

Fishkill Farms

July 28, 2018



A LEGACY OF SUSTAINABLE FARMING, PUBLIC SERVICE AND A WILLINGNESS TO ADAPT

By ML Ball

Photographed by Steven Steele Cawman

THERE IS TREMENDOUS VALUE in knowing where you come from and where you're going. Josh Morgenthau is certain of both.

Representing the third generation of Morgenthaus who have been passionate about the land and growing top-quality crops, and the fourth generation of Morgenthaus who have been just as passionate about serving the public good, Josh is the current owner/operator of Fishkill Farms, carrying on the family legacy while skillfully guiding it into the future, ready for today's and tomorrow's agricultural challenges. And like those previous generations, he too believes we're here to make a difference in the world.

"The family legacy for me is about public service and about trying to do something you're going to be good at but that benefits the most people," Josh said recently.

A HERITAGE OF PUBLIC SERVICE AS WELL AS SUSTAINABLE FARMING

As far as legacies go, the Morgenthau one is substantial. Josh's family on his father's side emigrated from Baden, Germany, to New York City in the late 1880s. His great-grandfather was the U.S. Ambassador to Turkey (the Ottoman Empire at the time) and, according to Josh, was the main whistleblower for the Armenian genocide. His maternal great-great-grandfather, Mayer Lehman, was a cofounder of Lehman Brothers.

His paternal grandfather, Henry Morgenthau Jr., attended Cornell University to study architecture, but after spending a summer on a ranch in Texas had a complete change of heart and transferred to Cornell's "ag school" (College of Agriculture and Life Sciences).

Upon graduation from Cornell, Henry planned on becoming a rancher and started looking at land in Texas, but luckily, his father intervened and convinced him to buy a farm in the Hudson Valley that, in 1913, became Fishkill Farms.

"He originally bought a few different farms, over 1,000 acres at one point," said Josh. "It was orchards and a dairy and some mixed berries and fruit, and then over time the economics of dairy became worse and worse, and the farm became primarily orchard. For many years, its focus was selling apples to supermarkets and big wholesale buyers and distributors in New York."



It soon became apparent that Henry's love for the land and farming was matched by his dedication to public service. Appointed chairman of the Agricultural Advisory Commission in 1928 and New York State's conservation commissioner in 1930, he then became chairman of the Farm Credit Administration and eventually secretary of the treasury under President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, his longtime friend from nearby Hyde Park.

When Henry Morgenthau died in the 1960s, the farm passed to his son, Robert. After serving in World War II, Robert, like his father, began a career in public service while continuing to operate the farm. Following a career in law, Robert was appointed U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of New York by President John F. Kennedy and then became the borough of Manhattan's longstanding district attorney, a position he held for 35 years.

"What a lot of people don't know about my father is that he was a dedicated farmer and loved this land and was up here working every weekend," Josh explained. "He would spend at least an hour a day in the morning doing farm work, taking care of the things an owner and operator of a larger-scale orchard would have to take care of."

SHIFTING FROM WHOLESALE TO PICK-YOUR-OWN TO ORGANIC

Under Robert Morgenthau's guidance, Fishkill Farms transitioned from a wholesale operation into a diversified, multicrop enterprise in the 1980s and '90s, opening its doors to the public and allowing customers to pick their own fruit. Sensing a growing demand for fresh-from-the-farm produce, Robert and farm manager Ray Morris planted peaches, plums, cherries, pears and berries to extend the growing season beyond simply apples.

When Ray retired in 1996, Robert was without a successor to manage day-to-day operations and found it hard to keep the farm profitable. Out of necessity, he leased out the orchard and fields to other growers.

Then in 2008, the farm entered its present phase, with Robert turning over the reins to his then 24-year-old son, Josh, thus bringing the farm's management back into the family.

In the ensuing 10 years, Josh has greatly expanded the farm's diversification begun by his father, while simultaneously introducing organic practices. Two years ago, the farm received organic certification through the New York branch of NOFA (Northeast Organic Farming Association) for its vegetables, berries, eggs and most of its apples.

So how did Josh prepare for the massive task of running a 270-plus-acre working farm, I asked? Did he grow up with dirt under his fingernails?

"No, I was an artist," he responded. "After studying painting in college, I moved back to the farm originally to make paintings. Then I thought, I want to do some farming while I'm here and see what we can do to bring the farm back. The orchard was in desperate need of pruning, replanting and renovation. Then as I started farming, I fell in love with it and realized it was more than a full-time job. Pretty soon I was doing a lot more farming than painting, and it's been a wild journey ever since."

