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New York, Calling Farm Animals

by Nathan Schneider

New York City used to have factories and it used to have farms. A few leftover factories, the Queens County Farm Museum, and the occasional community garden are all that remain of either in the post-industrial landscape. The health code prohibits poultry in “built-up” areas, and while

cattle, swine, sheep, and goats are permitted under certain conditions, who has the yard to support them? Yet, overlooking the concrete skyline from a Tribeca penthouse one late afternoon in January, a new war was declared on the practice of factory farming.



Writer Jonathan Safran Foer speaks to the crowd at Farm Forward's launch party. Photos by Nathan Schneider.

Munching on vegan hors d'oeuvres, several dozen guests attended the launch party of a new organization called Farm Forward. What its leading lights envision is something at once quaint, radical, and practical: end the practice of factory farming that makes misery for animals and pollution for the planet on an enormous scale. They want to encourage a gentler, more sustainable kind of animal agriculture, one carried out by family farmers who live on their land and take pride in their animals. And they've got help.

The novelist Jonathan Safran Foer, an active Farm Forward board member, read from his new manuscript about factory farming. Surprise remarks came from none other than Martha Stewart (“a would-be farmer,” she called herself), mother of the hostess, Alexis. And though she never materialized, rumors swirled that Natalie Portman might make an appearance as well. Downtown Manhattan couldn't be farther from actual farms, but this enchanted island offers networking opportunities—and the power of celebrity—that are out of reach to America's breadbasket.

New Yorkers, it turns out, are not the only creatures on the planet that live their lives packed into a noisy and suffocating artificial environment. Nearly every animal delivered dead to the city's groceries and restaurants suffers so, only unimaginably worse. Fenced off from public scrutiny, rural metropolises lead ten billion creatures per year through a short and miserable existence, shepherded by humans who are often underpaid for working under unhealthy conditions. Meanwhile, they spill out noxious pollutants into waterways and vent greenhouse gases into the air, helping to make livestock the single largest contributor to climate change worldwide. Even among those critters spared the worst by the current craze for free-range and organic agriculture, all but a tiny few are nevertheless deformed mutants, genetically engineered beyond recognition from their ancestors a century ago.

Ninety-nine percent of meat sold in the U.S. comes to us this way, and, as a result, the infrastructure doesn't exist to support those who might like to try something different. Government subsidies also favor unsustainable

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factory farms. Farm Forward combines advocacy, business consulting, and the work of “culture makers” to make old-fashioned agriculture possible again. “Nothing in the world demands our attention more immediately,” said Foer when the afternoon’s mingling paused for speeches. He’s serious, too, having put novel writing on hold to turn out a polemic against factory farms.

Since their legal incorporation in 2007, Farm Forward has worked to create the only—by their criteria—sustainable and humane nationwide chicken producer. Last year, they mounted a campaign to support California’s successful Proposition 2, which sets higher standards for the treatment of farmed animals. They rallied celebs to the cause, including Michael Chabon, J.M. Coetzee, and Alice Walker. They’ve worked with Jewish leaders to improve the sometimes-notorious conditions at kosher slaughterhouses. And all those promising efforts came before the New York debutante party.

As the event went on, it became evident that Farm Forward is a family farm of its own. Two-thirds of the executive staff are Steven Gross, an experienced business consultant, and his son Aaron Gross, an energetic scholar soon to finish his PhD in Religious Studies. The only staffer who accepts a salary, director Ben Goldsmith, is an activist by trade; his mother, Janet Wolf, a nonprofit consultant, helped to organize the event.

People care about this shit.” said Goldsmith, wearing a loosened gray tie over a black shirt. More delicately, Aaron Gross agreed. In recent years, he has been glad to see “an explosion of receptivity” to the issues he has been passionate about since his youth. Michael Pollan writes bestselling books about the ethics of eating habits, and Whole Foods Market can make a fortune by charging more than the competition for products labeled natural, organic, and free-range. Ever more ubiquitous, farmers markets assault the conventional wisdom that produce should be sold canned or frozen in sanitized supermarkets. Meanwhile, as Al Gore and the United Nations promulgate sensible anxiety about climate change worldwide, the profound pollution that industrial farming causes has become increasingly evident. In a July 2007 editorial against factory farming, *The New York Times* asked rhetorically, “Do we pursue the logic of industrialism to its limits in a biological landscape?”

At the center of Farm Forward’s concerns, though, are the animals, which have long-standing celebrity allies of their own. People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals has maintained a lasting love affair with the Hollywood elite, most spectacularly noticeable thanks to Pamela Anderson’s skin-bearing campaigns against fur. A foodie fad and the environmental crisis only magnify people’s inevitable sympathy for charismatic megafauna. Jonathan Safran Foer noted the influence of his dog, George, in driving him to work for animal welfare. Farm Forward’s executive staffers are all vegan. “Whatever we advocate,” says Aaron Gross, “will be within the frame of creating better lives for the animals whose flesh is being consumed.” But they’re anything but the black-masked warriors of the Animal Liberation Front. By their willingness to work with anybody interested in making the situation better than what it is, they signal the mainstreaming of animal welfare: a transition from theatrical attention-getting to constructive deal-making, armed with business plans and a network of loyal contacts.

The variety of interests that are converging against factory farming suggest that this movement will be more than a passing craze. Whether the desire is

to make meat more gourmet than gourmet, to own a small farm, to protect the ecological balance, or to treat fellow living things with a bit more respect, developing alternatives to the “logic of industrialism” is an imperative first step. But this coalition is bound to cause tensions, too.

With the same spite that PETA's crusaders so often evoke, it is easy to ask what right New York and Los Angeles have to marshal the most unavoidable media personalities against the economic superstructure of the heartland. In Tribeca, factory farms are a purely theoretical phenomenon, even though they feed most New Yorkers every day. As if to trump the complaint of regionalism, Farm Forward brought forth one of their most important allies: a real-live, fourth-generation poultry farmer from Kansas named Frank Reese. Partly by his own naïveté, Reese managed to maintain breeds and husbandry techniques that have otherwise almost entirely disappeared. Now Farm Forward works closely with him to grow his business and turn it into a national operation by combining worldly savvy with old-time know-how. He spoke eloquently, through a drawl not of the city, of what has been lost and of tastes most of us have never experienced.

Another speaker Farm Forward brought to Tribeca was Dan Barber, chef of Blue Hill at Stone Barns, an upper-crust destination on an old Rockefeller estate in the hamlet of Pocantico Hills, New York about 30 minutes up the road from the city. For some vegan ears there gathered, his rhapsodizing about the taste of natural foie gras, produced without subjecting geese to the usual technique of forced over-feeding, must have been excruciating. Others came away with the impression that Barber offered nothing for anyone who can't make a habit of the \$95 tasting menu at Blue Hill. But the Farm Forward guys believe people like Barber can forge a path that others will then be able to follow. Once the right infrastructure is in place, Ben Goldsmith says, humane and sustainable meat will be no more expensive than the stuff in stores today.

Still, in the rarefied air of hors d'oeuvres and consensus, this new animal welfare mainstream seemed content to put on hold the questions that have defined the movement since Peter Singer wrote *Animal Liberation* in 1975: Who are these animals, anyway? What do we owe them, or what do they owe us?

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