from Perdue or Tyson. To folks on limited incomes, pasture-raised, cage-free, chemical-free, and homemade foods can seem a luxury.

"When consumers ask 'Why is our food so expensive?'" says David, "my answer to them is: 'What corners do the supermarkets cut to make food cheap?'" Chicken in cages with an inch of space, growth hormones, grain instead of grass, antibiotics, pesticides, chemical fertilizers—all these help make Americans' food abundant and affordable, say the Nowacoskis. But it's "cheaped food," they argue. "The nutrient density of pasture raised animals who get fresh air and green grass is much higher than caged animals," says Marla. "And healthy soil produces more nutrient-dense vegetables."

Delivered Fresh's pricing structure is designed to support producers, they say. "I really believe small farms and family-owned businesses make up the fabric of our community," says David. "If we want to preserve the feel of our towns, we have to find ways to invest in them." They pay producers 85 percent of what they sell their items for at retail—well above the 40 and 50 percent discounts many wholesalers demand. The goal is steady cash flow, not high profit.

When their customers go to their website, deliveredfresh.store.com, to place weekly orders for local farm produce, they are given the option to donate to local food pantries. Three hundred and thirteen made donations in the second week of April.

Why do they do it? "Scripture says to love one another," David explains. "Your moral compass should steer you to compassion and generosity."

"They are phenomenal," says Sheryl Wilcox of Wilcox Honeypot. She and her husband are startup honey producers in Columbia Crossroads. "They're very selfless, always ready to promote other people's stuff above their own."

The Nowacoskis' resolve in 2013 to "make food" began not as an all-consuming delivery service but a wholesale poultry and preserved foods business. Their newbie naiveté still makes them laugh. "We started out with 250 chickens," David recalled in late March, with Marla alongside, over tea at their kitchen table. "Two hundred and fifty chickens? Hey, look at us!"

"We had no idea what we needed," Marla remembered with a shake of her head. Formerly a manager of corporate graphic design firms, then an at-home mom who preferred growing her own food to shopping, she had embarked on their homegrown canning business—dilly beans, salsas, soups—supposing six cases of jars would be plenty. And it was only when they started butchering their astonishingly plump turkeys in November that they realized their plug-in freezers weren't big enough to hold them. "We had no storage!" says David. "We were still butchering as the workmen were building our freezer barn over our heads." But the turkeys sold out in days.

By 2014 they were ramping up both operations. Marla's now comprises a store and commercial kitchen behind their house, with a behemoth, ten-burner, 650,000 BTU commercial stove and a wall of commercial coolers and freezers. Their WindStone Landing free-range poultry line—some organically fed, all with no antibiotics—has swollen meantime to 5,000 chickens and turkeys a year.

The entity now called Delivered Fresh emerged gradually—and unplanned—out of their poultry line in 2017. Supermarket chains were paying far less for wholesale poultry than it cost WindStone to produce, so they began selling at farm markets in Sayre and Wellsboro.

“They had a great following by the time we arrived,” remembers Tim Owen, who speaks fondly of the help Marla gave him and his wife, Liz, when they started selling their Grown Foods shitake, oyster, and lion’s mane mushrooms at an adjacent tent. “They would tell their customers about us,” he says, and explained to them the items that sold well at markets. “We think of them as our mentors.”

In those days the Nowacoskis would say “No, sorry,” when shoppers asked if they sold beef or anything other than poultry and her canned goods. Then Marla had an epiphany. “No,” she replied one day, “but I know who does.” On the way to market the next week she stopped at Backroad Creamery in Mansfield and picked up some cheese. By November of 2017 she had about forty families texting her with special requests.

“It was getting a little out of hand,” she says. But their aggregator/delivery service was burgeoning. That December it got a name—Delivered Fresh—and in February, 2018, a website.

Everyone loves farm fresh food, it declared, but driving all over the county to get it is a bit of a pain. We understand...and we are going to make it a lot easier. We are over a dozen local farmers who are working together to make sure our community gets the freshest, most healthy food possible. Here is what we could bring you: milk, bread, eggs, vegetables, fruits, chicken, turkey, beef, pork, honey and even cookies!! Locally roasted coffees and tea blends can also be added.

They had two online orders the first week, two dozen the next. Then, miraculously, a *New York Times* reporter showed up in March looking to explain to city folk this thing called farm-to-table. The article appeared on April 6, triggering an avalanche of inquiries from prospective vendors as far away as Ohio.

