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On the Edge of Agriculture

An interview with Narendra Varma and Gianna Banducci of Our Table Cooperative

by Mike Simpson



Photograph by Sarah Heath

One mile outside Portland's urban growth boundary near Sherwood OR, a new farm business is modeling innovative practices that could become the future of Oregon agriculture. The Our Table Cooperative brings stakeholders from all levels of the food system together as member-owners within the same organizational structure. By sharing costs and infrastructure, the cooperative seeks to show that small and medium scale agricultural production can be economically viable. The farm also emphasizes diversity of crops over industrial efficiency, and its management is based on dynamic governance.. Recently, Metroscape sat down with two members of the cooperative to discuss their vision, and how their approach to farming and farmland stewardship works within a system of land-use regulations that were designed to protect Oregon's farmland at a time when large-scale industrial production was widely thought to be the only viable agricultural model. Narendra Varma is a founding member of the cooperative. Gianna Banducci recently joined the cooperative as Marketing Director.

Q: *I'd like to start out by asking you what personal experiences have led you to become interested in food systems and farming, and what has motivated you to create this project?*

Narendra Varma: A series of fortunate accidents. I don't have a background in agriculture or food – my degree is in education. I've worked in the high-tech world. That provided a good financial foundation to be able to do this. I was coming at this from the perspective of a layperson looking at the food system, the problems that we are facing as a civilization and as a culture going forward, and thinking about what the landscape and

food system are going to be for our children and grandchildren.

And then I also brought certain viewpoints as an investor to the table – asking what is this word investment? We think of it in a uni-dimensional way : I give my money to some yahoo on Wall Street and magically it comes back bigger than it started. Really, that form of investment is gambling – it's not true investment. I think of the word investment as investing our skills and talents and abilities into trying to build the future.

Gianna Banducci: I left a job in corporate marketing, and I did a Food Studies

graduate program in northern Italy. That launched my exposure to small farming and a holistic diverse food chain. When I came back I worked in a cooperative in Northern California and then I moved to Portland last summer, and I joined the Our Table co-op a few months ago. My journey has been the communal nature of food – whether you are eating it, growing it, or selling it. I have this overwhelming drive to get people involved in any way that they are interested – whether that means shopping locally or learning a new recipe – whatever it is that gives people a tie and an investment in what they are putting in their bodies, where it comes from, and how it affects this greater picture that we are all involved in.

Q: *The Our Table Cooperative has been described as a 'farm incubator' project. Could you explain what that means and how it works?*

NV: Initially we definitely started as a more traditional incubator. We looked around and asked the question, “What are the barriers for new farmers?” Everybody knows about the aging farm population. Other major issues include access to land, access to capital, and access to markets. But we also identified that even when people have the land, and have the skills of farming, and maybe even have the skills of marketing as well as a market, they may not know how to run a business. So we thought: Why not build a farm incubator that would allow people to cycle through a piece of land, provide some training with a strong educational component and treat it as a traditional business and farming incubator?

Over time what we realized is that, although the focus on training farmers and helping new farmers come into the system is still a goal, our vision of the way we

want to manage the land was very holistic. We view the whole farm as a single organism. Biodynamic practices are reflected there. In order to realize this vision of how to manage the landscape in a sustainable way long-term, and to have that right mix of annuals and perennials and livestock that we felt was pretty necessary for truly sustainable land management, you need a mirror framework for the social and legal structures and organizations. One is a reflection of the other – the two go hand in hand.

We realized that you can have capital, and land, and training, and education, and young farmers, but the systemic problems are larger than that. For instance, there is a lack of small and medium scale infrastructure. Everything has gone giant scale. For small-scale agriculture to succeed not only do you need small farms and therefore, lots of farmers, but you also need some of that small-scale infrastructure to come back, such as seed cleaning, slaughterhouses, grain elevators, and all sorts of transportation or distribution infrastructure. So what we ended up becoming – and this might change as we evolve – is a cooperative that brings together both producers and consumers and everybody in between who is part of the food system. You have the farmer, the rancher, the person who drives the truck, the person who does the harvest, the person who does the value added processing, the retail, all the way to the consumer.

We realized that part of the problem with this idea of creating a regionalized food system is that we don't really have all the answers. You can't just go back to the way our great grandparents did things: the world has changed. We have all kinds of interesting scientific knowledge and technology that changes how things are done, we have a lot more people to feed, and

You can't just go back to the way our grandparents did things...

we've learned something along the way. It's not a question of going back. You have to ask how we use that wisdom of the past to go forward. We realized that all the players in this space needed to come together and figure this problem out together.

