A late-summer sunset off Maine's Blue Hill Peninsula. Left, from top: A shellfish course at Aragosta restaurant, on Deer Isle; chef Erin French in the doorway of her Airstream trailer at the Lost Kitchen, in Freedom; wooden tableware at Harborside's Good Life Center.

THE *Maine* COURSE

This coastal state's rugged, rocky landscapes aren't an obvious draw for farmers, food producers, or chefs. That's exactly why generations of outside-the-box types have settled here, finding meaning in Maine's hard-won bounty—and creating some sublime food along the way.

By Kevin West *Photographs by Greta Rybus*

JUST AFTER LUNCH, NOT LONG PAST

Labor Day, I was hightailing it across an Acadian landscape of glacier-scoured hills and moose-haunted plains. To be only somewhat more specific—because GPS showed me no nearby towns, just vague, empty stretches—I was between the Maine Turnpike and Penobscot Bay. Early as it was, somehow I was already late for dinner at the Lost Kitchen, an ambitious restaurant in an old gristmill in a depopulated town called Freedom.

Chef-owner Erin French's life story, a tale of hardship resolved, has made the Lost Kitchen into something like the *Wild* of the restaurant world—a runaway best seller about female grit. Despite the restaurant's cinematic isolation, nearly 20,000 hopefuls apply by postcard each year for roughly 4,600 covers. When I invited my neighbor Christine along for dinner, she didn't hesitate to drive the five hours from where we live to join me.

Christine was already there, wearing an eager expression, as I pulled into the restaurant's unpaved parking lot. We crossed the millpond dam and were shown to a table at the water's edge. Servers, mostly locals, brought artfully informal platters of appetizers while French's husband, Michael Dutton, lit braziers around the lawn. Dinner at the Lost Kitchen is typically served at six o'clock but, the day before, ours had been moved up because of incoming cold. As the afternoon sun slid behind the trees and I put on a jacket against the chill, French explained the meal ahead.

"I think we started a new thing—2:30 p.m. dinner," she said to the group, who hung on her words like the audience at a Carnegie Hall recital. As for the food she had prepared, "Last night I took my dog for a walk and found this patch of Jerusalem artichokes," French said, and "you could literally walk to the farm where your lettuce was grown," and "we have fresh pears from Victoria, who is waiting on you tonight."

A cold northern state with long winters and thin soils, Maine is perhaps not recognized as a place of agricultural abundance by anyone "from away," as Mainers say. But a

Clockwise from left: A yurt at the Good Life Center; Eliot Coleman and Barbara Damrosch, owners of Four Season Farm, in Harborside; pickles at Pembroke's Smithereen Farm; pizza at Tinder Hearth, on the Blue Hill Peninsula.

week of visiting its rural restaurants showed me how the state's culinary boom began: with its farms. Kitchens in Maine, lost or otherwise, are never far from the source.

As French described the caramel-custard dessert she planned to make for us, she mentioned that the last-of-the-season raspberries to go with it were still being picked. "Fingers crossed they show up," she said with a twinkle. The local grower had meant to deliver them the night before, French continued, but being also a midwife, she got called away by another sort of delivery.

Little sounds of delight gusted among the tables. A story of new life and last-of-the-season raspberries gathered such sweetness. Emotions missing during the six months of pandemic—spontaneity, hope, joy—flitted like damselflies over the millpond. Surely no one wanted to be anywhere else in that moment, and in September of 2020, that felt like more than any of us had the right to hope for.

MAINE IS AMONG a handful of states to have an item of food as its symbol—not through legislative action, the way calamari was designated the appetizer of Rhode Island in 2014, but as a matter of collective fancy. "Peaches come from Georgia / And lobsters come from Maine" goes the 1940s ditty "Rhode Island Is Famous for You." I saw a bumper sticker with the shape of the crustacean inside the state borders—an emblem for what it means to live in Maine, or at least get a taste of it on vacation.

