Russellville, Missouri is beautifully situated on the line that separates the rugged Ozark Mountains from the rolling prairies of the Midwest. This small town has a quaint charm that blends well with the dramatic rolling hills and rural farms that dot the landscape. It’s also a convenient 15 miles to the bustling state capital, Jefferson City.

Living smack dab in the middle of this classic slice of Americana are Emily and Brian Towne, self-described “eco-alternative farmsteaders” striving to produce the bulk of their own meat, dairy, eggs, produce and non-GMO animal feed, while building a fledgling retail business selling and bartering eggs, chicken, milk, produce, garlic and herbs to a small but growing consumer base.

The Townes love the country life – it’s in their blood. Emily grew up on a rocky Ozark hill farm and Brian was raised on a traditional row crop farm in Iowa. Yet, like so many farm kids, Brian and Emily set out into the world after high school to get an education and to find out if there was something else out there for them besides farming. When the couple met in Omaha, Nebraska, in the early ’90s, Emily was working for a Fortune 500 company and Brian worked as a mechanic. Soon after they were married, the couple moved back to Brian’s family farm where they grew corn, soy and a variety of livestock. Three years later, the couple moved to Columbia, Missouri, with the hopes of starting a farm of their own one day.

In 1998, Emily gave birth to their son, Henry. It was a joyous occasion, but it was also a serious wake-up call for the new parents.

The Townes had always eaten a healthy diet, but now GMO corn and soy had begun to hit the market, and the couple became increasingly doubtful as to the safety of the food system. As Emily puts it, “The state of the food and agriculture system, along with GMOs, became more of a concern for us. The idea of genetically modified food and the chemicals required to grow them was deeply disturbing, as was the thought of feeding our child and future generations the food that this kind of toxic system offered.”

Over the next few years, Emily pored over hundreds of books and articles on organic food production, permaculture and everything in between. Determined to produce as much of their own food as possible on their modest 1 1/2-acre town lot, the couple raised a small flock of chickens and grew and processed a great deal of their own produce with the dream of eventually starting their own farm. As a stay-at-home mom who homeschools her son, Emily not only wanted to make sure that he grew up with the know-how to grow his own food and be a good steward of the natural world, but she also worked to provide her family with nutritious food.

“I wanted my son to know how to do things for himself so he would not have to be dependent on a toxic corporate food system. I knew that these lessons would become part of who he is, and he would always have that empowerment.”

Emily and Brian Towne (above) and their son, Henry (at left).
empowerment. We started him out gardening and raising a small chicken flock as a 4-H project, but we dreamed of a place in the country where we could expand our food production efforts.”

At that time, the housing bubble made smallacreages difficult to afford, but in the fall of 2010, after five years of searching, the couple finally found an affordable place on the outskirts of Russellville to make their dreams of a farm of their own a reality. The new farm consisted of 15 acres and had a 1930s-era farmhouse, a shop with animal stalls, pasture and a small woodlot with a creek running through it. They quickly christened their new home Full Plate Farm. The property had once been part of a larger farm, but had been sold off in smaller lots over the years. As luck would have it, the couple was able to purchase an adjacent 15 acres one year later, which added a hay field and more pasture and woodland to their existing property. Now they could produce their own hay and still have additional pasture for their cattle and milk cows.

Although Brian continues to work full-time, the Townes have built up their farmstead over the last six years to the point where they are producing their own pork and have recently added meat rabbits and a small flock of meat and laying ducks.

“Garlic, eggs and raw milk are our touchstone products. We use beyond-organic methods to produce the highest nutritional value in our food,” said Emily. “For example, our eggs are exceptionally nutrient-dense because we don’t confine the chickens. We let them forage at-will from the pastures and fallow gardens and supplement with 100 percent organic grains. Chickens are omnivores and if you want them to produce eggs with super nutrition, they must have access to a wide variety of plants and plenty of insects. That’s hard to do if the chickens are restricted to pens, even moveable ones.”

Emily said when they first started selling eggs, they hesitated at the thought of asking a fair price that covered costs of production, “but because our customers know our commitment to the highest possible quality, they are willing to pay for them — and we have a waiting list. We sold them through a local grocery store for a while, but prefer direct-marketing our food.”

It’s obvious that when the Townes decide to add a new product to their farm, they want to do it right. So when they wanted to raise their beef cattle and milk cows entirely on pasture, a visit to Joel Salatin’s Polyface farm was priceless.

“Most people start their beef on pasture and then finish them off with grain thinking that the grain will fatten up the beef and give it good marbling. But feeding grain to ruminant animals that are made to live on grasses and pasture will completely change the nutritional benefits of the pasture-based diet, which just makes sense. We leave the cattle on pasture longer than you would a grain-finished beef so that the animal has time to mature and develop a good fat and nutritional profile. Under this system the meat is more succulent, tender and flavorful. Grassfed beef, milk and eggs have exceptional nutritional benefits compared to grain-fed versions.”

Emily has also been doing her homework on alternative feed for their chickens and pigs, but clean feed for their newly introduced meat rabbits has been impossible to find. While they work on that issue, plans are under way to regenerate the former hay fields, with their clay and rock, to a more fertile landscape that can sustain heirloom grains and higher-quality hay.

“We hope to expand our food offerings as time goes on and continue to build our garlic business as well.”