Q: *Can you describe in more detail how the decision-making and economic structures of the cooperative work?*

NV: Legally, it is a cooperative – a multi-stakeholder cooperative. So, we have three groups of members. One is consumers, and that's obviously the largest group in terms of numbers. The second is the folks who work in the cooperative – farmers on this land and anybody else who works on this facility. Some of the pieces that we provide are the farming, the management, the marketing, and the value added processing such as chefs and people who are producing packaged foods.

The third group is producer members – other independent farms who are not on this land can join the cooperative and be a part of this whole ecosystem. There is an aggregation function that is happening on this farm – if you are a small farmer on a couple of acres and you have a couple of cases of broccoli, you can bring them to us and be a part of our cooperative and we can market them under our one umbrella brand. In that example, you wouldn't be able to sell it to a distributor because the quantity is too small – there is a hole in the distribution model for really small-scale producers. We are trying to fill that hole by being a “first mile” aggregator.

In terms of decision-making, by law a cooperative is governed by its membership, by a board of directors elected by and of the members. But we are trying to use a

model of decision-making called dynamic governance or sociocracy – a model that comes out of the Netherlands and has been used quite successfully in corporate as well as non-profit circles. It's not consensus-based because there are all kinds of issues with consensus-based decision-making that people are generally quite familiar with. Dynamic governance takes some of the idealism of consensus and couches it in perhaps more practical ways. You are not going for 100% consensus, but 100% consent. There's a subtle difference there – everybody does not have to agree with a decision but everybody has to agree not to disagree with a decision. It allows a little bit more hierarchy based on a meritocracy of skills. At the end of the day we all have certain expertise and skills, and dynamic governance focuses on the fact that people have expertise but it also allows for more broad-based input from everybody, so that you don't get into group-think and some of those other challenges of being too narrowly focused. That's the decision-making structure that we are experimenting with, and it's relatively new in the US.

In terms of finances, the cooperative is a for-profit organization. Workers in the cooperative earn a living wage. We use the standard set by the Living Wage Calculator from MIT, a metric that is set on a zip-code basis. The numbers are far better than the minimum wage, although if you ask me it's still a little on the low side. If you could pay a living wage with benefits, especially health care as well as accidental death and dismemberment insurance for

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our members, that would be a holy grail and that is what we would like to work towards. Those are things that farmers generally don't have, and in a profession like farming if you do hurt yourself by accident you are finished. It is a physical profession and it's a huge benefit to have that peace of mind. Also to have some kind of retirement benefit. These are all things that farmers don't get because they are usually independent businesses. We would really like to use the power of the cooperative and the group to provide some of those things to workers.

Where is the financing coming from? Well, initially it's Community By Design, which is an LLC that bought this land, and continues to own this land, and put in the seed capital to establish the agricultural infrastructure. Most of that infrastructure is going to be leased out to the cooperative on a not-for-profit basis. Community by Design LLC is a capital shareholder of the cooperative and can get an investment return in the form of a cash dividend once the cooperative becomes profitable. The idea is that the cooperative is given a head start with access to infrastructure and land and some seed capital for operating expenses, and then it's on its own. It needs to succeed as a viable cash positive business. Otherwise, if it doesn't, then on some level the experiment has failed. We are not trying to be a non-profit doing something for the good of the public. We definitely have the good of the public in mind, but at the end of the day it has to be a viable business. If it is not a viable business, then it is not something that people can replicate – it's not something

that young people are going to choose to go into. That's not the way to make farming the next hottest profession.

Having consumers at the table is a crucial aspect of that, because as eaters in this culture we have gotten used to this fast cheap, convenient food system, and the cheap part is going to be hard to get over. People are struggling, so we have to be aware of issues of affordability and access. Having consumers at the table allows for a completely transparent financial scheme in a vertically integrated organization of which they are a member, so that consumers know what the true cost of production is: the cost of the land, how much the farmer was paid, how much the truck driver was paid, how much are we paying in taxes, or for fertilizer, or for whatever else, and that's why this head of broccoli costs \$1.27. Any profits are distributed back to members so there is no hiding behind being a private company and taking an unfair share.

Why is the industrial version of it cheaper? Because the industrial version is externalizing costs: whether it is the cost of the reliance on fossil fuels, or the externalized costs of destroying the soil, or contributing more to climate change, or not paying a living wage. We are not talking about a zero-carbon impact kind of farming here, but we are talking about a far gentler impact on the planet than the industrial agriculture system.

