

ORGANIC

FARMERS AND CHEFS OF THE HUDSON VALLEY



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PHOTOGRAPHS BY

Francesco Mastalia

PREFACE BY

Gail Buckland

FORWARD BY

Mark Ruffalo

INTRODUCTION BY

Joan Dye Gussow

Organic

By Francesco Mastalla

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Foreword

BY MARK RUFFALO

My great grandfather was an Italian immigrant and his entire backyard was his garden. In it he grew several kinds of tomatoes, onions, garlic, eggplants, black kale, spinach, broccoli, zucchini, rhubarb, grapes, and tomatillos, and would grow squash and greens in the fall. He had a big twisted plum tree and a small apple tree. Between every row were elevated planks of wood on bricks. I was taught these elevated bridges that criss-crossed the patches of deep green were to keep the soil from getting compacted under foot and ruining the homes of the worms. I got my fanny clapped more than a few times for wandering off the planks to seize a tomato or a hunk of rhubarb. I would watch my gardening grandpa in his white shirt and hat, his hanky around his neck while he piled his compost, picked and pinched and tied, trellised. I marveled at his knowledge, how he knew that the “tomatoes loved-a-da basil.” He was a magician to me, and knew secrets that were age-old and profound. Secrets that mystified me and gave great meaning to his life. “Grandpa, why do you put the rotted food back into the garden? Everyone else throws it in the garbage.” “No” he exclaimed, “that is food for the worms and the little bugs that feed the plants and make them strong and green, now get off the earth and on the wood before I clop you.” The dirt of his garden was the deepest black, flecked with white bits of egg shells, and was always sweet and moist. I wish I could get my clay soil of Upstate New York to be near the structure and filled with the life that his composted and egg-shelled soil had way back then!

This book isn’t primarily about the concept of organic, although there is plenty to learn here on that front. It is really a celebration of those who live it and engage it. Organic is not a label, but rather a way of being within a living system and a way of working within that system that uses all of the different relationships therein to one’s greatest advantage. The people in this book speak a special language that has been developed between the land, the living organisms in that land, and the person growing or raising food there. The organic farmer and those people who are artists of food, the organic chefs, hold an ancient kind of wisdom. They are artists and teachers. The revolution they are leading of the new regional organic farm carries within it a store of knowledge that was all but wiped out by the industrial farming craze that swept

our nation and left our waters polluted, our food poisoned, and our lands depleted of nutrients and viability.

Like every other discipline of modern man, from medicine to energy, our understanding has brought us to see the value in the sustainable processes of life. We find ourselves learning more by observing nature and understanding her processes then by trying to dominate her and bend her to our will. We are beginning to see that nature is not our enemy but our saving grace and that there is a holistic balance and observable connection to all things living and inanimate that we do well to preserve. Farming, like every other aspect of our lives, is in the process of being reinvented and the people you see in this book are the front line of that new wave of developing technology. This technology strangely enough is in large part one that is reflective as well as progressive. It is gentle and subtle and puts the natural processes of sustainability at its core and ancient in its beginnings.

The prevailing agricultural technologies of the past 50 years have put man deeply into conflict with the rest of his surroundings, and so our surroundings have becoming increasingly conflicted with man. These people remind us of the benefits and healing qualities of being part of an integrated system. Their food is better, their lands are healthier and more adaptable, and they and their workers aren’t dying from fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides!

The people on these pages, captured so beautifully and rawly in Francesco’s large-format images, display the very qualities of the farms they support and pick their ingredients from: complex, diverse, weathered, natural and honest, integrated and sound. Yes, these people exist today. They are part of an expanding network that is growing and diversifying every year. They are on the rise and have something to teach us all about a better way to grow, eat, work, and live in a world that we are part of and is part of us. They need to be lifted up, listened to, and celebrated, and Francesco has done just that in these pages. To organic and all of our organic mentors!!



Organic Matters

BY GAIL BUCKLAND

Organic matter matters.

Living organisms. Living well.

Slow food. Slow photography.

Local food. Local Hudson Valley photographer.

The Hudson Valley is fertile terrain for farmers and for master photographer Francesco Mastalia. There are riches here, in the soil and in the people.

Artist. Craftsman. Modern-day magician. Mastalia is all three. (When William Henry Fox Talbot announced in 1839 his invention of photography, he called it “a little bit of magic realised [sic], of natural magic.”)

Mastalia, like Talbot before him, realized that photography has an uncanny relationship with time. It doesn’t stop time; it works with time. It takes time for millions of light rays to delicately form an image on a light-sensitive surface. And light works on objects and chemicals in mysterious and unpredictable ways. Mastalia uses the forces of nature (not electronics, not pixels) to capture on his wet-collodion glass plates, people whose lives are also connected to natural forces. Farmers, chefs, and photographer all respect the Earth and its rich bounty.

Sunlight and patience with a dash of love. What is true for the farmer is true for the photographer.

Organic: Farmers and Chefs of the Hudson Valley is focused on the idea of integrity in the production and preparation of food. The individuals (and they are individuals!) encountered in this collection are less concerned with USDA certification and government issued labels than in knowing they are creating healthy food, grown and prepared in traditional ways, food that is wholesome, sustainable, and chemical-free.

Francesco Mastalia makes photographs the same way photographers did 150 years ago; the farmers in the book are

growing vegetables and raising cattle in basically the same way their forebears did 150 years ago. A sense of kinship between photographer and subject permeates the book and elevates it. Like food produced with pride for flavor and texture, these are photographs to savor.

Opening the book, one immediately sees that the photographs are different. They hearken to a previous era. Each portrait is from an ambrotype made by hand. Dirt under the fingernails of farmers; collodion lifting off the edges of the glass plates. The people we meet in these photographs and the process itself (described below) have an elemental, honest, “small scale” quality about them.

In the mid 19th century, when the ambrotype was popular, people understood their time with the photographer was precious. Quite possibly, never again would they have their countenance captured. Strangely, in a world of excess exposures and way too many photographs, the men and women who sit for Mastalia seem to understand that their time with him is significant. Mastalia doesn’t speak, as 19th-century photographers did, of capturing the soul. But he does want to capture what grounds them to the soil, to tradition, to the rhythms of nature.

Francesco Mastalia made the critical choice to photograph 136 organic farmers and chefs (103 appear in the book) with a reproduction of a large antique plate camera and a truly classic 19th-century lens. No camera tilts or swings here. The camera is back to basics. It is modeled on a camera manufactured by E. & H.T. Anthony, the company that supplied Mathew Brady and his team of Civil War photographers with their cameras and chemicals.

The lens is an original Dallmeyer 3B from the 1870s. What a beauty! Julia Margaret Cameron, one of the greatest photographers of the 19th century, also used a Dallmeyer. Upon receiving it as a gift from her daughter, she wrote: “From the first moment, I handled my lens with a tender ardour, and it has become to me as a living thing.” Mastalia’s portrait of

Preface

BY JOAN DYE GUSSOW

The farmers and chefs who will gaze back at you as you move through this astonishing volume, embody—in a way not fully captured even in their own words—what the term “organic” really implies. Each of them speaks about what it means to be an “organic” grower—someone who coaxes from the rich soils of the Hudson Valley plants and animals nourished by the beneficence of Nature—or what it means to be an “organic” chef who transforms the substance these farmers produce into meals that celebrate all the integrity of the original foods. We need these strong faces, and their bearers’ deeply-felt responses, to help hold uncorrupted the real meaning of organic, for we live in a time when words are easily undermined.

Forty years ago, the term “organic”—connected to food and agriculture—was too often derided by critics as either meaningless or fraudulent. Meaningless because the dictionary’s take on the term, “a class of compounds containing carbon,” allowed for critics’ claim that all living things were organic because all contained carbon. Fraudulent because those farmers who called themselves “organic,” couldn’t prove in numbers that their produce was different simply because it was grown with loving attention on soil not abused by synthetic chemicals.

The relative few who were actually growing or eating “organic foods” in those days, believed the term meant something importantly different. Not only did it insist on careful, synthetics-free farming, producing foods that were probably—if not provably—more healthful, but, as one sympathetic participant wrote in the mid 90s, the word’s lack of specific definition allowed many of us to associate it with important characteristics of scale, locality, control, knowledge, nutrition, social justice, participation, grower/eater relationships and. . .connections with schools and communities.

So now that foods bearing organic labels can be found on the shelves of the world’s largest food marketer, leaving behind all the values of community, scale, grower-eater relationships, and the like, how can we understand what the term “organic” really means?

The memorable faces and voices in the volume you are holding provide the richest possible answer to that question. Ask these chefs and farmers to define the term organic, and a range of feelings and beliefs emerge. Sometimes they are quite spiritual: “It is. . . the way the earth did it for millions of years,” says Chris Harp. For Brother Victor-Antoine, “Organic is the old, ancient, natural way that was predestined from all eternity for us to grow our own food.” It’s “agriculture as nature has intended,” asserts Jean-Paul Courtens. And what does nature intend? For Mimi Edelman “organic is about . . . using what comes from the land to vitalize it and always putting back. It’s using nature’s intelligence to work harmoniously with the growing season.”

“It really comes down to loving and caring” insists Cheryl Rogowski. “It starts from the land, the soil, and onto the seed that you plant and how you take care of that plant as it matures, how you handle it when you harvest, how it gets put on the truck.” And it also starts with the region.

