



Think Globally
Drink Locally

A FARM WHERE THE
WATER BUFFALO
ROAM

Jeff Mease of One World Enterprises with a few of his four-legged friends.

JEFF MEASE IS RAISING
EXTRAORDINARY ANIMALS
IN A CONSCIENTIOUS WAY
WHILE BUILDING THE SOIL FOR
FUTURE GENERATIONS.

BY NANCY HILLER PHOTOGRAPHY BY SHANNON ZAHNLE



Meet Buffy, Ginger, Nilla, Sassy, Blanca, and Bella.

Judging by their names, the girls in this list might be characters in a reality television show. But these particular flaxen-tressed lovelies have cloven hooves, and they like nothing better than to submerge themselves shoulder-high in a muddy pond.

They are water buffalo—six of the nineteen at Loesch Farm, the latest venture of longtime business partners Jeff Mease and Lennie Busch. Acquiring a herd of water buffalo with a plan to manufacture mozzarella cheese is not your everyday business move in the uplands of south-central Indiana. But Mease and Busch see the animals as an adventurous outgrowth of their more conventional undertakings—Lennie’s Restaurant, Pizza X, Bloomington Brewing Company, and One World Catering & Events, all of them organized under the umbrella of One World Enterprises.

The two partners are working to create a farmstead restaurant, a business model more common in Europe than in America. One such establishment in the U.S. is Blue Hill at Stone Barns, a working four-season farm and eatery 30 miles north of New York City. The Blue Hill mission is “to create a consciousness about the effect of everyday food choices.” Almost all the food served in the restaurant is sourced from the surrounding fields and pastures.



(l-r) Buffy, Blanca, Rodney, and “Number 6” pose for the camera.

it!” he thought to himself. “Water buffalo are interesting, because they’re out of the ordinary. They’re smart. They’re good with people, which will be important as the farm develops into a tourism destination. And they also have economic value.”

At 50, Mease is boyish, fun-loving, and energetic. A voracious learner whose idea of a great vacation is a bicycle trip through Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand, he can’t wait to describe his latest discovery, whether it’s some esoteric bit of etymology or how to use a simple tool such as a scythe.

Mease found his dream farm in 2007 while gardening at his friend Dwight Worker’s property on Loesch Road, five miles northwest of the downtown Square. (“The locals pronounce it ‘Lush,’” Mease notes.) He loved the location of Worker’s farm, which was rural yet close enough to town that he could ride there on his bike.

“Boy, would I love to have a place out here,” he mused to himself one spring day

back into the soil. Even the restaurant’s building, for which the partners hope to break ground in 2018, will be constructed largely of repurposed materials, including an exoskeleton made of 30-foot-tall steel towers salvaged from the limestone quarry near Cascades Park.

Eureka!

Mease, the creative visionary in the partnership, had long dreamed of keeping livestock when, in 2008, he came across a newspaper story about a Vermont farm that milked water buffalo to make mozzarella di bufala, an artisanal Italian cheese. “That’s

The plan for Loesch Farm is even more ambitious. For starters, there will be a brewery and an event space. Mease and Busch also intend to keep the cycle of production and consumption in-house—growing the food, serving it onsite, and returning waste to the soil in the form of compost. Kitchen and table scraps, along with the animals’ manure, will go

while working his patch of garden. At that very moment, Worker drove up on his tractor, leapt off, and announced, “Hey, that farm across the street is for sale.” Mease walked over and began investigating.

At the northeast corner of the property lay several acres of wetland, the headwaters of Jack’s Defeat Creek. Immediately to the south, an east-facing slope rose steeply toward the main part of the farm, obscuring everything beyond. At the top of the hill he found a barn and a 100-foot-long Quonset hut that would be ideal for storing the countless pieces of used equipment a restaurant tends to accumulate. (“It’s not a one-way dump,” Mease clarifies, “but fodder for new projects: parts to repair machinery and vehicles.”) There was also an old house that would be perfect for an onsite farm manager. Mease had just the man: his head brewer, Floyd Rosenbaum, who had worked with him since 1998. Hearing that the Karst Farm Greenway, a biking and walking trail under development by Monroe County and the city of Bloomington, would bring people right past the driveway helped clinch the deal. By the end of 2007, Mease and Busch had closed on the farm.

A porcine interlude

It was shortly after the closing that Mease ran across the story about the water buffalo dairy in Vermont. Excited about the prospect of raising buffalo, he devoted several months to meticulous research in order to educate himself about what lay ahead. Aside from the



obligation to care for fellow creatures, there was also the matter of financial investment; each adult female could cost more than \$1,000 and would need to be brought to the farm from out of state, since U.S. breeders are few and far between.

It would also be years before he would see even a cup of milk, let alone begin cheese production. Although water buffalo, which are native to Asia, have been used for centuries as draft animals, as well as for milk and meat, they have only appeared in the U.S. since the 1970s. Most American herds have been purchased for their novelty value, and there has been limited effort to optimize the breed for milk production. Mease would have to institute his own breeding program. He would also need to cultivate the animals’ trust over several generations before he could hope to get close enough to their flanks for milking. Fortunately, water buffalo can begin calving at age 3 and live into their 20s.

“I got impatient while researching the buffalo,” Mease confesses. For a stopgap, he “got into pigs”—specifically, a heritage breed of hog known as the English Large Black, whose long, thick belly was developed for bacon. Mease uses the meat at the catering arm of One

LEFT:
Water buffalo cool off in the pond that Mease and farm manager Floyd Rosenbaum constructed especially for them.