Q: *How does this sociocratic decision-making process work when it is time to decide where to plant a fruit tree for instance, or which lands to put into pasture?*

NV: Although we would love for everyone who is farming on this land to live here, that is really not the vision here. There are a limited number of houses available on

this land and therefore limited opportunities for people to live here. But we are very close to the town of Sherwood and there are plenty of places in the surrounding community for people to live. One of the projects that we use as inspiration is called Hawthorne Valley in New York, which started in the 1970s. They have created a little village around them because they don't have housing on their land in any great number, but they have 120 employees who live in the area. That would be the ultimate in terms of success – that you merge with the local community so that you are part of your local community and the local community is a part of you.

In deciding if something should go somewhere on this land, we have a broad-stroke master plan that was produced by a team of designers and that provides some guidelines that we use as a road map. For more specific decisions, the operations on the farm are organized by little mini-business units: the annuals business, the perennials business, the livestock business. Those groups make independent decisions about what they do on a daily basis, but they also check-in with the group when it's a decision that is going to impact the larger whole. And then we have whole farm decision-making that is about even broader issues. Decisions are always being made at many different levels all the time, and sociocracy is the framework that surrounds all of that.

GB: This really allows people to focus in on their strengths and take the lead on certain areas of this project. Also, being a member of the cooperative, whether as a regional producer, as a farmer, or as a customer, everyone has an equal ownership stake – everybody has a buy-in and everyone has a vote, which keeps things equal across the board and facilitates a

community that is able to come together and collaborate on the same level.

Q: You described the cooperative's approach to farming and land-management as influenced by biodynamics. It has also been described as influenced by permaculture design. Could you explain a little bit about what this means and how they influence the project?

NV: What attracts us to biodynamics is its focus on soil health, which by definition is a long-term focus. Also, biodynamics helps us to view the whole farm – and eventually the community outside the farm – as a single organism. You can see that at any level: you can see just your soil as a single interconnected organism, or you can also get a little bit higher up and look at the landscape as an organism, and you can see that the people are an integral part of that interconnected whole.

Permaculture also looks at the ecosystem in similar kinds of terms – sees it all as inter-related, as a system. Permaculture offers a set of design tools that are based on natural systems. This idea of interdependence is very crucial to this project. When you study the history of intentional communities, or housing communities, or utopian communities in the mid-1800s, you realize that a huge percentage of them failed. Researchers have asked what it is about the ones that have lasted for generations – examples such as the Amish. What is it that caused them to survive when many of their peers didn't? Really it boils down to one word – interdependence.

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If you and I are truly interdependent, we don't have to be the best of friends, but we can still live together. That is something that informs our thinking here and comes from looking at the natural world. In a healthy ecosystem, it's really hard to tell where one thing ends and the other starts because there are all kinds of things happening that we don't usually see. The relationships between us are the same: multidimensional, complex, with many, many layers. Biodynamics and permaculture are both trying to get to the same idea of looking at things as an ecosystem

GB: How we see it above ground is bringing people together in the sense that we envision our cooperative to be regional. We have this farm here for our farmers, but as we bring in regional producers we want to reach people in Portland, we want to reach people here in our community in Sherwood, and Wilsonville, and keep going west. One day, if there is a fisherman on the coast who would like to be a part of our cooperative, that's part of the community that we want to build. And it's going to be organic, as we grow and as people learn about us .

Q: *What is the most important aspect of this approach that distinguishes it from that of conventional industrial agriculture?*

NV: The key feature there is the distinction between monoculture and polyculture. It's very appealing and very efficient to specialize in one thing. It's what we are taught to do, it's what we are trained to do, and it makes a lot of sense from an efficiency standpoint. But, what ends up happening with that idea of efficiency is that you start to become uni-dimensional. If I have 5,000 acres of land, it is physically very difficult to grow 50 things. It doesn't

matter how clever a farmer you are, because on that scale efficiency drives you towards monoculture. That doesn't mean that you are a bad person, but that's the scale that you are operating at.

Our industrial agricultural system is about a model of industrial efficiency applied to what is fundamentally a natural system. Industrial efficiency, although it can be a very useful tool for many things in our lives, is not well suited for managing natural systems. When you look at natural systems you realize that what they are really good at is resilience, and they get that resilience from having large amounts of diversity. So, when we look at this farm, we think of diversity.. It's a form of agriculture that you cannot do with giant mechanized harvesters because they would trample over the 17 other things you are trying to grow on that same piece of land at the same time.