“This is some of the richest soil in the country right here,” says Hugh Williams. “Throughout the Hudson Valley there are nutrient rich glacial till, and when we develop the inner fertility of those soils through biological weathering, the potential to produce is just stupendous.” Paul Alward agrees. “Not every place is as lucky as the Hudson Valley. . . There are a lot of cool farmers doing different things up here, growing different crops and pioneering different methods. There’s a real sense of community.” That community is organic, part of a national movement. “Here in New York there’s beautiful soil all over the place,” says James Haurey. “We can just grow

here, keep the money here, and help the community instead of shipping it out to Guatemala or China, where nothing is regulated and you have no idea what chemicals are going into the food.”

Chemicals aside, some of these passionately organic folk chafe at how the word for what they practice has been distorted: “I have always wondered, even before the USDA got involved, why they chose the word organic,” remarks chef Sam Ullman. “It’s an old term, much older than this whole emphasis on being conscious of what inputs are going into our food production. It is carbon-based chemistry and carbon-based molecules. All the chemicals we don’t want on our food, half of them or better are organic. It’s semantics.”

“Organic?” asks Joan Harris. “I would like it to mean the way nature intended for the earth to be treated and food to be grown. I don’t know if it means that to everyone.” Amy Hepworth agrees. “The problem is, when I say organic, it means a lot of things that I don’t want it to mean anymore.”

“The first thing that comes to mind when I think of organic,” says Jack Algieri, “is. . . healthy animals and healthy people. But now in reality, the word has been swallowed. And while it’s an assurance, it’s hard to say what it’s an assurance for.”

When “organic” was certified, John Gorzynski growls “there was no way I was going to validate or lend it my credibility—that of my farm and my 20 years worth of work towards making the word organic mean something. I totally withdrew my name from the word.” But “I can look back and know I did no harm and I’m leaving things better than I found them.”

Indisputably, organic is good for the planet: To produce healthy food, Anne Eschenroeder explains, “‘sustainable’ has to encompass a lot of different realms. Like not using synthetic pesticides and fertilizers, and working with land in a naturally beneficial way so that you are getting crops out, but the land is actually improving.”

And what’s produced is gratifying to chefs. “As chefs, and as eaters, we have a responsibility to support the health of this living landscape,” says chef Dan Barber. “We need to. . .celebrate

every part of the ‘organism’—an integrated system of grains, vegetables, legumes, and livestock. You’ve heard of a nose-to-tail approach to the pig? Well this is a nose-to-tail approach to the whole farm. And it represents the future of delicious food.” “The organic I am looking for is honest and authentic,” says Wesley Dier. “There needs to be a face behind the product.”

Sometimes “organic” is about what it means to farmers and eaters to grow that way. “One of the benefits of organic is that I don’t have to ride a sprayer,” says Guy Jones. “There’s no farmer in the world that wakes up the morning and says, ‘Oh boy I get to spray today.’” Ron Hayward says, “I wanted my daughter to be able to walk out into our field or into the greenhouse, pick something, put it into her mouth, and feel really good about it.”

Any other kind of farming, says Steffen Schneider, does not do “justice to all the living creatures that we work with. . . I think the art of the farmer is to try to orchestrate all these various realms of nature—the mineral realm, the plant realm, the animal realm. . . in a way where they are harmoniously interacting and creating, you could say, a symphony.” Says Jean-Paul Courtens, “I feel like every year I am a performance artist, and I’m painting these fields. It’s this expression that you give to the land, helping an animal or plant grow and develop.”

There is no score for that symphony, no formula for that painting. These achievements cannot be captured in rules, except the overriding rule that nature must be respected. Organic is something you either understand, or don’t, or think you understand, and only perhaps do. What is without doubt is that Francesco Mastalia’s lustrous, archaic, stunningly deep portraits have captured organic in the fullest meaning of the word. See for yourself.



**BROTHER VICTOR-ANTOINE
D'AVILA-LATOURRETTE**

Our Lady of the Resurrection Monastery, Lagrangeville, NY

Organic is the old, ancient, natural way that was predestined from all eternity for us to grow our own food. In other words, organic is basic; it's the earthy, clean food that is in the Bible. At the very beginning of Chapters in The Book of Genesis, God orders Peter, "Go and plant gardens, and eat the fruits of what you plant and what you cultivate."

So, it's like a divine order from God. God always intended for us to eat healthy, to live healthy, and to produce healthy food, food that has no contamination and has not been treated in any way. We have to have respect for the soil and the land. It should be kept clean and pure. And we are comforted by the food that comes from the earth, which to us is holy.

Here we live under the Rule of Saint Benedict, a life based on the Gospel dating back to the fifth century. We retain the old wisdom of living with the cycles of the seasons and of the Earth.

Nature tells you what to eat, what to consume, and we reap the benefits of that. Once you go against nature and you're eating artificial things, sooner or later, it does have its consequences.

We don't always use the word organic. The idea was always to cultivate the natural way, the natural method of not using any kind of artificial pesticide or chemical.

Our vinegars are fermented the old-fashioned way. It's an old custom in France and Italy. The wine that is going sour is kept in containers in the cellar, breathing, so it will turn into vinegar.

We don't put anything artificial in them and they have a lot of natural flavor. If you taste our vinegars they taste clean and pure. Our production is small; we make eight varieties of vinegar. We make red wine vinegar and white wine vinegar out of organic wines made here in the Dutchess County. There are no sulfites or chemicals in the wine, so they're pure organic. We make apricot vinegar, sherry vinegar, apple cider vinegar, and then there is raspberry. You taste the raspberry, you can taste the apple in the cider, you can taste the apricot in there, because it is natural and clean and it retains the natural flavor.

I have written cookbooks and spiritual books. I must have six, seven cookbooks in English, and several in other languages. The cookbooks are simple vegetarian, monastic cooking, inspired by the garden. My first cookbook *From a Monastery Kitchen* has sold well over two million copies. And my second one, *Twelve Months of Monastery Soups*, has sold well over two and a half million copies worldwide.



GUY JONES

Blooming Hill Farm, Blooming Grove, NY

Back in the 70s I ran a storefront law office based out of Albany. I worked all over the country, all alternative stuff, civil rights and anti-war. One of the things I did was work with Cesar Chavez of the United Farm Workers. I spent a little time working with Chavez and as part of that you had to work out in the field with the people you were trying to organize.

I've been a gardener all my life, even when I lived in the city I would always find a place to garden. I like growing things, and I decided I needed to be doing more outside. I went to the Ag School at Cornell University for a while, took a lot of courses, and did that for a couple of years. Unfortunately, while there I learned that the agricultural system isn't quite as lily-white as you might think. I worked on non-organic farms and it wasn't what I was interested in doing. I needed to do something on my own.

We're growing 200–300 varieties of different things. You can't grow a lot of one thing and be organic. You run into trouble.

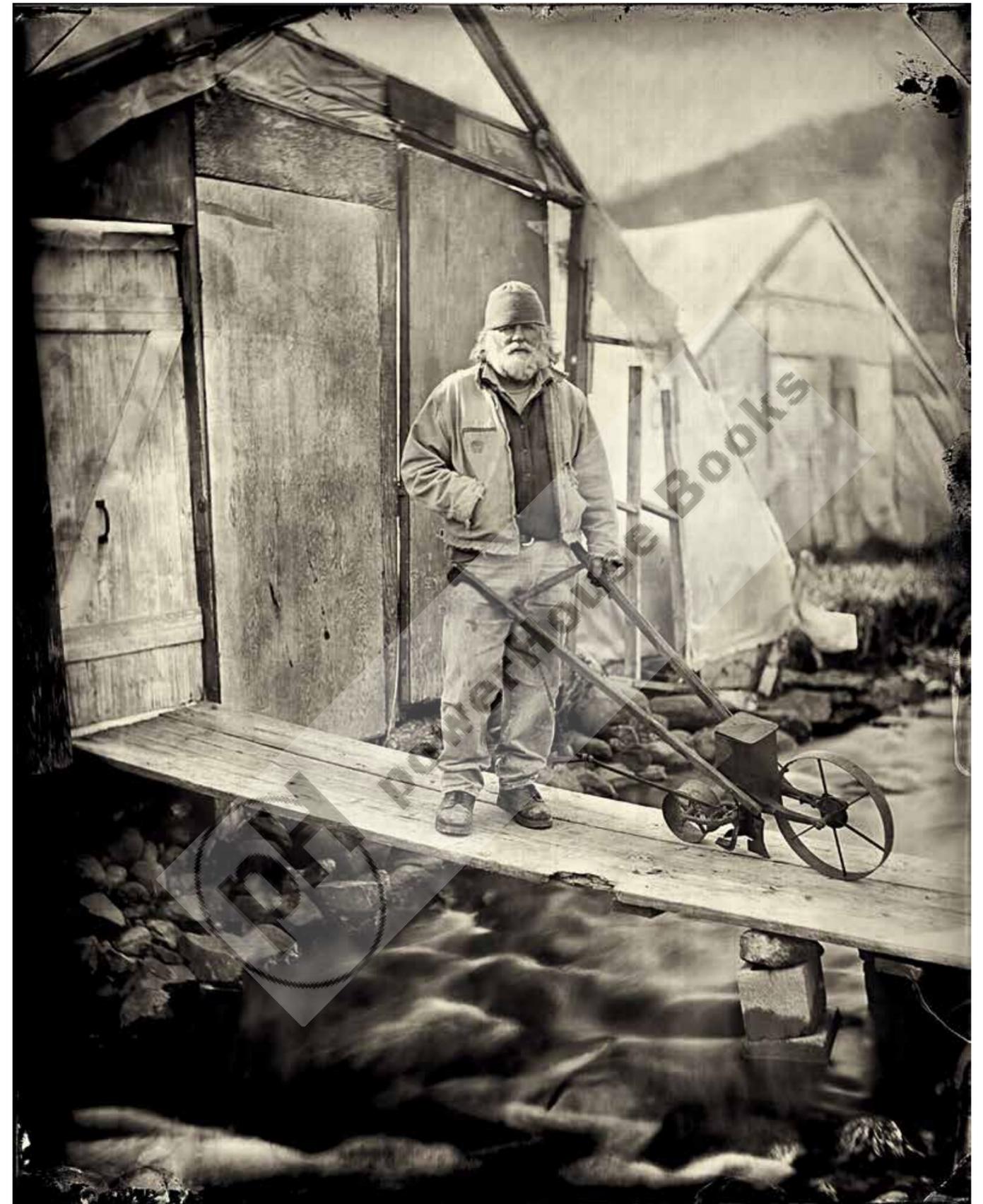
Organic farming is a tremendous amount of handwork. We're growing a lot of things in one field and they all need different types of care. We pick everything by hand—we're not using any machines—and are planting all the time. It's the first of December and we're still planting.

