

# Female Farmers: The New Food Industry Frontier

By [Claire Gordon](#), Posted Sep 12th 2011 @ 9:41AM



David De Lossy, Getty

When Ann Adams and Liz Brensinger started farming as a side job in 1995, they couldn't produce enough food. They wanted better tools. A rototiller that wasn't so unwieldy. A shovel that they could easily plunge into the earth. Farm equipment was designed for men, they realized, and men's bodies were different.

Why, they asked, does chicken feed have to come in 50-pound bags?

Farm equipment has been designed for men, because farming has long been the near-exclusive province of males. But this dominance has been challenged in the last 15 years, and

challenged ever faster. The last [Department of Agriculture Census](#) showed an almost 30 percent increase in female-operated farms since 2002, a leap from the 13 percent growth in the five years previous. Fourteen percent of farms are now female-owned.

When women gain a voice in a traditionally male world, some of the basic assumptions of that world tend to unravel. When women entered academia, suddenly the pronoun "he" [didn't seem so neutral](#). With female farmers now a significant presence in the industry, a shovel is no longer just a shovel. It's a shovel made by men for men.

Adams and Brensinger launched [Green Heron Tools](#) in 2008, the first company in the world to make farm equipment designed exclusively for the female body. Thanks to two grants from the USDA, they are releasing their Hergonomic Shovel-Spade (HERS) in the next couple weeks. Every feature is scientifically based on how a woman shovels. It's the first tool of its kind.

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Not only are women a growing force in the farming industry as a whole, they're the engine of today's food movement: the constellation of food producers, preparers and activists fighting our industrial food system and the damage it wreaks, like obesity, Type 2 diabetes, the ["food deserts"](#) of poor urban neighborhoods, the [fossil fuels spewed](#), the chemicals dumped, and the animals slaughtered into cheap supermarket fare.

Women are overrepresented in every strand of the alternative food movement. [Kitchen Gardeners International](#), which promotes home food growing, has over 8,000 fans on Facebook, and 78 percent of them are women. KGI launched the petition that successfully pressured [the Obamas](#) to plant an organic garden in the nation's most symbolic lawn. According to Roger Doiron, the founder of KGI and winner of the 2009 [Heart of Green Award](#), the vast majority of the over 110,000 signees were female.

[Slow Food USA](#) has a staff of five men and 14 women, and a membership that's three quarters female, according to a recent survey.

[Roots of Change](#), a network that's fighting for food sustainability in California, is run by one man and four women. Seventy-one percent of their 25,000-plus Facebook followers are female. [Edible Schoolyard](#) teaches public school children how to grow and make their own meals. Seven of the nine teachers are women.

The staff of [Community Involved in Sustaining Agriculture](#) (CISA) is seven women, two men. [At the Wholesome Wave Foundation](#) it's 11 women, three men. At [FoodCorps](#) it's five women, one man.

This gender imbalance may not be so obvious to the casual bystander of the American food movement. After all, its figureheads speak in more of a baritone: Michael Pollan, Eric Schlosser, Will Allen, August Schumacher, Jr., Joel Salatin. The Chez Panisse Foundation, founded by [Alice Waters](#), the greatest exception to this rule, has an [advisory board](#) that reads like the green glitterati. That board is majority male.

Even the fight for school lunch reform, the movement most likely to be helmed by a female, has [Jamie Oliver](#) as its charming mouthpiece.

This is an old trend in the world of food. While women cook most of the meals in America, the ones doing it for money are by and large men. Of the eight seasons of "[Top Chef](#)," seven men have taken the crown. Women are better represented in our country's Fortune 500 boardrooms than in the "[25 Most Successful Celebrity Chefs](#)" list compiled by *The Daily Meal*.

It was [Anthony Bourdain](#) who first widely publicized the violent macho-ism of professional cookery: tales of heat, scars, drugs, sex, and organized crime -- like war stories from behind the swinging doors. The domestic kitchen: gender female. The restaurant kitchen: gender "don't touch my dick, don't touch my knife."

The [10 most followed food critics on Twitter](#), according to *The Daily Meal*, are all men. That is, until Alison Cook of the *Houston Chronicle* tweeted that perhaps she deserved the No. 9 spot.

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But it is mothers, far more than fathers, who prepare dinner for the kids, pack their lunches, shop for good value fish sticks and Clementines. It's no coincidence that female-owned farms and food-based business have grown in synch with America's food consciousness. As [Michael Pollan](#) writes in *The New York Review of Books*, "food in America has been more or less invisible, politically speaking, until very recently." The same could be said of the women who grow it.

Our recent awareness of the horrors of the industrial food system was piqued by mad cow disease in the late 1980s. But it was really Eric Schlosser's 2001 best-seller "[Fast Food Nation](#)," Marion Nestle's 2002 "[Food Politics](#)," and Morgan Spurlock's near fatal plunge into fast food in his 2004 documentary "[Super Size Me](#)" that proved a three-pronged attack on the nation's love affair with cheap, fast eats.

As the guardians of the household diet, women have always cared more about the health value of food: the balance, the proportions, the preparation. Of the Americans who turn this into a career as [registered dietitians](#), around 97 percent are female. And since the introduction of the Secretary of Health and Human Services in 1980, there have been more women in that position than in any other Cabinet role: four. That's four times as many women as have served as Secretary of Agriculture in its 122 years.

When the way that food was grown became a public health issue, scores of women began doing it themselves. Most female-owned farms are small-scale, over half under 50 acres. They're also largely sustainable and organic operations, producing farmers' market favorites like Thai basil, Ozark plums, and heirloom tomatoes the shade of a bruise in each stage of healing.