They had to say no to most of them, but when the dust settled the Nowacoskis had newfound credentials in the organic food community. Since then, it’s been word of mouth, not publicity, that has swelled their website’s subscriber base to more than two thousand.

Now this middle-aged couple wonders if home-delivery across 1,700 miles every week can prove a sustainable business model, and debate whether to take out a federal COVID-19 loan to expand. “I hate debt,” David says. “It’s the ruin of so many farmers.”

They’ve reluctantly begun charging customers a five-dollar delivery fee to help offset their added costs. But that first wave of extra income got wiped out days later when their big truck burned out two wheel bearings in Wysox and had to be towed twenty miles. Call it a metaphor for stress. Still, they remain committed to their innocent resolve of seven years ago to “make food.”

“With any disaster like COVID, one of the most critical pieces is the food supply,” says David. “From that perspective, we [farmers] are the ones producing food and making sure that you get it. I hope people will remember.”

David O'Reilly was a writer and editor for thirty-five years at The Philadelphia Inquirer, where he covered religion for two decades. He and his wife, Birnie, moved to Wellsboro last fall.



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Memorial Day thru Labor Day: **Friday Evenings:** Candy Bar Bingo, Movie & Popcorn Night

Saturday Mornings: Arts & Crafts, 11:00 p.m. in the pavilion (\$ cost)

Weekends: Wagon Rides, Card Games, and Cornhole Tournaments (depending on participation)

May 30th: STONE SOUP 1 BETTER BAND & HORSESHOE TOURNAMENT—Saturday: 6:00 PM. Join us Saturday evening @6PM to enjoy the amazing stone soup that everyone will help prepare throughout the afternoon. Local BAND "1 BETTER" 7-10 PM. Cover charge for the band - \$5.00 per person for non-campers, kids under 8 free. Sunday 10 AM: help us raise money for Camp Good Day (camp for kids with cancer) by joining us for our 1st horseshoe tournament of the season.

June 6th: BIRTHDAY BASH 4-6 PM—(celebrate everyone's birthday) & DJ Biggie Entertainment 7-10 PM

June 13th - 14th: Wine & Cheese gathering—enjoy our Wine (any beverage) & Cheese with your fellow campers. You bring your favorite beverage, will bring the food.

June 19th-21st: SQUARE DANCERS & FATHER'S DAY PANCAKE BREAKFAST—Watch our Square Dance Club dance all weekend, they love visitors. You may be the next square dancer. Sunday: Father's Day Breakfast: Pancakes, sausage, coffee and juice. Dads eat free! Adults \$5, kids \$2. 9:30 AM in the pavilion.

June 27th: KICK-OFF TO SUMMER—Saturday: Join us for a Charity meet & Greet Event (4-6 PM). Commemorative Glasses for Sale, all money & donations goes to charity. During the day, we will have the slip n slide out for everyone to enjoy leading up to the Charity event. Then 7-10 PM Music by Sam Pallet Band. Popular, local band playing Classic Rock music. Bring your lawn chairs and beverages to the pavilion! Cover charge for the band - \$5.00 per person for non-campers, kids under 8 free

July 3rd-5th: 4th of JULY CELEBRATION—Saturday & Sunday enjoy our FIREWORKS, both displays at 10 PM Saturday Evening: Ice Cream Social at 7:00 PM, \$1.00 for 2 scoops of ice cream and lots of toppings, followed by Camp Bell BINGO. Also, join us for Cornhole tournaments (sign up in the office). Sunday: Dance music provided by DJ Biggie Entertainment, 7-10 PM

July 10th-July 12th: SAWMILL FESTIVAL & ROUND HOUSE ROCKERS—Join us Saturday & Sunday for our 5th annual Sawmill Festival. There will be lots of activities and trophies for winners from different age group and activities. We had a PHENOMENAL Time last year. More details to follow. Join us in the evening for this popular, local, country western & rock band. Cover charge for the band - \$5.00 per person for non-campers, kids under 8 free.

July 18th: DEATH BY CHOCOLATE & KARAOKE—Join us Saturday afternoon for Wine & Art event, then in the

evening 6 PM for endless CHOCOLATE. Everyone can bring their favorite chocolate item. We will all share and die by chocolate. Followed by a fun evening of karaoke with DJ Biggie.