One of the benefits of organic is I don't have to ride a sprayer. There's no farmer in the world that wakes up in the morning and says, "Oh boy I get to spray today." You have to put on all that gear and you're working with nasty chemicals. Then, of course, there are no earthworms and you're killing the birds.

We were certified for years but when the federal government took over the program we dropped out. I didn't see why they had to run it the way they wanted to run it. The USDA organic program is driven by the big guys.

We sell mostly to restaurants in Manhattan and Brooklyn—we have about 50 on our list—we have a CSA, we sell at the farm, and at farmers markets.

I've been farming almost 30 years. I like what I'm doing. I try to be honest and do the right thing. I've got aches and pains, but luckily I didn't miss a day's work this year.



JEAN-PAUL COURTENS

Roxbury Farm, Kinderhook, NY

I started farming in Holland, in 1978. I thought I was destined to be an artist. When I went to school I realized it wasn't for me. I couldn't be inside. I really enjoyed the physical activity of farming—that's what I fell in love with.

When Lord Northbourne, an anthroposophist, had to describe the way in which Sir Albert Howard was expressing his form of agriculture, he gave it the name "organic agriculture": agriculture as nature has intended.

That word was in relationship to the word organic, in the context of Goethe. During his time, in the early 1800s, people knew him only as a poet, but he was also a philosopher and a scientist. He inspired people to think in more organic ways. Thinking organically, thinking the way that nature is reflecting.

I think the word organic has lost its meaning. The original philosophy where Sir Albert Howard came from, just like Rudolph Steiner, was inspired by peasant farmers; not only their agricultural methods, but also their lifestyle and sense of community. It was really this holistic approach that Sir Albert Howard emphasized, whereby the farm is a living organism.

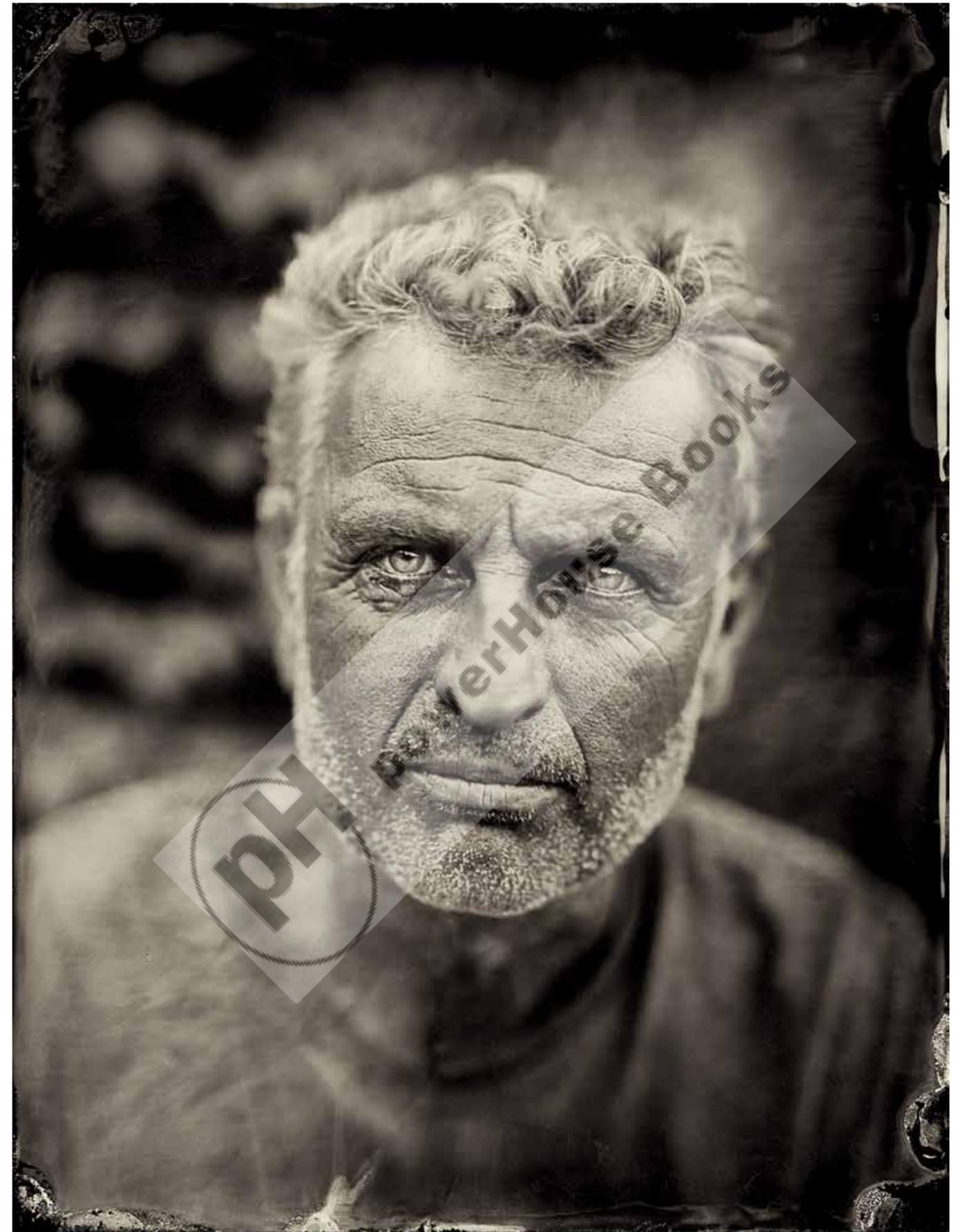
The original principles—this whole sense of community and social relationships—are very important in the original foundation of organic farming. It's not only that we treat the soil and the animals the way that was intended by nature, but also treat the people how it was intended by nature. We really have taken the whole thing out of context. We made it a commodity and it was never intended to be a commodity.

These days if you go to a supermarket, or talk to a large organic farm in California, to them organic means following the guidelines of the USDA. It is an input/output system. The farm is not a living organism.

Our particular farm is based on anthroposophy. Our growing practices are in conformity with the standards of Demeter. They are the ones that provide the biodynamic standards. We have 375 acres and provide food to over 1,000 families through our CSA.

I feel like every year I am a performance artist, and I'm painting these fields. It's this expression that you give to the land, helping an animal or plant grow and develop.

You have to go back to where the word originally came from.



ASHLEY LOEHR

Sparrowbush Farm, Hudson, NY

When I was 13, I started working on farms. I worked on a big vegetable farm in Massachusetts, and then on farms in New Hampshire and around New England.

The reason I'm a farmer is because I think our industrial food system is very destructive and has far-reaching impacts beyond our country. Some of my most motivating experiences were when I was traveling in Mexico and meeting the farmers who lived there. They basically had no livelihoods because of commodity corn or agricultural practices that were dumping on their market. The strong message I got from those people was, "Go home and start making alternatives." The industrial food system is negatively affecting so many people's lives in so many places.

Now when I think of organic, I think of organic matter—the soil. It is something I'm always trying to create and foster. It's the basis of what microbes in the dirt eat, which makes plant life possible and abundant. I think of the soil chemistry context and less of the label.

Learning about soil inspired me to keep it alive and that means not applying chemicals that will cause soil organisms to die or perish.

The things I admire most are careful management and intelligent ecological notions, which are not necessarily certified practices. I'm not interested in organic certification; I would never spray conventional pesticides. For me it's about reinvesting in the land that I'm taking from and making sure it's here for future generations in a better state than it was when I got there. So I have found, over and over again, that the lines between conventional and organic are blurred because there are many certified organic pesticides that are quite similar to conventional pesticides. Accountability is a word I'm more interested in.