Maine actually has two iconic foods, the other being wild blueberries, an August harvest for pies and jam. The night I visited the Lost Kitchen, French served lobster on a biscuit as a starter. Later, when we spoke over the phone, she said half-seriously that lobster on the menu usually means something else—something more interesting, in her view—has fallen through.

What I had come to Maine to taste was whatever might qualify as more interesting by her standards, a level of rigorous discernment shared by James Beard–aware eaters I talked with around the state. I was told not to miss the farm-to-table Asian takeout at Ravin Nakjaroen and Paula Palakawong's Long Grain, in Camden. I was reassured that El El Frijoles, near Blue Hill, was not just a joke name but a locavore taqueria where even the heirloom black beans were Maine-grown. And I was encouraged to go to Devin Finigan's Aragosta, on Deer Isle, where the woman-led kitchen cooked woman-raised Penobscot Bay oysters and woman-grown leeks from the town of Harborside.

Finigan was raised in Vermont, and first came to Deer Isle to visit her sister, who was enrolled in the nearby Haystack Mountain School of Crafts. Later, after Finigan received a culinary education working under fine-dining luminaries Jean-Georges Vongerichten, Thomas Keller, and Dan Barber, she came back to Deer Isle to open Aragosta (Italian for "lobster") in the village of Stonington. Now relocated to Goose Cove, the indoor-outdoor restaurant is the centerpiece of a summer-camp-like resort. Ironically, the coronavirus pandemic, ruinous to many restaurants, propelled Finigan to creative maturity. She removed 40 seats from her dining room for safe distancing and switched the à la carte menu to a 10-course tasting experience.

"I want it to reflect the landscape," she explained the morning after I had been seated for dinner, blissfully alone, in the restaurant's greenhouse. "I want to highlight how lucky we are to live here." Finigan rattled off a list of ingredients sourced from the immediate vicinity—lobsters caught by her husband; scallops raised by Marsden and Bob Brewer, a father-son team in Stonington; and peas from Eliot Coleman and Barbara Damrosch's Four Season Farm. "It's lovely to see where it all starts," Finigan said.

Other chefs I met likewise expounded a culinary vision of place, the romance of Maine's land and sea. But many also delivered a no-nonsense disquisition about what it means to be a conscientious chef-citizen in the 2020s: making an earnest attempt to live in the granular detail of equitable action, rather than simply waving a stylish green flag. Sustainability in its full expression, I heard, meant understanding the interconnected health of soil, water, the human body, and the broader community. Equity means reimagining a status quo that, since European settlement in Maine in 1604, has underserved the land and many of its citizens.

In other words, Maine food showed me the state through two lenses. The more rose-colored put a soft focus on Vacationland nostalgia—a lobster roll for lunch at McLoons on Sprucehead Island, an art director's fantasy of coastal quaint. The other lens drew my eye to new ways of thinking about food. I heard about aquaculture as a sustainable alternative to climate-stressed fisheries; employee-owned seed companies; cider made from foraged apples; and the birth of a Maine wine industry. As I toured the state, my drink of choice was Morphos, a *pétillant naturel,* or naturally fizzy wine, from Oyster River Winegrowers that embodied a new sensibility, one that was scruffy and determinedly forward-looking.

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From far left: Warming up after a late-season dip near Stonington; lobsters at Smithereen; a volume from the trove of culinary writing at Rabelais, in Biddeford.

A BOOK HAD INSPIRED my Maine itinerary, so I made my first stop Rabelais, a bookstore in Biddeford, a former lumber and textile town midway between Kennebunkport and Portland. Owner Don Lindgren, a specialist in books about food and drink, wears a lobsterman's beard and grows food on his small homestead a few miles away.

I explained to him how I had been prompted to come to the area after reading Scott and Helen Nearing's books. Cosmopolitan intellectuals and committed radicals, the Nearings left New York City for a remote Vermont farm during the depths of the Depression, rejecting family wealth for a life of voluntary poverty. *Living the Good Life,* published in 1954, was their joint memoir/user's manual for what today's bloggers might call a green lifestyle—although the Nearings, who were straighter than spruce timber and buttressed by a granite sense of self-assurance, would have scorned such squishy language.

