

Thriving not just surviving, support for new entrants into farming

The recently launched EIP-AGRI Focus Group 'New entrants into farming' is looking into which patterns characterise new entrants in farming and what can be learnt from them to foster innovation and entrepreneurship in agriculture. Agnès Papone, one of the Focus Group experts and a recent convert to the farming profession, believes in the importance of drawing lessons and establishing tools and sharing them amongst other new entrants into farming "to help them thrive rather than just survive". We interviewed Agnès (41) who has started up a new farm in France with her husband Renaud (43):

Tell us a little bit about your farm

It is located in the lower French Alps, a mountainous region where pastoral sheep and goat farming is common. Organic vegetable farming is not very typical in the area. However a new trend amongst entrants is to produce diversified vegetables for community supported agriculture schemes. We have 1.2 hectares of vegetables with olive and fruit trees along the edges of all the terraces. We have 250 laying hens for eggs and 10 pigs for meat. 95% is sold directly to consumers through community supported agriculture schemes, online via the Food Assembly, to local school lunch programmes, the local weekly market or through our 8-member organic farmers' cooperative. A very small proportion is sold to supermarkets or specialty shops.



We run the farm full time with a division of labour where Renaud does the bulk of the work in the fields and I take care of sales, marketing, deliveries, administration etc. We have one apprentice who is in his final year and we usually hire 1-2 seasonal workers to help during the summer months.

Taking up farming was a radical professional change for you, how did it come about?

We launched our farm project in January 2009, in a formerly bountiful agricultural area about an hour's drive from Nice, France, on land that belonged to my husband's great grandparents. We were both quintessential new entrants to the world of farming, I came from an urban, epidemiological HIV research background and my husband managed a small mountain-village supermarket. We needed to start a new project since neither of our 'former' lives would allow us both to work and live in the same place.

So how did you get the farm up and running?

Our farming innovations were numerous. Before boldly restarting the farm, which had lain dormant for more than 30 years, we obtained organic certification to ensure we wouldn't have to go through a lengthy conversion period. Then we scouted for interested subscribers and created our own community supported agriculture schemes (called AMAP in France).

Our first experiments were to find the right combination of farming activities to provide a smooth income stream – since my husband had experienced it with his grandfather; we tried beekeeping combined with highly diversified vegetables and fruits. We joined an EU-supported cross border project (ALCOTRA) to reintroduce and multiply heirloom varieties into challenging growing environments such as mountain regions or those with poor soils.

Then, you spent some time experimenting with various different crops?

As part of our medium-term diversification plans we planted truffle-bearing oak saplings (our land is traditionally truffle-bearing) and saffron bulbs to produce potentially high-end revenue generating products. After our first few seasons we realised bees and vegetables were not the ideal combination but the experience had given us enough time to bring the olive and fig trees back into production, to market their delicious jams and pastes, to raise a growing flock of laying hens that fed on our excess vegetables, and finally this year to bring in 10 piglets for fattening.

How do you interact with the surrounding area?

We aim to find a balance of new and old varieties, products and offerings to enable the farm to sustain itself, ourselves, and to create employment in our rural area. We mentor an apprentice through a farm-school program and have trained several interns, as well as partnering with local training schemes. One of our goals is to demonstrate that it is possible to farm and live off farming activity despite limited land availability and a short growing season. We can overcome these challenges because of our proximity to Nice and the enormous market potential on the Riviera, by selling directly to consumers.



As new entrants into farming, how have you dealt with the learning curve?

Each year has yielded extraordinary lessons and new knowledge, since we are always trying new innovations in growing techniques, water usage, outreach to local villagers who have leased additional land to us (teaching us the legal and policy tools available to farmers), forming a small cooperative with other small scale organic farmers to make our products locally available, using a crowdfunding mechanism to increase our capacity whilst engaging and growing our subscriber-base.

Since January 2010, we have been very actively involved in a number of associations and research projects. We have also founded Bio d'Ici, a local organic agricultural cooperative along with 8 other farmers to market our products directly to local consumers and tourists in 2010. We are members of the local rural farm agricultural union and mentors to numerous new entrants and we volunteer on several rural development advisory boards. We were part of consultative groups to our local LEADER application which has been successful.

Which difficulties did you come across?

Dealing with the overwhelming and very burdensome agricultural bureaucracy and their lack of knowledge about diversified vegetable farming, organic practices and new approaches, as opposed to looking in every possible subsidy programme. We overcame this through patience, perseverance and personal conviction!

Why do you think you were successful? And what are your future plans for the farm?

We were able to start with no debt on a small family property and develop farm activities incrementally. We were able to expand the land in cultivation with the help of several local property owners who were willing to lease land to us or make it available to us. We will continue to diversify and develop the existing practices, ie. increasing from our current population of 10 pigs to reach a sustainable number, growing more of the livestock feed ourselves to limit costs, carbon footprint etc.

How do you feel about support for new entrants into farming?

In our region, the average age of farmers is 55 years, the rate of generational renewal is very low, and many are new entrants like us. Some are succeeding but others are failing spectacularly, and many of the latter have done so because of poorly advised business plans, overwhelming debt, or a mismatch between the old, conventional approaches to the new realities. Small conventional farmers used to produce monocultures and deliver them to wholesale markets to have prices dictated to them, whereas often new entrants are farming diversified crops and cutting out the middlemen to increase profitability and sustainability. We are most often able to sell in advance of our harvests directly to consumers.

Creating new models of cooperatives, farm-to-table, or direct-to-consumer marketing are essential avenues to success, but little is done to advise and assist new or older farmers in this. We found this ourselves when we sought advice before starting our farm - as new entrants we lacked experience and credibility, agricultural bureaucratic structures were of no assistance and wary of our motives (thinking we wanted to bypass zoning regulations to speculate in real estate!). Our local political environment is completely adverse, because our leaders are resigned and apathetic about farming and have not yet realised that agriculture is bouncing back. In fact, they think it a lost cause, so outside of election cycles there are few options for engaging in dialogue, let alone developing simple innovative strategies (e.g. contracting with local school canteens to provide produce, selling local products along the stops of the tourist-train lines.)

Why did you apply to the EIP-AGRI Focus Group?

My motivation to participate in the Focus Group on New entrants was to come up with an arsenal of tools partly based on the lessons we have learnt and sharing them with others to help them thrive rather than just survive. The cost of land in our region is astronomical and the temptation to develop prime farm land is very high. This is a major challenge to new entrants. If left unchecked, the best and most fertile land will soon become built up and entrants' access to arable land will become even more limited.

For more information on Agnès and Renaud's work:

www.lavancia.com

<https://www.facebook.com/FermeLavancia>

<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Bio-dIci/610659045689365>

Follow the work of the EIP-AGRI Focus Group New entrants into farming: lessons to foster innovation and entrepreneurship [here](#).