July 25th: WENDY OWENS MUSIC with JIM ANDERSON—Join us in the evening 7-10 PM for this popular, local band. Cover charge for the band - \$5.00 per person for non-campers, kids under 8 free.

August 8th: CHRISTMAS IN AUGUST—Celebrate with Santa. Saturday: 11:30 AM, lunch and photo with Santa (\$4.00). Followed by arts & craft project (free) and then a wagon ride to the ice cream shop with Santa (parents must attend to purchase ice cream). In the afternoon 4-6 PM, join us for a wine (you bring) & cheese (we provide) party with Santa (adult time with Santa). 7 PM - 10 PM, Tree lighting & Dance music provided by DJ Biggie Entertainment.

Aug 15th: NASCAR WEEKEND & PEDDLE CART RACES—Join us for the campground's 2nd annual peddle cart races. Heats by age group. Prizes awarded. Watch our Square Dance Club dance all weekend, they love visitors.

August 22nd: CHARITY LUAU POOL PARTY—Saturday: DJ BIGGIE (maybe a special guest appearance) for a Charity fund raising Party Time TBD.

August 29th: SOUTHERN EXIT BAND—Join us for our 7-10 PM listen to this popular local Country band. Cover charge for the band - \$5.00 per person for non-campers, kids under 8 free.

Sept 4th-6th: LABOR DAY WEEKEND CELEBRATION—Saturday: 7:00 PM, in the pavilion Ice Cream Social \$1.00 for 2 scoops of ice cream and lots of toppings, followed by Camp Bell BINGO. Also, join us Cornhole & Euchre (sign up in the office). Sunday: Dance music provided by DJ Biggie Entertainment, 7-10 PM in the rec hall.

Sept 13th: HORSESHOE TOURNAMENT—Join us Sunday at 10 AM for Horseshoe Tournament to find out who is the "Best" and who gets the "Horse's Ass" trophy. Food and non-alcoholic beverages will be sold. All money raised will be donated to our charity, "Camp Good Days" (camp for kids with cancer.)

October 10th-11th: HALLOWEEN WEEKEND—Decorate your RV for the Halloween festivities and win a prize for the Most Unique. Saturday: 11:00 PM, in the pavilion, Halloween Activity, free to all kids. 2:00 PM: Trick or Treat, Kid's Parade and Costume Contest. Don't forget to bring treats for the kids. Wagon ride at dark, weather permitting. Sunday, 7-9 PM Join us for a good old fashion Barn Dance.

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Foragers Stephani and
Ben Wallen Reap the
Bounty of Nature Near

By David O'Reilly

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Into the Woods

Fed by Sunshine, Rain, and Soil, Local Foragers Stephani and Ben Wallen Reap the Bounty of Nature Near

By David O'Reilly

The hills and forests of northern Pennsylvania and southern New York are rightly renowned for their fishing and hunting—but not all the game lurking in the Endless Mountains and the Pennsylvania Wilds wriggles and runs. Some just *sits* there.

So as Ben and Stephani Wallen halt their pickup on Armenia Mountain on a hot Sunday afternoon in August, it isn't shotguns or

fly rods they reach for.

"Here, honey," she says, and hands her husband a gallon ZipLoc bag. Ben pulls tall hiking staves out of the back and hands her one. "Let's hit as many as we can," she says, nodding toward the countless sunlit bushes that line this gravel road in Tioga County. He nods, and starts swiping and poking his stick into the shallow gully separating the road from the thicket.

Delectable brush: Ben and Stephani Wallen don their sticks and begin their berry hunt.

See *Forage* on page 8



Feeding on nature: identifying berries, plants, and mushrooms is only part of the journey. Stephani Wallen shows off blackberries and an impressive reishi mushroom during a hunt.



(2) David O'Reilly

Forage continued from page 7

The Wallens, whose home is a log cabin on twenty-three acres in Gillet, Bradford County, are professional foragers.

"The rattlesnakes will be under the rocks," Ben explains to a visitor, though it's not the timber rattlers the Wallens are seeking. Their objective today is blackberries, which Stephani will cook into a basil-infused jam and can in a professional kitchen a few days later. And maybe—just maybe—they'll find some of those spongy delicacies that grow on decaying trees: wild mushrooms with names like golden chanterelle, lobster, black trumpet, hen of the woods, chicken of the woods, reishi, and chaga.