Perhaps to everyone's surprise, the book turned into a best seller and became the Old Testament of the back-to-the-land movement. When Vermont grew too crowded for their liking, the Nearings moved to Maine's Blue Hill Peninsula and made homesteading into a kind of performance art. Disciples flocked to see them chop firewood, grow vegetables, and live in the 19th century—though they did have electricity, to the disappointment of some. One visitor, now in his early 80s, stuck around. Eliot Coleman established a homestead that grew into Four Season Farm, and in time, he became a snow-haired organic guru himself.

Lindgren pointed out to me that Coleman has by now influenced generations of Maine farmers and chefs, including Sam Hayward—whose Portland restaurant Fore Street, opened in 1996, was the "seedbed," in Lindgren's eyes, for the city's later culinary flowering. He encouraged me also to look past the Nearings to see the region's first farmers: Abenaki peoples, who were growing corn, squash, and beans on the islands when Europeans arrived, and the French settlers, who established homesteads years before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock. It was never easy. "It comes down to hard times and wild foods," he said, quoting historian Sandra Oliver.

"We've always had a short growing season," Lindgren explained. "We've always had soil that wasn't fantastic. We've had freezing cold weather and tons of snow. But people have chosen to farm here and fish here and forage here." On my way out, he gave me a vintage pamphlet on how to catch and prepare Maine seafood, as well as a paper sack filled with walnut-sized apples, an antique variety he grows called Chestnut—souvenirs of wild food and hard times.

