



All Hands on Deck

Salvation Farms is counting on prison inmates to fill a gap in the local food system

by Suzanne Podhaizer

At some of Vermont's correctional facilities, inmates are required to labor while serving time, so it's not uncommon for those in the custody of the state to spend their days picking up trash on the side of the road or punching out Vermont license plates.

But at the Southeast State Correctional Facility in Windsor, some of the inmates are engaging in a different line of work: gathering, cleaning, and packing vegetables for food-insecure Vermonters.

Alongside Theresa Snow of Salvation Farms, low-risk offenders walk through fields and orchards in Wolcott and Randolph, collecting produce that farmers haven't harvested. Back at the facility, higher-risk inmates—many of whom are sex offenders in treatment—wash and package potatoes, apples, winter squash, and onions that are destined for the Vermont Food-bank and other charity food distributors around the state.

Theresa founded, and now runs, Salvation Farms, a non-profit with a mission to "build increased resilience in Vermont's food system through agricultural surplus management." Just how much farm-grown food is left in fields at the end of each harvest season? "It's really inaccurate, but we say 2 million pounds. I think it's a lowball figure," Theresa says. "This year, with our partners at the Vermont Gleaning Collective, we've been able to capture about 80,000 pounds."

The opportunity for inmates to get out into the fields and glean is still rare, but processing roots inside of the facility has become a regular gig. Since the pilot project began at the Windsor correctional facility in November of 2012, 171,500 pounds of produce have moved through the prison to their final destinations.

Currently, the food operation occurs in an insulated, unheated room, with infrastructure put together cooperatively by Salvation Farms, the Department of Corrections, and the Department of Building and General Services. But, Theresa says, "We don't have the ability to store food, and we don't have the ability to compost [at the facility]. Everything that comes in I need to ship out in boxes or bags, or drive out to be composted."

If all goes as planned, by next fall Salvation Farms will have built a more robust processing facility at the Windsor location, which will include cold storage and the ability to wash produce prior to packing it. This will allow even more gleaned produce to make its way into the kitchens of those who are served by the state's food shelves. Future additions may include equipment that will allow for canning and dehydrating.

The upgrade, which comes at an estimated cost of \$156,000—which Salvation Farms is currently fundraising for—"will be a game changer," according to Theresa.



Why operate at a prison? First, the free labor is an important commodity, since the packaged food is given away. Second,



there's the scale: "You can't do this in a [food] venture center," Theresa notes. Salvation Farms oversees a variety of projects in such facilities, including the Vermont Food Venture Center in Hardwick. But, while "those great little projects look good in the [news]paper, we're not moving tons of food in and out," she explains. In Windsor, "we *can* move tons of food."

What is the end game? "I think we can create a surplus food system that opens the door for more local food...in schools, and nursing homes, and prisons, and potentially hospitals," Theresa says. But, she cautions, it will require a great deal of work—and many collaborators—to replace the out-of-state commodity food that flows liberally into such institutions with gleaned items that would otherwise be rotting in the fields: "This sort of system for managing in-state food doesn't exist elsewhere."

That makes sense, given the number of factors that must be juggled to operate in a correctional environment. However, given Vermont's caché as a food-systems leader, Theresa hopes that vital state partners, such as the Agency of Agriculture and the Agency of Commerce, will see the value in getting involved with building an in-state commodity system using prison space and the labor of those who are incarcerated.

But, until the spot in Windsor is operating at a greater capacity, Theresa is not ready to articulate a long-term vision.

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"The seed [of the current project] hasn't even germinated yet. That would be like thinking of the harvest," she says. Once the renovation is complete, though, "we will measure what it can possibly capture, and then what is still going to waste because we don't have the infrastructure to capture it."



How did Theresa, 36, become the first person in Vermont to mix gleaned and corrections? In 2004, the Sterling College graduate was in her fourth year of employment at Pete's Greens in Craftsbury. She'd begun to realize that something about her work wasn't filling her need to participate in social change. "I was struggling with the course I felt our culture was on—that we're very superficial, consumer[ist]."

Pete Johnson, the farm's owner, noticed her tension, and asked her some questions about what she really wanted to be doing. "I said that I want to teach people about food...in a way that makes them feel more empowered and able to provide for their basic needs." Pete mentioned that there were lots of extra greens that got left in the field; Theresa began gleaned them, and her food reclamation project was born. In 2005, she established Salvation Farms under the umbrella of NOFA-VT (the Vermont chapter of the Northeast Organic Farming Association). It became a federally incorporated nonprofit in 2012.

The search for a correctional facility interested in hosting a food-processing operation began in January 2009, when Theresa toured several prisons. "I knew that [the involvement of a correctional facility] would be vital if we were going to manage what we have in Vermont that is going to waste," she explains. Operating in Windsor made sense for many reasons, including the town's proximity to Black River Produce, which operates the trucks that deliver the packaged food, and the presence of a friendly farm down the road that takes all of the compost the project generates.

In addition to working toward food sovereignty and feeding hungry Vermonters, Theresa is excited about the possibility

of changing lives through community engagement and food systems work. Although many of the inmates with whom she cleans potatoes were in the workforce prior to incarceration, Theresa believes that engaging with food offers them something out of the ordinary. Not only does farm-based and food-related labor "give [incarcerated people] an opportunity to build understanding and skills in a growing sector in our state," it also allows them to "engage in their community in a way that most incarcerated individuals don't. Some people say, 'My family will probably get these [potatoes]. I'll probably need this service when I get out,'" she explains.

Former workers have sent messages to Theresa letting her know about the impact of the experience. Some, she recalls, have said that the work made them feel like human beings and individuals again. Others have said that the work was "a positive experience during a really dark time."

"Feeding people just has a different feeling," she suggests. "And managing something that otherwise would have gone to waste is different than raking leaves or picking up trash."

Although Theresa has worked hard over the many years since she started Salvation Farms, taking steps toward food sovereignty—a process that she acknowledges is lengthy and slow moving—has proven to be one of the pieces that was missing in her life when she was engaged in more typical farm employment. "I come from an activist background," she says, "and this is the most effective way that I can be an activist."

In the end, what Salvation Farms is aiming to do is not simply to move a little bit more sustenance around the map. As Theresa explains, "We want this to be a correctional industry. It's about creating a new segment of Vermont's food system."

Suzanne Podhaizer is the chef-owner of Salt Café in Montpelier, as well as a goose farmer, culinary consultant, and cooking teacher. She is the former food editor of Seven Days, loves to write whenever she can, and swears she's going to publish a cookbook someday.

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