I don't have a say in this farm equally, even though I designed most of it and put it in the ground. It has a life of its own. The farm's organisms develop with their own complete character and it's really defined a lot by the characters of the humans who manage it. But it has its own thing, which is special and humbling.

My main marketing outlet is a winter CSA that runs from November through May; and it's a full-diet CSA that includes vegetables, meat, cheese, milk, bread, all those things.

The way you can have a voice in it, as a consumer, is to make other choices.



WILL BROWN

Lowland Farm, Warwick, NY

Prior to farming I was a bank economist in New York City. It's a big change from sitting at a desk and giving presentations to people to being outside and hardly talking to anyone all day.

I drifted into farming gradually. I started 15 years ago doing hay, then having a few cows, then having more cows, so it's been a gradual process. We've been doing grass-fed beef, and now pastured pork, for about six years.

I love the animals, but really what I like most is farmland. I love the land. Not wild woods, but this combination between partly natural, partly man-made, open farmland. I just have a real weakness for it, that's why we bought this place. The great thing about cows is they need a lot of land, they're very land intensive. So, you're out there over a large area of farmland and you are managing it. That's really what attracts me to farming most.

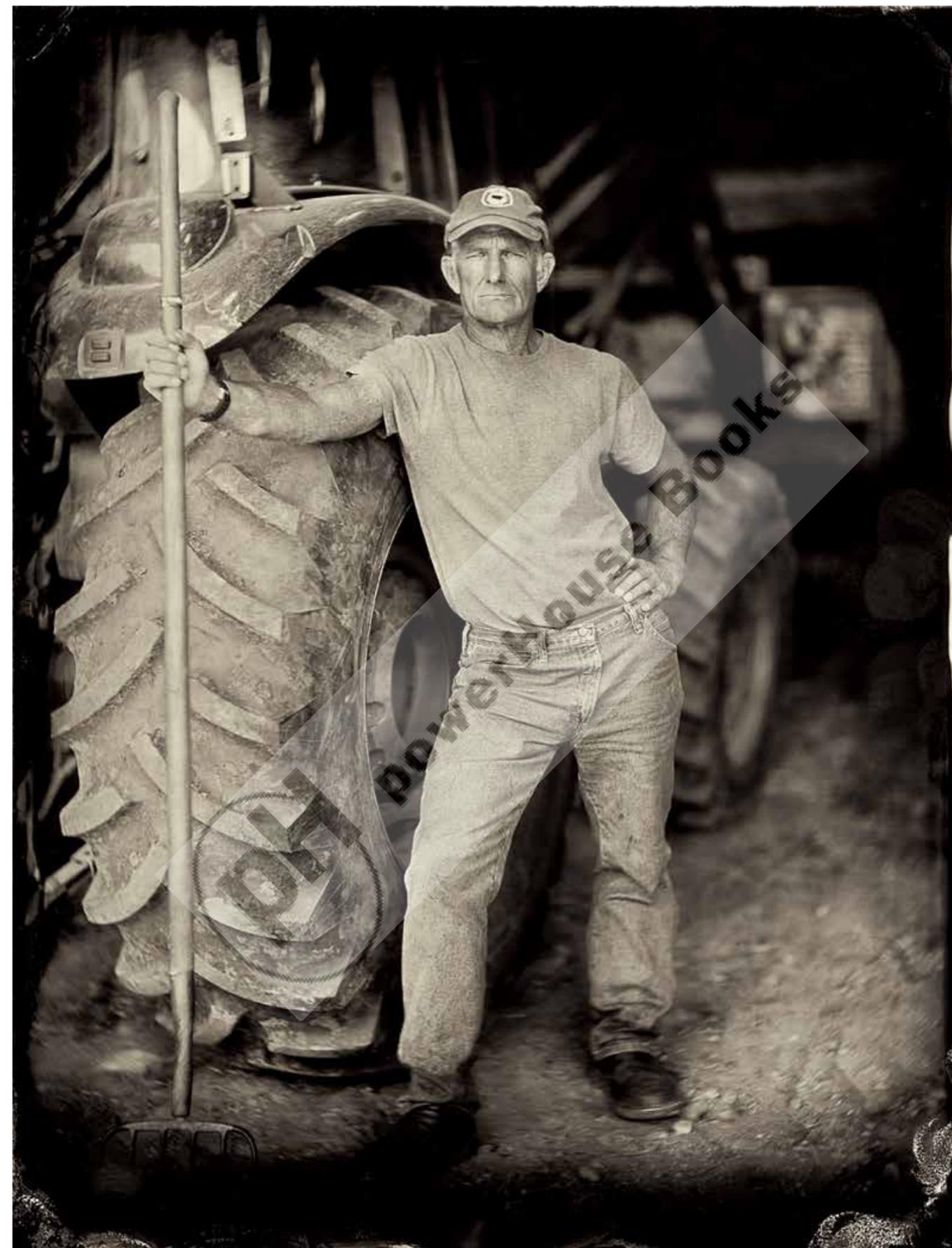
At the beginning we were just grazing the cattle, and doing a cow-calf operation. Then we thought about expanding the business, and that's when we decided to do the grass-fed.

We have about 140 cows now, after calving we probably have about 165. When you're doing grass-fed you have a least three generations on the farm. You have your cow, your yearling calve, and your two-year-olds. So you have three, and sometimes even four, generations on the farm at one time.

We're not certified in any way, we have not gone down the organic certification route. As far as cows are concerned, they're just naturally in the fields. We don't fertilize, we don't plow, we don't plant. We are managing our pastures with the animals themselves. We wouldn't have to change anything to be organic. What we do is holistic grazing; it's a way of managing your pasture with the animals. We move the cows every day. The main herd gets a two-acre section in the morning, and the next morning we move them to the next two-acre section. It's more of an art than a science.

We listen to our customers. Our customers like the grass-fed aspect. It's important to them how we treat the animals, and also having it local. We're not hearing a whole lot of, "Is it organic?"

All the grasslands in the U.S. were not there by themselves, they were there with big herds of animals going across them. It was the interaction between the animals and the grasses that was successful.



DON MCLEAN

Thompson-Finch Farm, Ancram, NY

I grew up in Vermont next to a small farm and apple orchard. As a teenager I worked there on and off. I got really interested in farming and caught the bug.

We'd been organic farmers in Vermont before we moved here in 1981. We came from a place that looked at organic farming as a philosophical, ethical life choice. We think of ourselves as trying to create realistic workable alternatives to conventional farming and always wanted to show how it can be done. For years, we've been doing things that people said can't be done.

It was 1986 or 1987 when we got certified. The decision to certify back then was because we were expanding our capability to grow—the amount we could grow, the varieties we could grow—and we were tapping into the local wholesale market. So, we needed some sort of third-party certification to enter that marketplace. If you're going to start selling stuff directly through CSA sales, farm markets, and pick your own, it wouldn't matter. We have our reputation and it's solid. It started because we were selling to places where they, rightly, wanted some certification. We support that concept and we recognize its value.

Now, organic includes huge industrial corporate farming and it's unethical regarding what we want organic to be, and what we think organic farming should be. We have a system that's making people sick, and making them obese, and giving them diabetes, and we're actively supporting this as a nation. The whole thing seems to revolve around corporate interests and corporate power.

When it went to the federal level the certified organic agencies out there had enough variability in their standards that people were realizing there was a need to have some kind of national standard. I think it was good in that sense, but bad in the sense that the way it is now is a reflection of the corporate interests that have basically usurped that facet of our government.

The Hudson Valley is one of the greatest places to be doing this: great farmland, great farm markets, and really educated customers. I think it's pretty clear that the Hudson Valley is heading towards being an international food destination.



JOHN GORZYNSKI

Gorzynski Orner Farm, Narrowsburg, NY

I remember when I was five or six years old, I wanted to be a farmer. My grandfather had a farm in Oradell, New Jersey, and my great-grandfather had a farm where the Bronx-White-stone Bridge is. Farming is in my blood. I always wanted to farm.

My folks bought a place in Wantage, New Jersey. Within the first year I tripled the size of the garden. I was doing it as a hobby, but very quickly it turned into an economic statement that we were saving taxes and that we were feeding the family.

I went to school for forestry and got a job with the shade tree department in the town of Oradell. Within six months I was promoted to foreman. It was right during the peak of the gypsy moth infestation, so spraying chemicals was a large part of the job. Most of what we sprayed were highly toxic pesticides. Being exposed to the chemical industry, I got to see people with different levels of cancer and sicknesses, and what it did to the ecosystem.

When I started farming in 1976 it didn't take me long to put two and two together, and I arrived at the conclusion that organic was the way to go. I have been farming organic from day one.