Both grew up in the Midwest: she outside Milwaukee, where she hunted and fished, he on a Michigan sheep farm where his parents started him foraging for morel mushrooms at age three. But they got into organically grown and healthy foods in earnest ten years ago when Ben, now forty, developed a rare lymphoma and was given just one to three years to live.

"I wanted to do whatever I could to help him get healthier," says Stephani, thirty-nine. "That's when I learned the power of food—especially mushrooms—to try to extend our lifetime together."

"One of the greatest benefits of eating wild food is that it reminds us that we are fed not by supermarkets, but by the sunshine, rain, and soil," says Samuel Thayer, one of the nation's leading experts on foraging for wild edibles. It is "the oldest occupation of humankind," he writes in one of his best-selling field guides, *The Forager's Harvest*. "For most of our history we knew no other way of living..."

Alas, the summer of 2020 has been "abnormally dry," across north-central Pennsylvania and New York's Southern Tier, according to the National Integrated Drought Information System. The dry conditions have yellowed lawns, dried out creeks, parched cornfields, and withered the summer mushroom crop for professional foragers like the Wallens.

Stephani frowns at today's nearly cloudless sky. "Mother Nature and I have to have a talk," she half-jokes.

"It's mostly berries this year," explains Ben, who works weekdays in the oil and gas industry. He used to split his time between an office and well sites dotted across several counties, but COVID-19 has closed the office and most of his "meetings" are now online. This time of year the Wallens typically forage together two evenings a week and one day each weekend.

They began by raising their own organically fed hogs and free-range chickens, and pesticide-free fruits and vegetables. Then, in 2018, soon after relocating to Pennsylvania, Stephani did a deep dive into the health and nutritional benefits of foraged foods—those wild edibles that spring directly from nature, unnurtured by humans, yielding themselves to those who know where to look and what to look for.

Their teachers have been Mansfield University dietitian Mary Feeney and her husband, Mark Losinger, a passionate master forager, whom Stephani first encountered in January of 2019, when she was working at the Bradford County library. She invited them to give a public talk on foraging and found it "fascinating."

Soon after, she and Ben started Woodland Farm, a line of naturally grown, farm-to-table foodstuffs which, depending on the season, can include tomatoes, eggs, ramps, rhubarb,

squash, jams, salsas, mushroom-spiced cocoas, soup mixes thought to boost the immune system, a variety of dried mushrooms, and much more. They sell mostly through Delivered Fresh, the farm-to-table home delivery service based in Columbia Crossroads.

Stephani lets out a "Woo!" as she steps off the road and into the gulley, which is steeper than she realized. She sweeps for rattlers and finds none, but moments later spies a spread of flattened bushes. "Our bear's been here," she tells Ben.

Black bears like nothing better than devouring berries and falling asleep. "They're just big bunnies," she says with a shrug, and they run away at the sight of humans. Still, the Wallens do a quick search of the underbrush for any three hundred-pound "bunnies" before starting their own harvest.

They move through the bushes, plucking the larger, plumper blackberries and dropping them into their bags. "One of the advantages of blackberries," says Ben, popping one into his mouth, "is you can field test 'em." The raspberry season is over, they explain. The dry summer has left the choke cherries small and the thimble berries few.

It's hot work, and the bears and birds and racoons have already been feasting in this field. After about ninety minutes of picking they call it a day. His bag is about one-third full, hers about one-quarter. "I was talking too much," she explains. He laughs.

It's not a big yield, but the Wallens agree that an essential part of the foraging experience is simply immersing one's self in nature. "This is my Zen place: being in the woods," says Stephani, whose T-shirt reads *Kinda Hippie, Kinda Country*. "In the woods I'm in the middle of nowhere. I hear no cars or people, just the birds and the water and the wind."

"It's just being in the woods with my wife," says Ben, "and the peace and quiet, and hopefully finding food to eat."

Still, they are enthusiastic about the health benefits of wild edibles. Those, together with the other organic and pesticide-free foods they raise and consume, have made a "hundred percent

See *Forage* on page 10

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Angels and demons: Stephani and Ben find a “destroying angel” despite this summer’s dry conditions; mentors and fellow foragers Mark Losinger and Mary Feeney display a little-known plant called the Indian cucumber.



(2) David O'Heilly

Forage continued from page 9

difference” in his health, Ben says.