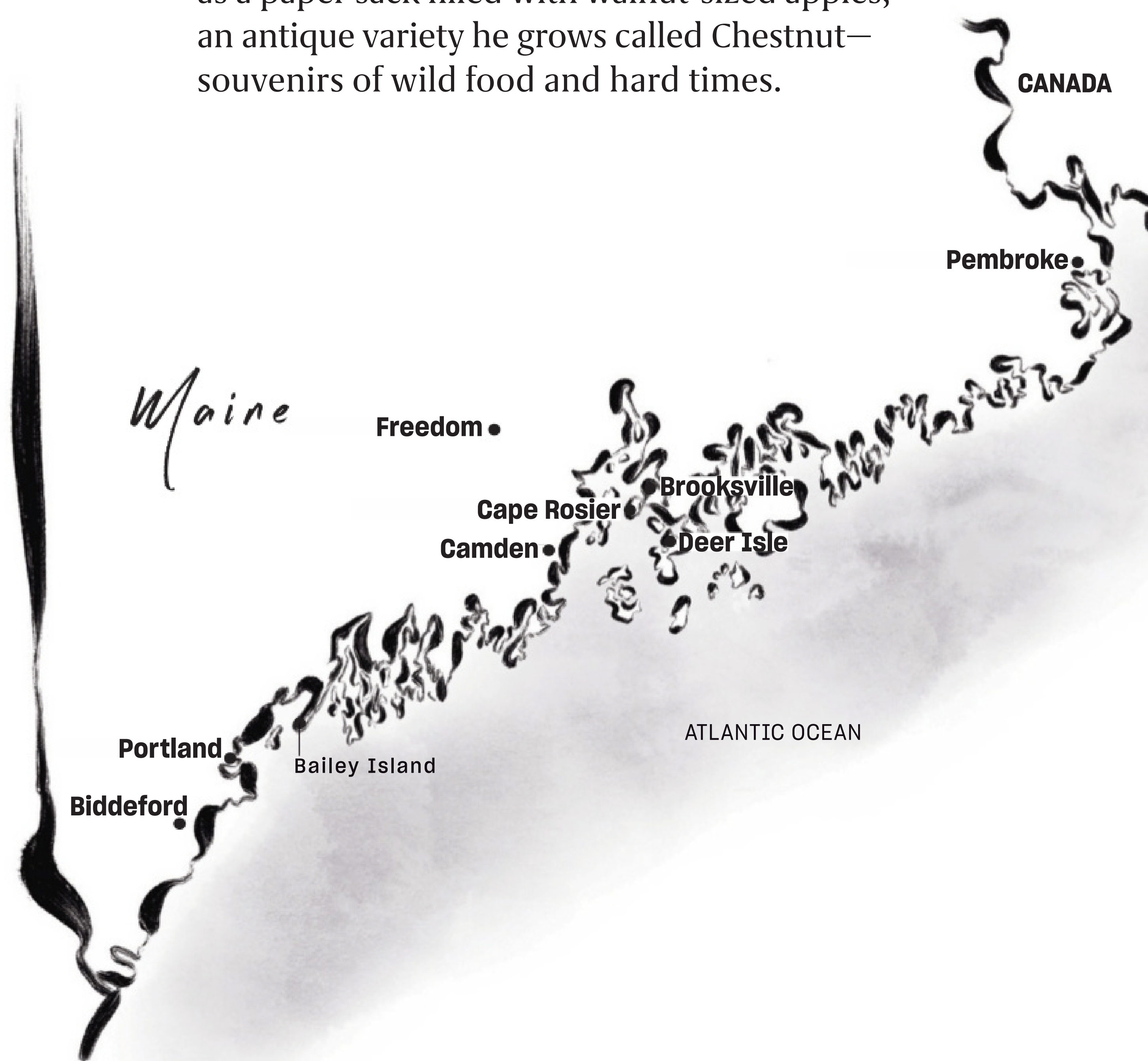

ILLUSTRATION BY MAY PARSEY

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From left: Outdoor seating at the Lost Kitchen; one of the newly restored cabins at the Gills Group, on Bailey Island; chef Devin Finigan sourcing ingredients for her restaurant, Aragosta, off the coast of Deer Isle.

'IT COMES DOWN TO HARD TIMES AND WILD FOODS. BUT PEOPLE HAVE CHOSEN TO FARM HERE AND FISH HERE AND FORAGE HERE.'

— Don Lindgren, owner, Rabelais bookstore

THE NEXT DAY, at Wolfe's Neck Center for Agriculture & the Environment, a working saltwater farm near L.L. Bean's Freeport emporium, I met dairy cows adorned with microchip earrings. They are part of a cutting-edge research project with a goofy name: B3, for Bovine Burp Buster. The middle *B* refers to methane, a greenhouse gas more than 80 times more potent than carbon dioxide. The center's agricultural research coordinator, Leah Puro, explained how the B3 Project works. A computer-controlled mobile feeding station recognizes each cow by her ear tag. It releases a dietary supplement of dried Maine seaweed, which inhibits methane production in the cow's stomach; a second machine measures the effect on her emissions. The stakes are real. Livestock contributes more than 40 percent of all human-caused methane released into the atmosphere, and at least 90 percent of the gas produced by dairy cattle comes out the front end.

Now that organic practices have become the baseline in Maine's progressive farming circles, innovations like this one have set a new, higher standard. So-called regenerative agriculture strives to undo industrial agriculture's destructive effects, including its contributions to climate change. "Regenerative agriculture means to farm with the cycles of nature and mimic them with our practices," Puro explained, making a full-circle gesture in the air as we toured the dairy with her colleague Andrew Lombardi. At the cows' dairy barn, which, like the entire 600-acre property, is open to the public, Lombardi added, "Organic is great. It doesn't hurt the land. Regenerative is making the land healthier."

When the Nearings arrived in Maine they, too, espoused harebrained ideas since proved prescient, among them organic gardening and a vegan diet. The morning after I met the cows, I set out on Highway 1 for the heart of Nearing country. The route took me past coastal villages where fine Federal architecture recalled how much wealth the forests and fisheries had created in centuries past. The tall-ship era marked an economic high tide in Maine, a postcolonial boom time followed by 100 years of recession. Pretty seaports survived only by replacing the once-bountiful cod with tourist dollars.

