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LONG ISLAND DINING | FROM THE FARM

## Unlikely Harvest for 2 Young Farmers



Nicole Bergsma/The New York Times

WAVES OF GRAIN Catherine Baldwin, left, and Amanda Merrow harvesting wheat.

By LAUREL BERGER  
Published: July 30, 2010

LAST fall, Amanda Merrow and Catherine Baldwin's first wheat harvest here was over in three hours and yielded only four buckets of hard spring wheat. "It was almost a joke," said Mike Collins, a veteran East Hampton farmer whom the young women had consulted. "I told the girls to mow it and till it under," he said of the tiny patch of land clotted with wild mustard and other weeds.

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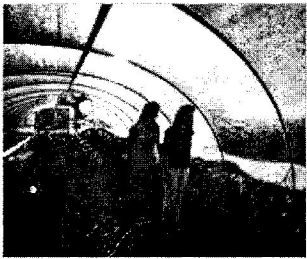
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Ms. Merrow and Ms. Baldwin check on garlic drying in a greenhouse.

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Nicole Bergsma/The New York Times

Earlier that year, the Peconic Land Trust had awarded Ms. Merrow and Ms. Baldwin a three-year lease on 7.7 acres behind the Amagansett Farmers Market. As a sign of their aspirations, the women named their farm Amber Waves.

It was not an obvious project, to say the least. Wheat is considered "a minor crop out here," said Dale D. Moyer, agriculture program director for the Cornell Cooperative Extension of Suffolk County. "How do you harvest it economically and how do you process it?"

For Amber Waves' second wheat crop, which was harvested over two evenings a few weeks ago, the new farmers, working with the [Northeast Organic Farming Association](#), a nonprofit group, planted four heritage strains of winter wheat, which they had heard was easier to grow than the spring type. Their neighbors Alex Balsam and Ian Calder-Piedmonte, co-owners of [Balsam Farms](#), in East Hampton, agreed to gather the bulk of it with their combine.

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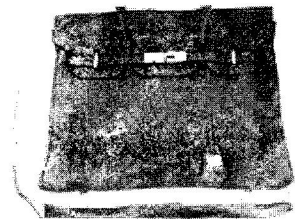
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the farmers have had two wheat harvests.

All that day, visitors fluttered around the fields like cabbage moths.

"How's the wheat?" a woman in a safari outfit asked.

"It is so, so ready," said Ms. Baldwin, who is 29 and known as Katie. Besides cultivating roughly four acres of wheat, she and Ms. Merrow raise organically grown vegetables, which they sell at the Montauk and Amagansett farmers' markets. They have also established a 40-member Community Supported Agriculture program, hosted schoolchildren for visits through their Farm to Fork Curriculum and formed the Amagansett Food Institute to promote sustainability.

"Given how little experience they had, what they've accomplished in two seasons is remarkable," said Scott Chaskey, who manages Quail Hill, a 220-acre neighboring farm (with 30 acres under cultivation) owned and administered by the Peconic Land Trust. In 2008, the women were working as his apprentices when, having been seized by what Ms. Baldwin described as "the insane joy of growing food for others," they responded to a request for proposals by the Trust with an education-oriented business plan. Mr. Chaskey has helped them with equipment, manpower and advice.

"Katie and I are living proof that anyone can become a farmer," said Ms. Merrow, 25. Neither she nor Ms. Baldwin had a background in agriculture before joining Mr. Chaskey. "At first we daydreamed about a pizza farm," Ms. Merrow said. "We pictured a miniature dairy with a couple of goats and a vegetable patch. Then it hit us that we'd love to grow the wheat to make an entirely local loaf of bread."

She and Ms. Baldwin "think it's important for the East End to be self-sufficient," Ms. Merrow said.

In James Truslow Adams's 1918 book, "History of the Town of Southampton (East of Canoe Place)," there is mention of wheat on eastern Long Island as early as the 1600s. According to Greg Lemmons, an agricultural statistician at the National Agricultural Statistics Service, more than 9,000 acres were grown in Suffolk County in 1879. These days the number is around 400, he and Mr. Moyer said.


John de Cuevas, a local conservationist and serious bread baker — his daughter, Margaret de Cuevas, owns the Amagansett Farmers Market and the adjoining farmland — is one proponent of locally grown wheat. He gave Amber Waves a \$25,000 start-up grant through the Baker Foundation, which his family established in 1983 to provide support for nonprofit initiatives with a focus on education, agriculture and the environment. Mr. de Cuevas called the grant "one of the best we've ever made."

On the evening of the harvest last month, Mr. Calder-Piedmonte rolled up to the farm's entrance in his red International Harvester 205. In short order, the machine reduced the outlying field to a stalky clearing.


Five days later, under a new moon, Ms. Merrow and Ms. Baldwin reaped the remaining winter wheat with scythes. The mechanical harvest had yielded about a ton of grain — not bad, considering that one acre had been eaten by wild turkey and deer. With this one-third-acre plot, planted with two test varieties, reaped by hand and threshed in the days to follow by schoolchildren, the job would be finished.

The farm has applied to the Internal Revenue Service for nonprofit status. Until the two farmers can raise \$25,000 to buy a communal grist mill and grain silo, they will sell wheat berries at the Montauk farmers' market, as well as to beer brewers and chefs in New York; in Montauk they will use a small electric unit to grind wheat into flour on demand.

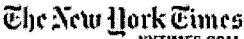
As she picked up the gleanings in the gathering dusk, Ms. Baldwin recalled people telling



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er that she and Ms. Merrow couldn't grow wheat on the East End, that the climate wasn't right. "Now we can tell them, 'Oh, but we can,'" she said.

*Amber Waves, 375 Main Street, Amagansett, sells produce at the Amagansett Farmers Market daily until mid-October and at the Montauk Farmers Market on Thursdays through Sept. 30. Information: [amberwavesfarm.org](http://amberwavesfarm.org).*

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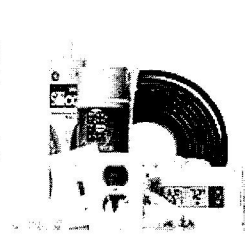
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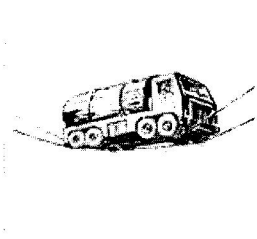
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