Many wild edibles present bigger, brighter, or deeper flavors than their cultivated counterparts, says Stephani, because the soils in which they grow are so loaded with nutrients.

That nutrient load can make some edibles seem sharp or bitter, says Debbie Naha-Koretzky, a nutritionist and master forager based in central Pennsylvania. “What we’ve done over many years as we cultivated greens, for example, was breed out the bitter components to make them milder tasting. But we bred out things like anti-oxidants that made them so nutritious. Bitter greens, like them or not, are good for us.”

Stephani agrees. The Maitake soup she makes for Ben from hen of the woods mushrooms “doesn’t taste the greatest, but it’s an excellent immune boost,” so she tries to make it more palatable. “I cook it with chicken bone broth and lots of garlic and wild onions.”

After returning to their pickup, the Wallens head down the mountain about half a mile before turning onto a narrow dirt road and into dark woods. “Mushrooms don’t like the light,” she explains as Ben cruises at about five miles an hour. He’s searching left. She’s searching right, but they aren’t optimistic. Mushrooms need moisture to grow, and this summer’s dry spell

has drastically diminished their mushroom-based product line. “No chanterelle cheesecake this year,” she laments. “No chanterelle rose hip jam...”

“Even turkey tails,” she continues, a normally abundant, fan-shaped mushroom used to make medicinal tea, “have been hard to find.”

Ben spies a chicken of the woods, but it’s growing on a dead hemlock. That chemistry creates a mushroom that causes gastric distress, especially when ingested with alcohol. They keep going, scanning stumps and trunks and leaf mounds. The woods feel dark and mysterious, as if in waiting.

“This is where we also find reishi and chaga,” Stefani explains, and moments later Ben halts the truck to point out the black, fourteen-inch spore ball of a chaga about eighteen feet up the side of a green birch. Prized for its antioxidant properties, chaga has no nutritional value in warm months and is harvested only in winter, when the host birch has gone into dormancy. “It’s hard as a rock,” she says. “You need a special saw to cut it.”

They park the truck and clamber down a ravine toward a creek where they often find reishi mushrooms—they’re large, mahogany colored, and kidney shaped—but the normally rushing stream is a trickle today, and they find only a gray-topped mushroom of the *russula* family with no nutritional value. Then it’s back to the truck, which Ben turns around carefully.

Moments later he steps on the brakes. “There’s a mushroom,” he says. That’s an understatement. The object of his attention is white and solitary, about three inches tall, some fifteen feet inside the woods, poking out of a low leaf mound by a rotting stump.

Only a few dozen of the thousands of mushroom species found in the United States are edible, and seven in Pennsylvania are poisonous. The Wallens have just found an *Amanita*

bisporigera, or “destroying angel,” one of the deadliest of all. Ingesting just half the cap will shut down the liver and kidneys, and there is little hope of recovery without intense treatment at a hospital.

“Make sure you know what you’re eating,” says Stephani, who shows off the “angel’s” distinctive white veil that covers the gills on its underside. “It also smells like potatoes,” says Ben, who offers a sniff. He’s right.

Like most states, New York and Pennsylvania require certification of anyone selling wild-found mushrooms. In June of last year, the Wallens took a two-day course in State College conducted by Mushroom Mountain University, based in South Carolina, which certified them after they passed an identification exam.

Their advice to anyone wishing to learn foraging is to take hands-on courses or train with teachers who take them into the wild to point out where species grow, their visual characteristics, when to harvest, and how to harvest sustainably—leaving the roots in place, for example.

The Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture, meanwhile, urges beginning mushroom harvesters to avoid mushrooms with gilled caps (such as oyster and shiitake) because they can be confused with others “that are seriously poisonous and deadly.” Wild harvested mushrooms should be thoroughly cooked and never consumed raw, according to the PDA, and not show any signs of spoilage or insect infestation.

Foragers should only reference guidebooks written by qualified experts, continue the Wallens, and put little reliance on websites created by amateurs. “There’s a lot of old and bad information out there,” says Stephani. And get permission before foraging on private property.

On the way out of the woods they stop at a dead hemlock that has sprouted several reishi mushrooms at its base, but the near-drought has rendered them brittle and dry. “There’s nothing to harvest here,” says Stephani, but she pats the tree affectionately. “We’ll be back next year,” she tells it.

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The Wallens concede they are “pretty good when it comes to mushrooms,” but “we’re still learning about plants and berries,” says Stephani. “There’s so many we’ve still never seen.”