That wild journey has included transitioning the farm from an old-school, conventional family business growing mostly apples for wholesale into a diversified farm operation offering dozens of types of berries, peaches, nectarines, apricots, plums, cherries, pears, apples, lettuce, eggplant, kale, squash, tomatoes, peppers, pumpkins and hard cider, as well as a 300-member CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) program.

"We're making all of that available to the local community as well as reducing our carbon footprint by marketing and selling locally," said Josh. "We're also able to produce and harvest fresher produce because we don't have to ship it thousands of miles to get to our customers."

When asked if his degree in fine art has helped him in his current career, Josh answered in the positive. "Yes, in a lot of ways it has, because when I was working as a painter in New York before coming to the farm, I really had to be self-motivated and find my own way and do a lot of independent research. I think that degree of experimentation and knowing how to self-teach was critical for taking on this family farm, changing it and hopefully improving it for the better over the past 10 years."

"I leaned on Cornell's satellite research lab in Highland really heavily in the beginning," Josh said, "so when they asked me to be on their board seven or eight years ago, I said yes. The joy and benefit of being able to interface closely with the scientists and researchers there, and also give back by helping fund-raise and support their efforts, is really satisfying, especially because they're a nonprofit, originally founded by growers in collaboration with Cornell."

105 YEARS AND COUNTING

Today, Fishkill Farms has been in the Morgenthau family for over a century, and although it manages to remain in the black, Josh readily admits that the issues facing farmers today are very different from those of 100 or even 50 years ago.

"Protecting the environment, conserving natural resources and producing better food all make up a complex set of challenges that have a vast impact on public health, from the nutritional content of the food we eat to what sort of chemicals or natural alternatives we're growing our crops with," Josh said. "We've only started to see the tip of the iceberg of the effects of modern commercial agricultural production on our health."

Not only that, but farming in Dutchess County—from labor costs to simply the cost of doing business—is expensive, Josh said. "Yet we're competing against farms that don't have our high labor costs, even if they're local farms. As a result, to survive in our area, I've found that we really have to be adaptable and can't just do things the same old way. We have to be willing to experiment every year and make some mistakes, but with an eye to getting better in the process," he said.

Indeed, in these current times of great change, often a farm's survival comes down to its willingness and capability to adapt. "For me," Josh explained, "taking back this family farm that is part of our legacy and trying to do something positive with it and grow organic and eco-certified fruits and vegetables for the local community is a way to provide a model for how agriculture can change and can be a direction for growers going forward."



TAKING ADVANTAGE OF EXPERT ADVICE FOUND LOCALLY

To get up to speed in his early years of running the farm, Josh sought advice from a number of sources, including his father, farm manager Ray Morris (now retired), the Cornell Cooperative Extension and the Hudson Valley Research Lab—a satellite of Cornell's Agricultural Experiment Station in Geneva, the oldest agricultural research facility in the country.

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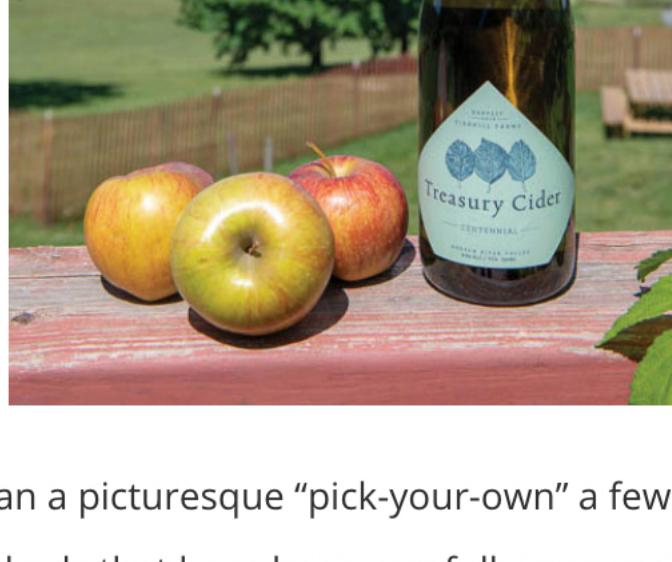
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And this is why Fishkill Farms is more than a picturesque "pick-your-own" a few turns off of I-84. It is a collection of orchards and berry fields and vegetable beds that have been carefully managed and diligently held on to by three generations of visionaries, an indelible symbol of caring for the land and the people who eat the food grown on that land. Quite a legacy indeed.

For more information on Fishkill Farms, visit www.fishkillfarms.com.