At the Penobscot River, I crossed a dramatic cable-stayed bridge strung like a shipwrecked piano; then the road bent toward the Blue Hill Peninsula. Hardscrabble farmhouses blasted by centuries of sharp weather trailed stone walls like loose threads. The illusion of being cut off from the world took hold of me, and I could imagine how

powerfully it must have acted upon visitors 70 years ago, when the Nearings decided to stay.

Partway down the peninsula, I turned right toward Cape Rosier, emerging from dense woods at the shallow cove where the Nearings established Forest Farm. Scott Nearing was already nearly 70 when they started clearing land for new gardens and composting seaweed to enrich the meager soil. He died in 1983, aged 100, and Helen Nearing was still living independently when she was killed in a car crash at the age of 91. Since her death in 1995, Forest Farm has been open to the public as the Good Life Center, and although programming was on hold due to COVID, kind members of the board made a special trip from Blue Hill so I could see the library and poke around the garden.

Half a mile down the road I met the Nearings' successors. Eliot Coleman and Barbara Damrosch were at breakfast in the warm, bright kitchen at Four Season Farm. I took a seat at a safe distance, and Damrosch brought me a small bowl of Sun Gold cherry tomatoes, fruit-bowl sweet. A native New Yorker who studied for a Ph.D. in English literature at Columbia University, she was already an established gardening authority when she met Coleman. **(Continued on page 101)**

Your Culinary Maine Address Book

Where to Eat and Drink

Aragosta
The seasons of Deer Isle in a 10-course tasting menu—plus stylish cottages and suites to sleep in. *aragostamaine.com; doubles from $140; tasting menu $125.*

El El Frijoles
Fun locavore taqueria on the Blue Hill Peninsula. *elelfrijoles.com; entrées $6–$15.*

Long Grain
Farm-to-table Asian takeout in the heart of the Mid-Coast. *longgraincamden.com; entrées $14–$19.*

Lost Kitchen
Homegrown ingredients elevated by star chef Erin French. *findthelostkitchen.com; tasting menu $175.*

McLoons Lobster Shack
Of many great lobster options, this Mid-Coast spot is perhaps the most picturesque. *mcloonslobster.com; entrées $6–$33.*

Tinder Hearth
Utopian wood-fired pizza on the Blue Hill Peninsula. *tinderhearth.com; pizzas $16–$22.*

Where to Visit

Four Season Farm
Produce from Eliot Coleman and Barbara Damrosch's legendary farm is sold to the public from a farm stand on Saturdays. *fourseasonfarm.com.*

Good Life Center
The Cape Rosier homestead of back-to-the-land gurus Scott and Helen Nearing is scheduled to reopen to the public next month. *goodlife.org.*

Haystack Mountain School of Crafts
Visit this mecca for modern crafts on Deer Isle on one of its occasional open workshop days. *haystack-mtn.org.*

Rabelais
A shoppable archive of food writing from the Renaissance to the present day, near Portland. *rabelaisbooks.com.*

Wolfe's Neck Center for Agriculture & the Environment
A 600-acre working farm with hiking, camping, and a café. *wolfesneck.org.*

Where to Stay

Blind Tiger
Start or end your road trip at Portland's stylish new B&B. *blindtigerportland.com; doubles from $189.*

Brooklin Inn
A quiet, simple country inn and restaurant near Blue Hill. *thebrooklininn.com; doubles from $175.*

Gills Group
Quintessential summer houses on Bailey Island. *thegillsgroup.com; cottages from $200.*

Smithereen Farm
A Down East saltwater farm with cabins and camping. *smithereenfarm.com; cabins from $50 per night.* —K.W.

(Maine, continued from page 93)

Together, they have organic star power—the ag world's Warren Beatty and Annette Bening.

"The Nearings probably inspired ninety-some percent of the people who came here," Coleman said. "A lot of them probably did what my first wife and I did after reading the book. We came to meet the Nearings." The land they sold the young couple was agriculturally barren but creatively fertile. Coleman combined hands-on experience with wide reading to pioneer the use of greenhouses for four-season harvests—hence the farm's name—and to apply organic methods at a commercial scale. "At that time, everyone told me, 'Oh this is impossible. You can't do it,'" Coleman said. "Well, I knew *impossible* was an easy word to overcome if you put enough energy into it."