"You see the numbers and there's clearly something going on here," said Lisa Kivirist, the author of "[ECOpreneur: Putting Purpose and the Planet Before Profits](#)" and the head of Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Service (MOSES) [Rural Women's Project](#).

"There's a strong message to what women farmers are doing. Women are starting farms and food-based businesses with a real passion for changing the way we eat."

Many female farmers add that women's sociability lends itself to the small-scale farm, which involves more person-to-person selling. Strolling through a farmers market you can feel the neighborliness, as farmers chat in the lulls, sharing techniques.

"If I don't do this, I'm going to get a job at T.J. Maxx," said Suzy Dare, who's been running [Cherry Lane Farms](#), N.J., since her husband passed away. "I just like talking to people."

And female farmers, like minorities in many fields, have taken a more collaborative approach to their craft. Starting in the mid-1990s, Women's Agriculture Networks began blossoming in big farming states, like Pennsylvania, Iowa, Kentucky, and Vermont, offering workshops, classes, conferences and social events for women who own farms, or hope to.

Others have a simpler explanation for why women have chosen alternative agro-food. "Big Ag is like a big corporation," said [Trina Pilonero](#), who raises Highland cattle, chickens, vegetables, and herbs on her 20 acres in the Catskills. "You hit a glass ceiling."

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Female farmers are the first to point out women's ancient and intimate relationship with the earth. As Kivirist put it: "This is the oldest newest movement." When humanity transitioned from hunting and gathering to agriculture, women were the first to till the soil, while men were out finding and slaughtering the protein.

"There's a web between women, health, food, medicine, herbs," said Adams. "That's always been there historically."

In what has become known as the [McElvaine Thesis](#), the shift to agriculture caused a revolution in gender norms. Farming devalued the man and his role as hunter, which sparked a backlash, captured elegantly in the metaphor of farming itself. Men were the seed sowers, the authors of life, while women were the fertile soil, the expectant, passive receivers.

Leaping ahead several thousand years, farming in the United States became one of the more macho day jobs, epitomized by the yee-hawing cattle rancher, who can roll a cigarette on horseback. One-handed.

Of course, women were there too. "They've been seen not as farmers themselves," said Brensinger, "but farmers' wives."

That change began in the 1870s, according to Maria Trumpler, the director of Yale's Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies Department, a History of Science scholar, and former dairy farmer, who teaches the popular seminar "Women, Food & Culture." Farming at that time developed a zealous confidence in science. Federally controlled land was given to the states to establish land-grant universities with a focus on agriculture, science, and engineering -- a more practical counterpart to the abstract philosophizing of liberal arts schools.

The science of farming, and the institutionalization of that science, split men and women into separate "gender appropriate" realms. "They were set up to teach Midwesterners to run their farms better," said Trumpler. "The men studied that. The women studied home economics."

Dairy farming, in the past, was a particularly female domain; women took care of the cows, milked them, and sold the products for extra income. There's no male equivalent of the milkmaid.

"With the advent of pasteurization, women don't know what they're doing" explained Trumpler, impersonating a 19th century farmer. "We need to send the milk off the centralized dairies." Herds ballooned from a manageable five or 10 cows into four digits, far too much bovine for a few milkmaids to handle.

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Farms have exploded in size in the last half century, mass-producing a handful of cheap commodity crops, which are processed and traded by a few mega-agribusinesses. "They're almost like Wall Street," said Trumpler. "Too big to fail."

The growing food consciousness of the last 15 years has been bad PR for the country's largest industrial growers. They've caught on that the public, and in particular the female public, cares more than ever about how their food is produced.

So the National Corn Growers Association and the United Soybean Board began training female farmers earlier this year to be spokespeople for Big Ag, in order to cultivate a softer image. Or in the words of *St.*

*Louis Today*, it's an "attempt to put a more feminine, friendly and empathetic face on large-scale agriculture by using [women farmers](#) to appeal to suburban and urban grocery shoppers -- most of whom are women themselves."

Making women the face of Big Ag is slightly inaccurate. As the [Environmental Working Group](#) reported, the boards of the five largest lobby organizations, which represent the five largest commodity crops -- corn, soybeans, wheat, cotton, and rice -- are only 1.3 percent female.

Women have almost entirely chosen the underdog route, growing the organic produce that counts for just 3.7 percent of overall food and beverage sales in America. But its sales numbers have made hopeful strides, from \$1 billion two decades ago to \$24.8 billion today. "Artisinal cheeses from Vermont are never going to challenge Kraft Singles," said Trumpler. "The key is to have a robust alternative."

But even in this sector, women have to work a little harder for the respect handed to men. On a visit to the Union Square Greenmarket in New York one Wednesday morning in August, almost every female farmer has a story.

Suzy Dare, between weighing piles of plum tomatoes, explains that food purveyor never paid her for \$1,400 of strawberries. He ripped off a friend too, another woman. It wouldn't have happened if she was a man, she thinks.

When Lynn Fleming ordered goat feed from a new company, the man dropped the 100-pound bags across town. "You don't have cows, so you're not a real farmer," she said, from behind her spread of chevre logs and blocks of brine-soaked feta.

Trina Pilonero was manning her stall a few weekends back, while her husband, an engineer, was sitting to the side, reading the newspaper. Although she was the one with the apron, people kept turning to him with their questions.

"I wasn't offended by it. I don't want to live being offended," Fleming said. "I don't like to think about gender."

What about the big bags of feed, *AOL Jobs* asked.

"Yeah," she paused. "Why do they have to be 50 pounds?"