

MEET THE FARMER



Pete's Greens at
Craftsbury Village Farm
Craftsbury, Vermont
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petesgreens.com

Growing Greens in Any Weather

In northern Vermont, Pete Johnson has figured out how to work with the seasons

At an age when most toddlers were playing with blocks, Pete Johnson was pushing around earth in his parents' plot in Vermont. "I always picked up soil," he remembers, "and smelled it, felt it, rolled it in my hands." As a teenager, he experimented with hand-made greenhouses, watching most of them blow away or collapse under snow. "By the time I was 14," he says, "I remember thinking that I was going to be a farmer."

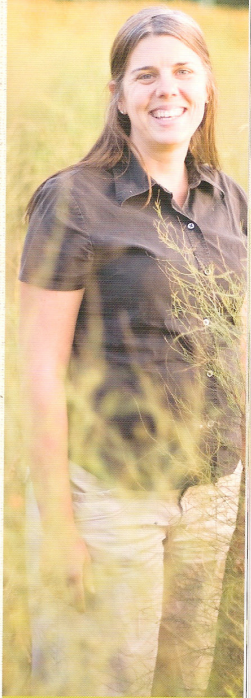
Fast-forward two decades—Pete Johnson's hands are still in the dirt. Johnson (left), now 36, owns and operates Pete's Greens, a 230-acre farm in rural northern Vermont. He sells organic produce at a seasonal farmstand and through a CSA program to over 250 members. His greens are featured on the menus of acclaimed restaurants from Vermont to Boston to New York City.

"So much," says Johnson, "depends on your soil." He extensively composts his fields to build a base of nutrients. He cover crops—that is, he rotates nutrient-recycling and soil-protecting crops in with his actively producing plants—as a sustainable way to increase and maintain his soil's fertility. Why the emphasis on his soil? Because produce from small organic farms should be more flavorful and more packed with nutrients. "When I eat food that was grown in lively soil—soil with nutrients that really feed the plants—I can taste the difference," he says. Most of all, says Johnson, "I can care for every foot of soil in a way that just isn't possible on a large operation."

Johnson has to maximize his growing seasons. To protect crops, he designed four innovative 7,000-square-foot greenhouses that slide on metal tracks. He can now plant tomatoes in March or April under cover of one of the structures while frost and snow still cover the ground outside. After harvesting tomatoes in August, he'll slide the structure over his signature crops—his greens, such as chard, parsley and kale—which will allow him to harvest into December. Meanwhile, the elements will cleanse the newly uncovered soil he holds so dear, and cool temperatures will rid it of the pests that often plague stationary greenhouses.

While Johnson would probably love to grow year-round, his greenhouses are not heated and he isn't trying to completely defy the northern seasons. "Glory in the limitations of the seasons," he says, "and fully exhaust what each season has to offer." Eat it while it's fresh, and pine for it when it's not. It will taste that much better when it comes around again next year. —Mark Aiken

MEET THE FARMER



Fairview Gardens
Goleta, California
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fairviewgardens.org

An Organic Oasis on the Central Coast

One of California's oldest organic farms raises a traditional crop of white asparagus

Fifty years ago, the rich seaside plains west of Goleta, 10 miles outside Santa Barbara, were planted with fields, orange and avocado groves. Today, much of the surrounding landscape has been paved or built upon. But a 12-acre oasis remains. Established in 1895, Fairview Gardens is one of California's oldest organic farms and serves as a reminder of the way things were and an example of what's still possible.

The West Coast was once a hotbed for white asparagus, but with rising land and labor costs, most commercial white-asparagus farms are now based in Peru. At Fairview, whose mission is to preserve agricultural traditions, farmers still plant about an acre of white asparagus a year, carefully piling mounds of earth on the rows that will become white asparagus. Then they cover the mounds with plastic covers—tunnel-like archways that deflect the sun's rays. When the asparagus stalks break through the mounds in the spring, they are clipped at the very bottom of the mound—the result being white stalks where photosynthesis never had the opportunity to occur.

Santa Barbara's chefs and regular customers make up a loyal fan base, and the tender, mild-tasting white asparagus never lingers long on the farmstand's counters. "It is gone in a matter of minutes," says Fairview's Tiffany Cooper (right). Although agriculture struggles for survival amidst the developments that creep along the coast, Cooper knows that protecting the region's farming heritage requires a forgiving climate and people who will buy their produce. Goleta, California, offers both. —Mark Aiken