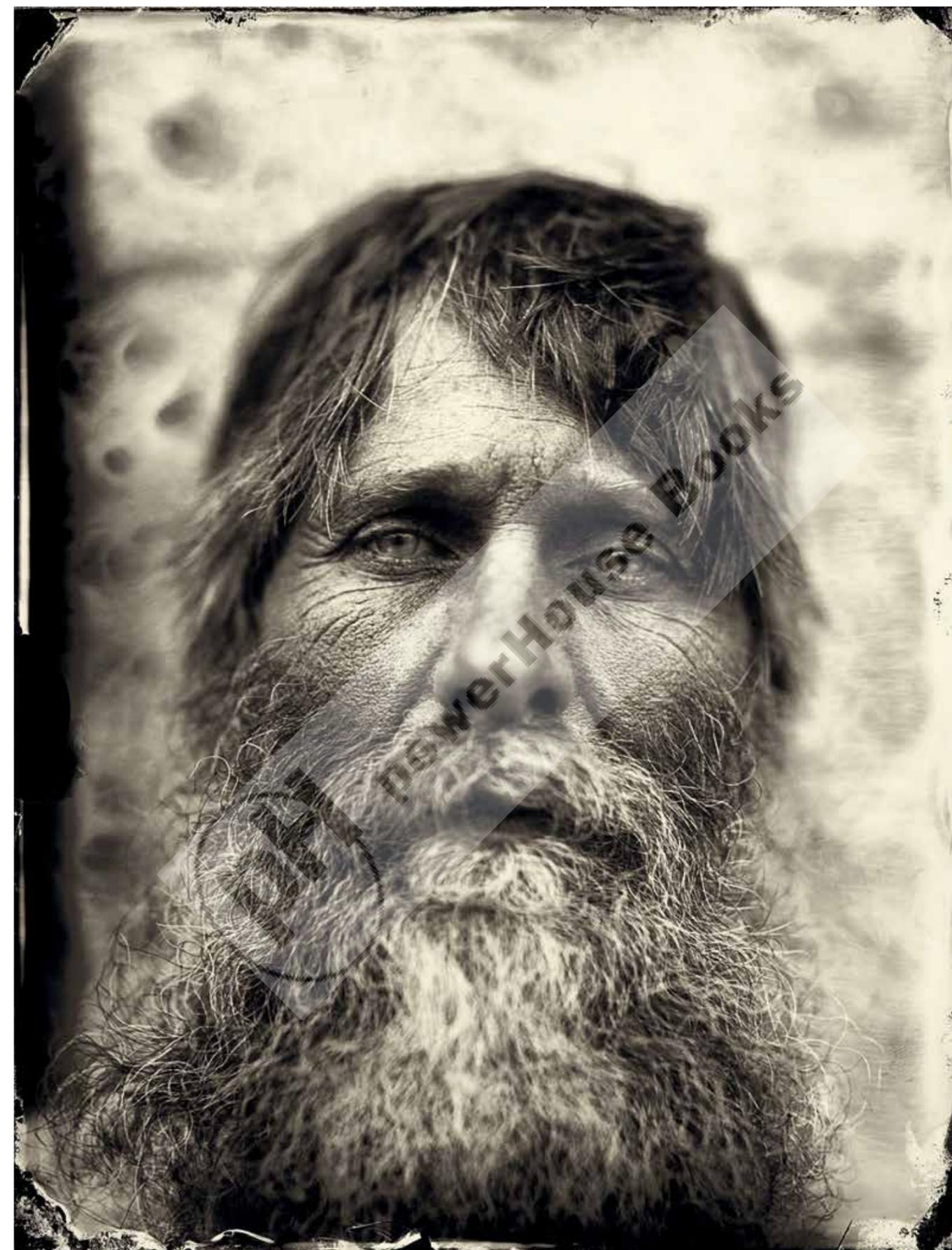
In 1982 I formed—along with quite a number of other farmers from New York State—NOFA New York, which was a grassroots organization. I was selected as chairman for the first couple of years, and towards the end of my reign we decided as a board that we should form our own certification agency that would certify organic farmers. We proceeded to set up standards that were among the strictest, if not *the* strictest, in the organic industry in this country.

The first 20 years of my farming life I was certified, from 1979 up until the USDA took over. As soon as the USDA became involved the definition was diminished to the point where I would no longer be certified. It didn't come near to my standards of what I felt organic should be, and there was no way I was going to validate or lend it my credibility—that of my farm and my 20 years worth of work towards making the word organic mean something. I totally withdrew my name from the word.

A number of smaller organic farmers in the NOFA chapters got together and sat down and brainstormed and isolated 63 issues with the USDA regulation. The one that's the easiest for me to convey is the synthetics allowable in production, processing, handling, and storage. To date there are 142 synthetics that are allowable, and in my definition of organic, synthetics don't exist.

This farm is 52 acres, we farm about 23 to 24 of them. In a normal year we'll grow about 600 varieties of vegetables and herbs, and we have about 300 varieties of fruit on the farm.

I can look back and know I did no harm, and I'm leaving things better than I found them.



AMY HEPWORTH

Hepworth Farms, Milton, NY

It has been Hepworth Farms since 1818; I'm the seventh generation. In order to be around that long you have to adapt and change. My family has been very into quality produce, so it's been engrained in our business—quality, quality, quality, if in doubt, throw out.

For generations all of us have attended Cornell, but we have more of a progressive bent on farming, it's been handed down. I've been practicing organic agriculture, and I studied biodynamic farming. When we did it in the 80s, we scientifically knew that we could do better than organic in an ecological way. To be able to have a sustainable farm, to be able to have a farm that will go on past you, you have to take care of the land.

The reason and purpose of organic agriculture is to take care of the soil and rejuvenate it in a natural way to stimulate all of the biologicals. We've been through various stages of certification. When you're organic, there's a certain protocol you follow.

Organic makes me feel that you're trying to do the right thing by the soil, by making it as healthy as possible and making a more natural lifestyle. The problem is, when I say organic, it means a lot of things that I don't want it to mean anymore.

In 1980 I was growing apples. I wasn't certified organic, I grew them organic—that's the difference. There's no glory in doing something and not doing what you're saying. We've been doing it for a long time because we're trying to de-chemicalize the food industry and we were organic because it just seemed like it would be a good way to get out of what was seemingly starting to create a lot of problems with the chemicals.

We do things and it doesn't matter how much it costs if that's the best agricultural protocol. Meaning, to stimulate biological activity in the soil. Even if I wasn't organic I still wouldn't put herbicide between my rows. I like having soil that has weeds; I like having a living system.

Organic or not, I would still follow a holistic, or a whole-alive, farm approach, a system that is focused on creating as much positive and the least amount of damage as possible.

There are a lot of things to worry about, so if you buy local, fresh, organic fruits and vegetables, that's what's going to make you healthy.



DANIEL LEADER

Bread Alone, Boiceville, NY

You know when you hear some music you've never heard before, and you're just completely moved, like, "Oh my God, what is that?" It was like that when I first met bread makers.

That was in 1979, and I was working as a chef. I worked at a bunch of fancy restaurants: La Grenouille, The Water Club, Raoul's. I worked at a place called Regine's, The Palace, and I used to moonlight with Italian bakers.

I modeled Bread Alone after organic bakeries I saw in Europe. From the very beginning, long before the organic certification was on the table, we were using organic flours. Our philosophy is to make simple, handcrafted, European-style, artisan breads.

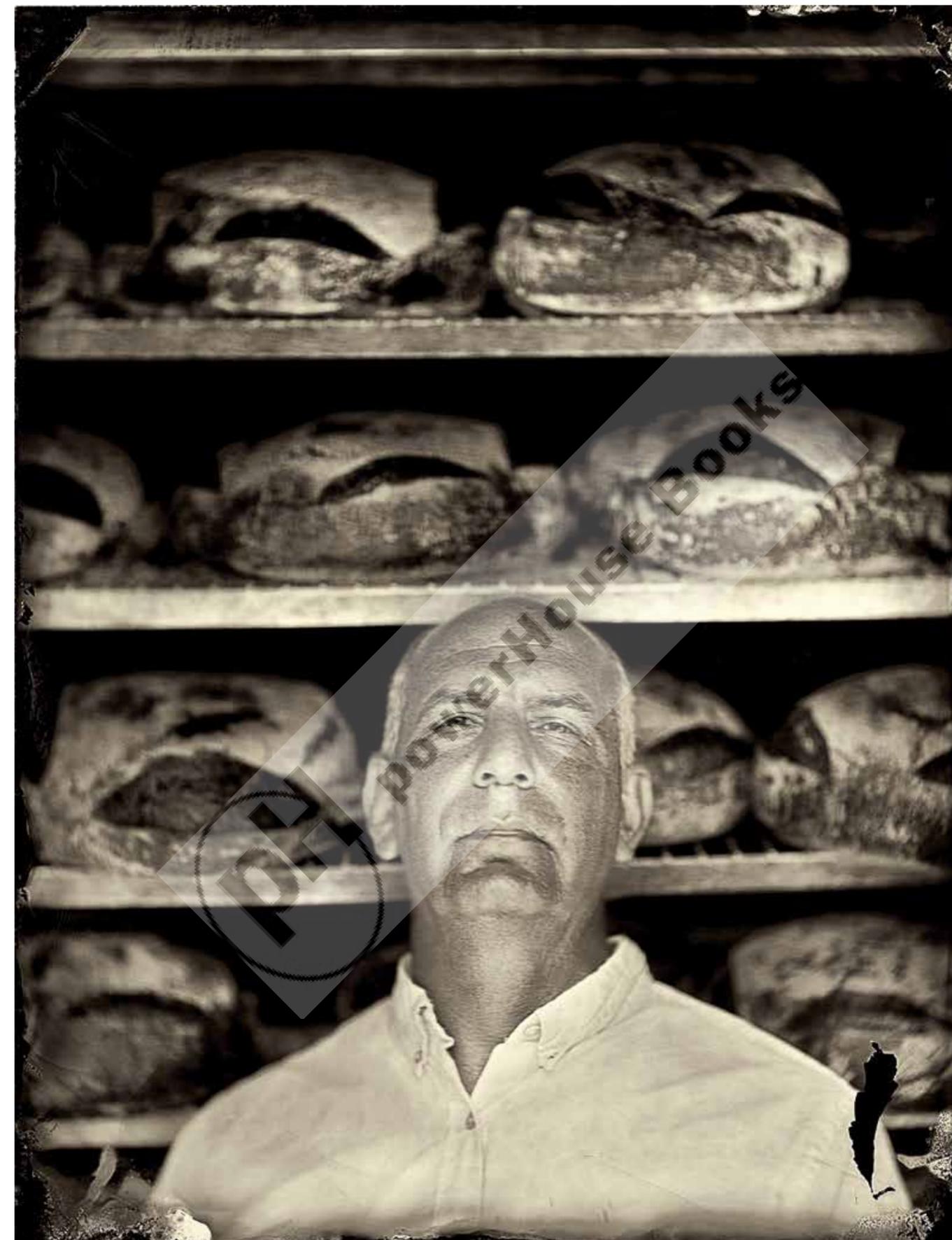
To me organic is a process, it's unfiltered, and you are not dealing with the questions of pesticides, herbicides, and fungicides. You're dealing with food as it should be in its natural state.

