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Their Food Has a Story— A Very Connected Story

Stone Acres Farm, 85th Day Food Community
& the Yellow Farmhouse Education Center

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From left: French Breakfast radishes on the grill for a dinner hosted by 85th Day Food Community at Stone Acres Farm.; Renee at the farm with fresh tomatoes (photo by Winter Caplanson); Chris preparing sushi for clients of 85th Day Catering and Events; guests enjoying cocktails at a farm dinner series outside of the Manor House



Stone Acres Farm History

The farm has been a bastion of community support from its early days, through the war of 1812, the great hurricane of 1938, and everywhere in between. Stone Acres Farm now serves as the cornerstone of a unique and evolving partnership of source, service, and education. The overriding objective of this partnership is to help people to better appreciate how their food is grown, where it comes from, how to ensure it continues to grow, and how it evolves to James Beard level cuisine on your plate!

Currently owned and run by Dan and Jane Meiser, and their partners, Stone Acres Farm has been in Jane's (nee Simmons) family since 1765. The family name at Stone Acres is Paffard, It's been in the same family the whole time since 1765, but it's changed through marriage to three different family names including the Phelps family, the Edwards family, and then the Paffard family. Dan shares, "Jane's mother's maiden name is Paffard, so that's her direct connection."

Stone Acres has had a really amazing history. During the war of 1812, there was a famous attack on Stonington when the British warship, the Ramillies, was ordered to take Stonington. As roughly 20 men and two 18 pound cannons defended the town, the women and children of Stonington Borough left during the battle and many of them sought shelter at Stone Acres. Dan surmises that "Stone Acres was really the first farm they reached, a safe haven and place of refuge outside of the borough that the Ramillies's guns couldn't reach." Spoiler alert, the men successfully defended the town from the much stronger British force.



Another story is of the hurricane that struck the coast in September of 1938, one of the worst natural disasters in New England history. Hundreds were killed, hundreds more injured, and thousands of homes, boats, and automobiles were destroyed. The Bostonian, a train heading from New York to Boston struck debris and high waters in Stonington. Some 40 people spent several nights at Stone Acres sleeping on the floor, sleeping in beds, seeking shelter from the storm.

We're talking about a local farm that has been in the same family for over 259 years, a widely hailed restaurant group, and a farm education center literally re-writing student food curriculums.

Just recently, about eight years ago the farm itself was besieged directly as there was a decision to put the farm on the market. A group led by a few families including Jane and Dan, Jane's mom and dad, her aunt and uncle, and Chris and Barbara Dixon (he's the chairman of the board) who own Manatuck farm just to the north of Stone Acres. Essentially, the families got together and said, "We've got to save this property."

"It was important for all of us as family, neighbors, and members of the community that the property stay a farm forever, that it remained open space and that it remained a keystone of the community. We put together a group of like-minded folks and we raised the money to buy the farm," Dan recalls.

"For us, part of our responsibility and our journey is to keep Stone Acres as a place that is extremely public facing. It's a place that can provide nourishment, education, access, and experience to the community. And that's really what we're trying to do in this next 250-year chapter of Stone Acres."

The 85th Day Food Community

The second piece of the partnership came in 2011 when Dan and his team opened Oyster Club in Mystic and along the way launched the 85th Day Food Community. By the way, the name comes from Hemingway's "*The Old Man and the Sea*", it was his 85th day at sea when the old man risked all and finally hooked his massive marlin. Never give up your dream.

From the beginning Oyster Club was always a destination but it has really taken off since Executive Chef Renee Touponce came aboard in 2017. We were

lucky to write about Renee and her team in the Winter Holiday issue of 2021, but she and her team have really exploded since then. Renee is a 2024 James Beard Award Semifinalist for Outstanding Chef, a 2023 James Beard Award finalist for Best Chef Northeast, and was named Chef of the Year at the Connecticut Restaurant Association's 2022 CRAzies Awards.