Half the fun of foraging, says Ben, “is finding something you’ve never seen. Then you come home and put your nose in a book for half an hour learning about it.”

Still, nothing beats having mentors in foraging, and for that Ben and Stephani still turn to their friends and original teachers, Mark Losinger and Mary Feeney. Their simple house, somewhere between Asaph and Westfield, fronts a dirt road high in the hills and backs onto state forest.

“He doesn’t bite!” Mark shouts as their giant German shepherd, Zap, bounds off the front porch to greet a newcomer. Zap just wants you to pull the plastic chew toy out of his mouth, but Mark has a better idea. He pulls up a chair on the porch and plops down opposite. He sports a trimmed beard and a braided, hip-length, chestnut colored ponytail.

“You’re gonna taste our yard!” he

announces, smiling broadly and instantly displaying his near-messianic passion for foraging. “There are flavors your tongue has never tasted and cannot buy in any store.”

Mary, who’s standing nearby, nods in agreement. “There are just some foods you can’t describe to say ‘this tastes like asparagus, or a green bean,’” she says. A Ph.D. dietitian, she’s director of the nutrition program at Mansfield University, where she teaches nutrition and epidemiology.

The lack of rain has made this “the worst summer I can remember for mushrooms,” says Mark, but he can barely contain his excitement over the treat he does have in store. He lifts a cloth napkin from a plate to reveal seven oblong yellow fruits the size of kumquats

“This is North America’s finest fruit that no one knows about,” he says.

“In our opinion,” says Mary.

“This is a mayapple,” he continues. “It doesn’t ripen in May and it’s not an apple. That’s the part of the wild food thing—they get these names.” Mary explains that the plant, known as American mandrake, “shoots up in spring when we’re looking for morels, but doesn’t ripen until mid-August.

And all of the plant except for the ripe fruit is poisonous.”

In a typical summer they harvest mayapples by the bushel but—thanks to the lingering dry spell—the seven on the plate are all they have this year. They want to share one, but foraging protocol dictates that a forager first samples any wild edible he or she is about to offer. Mark cuts one in half to show the fleshy white pulp and seeds, and sucks these into his mouth. He savors the gooey flesh and spits out the seeds.

“It’s the best!” he exclaims. “I mean, unequivocally.” And he can barely contain himself as their visitor bites into the skin of one and sucks in the goo. “Banana?” he asks. “Pineapple? Mango? Peach?”

He’s right. It’s amazing. It tastes like all of them at once.

Moments later he’s crushing the hull of a little beaked hazelnut with the butt end of his foraging knife to share, and reminiscing about the spruce tip ice cream he made early in the year. “It tasted like green springtime.”

Then it’s down off the porch to sample some of the bergamot leaves, or bee balm, growing near the house—it tastes like

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May day: Mark Losinger shares one of his seven-only mayapples while explaining its unique flavor and backstory.

David O'Reilly

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oregano—and into the woods to see “a plant you’re not gonna see in any book.”

With Mary and Zap on the path ahead, he crouches over a cluster of low, whorled leaves rising out of the ground on a string-thin shoot. These are “Indian cucumbers,” he explains, and cuts at the base carefully before pulling up a white, inch-long root as thin as cooked spaghetti. He breaks off a bit, pops it in his mouth, and hands over the rest. It’s crunchy and tastes, yes, like a burst of cucumber.

We sample sheep sorrel’s lemony tang, but ignore the oxeye daisy leaves that grow in abundance in their lawn, whose flavor he finds uninteresting. “I could eat half the stuff here,” he says, “but I don’t want to.”

To the untrained eye, he observes, the kings of the forests might seem the physical giants, like oaks and hemlocks. “But look down at the things like bloodroot,” which can grow for hundreds of years and yields compounds used in a variety of important medicines.

“There is so much regarding wild food,” he says, “that most people have been trained to neglect.”

Readers who wish to contact the Wallens may do so at woodlandfarmspa@gmail.com. Contact Mark Losinger at mushroomgod@frontier.com. He also hosts the Pennsylvania Foragers Club on Facebook. Debbie Naha-Koretzky is at (908) 456-1681 and on Facebook.

David O'Reilly was a writer and editor for thirty-five years at The Philadelphia Inquirer, where he covered religion for two decades. He and his wife, Birnie, moved to Wellsboro last fall.

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