RIGHT:
Mease (left) and Rosenbaum.

BOTTOM:
Visitors to the farm will get to meet water buffalo face-to-face.





her. “Matilda was my first pig,” he says affectionately. “She’s smart. She loves to have her belly rubbed, and she loves to eat giant ragweed.”

A different philosophy

The 69-acre farm had previously been used to raise pigs, though not in this kind of *Charlotte’s Web*-worthy idyll. The farm’s earlier incarnation included a confined-animal feeding operation, with large numbers of animals kept in a small space and fattened on purchased feed. In contrast, Mease allows his pigs to roam and feed freely on about six acres. Small sheds provide protection from the sun, rain, and cold. The pigs have access to the woods, where they feast on hickory and walnuts. Although pasturing livestock in woodlands can damage tree roots and trunks, maintaining the right ratio of pigs to acreage can prevent such damage while enriching the soil with manure. Besides, adds Mease, “they’re feeding from nature. In nature, pigs don’t live on a diet of corn and soybeans.”

The importance of bagels

In 2008, Mease found his first herd of buffalo in Georgia and brought them to the farm. There were eight altogether, two of them pregnant. He purchased more the next year, this time from a defunct dairy startup in Wisconsin by way of a livestock auction in Tennessee.

Like first-time parents, he and Rosenbaum made the necessary preparations to assure the animals a healthy and minimally stressful transition. They constructed a pond for wading

and watering. They fenced in two nine-acre pastures to allow for grazing rotation—a must if clover and grasses are to have any chance of regenerating. And they sowed more acres in clover and grasses for winter hay. Clover, being a legume, also brings nitrogen to the soil, improving fertility.

Buffy was the first calf born on the farm and is by far the tamest because she has always had lots of attention. “She figured out early on that she was the cutest,” Mease laughs, “and is always the first in line for bagels.”

Bagels are a special, if improbable, treat for the Loesch Farm livestock. They come from friends at the Bloomington Bagel Company, who must dispose daily of unsold stock. Even after donations to the Hoosier Hills Food Bank

A dirt worshipper

“Farming—or gardening at any level—is about building the soil,” says Mease. “Considering that life as we know it depends on this very thin layer of topsoil, the idea of being a dirt worshipper is not that crazy.”

His stewardship is paying off—and not just in terms of livestock health. “This land had been chemically farmed for decades. When we arrived, I saw no worms or bees and very few birds. Now the soil is teeming with worms, and birds are everywhere, and the bees have reappeared. I get excited about this system. We can raise animals in a conscious and thoughtful way, and we can build the soil for future generations rather than mining it for our own short-term gain.”



and other nonprofits, there are sometimes leftovers. Mease offers to take these. While the bagels are a welcome addition to the pigs’ diet (their favorite flavor is jalapeno cheddar), they’ve turned out to be potent tools for taming the water buffalo, who devour them. Since domesticating the herd is a critical step on the road to mozzarella, bagels are serious business.

Loesch Farm does not currently have access to city water. Instead, it has a well. Getting water from the well involves using an electric pump. But why use electricity when you can collect rainwater from the roof of a 30-by-30-foot barn? With strategically placed collection barrels, a 1-inch rain produces 500 to 600 gallons of water for the animals and gardens.

The farm also has afforded the opportunity to divert biodegradable restaurant waste away from the landfill. Lennie’s staff members separate this waste from other trash and deliver it weekly to Loesch Farm. We’re not talking about the few gallons a typical household generates each week, but 500 to 600 pounds of premium compost fodder. The brewery, too, produces soil-building waste, in the form of spent yeast and grain by the 55-gallon barrel full.

Though most of the farm’s mowing is done with a tractor, Mease cuts around the gardens by hand, using a scythe—an excellent form of exercise that burns calories instead of fossil fuel. He mounds the long stalks of clover, grass, and alfalfa around crops in the garden to form a thick, moisture-retaining mulch.

Rosenbaum also grows hops, one of the principal ingredients in beer, if only in a symbolic quantity. Why? Because highlighting the connection between the finished product and its source is important. “The whole idea of doing craft is how you put meaning into it,” Mease says. “Using your own produce makes it that much more interesting—not just to others, but also to yourself.” The Bloomington Brewing Company produces a “home-grown” series yearly and sells it at Lennie’s, usually in late August.

Slowly and deliberately, Mease and his team are finding out what works in the pursuit of their vision. To date, One World Enterprises has invested substantially in the farm, without financial return. How can Mease and Busch bear to wait years for a return on their investment in a world where conventional businesses live or die by the annual bottom line?

“A few years ago, a friend took me to a farmers market in Freiburg, Germany, where vendors set up stalls daily around a 14th-century cathedral that took over one hundred years to build,” Mease explains. “The art and craftsmanship that went into those buildings is awe inspiring. Their builders were trying to create something of beauty and magnificence—not to mention that the open market around the cathedral has been going for 600 years. For my farm, I could hire a designer, I suppose; he or she would tell me exactly how to set up the brewery and event space right now. But I’m inspired by things that take time to develop. To me, that sort of organic process is the most interesting and often yields a richer and more beautiful result.” ✧

ABOVE:

Mease with Matilda, an English Large Black hog.

OPPOSITE:

Two of the farm’s water buffalo, yet to be named, engage in what Mease calls a bit of “buffalo buffoonery with bagels.”