As to the larger partnership Renee says, "Working with partners who are committed to telling a story and having impact through food is a relationship I value. These three teams grow, teach, and feed our community on a daily basis. Being able to work so closely with our farm helps me when creating menus. I am able to walk the fields and taste produce allowing me to connect to the seasons and flavors."

The Engine Room came next in 2014, led by Executive Chef Chris Vanasse, located in an historic refurbished marine engine building. Also dedicated to locally sourced produce, fish, and meat the restaurant is gorgeously designed and features beers, burgers, and bourbon. They offer an amazing selection of each.

Then, in 2022 the team opened "one of the best bars in America", as noted by Esquire magazine, The Port of Call. The restaurant/bar, also led by Renee and Beverage Director Jade Ayala, has since garnered broad recognition from the CT Restaurant Association awards, The CRAzies, and once again the James Beard Foundation.

Renee explains, "At the 85th Day Food Community, we say, "our food has a story." Our guests have the unique opportunity to be part of that story from start to finish. To visit the farmstand at Stone Acres, meet the farmers, attend a workshop or class at YFEC, and to eat in our restaurants provides a full circle experience."



Touring the Stone Acres Farm gardens on a summer day; local oysters on the grill at a Stone Acres Farm dinner





Yellow Farmhouse Education Center

Jennifer Rothman, now the Executive Director of the Yellow Farmhouse Education Center, first met Dan and Jane when they visited Stone Barn Center (run by famous Chef Dan Barber and his brother David) for a tour.

Shortly thereafter, in 2018 Jen, along with founding board member Barbara Dixon, who sadly passed away just this fall, founded the Yellow Farmhouse Education Center. “We’re an independent 501(c) (3) nonprofit,” Jen explains, “meaning our technical arrangement with Stone Acres Farm is that we are a tenant of the farm. But obviously there’s a deep and strong partnership between the two organizations. It started with just me as the sole employee and is now a team of six.”

Their mission is to connect people to each other and to where their food comes from through culinary and farm-based education. There are three main program areas that emerged through various circumstances, somewhat organically.

The first program focuses on professional development for Family and Consumer Science Teachers, those teaching high school culinary classes. “It was just clearly needed and well received so we started building this program of professional development and curriculum development for the high school culinary classroom that essentially takes the same curriculum that you normally do but deepens the connections to the farm,” Jen explains.

This means that students learn not just how to cook eggs or bake bread, but also learn the difference between pasture raised chickens



Whole roasted veal on the wood fire spit “The Firebeast” on Stone Acres Farm hand built stone hearth; farm to feast fare, a platter of hors d’oeuvres at an 85th Day Food Community dinner at Stone Acres Farm; Chef Jacques Pépin, Chef Renee Touponce, and Chef Jeremy Charles at an annual birthday celebration for Jacques Pépin at the Manor House

and factory raised chickens, about fair wages and labor laws in farming, or about the industrialization of wheat or local wheat. This effort is now supported by two back-to-back grants from the U.S Department of Agriculture, one from the Farm to School program, and the National Institute for Food and Agriculture. Jen says proudly, “That was huge. That took that program and really expanded it.”

The second program is called Kojicon. Koji is a naturally occurring culture, typically cooked rice and/or soya beans that have been inoculated with a fermentation culture, *Aspergillus oryzae*. Koji is used to make popular foods like soya sauce, miso, mirin, and sake.

Jen says, “We had done a Koji program on the farm, and it was really popular. We launched an online version during the pandemic and hoped to sell 100 tickets. We ended up selling over a thousand tickets to people in 63 different countries!”

It’s now an annual global conference with two weeks of sessions by well-regarded Koji cognoscenti and is well attended by a committed community of fermenters that come back every year.

The third program is a micro farm that was started so students could work outside and help drive donations. “The focus of our school group is often talking about food waste, and ways that you can reduce that. We will bring out a group of students, collect whatever crop is ready cleared then we sort, clean, package and ready it for donation,” Jen says.