Per unit of land, interrelated, complex, diverse systems can produce more useful biomass and be more resilient to any kind of perturbation, whether it's pests or weather, and I think it is a far better way to move forward. But it cannot compete when it comes to per unit labor efficiency because its labor cannot be multiplied by a machine. To say that the guy farming 5,000 acres alone is highly productive is actually kind of ignoring the fact that what he is really doing is just pushing a button and its the diesel that is doing all the work – it's fossil fuels that are magnifying that person's capabilities.

NV: Socially we see a monoculture where the decisions are out of the hands of the farmers and are being made by the government or corporations. So you lose that ability to have any kind of collective or individual decision-making because people are doing that across the board for you,



Photograph by Sarah Heath

which limits the opportunity for diversity or the chance for small scale agriculture to have viability because its in the hands of greater powers.

Q: *Your farm is situated just one mile outside of Portland's urban growth boundary. The innovative approach to agriculture that you are creating emphasizes small-scale production, as well as a community of diverse stakeholders and micro-enterprises who share farm infrastructure under a unified cooperative. How has this model been helped or hindered by Oregon's land-use planning laws?*

NV: The land-use system in Oregon has been very revolutionary in many ways. One of the reasons we located this project in Oregon is because of the land-use system, because we felt that something like this needed to be done near an urban core, but not too far away. In jurisdictions where there isn't any kind of comprehensive land use planning, generally our culture has tended towards urban sprawl and suburban sprawl. As a result, decent farmland has been gobbled up by development willy-nilly without any kind of planning. Generally speaking, the land-use planning in Oregon since the 1970s, and this idea of preserving farmland, has been a huge positive for the state. Here we are, exactly 15 miles and less than a half hour drive away from Powell's Books, sitting essentially in rural America. But a mile north of us is suburbia and a town. This kind of thing really doesn't exist in places that don't have comprehensive land-use planning.

You are right that, for one reason or another, at the time when these rules were developed the idea was to protect farmland from development, and development in people's minds equalled housing. I think they came to the conclusion that the way to limit development on farmland was to limit housing on farmland. Of course, this was also at a time when no one was really questioning industrial agriculture – the

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idea was that with science and technology, and cheap oil, we didn't need so many farmers. This concept of large farms was perfectly reasonable at the time. If you then allowed five houses on one piece of land, that was akin to a subdivision in some ways. I think that's where all of that came from.

We chose this location one mile from the urban growth boundary because we wanted to be close to the urban core, and what's interesting about being so close to the urban growth boundary is that we are on the edge here. There is this big melting pot of urban, suburban, and rural all swirling around on the edge. Again, it's one of those permaculture principles – maximize the edge because the edge is where the diversity occurs, whether it is the edge where the pond meets solid land, or whether it's the edge of the rural and the urban.

Clearly, I totally agree with the philosophy of the land-use system – there is no question about that. We always wanted some form of a residential community because we felt very strongly that farmers need to live on the land. If you are a livestock farmer, telling you to commute is ridiculous. The animals are there and they need you in the middle of the night. Clearly some farmers have to live on the land. We chose this property partially because it had a Measure 49 claim on it which allows three residences. We plan to construct these three residences. By law they have to be clustered around this existing residence, so it will become a little residential cluster.

Q: Do you think that permitting more housing developments on single-farm land outside the growth boundary would necessarily open the floodgates to subdivision development and suburbanization?

NV: Well, I don't think it necessarily would, but the devil is going to be in the details. I do believe that the State needs to step back and say, listen, we've had all these great successes with the land-use planning system, but the world of agriculture is changing, so therefore our regulatory system has to change along with it. If the requirement is that we are going to have more small-scale farms, and therefore many more farmers, and those farmers have to live somewhere, then the regulatory framework has to be adapted to deal with that.

Small-scale agriculture is going to happen on these urban edges. Perhaps a regulatory framework that talks about those edges in a special way is what makes sense. For example, people have talked about a zone that is maybe a mile on either side of the urban growth boundary that is treated like some form of a hybrid or a buffer zone. We know that the urban growth boundary is growing slowly but surely, and that these areas are going to get absorbed eventually. We don't want to lose good farmland, but there's got to be a more creative solution than saying "here's this line in the sand." I think those things can be changed, it's just a matter of getting the people around the table.

GB: We are a part of the change that is happening right now in farming, and part of our challenge is exposing different types of players – whether it is the county or our own neighbors – to our new style of land use, and showing them that it's not going to cause a problem. It's a very delicate but very powerful part of what we want to be doing. **M**

Mike Simpson is a graduate student of Urban and Regional Planning at Portland State.