People say that industrialized food is cheaper. I don't buy the argument that it provides cheap food for the masses. If money is an issue, buy a 50-lb bag of brown rice, buy dried beans, buy fresh vegetables. You can't eat any cheaper than that. Stop eating processed, packaged, corn-based food. Look at the food pyramid, there's whole wheat, bread, dried legumes, vegetables, and a little bit of meat.

We're baking 60 to 70,000 pounds of bread per week. We have three retail stores, we sell at 45 farmer's markets a week, and have over 300 outlets for our breads.

I've seen the Hudson Valley go up and down, and there is certainly a resurgence of food producers now, whether it's cheese, bread, vegetables, meats, ciders, or maple syrup. One of our focuses is to support local people whenever possible.

I've been here for 30 years now; I'm not going anywhere.



CHRIS HARP

Honeybee Lives, New Paltz, NY

An average hive has 40,000 bees. Nobody tells any individual bee what their job for the day will be, but they all know it and do it with the most absolute perfection. It's fascinating.

People call us all the time about buying honey, but we don't sell honey. My job is to keep the bees alive, because without the bees, we'd have no food. 70 percent of the trees above us would not be here if the bees hadn't pollinated them.

One of the greatest hits on the bee industry are genetically modified organisms, GMO food. I consider it ingenious—they took the gene of a trout, spliced it into the tomato plant so the tomato could handle the cold better, stay red longer on the store shelf, and become a better selling commodity. Now my bee goes to that tomato flower, brings back the pollen. Pollen is what they use as flour to make the bread to feed their larvae. Now they're feeding this baby bee the gene of a trout. They never dealt with that for millions of years; not until the past 50 years, when we have been doing all this engineering of life.

What the USDA considers to be organic and what I believe is truly organic are two different factions. Organic to me is heirloom. It is a plant that has been around for hundreds of thousands of years without changing its molecular structure. It is something that does not come into contact with man-made petroleum based fertilizers, herbicides, pesticides, and fungicides. It is something that is truly of the earth; the way the earth did it for millions of years. These pesticides were used in chemical warfare. When the war stopped they had all these chemicals, they diluted them and now they kill bugs instead of people.

Honey was finally approved by the FDA to be prescribed by doctors in 2007. Honey is used on wounds and burns because it creates hydrogen peroxide and it completely disinfects the area. It also spores the genes in your body, the regenerative genes to heal it. They're using propolis right now as one of the main studies for treatment of human HIV/AIDS. Propolis has also been found to be the sole cure for sleeping sickness. Raw honey is also used for people who have allergies because you're building your immune system to deal with the allergies that you might have.

Everything a honeybee comes in contact with is benefited in a positive manner—even when you get stung by a honeybee.

I love this work. I love the energy of the bees.



JODY BOLLUYT

Roxbury Farm, Kinderhook, NY

My summer job has always been farming, since I was 13 years old. I grew up in Iowa, and a lot of the farms needed help in the summer, so as teenagers, that's what we did. We de-tasseled corn, we sprayed beans with herbicides; I did that through high school.

My grandparents had a farm. It was sort of that classic farm story that you hear: they had an orchard, dairy cows, beef cows, they grew all their own food. They always told stories about the community around the farm and the life of farming.

I couldn't imagine working on my uncle's 1,500-acre grain farm, farming soybeans. I just didn't think it was possible to make a living as a farmer. As I got older my uncle talked about how they couldn't drink the water out of their well anymore because of all the chemicals in it. Babies couldn't drink the water anymore because there was so much nitrogen pollution.

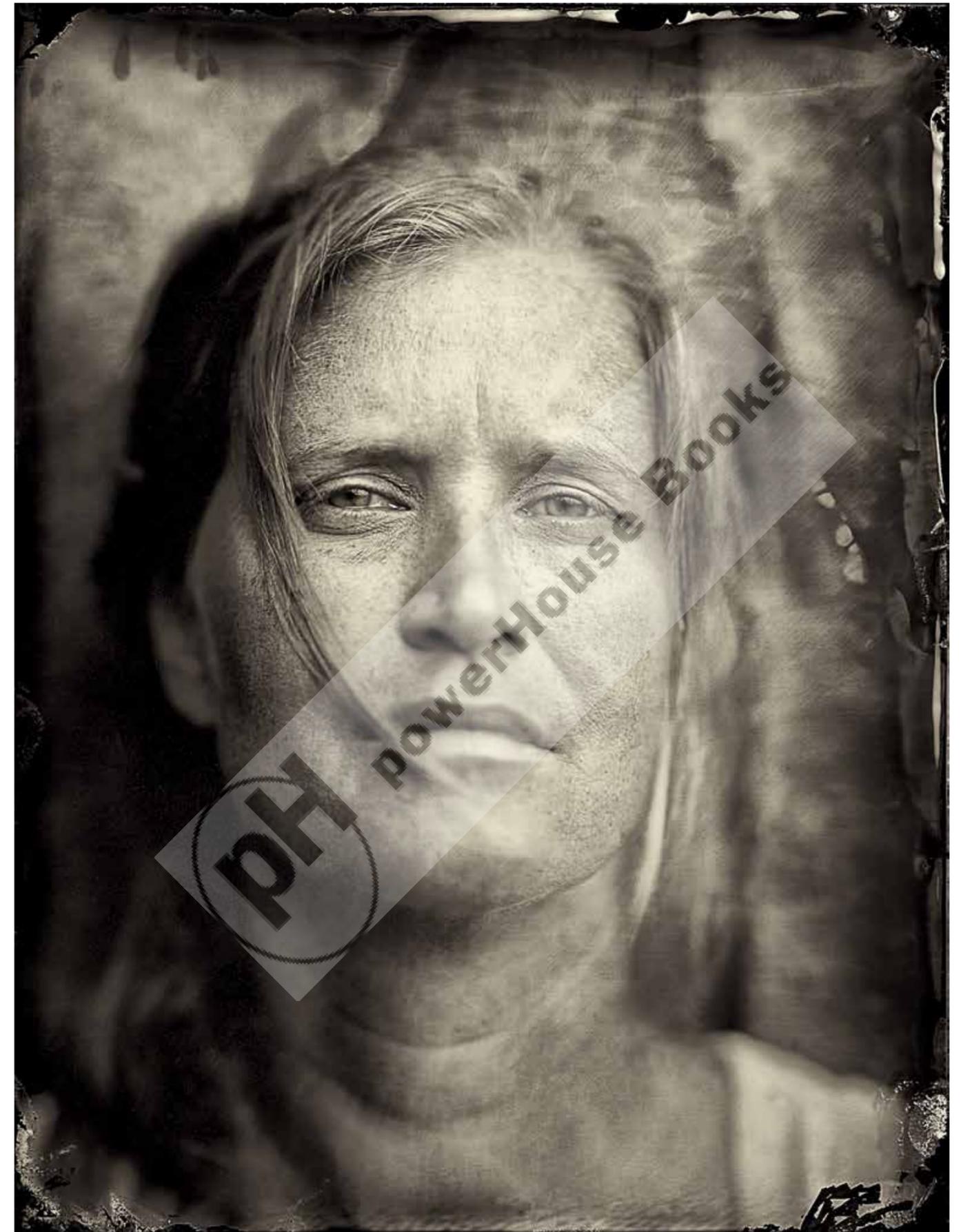
There used to be small farms there, then they all closed and we lost a lot of the community that we used to have. After seeing what happened to the landscape, I didn't really want to go back to the old ways of farming.

Organic on our farm means that we do things in the best way possible so that we can do this for generations. The way we treat our soil, the way we treat our animals and the plants, it's something that we could go on doing for a long time.

You have to treat your soil with respect, it's not a commodity, it's something you have to take care of just like you take care of your animals. You need to take care of the people who work the land too. You have to provide for your farm workers and farmers so that they can continue to do the work with dignity and feel like they are respected for the work they do. I think you should treat your animals the way animals should be treated, and allow them to express who they are. They need to express their own inner nature.