A summer dinner at the Farm

She continues, “The thing I’d say about the broader partnership is that each of us do the work that we do. What I love about the restaurants, the farm, and the education center, is that we each bring something to the table and we each need something. And what we bring to the table is needed by the other partners. What they bring to the table is needed by me, and there’s no competition because we have such different vision. Our overall vision is the same, but our needs and assets are different, and that just makes for a really good partnership.”

Stone Acres Farm Today.

Today the farm continues to be a refuge, albeit one of stewardship, nutrition, and education. Will Conway, Director of Farming Operations, says, “We manage four acres of vegetables, a half-acre of cut flour production, and we raise chickens and Thanksgiving turkeys. Our growing practices are guided by soil health, and ecological diversity, and sustainability in terms of making sure that nothing we do compromises our ability to produce healthy, nutritious food on the grounds of stone acres in perpetuity. That involves the basics of sustainable agriculture, from crop rotation to the use of cover cropping and composting, and ensuring we are supporting and including a diversity of enterprises on our farm. Things like the cut flower program brings in a ton of pollinators and beneficial insects. The poultry helps us to rejuvenate some of the pastures and land that otherwise wouldn’t be productive.”

Will works closely with the restaurants and the Yellow Farmhouse as you’d expect. The farm is the unique position of having a consistent and predictable outlet for all they produce. They support the needs of the restaurants, the on-site market, farmer’s markets, and CSA’s, but also manage to provide for the Yellow Farmhouse programs and ensure nothing is wasted through donations.

Will enjoys working in a creative partnership with the Chefs, especially Chris, who runs the seasonal on-farm dinners. They typically meet quarterly to discuss and create the next menu inspired by what is coming off the farm. But they also talk weekly, joined by Will’s assistant manager, Pete Higgins, to ensure that production of the farm is meeting expectations for that week’s dinners.

Before moving to the farm, Will was an educator at the Yellow Farmhouse so it’s dear to his heart and the farm is integral to their programs and curriculum, so he works closely with Jen throughout

the year as well. He says, “Part of my philosophy as a farmer is to try to help educate others about sustainable agriculture and the value of local food.” The Yellow Farmhouse is a perfect outlet for that drive.

Will notes, “I think it’s really ambitious and unique what we’re trying to pull off here. We’re a for-profit farm with really high standards in terms of our ecological approach to growing. We see our production, our farm, as really inseparable from the values of the education center. And of course, we are so honored to

have our products featured on world class menus. We’re honored to have a close partnership with them all.”

The Future

With so much success one has to wonder what’s next, especially now that you know the origins of the 85th Day name! Luckily for our local food community it looks like the culmination of all three entities may come together. While many farms do two or three dinners, Stone Acres now hosts up to 50 dinners a year. But, of course, they’re not stopping there.

“We’re hoping to have a restaurant on property. It’s always been part of the plan,” says Dan. “We’ve also known that we wanted this to be active food campus, so there’s a renewed commitment to really make Stone Acres a place for people to not only shop at the farm stand and the education component, but to really expand the opportunities for people to eat and be present where their food was produced.”

The options are many. The manor house would make a wonderful, more formal setting. Yet the carriage barn would support a very scratch cooking atmosphere that’s entirely focused on what’s coming from the farm and other local products. Picture an open kitchen, open dining room, and open fire cooking with big wood tables. A country bistro if you will. Every option, frankly, sounds fabulous.

Dan concludes, “You have Stone Acres Farm, you have the Yellow Farmhouse Education Center, and then you have the 85th Day Food Community. And each one of these organizations is independent of one another, but also very dependent upon each other and has a tremendous amount of interaction and crossover, which is really cool. It’s really, really cool.”

Each entity is world class on their own. But the connection of all three is definitely bigger than the sum of their parts.

*Stone Acres Farm is located at 393 North Main Street & The Yellow Farmhouse Education Center is located at 389 North Main Street – both in Stonington. stoneacresfarm.com • yellowfarmhouse.org
Oyster Club is located at 13 Water Street, Engine Room is located at 14 Holmes Street & The Port of Call is located at 15 Water Street – all in Mystic. oysterclubct.com • engineroomct.com • theportofcallct.com*



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