AND SO A NEW generation of energetic idealists has followed. At the United Farmers Market of Maine, in Belfast, I met Ben Rooney, a millennial who cofounded what was surely the state's first commercial rice farm. A Colby College graduate from the Midwest, Rooney stuck around to test himself against a piece of waterlogged clay soil unsuited to more conventional crops. "The seeds are growing," Rooney said, meaning not his literal crops but the progressive ideas passed down by the Cape Rosier elders.

The surprise is how the new growth, once it bears fruit, can look so different from the parent stock. Tinder Hearth is a wood-fired bakery and pizzeria on a 19th-century homestead in Brooksville, a short drive from Four Season Farm. Tim Semler's parents, musicians, moved there in 1983, the year he was born, to get back to the land. Semler grew up around gardens and unconventional ideas, and he came to understand the loss suffered by the community when its fishing and farming economy no longer sustained the stores, garages, schools, and churches that were the agencies of civic vitality. In 2007, he and his wife, Lydia Moffet, opened a utopian bakery to bring friends together around a community bread oven—"a village bakery without much of a village," in the words of one review.

Today, Tinder Hearth supplies bread to a community that extends as far as the Lost Kitchen, and on its twice-weekly pizza days, the wood oven fires 160 pies from 4:30 to 8 p.m.—about one a minute. Semler and Moffet have raised their kids in Brooksville, composing a life that is sustainable on a whole lot of levels. Call it regenerative entrepreneurship. "You wouldn't really know at first sight that this bakery is the result of the back-to-the-land movement," Semler said, "but it totally is."

MY FARM-TO-TABLE road trip was bookended by...books. At the end of the week, I was surprised to find myself at an 8,000-volume library for agrarian scholars in Pembroke, which is nearly as far Down East as you can go before you reach Canada. Pembroke was a 19th-century industrial center with shipyards, sawmills, an ironworks, and sardine canneries. These days the sardines are fished out and there are one-third as many residents as in 1870, the end of the sailing age. Even by Maine standards, land is dirt cheap.

Which is why the town's remnants are of interest to a freethinking idealist born to a wealthy Swiss-Californian family. Severine von Tscharner Fleming is a farmer, activist, and eco-firebrand who had founded four nonprofits before she reached Pembroke in 2017.

"This is not the edge of the world," she hooted as she drove me around her summer headquarters. "It's the periphery of the end of the world." Her library, soon to reopen to the public, is housed in Pembroke's Odd Fellows Hall, a lodge built by one of the mutual-aid societies that flourished with the local industries. Or, as Fleming put it, "the working man's utilitarian mansion, an artifact of the golden age in coastal Maine."

Possessed of Nearing-like physical stamina and vocal endurance, Fleming teaches culinary "wild-crafting" camps at Smithereen Farm, sells wild-blueberry jam and homemade fish sauce, and invites paying guests to stay in farmhouse rooms or in cabins or camping platforms scattered around the property. She has made herself town crier for a more sustainable, more equitable agrarian future. "Farmers are brave and good," she shouted at me. "Give them land!" Suburbia is her nemesis. Maine is her laboratory. And Smithereen is a grand experiment: a model for the 21st century built on a "diversified ecological approach to a regional, value-added food economy."

Our conversation continued the next morning in Smithereen's open-air, wood-fired kitchen, where Fleming's ideas are grounded in the practical here and now of her revived saltwater farm. She busied her hands with the task of shucking homegrown corn, and I helped myself to breakfast from a bushel of apples harvested in an abandoned orchard nearby. Fleming told me how she had been crowded out of the Hudson Valley, her previous headquarters, by what she described as "rapid gentrification."

In Maine she found what her ideas needed most. As was the case for the Nearings, and for Coleman and Damrosch, and all those who followed, what she needed was land no one else wanted—a farm of her own. "If you're a counterculture or a reform movement, you go to the edges," she said. "We come to the margins to experiment with new ideas." ✚