We have chosen not to be certified because we direct-market everything to our community supported agriculture families. They can come to our farm whenever they want, to see what we do. We have a direct communication with them about everything we do here. So, we felt the certification was not a necessary step we needed to take.

I can't think of anything else I'd rather do.



CHRIS REGAN

Sky Farm, Millerton, NY

I always farmed organically. I wouldn't have done anything else. It seems like the honest way to farm, and using synthetic pesticides or chemicals is the opposite of the way to do it. This is my 19th season farming. The 15th year at Sky Farm, and I farmed four years up in the Berkshires.

Organic is working with nature, not telling it what to do, not demanding of it things it can't do. You're allowing Mother Nature to do the hard work, and you're facilitating that. You're not introducing things that are unnatural. You're not introducing chemical pesticides and such. It's a straightforward way, and it's also management. You're doing a lot with the land, and it's your responsibility to be treating it well, so it's also husbandry. You're actually trying to make the soil better and dealing with your fields in a way that improves them.

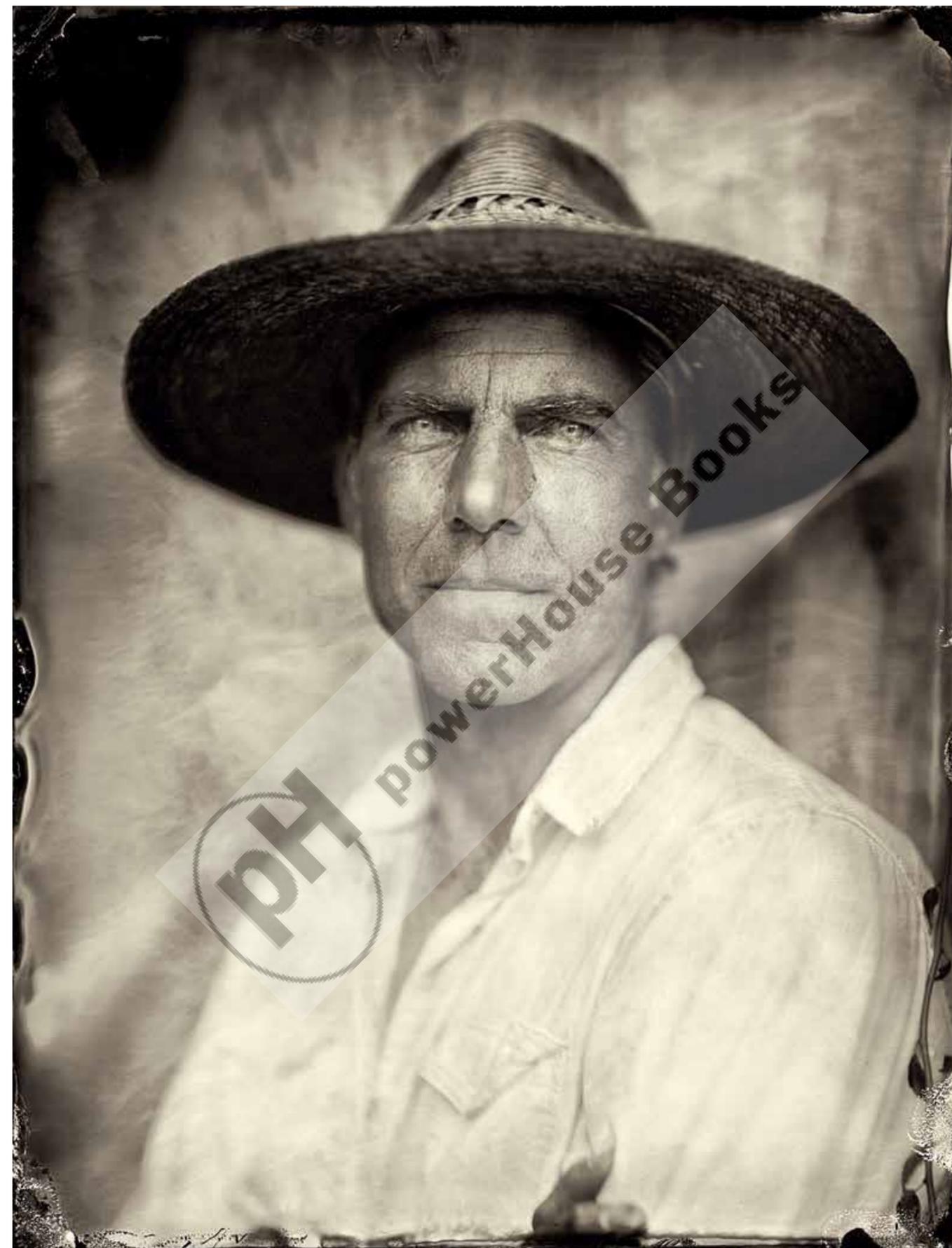
I'm not certified. I've been certified a couple times, early on, before the federal switch over to the standards. It was expensive then, and it's more expensive now. I'm working with chefs that don't really ask if it's organic. They're not really concerned about the certification, they're interested in quality. The key is respect: respect for the product and the land.

Farming in the Hudson Valley has been great. It has allowed me to do what I wanted to do because there is enough demand for quality, locally produced, organic food. That's the thing—the market has grown every year. I'm going a 50, 60-mile radius to sell all my food. It used to be that I had to go to the city or sell through a distributor, but now I can sell it all locally. There are a lot of chefs supporting farmers now and providing us with a way to make a living. They are also providing their customers with the best possible ingredients.

It's growing every year, people's awareness of it is growing, and chefs are playing a role in that. Also, with the spread of farmers markets and CSAs, it's getting bigger.

I think the movement towards local is very omnipresent at this point, certainly at high-end restaurants. It's almost a requirement to get your vegetables locally, and now they can.

I still value the word organic myself. I know what it meant 20 years ago, and that's what I still think of it as meaning.



WILLY DENNER

Little Seed Gardens, Chatham, NY

I had a lifelong interest in farming, but it was something that everyone I respected advised me not to do. I had a great-uncle who was a produce grower in South Jersey, and everybody said, "Don't end up like your uncle Gene." My grandfather and great-grandfather both had big vegetable gardens. So, I always gardened from my early youth, and always had a dream of farming. It took a long time to decide it was worthwhile to do.

When we started, even our farming neighbors were just dumbfounded, and for the first ten years when I would say, "I am an organic farmer," people would respond, "Oh, that's a lot of work."

My inspiration had something to do with reconciling human separation from the rest of reality, and trying to understand that through meeting some of my own needs directly through contact with the earth. I thought that was the best way to pursue the discomfort I had; in recognizing my humanity and trying to integrate that with early consciousness of things that were hard for me to accept about humanity. Farming has been a process of trying to have insight into that, how to live humanely.

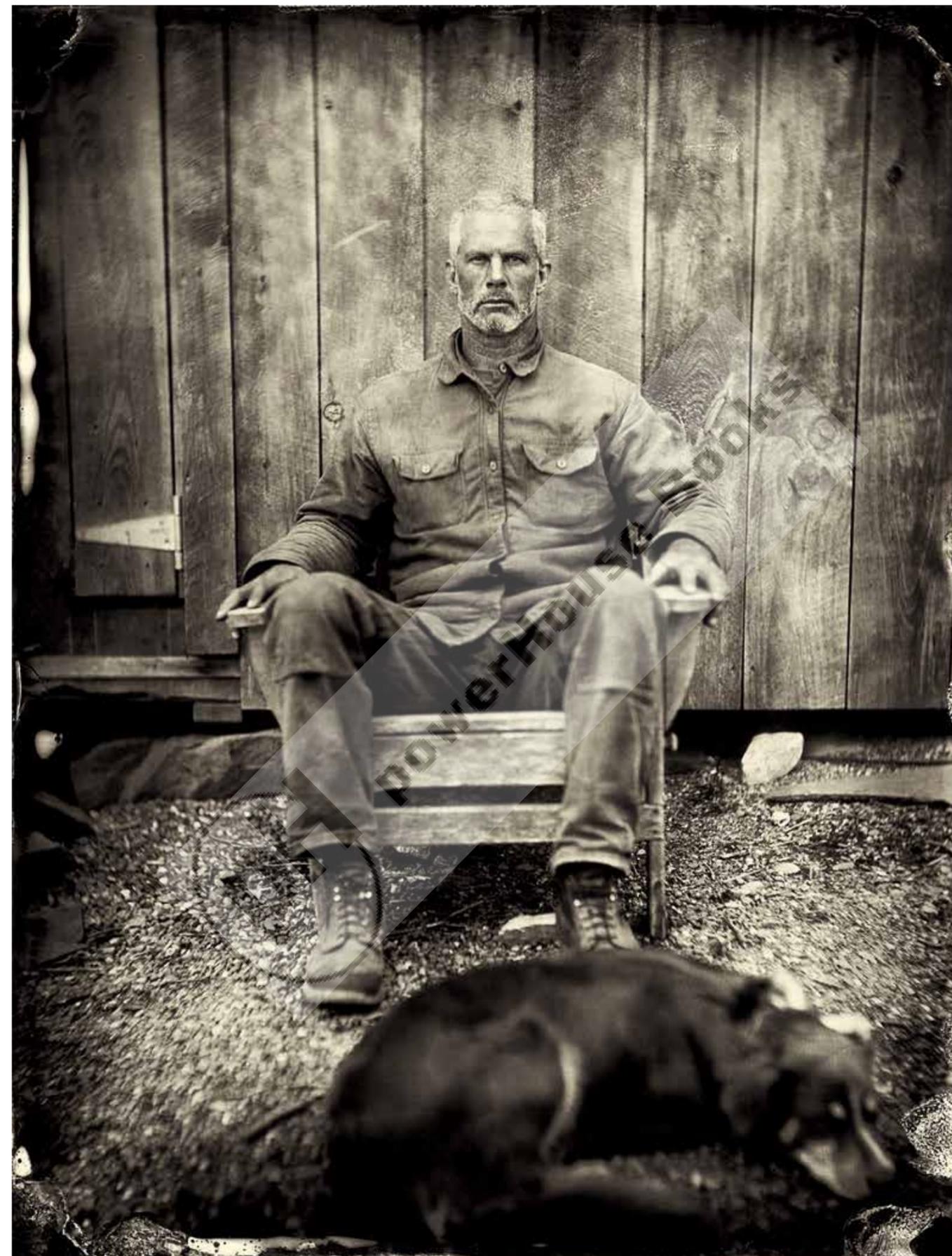
Life is the thing that defines organic farming for me, allowing life. I have the thought that all human need is met with contact with the earth. Farming came out of trying to feed myself, and the people I cared about. So, that sense of nourishment that I was looking for was from a connection with my own needs, with my human needs.