As part of their “beyond organic” approach, the Townes are striving not only to use all organic non-GMO feed, but to grow their own heirloom varieties on-farm. They are able to purchase certified organic feed for their chickens and pigs, but clean feed for their newly introduced meat rabbits has been impossible to find. While they work on that issue, plans are under way to regenerate the former hay fields, with their clay and rock, to a more fertile landscape that can sustain heirloom grains and higher-quality hay.

Emily has also been doing her homework on alternative feed for their flock of hens by absorbing the wisdom of Harvey Ussery, whose methods include increasing “self-farming” opportunities by cultivating specific crop plants for browsing and encouraging natural populations of live protein sources such as earthworms and soldier grubs. In turn, the chickens are used to increase soil fertility and control insect pests. This method works well with the Townes’ current plan, which begins with regenerating the soil by returning all of the farm’s organic inputs back to the soil, rotational grazing and a diversity of cover crops.

“It’s all about protecting the land and bringing it back to health. Not just taking what we can get from it, but giving back to the system to keep it fed.”
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SEED CONNECTION

For Emily, one of the aspects of living with the land and not just on it comes full circle in the form of seed – specifically, heirloom seed. In fact, heirloom seed was the reason I came to know Emily in the first place. It started a few years ago when I was volunteering at the Missouri Organic Association and Emily stopped by my table. We got to talking about farming and seeds and I offered her some of my rare red-seeded watermelon seeds. It was a passing moment between kindred seed spirits, but we were soon to be entwined in an heirloom seed saga involving a long lost cousin, endangered beans, Seed Savers Exchange and a rekindling of Emily’s Ozark heritage.

It all came together when a woman I met while giving a seed saving presentation wrote and asked if I could help her save some old dry beans that had been passed down from her grandmother, to her mother and then to her. Her mother had passed and the beans were in poor condition and would not germinate. As we worked on the problem, she mentioned that her mother may have sent the same beans to Seed Savers Exchange back in the 1970s. It just so happened that my nonprofit project, Share the Seed, was affiliated with SSE through their Community Resource Program, so I contacted them to see if they had the seeds in question. Unfortunately, they didn’t have the Bessie Beans, but they did find several other family heirlooms, which made us all very happy. I was so happy that I posted a little something about the event on my Facebook page, excluding the names of the participants for privacy reasons.

Almost immediately, Emily sent me a private message saying that her family had been saving ‘Grandma Beans’ for years and wondered if I might possibly be talking about her long-lost cousin, whom she hadn’t seen since her days on the rocky hill farm in the Ozarks. Of course, it turned out that the woman was indeed her cousin and the Bessie Beans were a direct link to her father and great-grandmother from whom she obtained many other heirloom seed varieties, including her treasured ‘Grandma Beans.’ Through a series of emails, we hashed out the family connections and discovered a number of other family heirlooms that had been housed at SSE since the ’70s. One day, Emily not only hopes to obtain and grow all of the old family seeds, but to add to that inventory by including the family heirlooms that she has grown and saved for years.

When I began talking to Emily about heirloom seeds and farming, it was only natural that I would want to write a story that encompassed both – which, in my mind, go hand in hand with eco-farming and “getting back to the basics.” It didn’t surprise me at all when Emily told me that Full Plate Farm hosts a seed share on the farm each spring where friends, customers profile. And when our local butcher saw the hanging carcass of our beef for the first time, he told us we were doing it right.”

The Townes’ main goal is to have a high-quality food stream for their family and to be the change they want to see in agriculture. “We want to offer like-minded people high quality food that is the polar opposite of the factory food model.”

When it comes to building their fledgling farm business, Emily is delighted by the results.

“In Missouri, it is legal to sell raw milk directly to individuals both on and off of the farm and raw milk sales paid for our first cow.” When asked if they sold at farmers’ markets, Emily replied, “We used to, but in our small town it just wasn’t working out for us. First of all, farmers’ markets here are only seasonal and only on weekends. We found that people are busy on weekends and didn’t really want to get up early in the morning on a Saturday to come and buy produce. Joel Salatin once said that farmers’ markets were ‘an inconvenient rendezvous’ and for us, that has been true.”

So, instead of asking customers to come to them, the Townes decided it would be better if they went to their customers. This meant delivering once a week to Jefferson City, which is a short drive from Russellville. For a state capital, Jeff City, as Missourians affectionately call it, is fairly small. With only around 43,000 permanent residents inside the city limits, a large population of rural conventional farm culture and a community generating little demand for organic products, the Townes had their work cut out for them. But over time and by word of mouth, more and more people discovered the delicious and nutritious offerings from Full Plate Farm.

“The key was to talk to everyone we could about organic food and why it is better and more nutritious. Everywhere I go, I talk about organic farming and how healthy animals and healthy soil make healthy food.”

As word got around, Emily set up a Facebook page to help potential customers get in touch with the farm and to see for themselves the care and love put into the food they pro-
and neighbors come together to swap seeds and talk food and farming. For while the seed share is obviously a great way to bring in new customers to the farm, that’s not the main goal. True success isn’t always about making money — sometimes it’s about making things better.

Jill Henderson is an artist, author and organic gardener. She is editor of Show Me Oz (showmeoz.wordpress.com), a weekly blog featuring articles on gardening, seed saving, nature ecology, wild edible and medicinal plants and culinary herbs. She has written three books: The Healing Power of Kitchen Herbs, A Journey of Seasons: A Year in the Ozarks High Country and The Garden Seed Saving Guide.

NEED MORE INFORMATION?
For more information on Full Plate Farm, find them on Facebook or call 573-680-8578.