



Philosophical Ponderings of a Farmer

The Financials of Micro-Farming

By Meghan Mix

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I want to start by recognizing the privilege I have to even be able to consider farming as a profession when it pays me so little. I am privileged that I am able to live in a community where so many people support small farms, farmers markets, and CSAs. I am privileged to have the opportunity to farm mainly on a collective piece of property with shared access to resources like a wash/pack station, walk-in cooler, greenhouse, and more. I am privileged that my land rent is so affordable. I am privileged to have grown up in a middle class, white family and to have received a good education as well as strong support from family and friends. I am privileged to know that if this whole farming thing doesn't work out, I have other options to fall back on. I am privileged.

OK, the numbers. The info below is from 2021, and so far, 2022 is looking much more promising. Also, I know I could have grown the business more quickly, and arrived at this point within a year (or two), from when I started, but what can I say, I'm staunchly conservative (well, at least when it comes to starting a business :). In fact, I intentionally started small, and have grown Hopscotch slowly. I deliberately based my business model on creativity over financial inputs, leveraging community resources rather than debt. I began Hopscotch back in 2017 with very limited capital (under \$4000) as a multi-plot farm operating out of several urban backyards. I farmed part-time and retained outside employment to ensure I had my systems in place before I took the leap into full-time farming. And as the business began to support itself, I shifted to slightly larger leased plots. 2021 was my first year without outside employment - hurrah! - and I was able to "support" myself - double hurrah!

Aside from all those crazy records I was keeping as part of "knowing my cost to grow," I also kept records of my overall hours worked. I also want to note that before thinking about how dire these numbers may seem, there are a few things to consider: This includes ALL my time, for continuing education, commuting between plots or to the farmers market, and all those hours I spent calculating my cost to grow, plus collective farm meetings. It is based on my net income, AFTER expenses and reinvestment back into the business. Plus I took a couple of months off in the winter. Additionally, I was able to stockpile more value-added products that were crafted in 2021 for sale in the spring of 2022 than ever before, meaning that my revenues are up for this year.

OK, here it is folks: My overall hourly wage in 2021 was just slightly under minimum wage. Hmmm. Makes me wonder: How can I make the jump from paying myself almost minimum wage to paying

myself what I consider a living wage and saving for retirement? (Fun fact: accounting for inflation and increased productivity, the current minimum wage should be well over \$20/hour.) My time is already maxed out, so I can't just work a little more to sell a little more. I'm not asking for a lot - I live a very inexpensive life, but it would be nice to have a safety net and feel like I can afford to go to the dentist or take an occasional non-camping type vacation.

My plan is to (hopefully) increase efficiency, something I've done every year since I started Hopscotch. Whether that is something as simple as not cutting the roots of the leeks (oddly time consuming, plus the roots are beautiful!) or ensuring that I weed early and often (it takes soooo much longer to weed by hand when the weeds get too big to use a hoe - unfortunately that ship has sailed for this season). And also knowing when it is time to call it quits for a crop or product. Have you noticed that I no longer sell my Beet Relish in a pint jar? It is now packaged in an 8-oz jar just like all the rest of my sauces/relishes. The biggest lesson I learned from my cost analysis last year is that the 16oz Beet Relish was simply not profitable.

I know that I make so many choices everyday that don't help increase profitability. For instance, I only use organic vinegar in my pickles. And organic vinegar is triple the cost of non-organic. But it is better for the planet and for people (and it's non-GMO!). I don't use mechanized equipment in my beds (for soil health). But I am unwilling to compromise my values for profit. Because if I did, what would be the point of running my business in the first place? I also know that at my scale, farming will not be as profitable as it might be on a larger small farm. Maybe that farm uses machinery, maybe they make a slight compromise on quality (so slight that probably no one will notice), maybe they hire employees who (are happy to?) work for minimum wage.

To me, this means that the system is fundamentally flawed. And until it changes (or until climate change and political unrest catch up with us), my small farm will probably remain profitable but not financially sustainable. Because, as a society, we no longer have any sense of how much it actually costs to grow. (Here I'm not referring to how much it costs me to produce 1 bunch of carrots vs how much it costs a large agribusiness farm. I mean, how much is it costing our most fundamental resource of all, our planet, when a small farm can't truly make it because we continue to rely on an industrial food system?)