We are a commercial farm, and the organic certification has a lot to do with our marketing. But it's kind of a catchall, it has a way of creating definitions, barriers, separations, and groups. And of course there are all the rhetorical dangers that any term can take on. I like to think the process I'm engaged in is more holistic.

I love to feed people, including myself, and I love to enjoy the fruits of my labor. I look forward to things coming into season, and then on top of that, it is a wonderful gift to be involved in, immersed in the process of life.

Farming is a place where you get to directly connect with people and the social difficulty of experiencing abundance, of recognizing the amplexness of the gifts of the earth and our ability to connect with them.

My hope is to continue a life in farming. If I succeed in that, I will have met all my objectives.



SAM WILDFONG

Obercreek Farm, Hughsonville, NY

I fell in love with the physicality of farming, and not just the idea of growing food.

Organic is a lot of healthy growing, it is building community, building the soil, it's building deep roots; whether those are deep roots in the community, or with your plants. It's more of a holistic take on food. Hearing the word organic I think of something way more wholesome, whole foods, being nourished, and whole people. We use organic practices here, but we are not certified organic. We rely on the fact that our customers know us.

To produce healthy food you have to start with someone who is dedicated to producing healthy food. Someone committed to growing organic, mindfully grown food, natural, whatever you want to call it. Growing healthy food you have to start from the soil up, you have to know what capacities your soil has. We are really working to build the soil and to grow healthy nutritious food, and that means that we are not putting any chemicals on the ground or the crops, so that when people ingest it, they're not getting any of that.

Being certified organic is a lot of paperwork and it's a lot of money, and we don't have the time to do the paperwork or the money to spend on it, and we don't need it for marketing purposes. Usually when we are selling our produce we're there to explain it.

These big 1,000-acre farms aren't going to last. I think they have a lot of changing to do because of their monoculture. It's not diverse, we need diversity to sustain ourselves.

Every day is a new thing, it's challenging, that's what's exciting to me and that's why I do it. You have to know your land, you have to approach every crop and every situation like, "What can I learn from you first?" You have to be humble every day. It's the hardest thing I have ever done, not only physically, but I have never challenged my brain as much.



KEN GREENE

Hudson Valley Seed Library, Accord, NY

When I started this project I was a librarian at the Gardiner Library. The seeds were a side project that was focused on saving local, whole varieties, and also teaching people how to be seed savers.

I started thinking about seeds the same way I was thinking about books and information. There are all kinds of stories and ideas, imagination and information, and genetic stories—which are sort of the nonfiction of 12,000 to 15,000 years of co-evolution with humans. So, when you're planting a seed, you're growing that genetic story. And then there are all these other stories: there are anecdotes, there are myths, there are tall tales, there's romance and tragedy, and the history of all these stories that come with the seeds.

I think there are a lot of misconceptions about the word organic. Sometimes I get a negative reaction, "Oh that's USDA, that's the government, we can't really trust it." But when it comes down to it, if you're certified organic, you are using practices on your farm that are better for the soil, better for the water, better for the planet, and better for people's health.

It's much more challenging to grow organically, and it's more labor intensive. I feel there should be a lot of respect for farmers who are committed to using organic practices, whether that's certified organic, Certified Naturally Grown, Farmer's Pledge, or whatever it is. I don't care that much about the label, but for us, for seeds, it was important to have the label because certified organic farmers who are growing food for people are supposed to do due diligence in finding certified organic seeds, and there've been so few choices out there for them.

In the seed industry there aren't the same regulations for chemical applications as there are for food crops, because they are not directly consumed. The seed industry is actually using tons and tons more chemicals. It's a much more harmful farming process—for the environment, for our health, and for the future—than chemical agriculture for food.

For me, the story of genetic engineering is a story that I don't think should be in our backyards or on our farms. When I look at seeds, I look at each seed as a living organism. The way we grow and process seeds, everything is done by hand. We are caring for seeds and their life in a way that when you look at these big seed companies, whether genetic engineering or hybridizing or whatever, they're viewing seeds purely as a commodity, as inanimate.



JAY UHLER

Peace & Carrots Farm, Chester, NY

This is our first year farming here. I felt farming was something that connected me back to the land, and something I could do with my hands and produce something. I was looking for something to do that was outside, and I wanted to do something I felt had value to it, something that I could feel was real work and feel that it had meaning and purpose to it.

I don't really understand, as a farmer, how growing something conventionally even makes sense. I feel like farming by spraying chemicals on your plants just goes against the whole thing. I don't understand how you can be a steward of the land, and taking care of it, and then poison everything you don't want here. It doesn't make any sense. I don't see how you can be a farmer and not do it organically.

Organic is when you plant something in the ground and you don't mess with it. You just let it grow and it comes up. You don't need to add anything to it, just sun and water, and care for it. Just get out there and tend to the field, pull out the weeds, and do all you can without messing with the genetic structure of anything.

Anything that has to do with the meat, dairy, or egg industry is really frightening. I don't like that it's so hard to get vegetables that taste like anything in the supermarket. I haven't eaten tomatoes in years, because every time I get one, it's this pinkish, grainy matter, and it doesn't really taste like anything. I don't like that vegetables aren't fresh, and have no flavor, and I don't know where they come from or what is done to them to get them here. When I think about tomatoes being picked when they are green and sprayed with gas to make them look red and ready to eat, I don't really get that. I'm glad I can play a part in separating myself from that. I'm not trying to change the world or anything, but I know that I do something that works and doesn't do anything negative to the environment or economic structure, or anything negative to my community. I like feeling good about what I'm doing.

It's just awesome to be out in the field, working, being able to eat fresh stuff—that feels so good. You get to work outside all day, play in the mud, eat the best food that you can possibly eat. You get to look back at the day and see that you did something useful for eight, ten, twelve hours, or however long it is. It's hard, and your body feels tired, and your skin is burnt from the sun, or wet from the rain, but you feel that you accomplished something and don't feel like you wasted any time. Every day after I finish work, I feel that it was a good day.



DON LEWIS

Wild Hive Farm Community Grain Project, Clinton Corners, NY

My parents were farmers. From about 18 years old I lived on farms and worked in agriculture pretty much the whole time. It was important to me—that lifestyle—and to be close to the food system.

Organic is an approach to producing food in a manner that is safer for the consumer and the environment. It's about the approach to the stewardship of the land. When I think of real organic, it's about the method to me, and not about the certification so much; that's the politics of it. In the process you put back into the soil, and you have a rotation, and you help build the soil. Those are the really important things, so you don't just take from the soil.

The Wild Hive Community Grain Project is really focused on reintroducing grains for human consumption in the Hudson Valley. There had been an 80-year hiatus on grains for human consumption being grown here. When I started, I met Alton Earnhart. He was growing grains for animal consumption and had just started growing wheat. He gave me a bag of flour that he milled and said, "Here, check this out, maybe you can do something with it." I stuck my hand in it, and that was it. I just knew this had been missing, and it's special.

When I was in a position to be certified, the politics changed, and the USDA had taken over the certification process. I felt as though it lowered the standards to allow larger producers to enter the market, and those were sacrifices to the concept. So politically I didn't want to align myself with that.

I hear, "Is it organic?" a lot. I explain to people that it's not certified organic. So the answer is, "No, it's not certified organic, but the product is produced and grown with organic methods." But still, I can't put it on my labels.

Everyone has a right to farm, and rights are important to me. That's one of the reasons why I've done what I've done; it's about politics, food politics. You need to have availability, you need to have resources, you can't just have a few things offered to you and that's it. I always thought it was really important to have a choice in our food system.

I've been producing agricultural products and making my livelihood from them for most of my life. Since the early 80s I've noticed how it's changed and grown, and education has been a key component.

We're now milling 130 tons of grains annually and that's up from the first harvest of 5,000 pounds.



Organic

By Francesco Mastalla

Published by



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