



# A CONVERSATION WITH RICHARD BALL, NEW YORK STATE'S COMMISSIONER OF AGRICULTURE AND MARKETS

In 1993, Richard Ball sunk his hands into the rich, deep, loamy soil of Schoharie Valley Farms, 200 acres he had just bought at the foothills of the Catskills and Adirondacks. He had always dreamed of providing his three kids the chance to be connected to a piece of incredibly fertile land. With 20 years of experience managing a commercial vegetable farm in Rhode Island, this Schoharie Valley native had finally returned home. Little did he know that, in 2013, he would receive a phone call that would change his life and grant him the privilege of helping shape New York agriculture.

*Edible Capital District: Commissioner Ball, could you share a glimpse into the history of Schoharie Valley Farms?*

Richard Ball: This land has been farmed consistently since the 1700s, by five different families. The Palatine Germans and Dutch who inhabited this region quickly recognized its agricultural potential. It was probably a lake bottom millions of years ago, so we have really deep—up to 18 feet—of mineral rich, loamy soil, one of the top 10 soils in the world. The Germans and Dutch who inhabited this region quickly recognized its agricultural potential. When you plant a corn seed, the roots grow deep and strong. A corn plant will grow a few inches taller, the season will last a little longer, and we'll get more yield.

The farmer before me bought this land in 1958 and grew commodity crops—carrots, parsnips and turnips. We bought this as a wholesale carrot operation in 1993. That's why we named the store the Carrot Barn. We converted many of those carrot acres to diversified field crops and began to sell to more restaurants, chefs, food service and other markets.

We have five large greenhouses filled with vegetable and flower transplants. The greenhouse business has been so good for us because it taught us to pay closer attention outside in the fields. A bench in the greenhouse is like an acre of land outside. All the nutrient pressures and water needs are magnified.

*ECD: And the solar array?*

RB: Electricity had been the biggest cost after labor, so we decided to solve that issue starting in 2010. We now have 528 solar panels adjacent to the greenhouse that generate 95 kilowatts of power. That covers electricity for the entire farm operation.

*ECD: You also have the Carrot Barn, a very successful retail store.*

RB: The store is an important face to the business. We offer beef, pork and lamb raised here in the valley, along with glass-bottle milk, yogurt, butter and cheeses from local farms. This gives us the opportunity to help out some neighbors who may not have the time or

the access to as steady a retail market. People do a lot of canning and freezing around here, and we sell potatoes, carrots, winter squash and field veggies by the bushel full.

Our commercial kitchen has evolved over the years. We bake everything from scratch: carrot cakes and carrot brownies, cider donuts, pies, cakes and cookies. Once my daughters came back, we got more courageous and started branching out more.

*ECD: So you've built this into a family business?*

RB: That's right. My wife, Shirley, and I have three kids. Sarah pays attention to the bakery, displays and gift end of the store. She's married to a farm down the road and floats between the two farms. My son, Ethan, always spent time with me in the fields, and he does a lot of the tractor work and harvesting. He's taken over buying and selling wholesale and trucking to markets. JoLyn is very retail oriented. She largely takes care of the café and manages the Carrot Barn employees. We employ about 50 people, and many are like extended family. Our crew leader started picking peas here when he was 14.

*ECD: Like those corn plants, you have deep roots in this valley.*

RB: My mom was fifth generation on a dairy farm nearby. My dad worked as a processor for several dairy co-ops. I was born about 15 miles from here and spent a lot of time on my grandparents' farm. I always thought I'd be a dairy farmer. I loved riding the hay wagons, being around the cows and horses. But they retired and sold their farm when I was around 10 or 12. That's when I knew I wanted to be a farmer but didn't have a farm to go to.

*ECD: Tell me about your farming background.*

RB: After high school, I started working on a vegetable farm in Rhode Island in the 1970s. I became a crew leader and eventually the farm manager. It was ideal for me because it had been a dairy farm and then switched over to wholesale potatoes. They tried new crops, added a variety of markets, built greenhouses. That was my college education in agriculture. Ingrained in my head was that you needed to not only withstand change but seek it. I was there for 20 years.

In 1993 I had the opportunity to buy this farm. I loved the idea of returning to this valley and having our own farm for my own family. We borrowed a ton of money and jumped right in. We immediately began looking for ways to change and evolve.

*ECD: You seem to thrive on change.*

RB: The ability to change keeps you alive in agriculture. We challenge

ourselves every year to do six new things. In January the kids and I sit down and assess the past year and decide on what we want to change. Maybe it's solar panels, another greenhouse or expanding some aspect of the café and market. Change requires that we know our customers and are ready to anticipate and respond to their needs. Are we giving them what they want? We try to pay attention to that for sure.

*ECD: How has the local food movement impacted your business?*

RB: Frankly, everyone wants to know what our grandparents knew about food: how it should taste, what's in season, how to cook and preserve it. Grandma said, "Eat your vegetables." She was right!

The timing has been ideal for farmers and food producers. Having this generation care about their food makes it more compelling for the younger farmers to commit to staying on the land. We have three generations working on the farm now. I think we're going in the right direction.

*ECD: What's it like selling to some of the top restaurants in New York City and the Capital Region?*

RB: It's pretty amazing to be in the kitchens of Thomas Keller, Daniel Boulud, Gordon Ramsay, Angelo Mazzone and see the enthusiasm of the chefs. They want to know about the farm, our growing methods, different varieties of crops. It's really fun to work with people who are so passionate. These chefs start with the best ingredients and treat them with reverence. They're our billboards for local food. All the cooking shows on TV also help the cook-at-home movement.

finance, retail and wholesale marketing, display, seeing customers. Making it all work, putting order to what could be chaos. I fell in love with a piece of land and learned how to take care of it so it's better next year and sustainable for the coming generations.

*ECD: You're a teacher in many ways.*

RB: As much as you think you're in the vegetable business, you're actually in the people business. Helping teach young people on the crew and train them to be good workers and productive members of society is so rewarding in itself. If you've spent four or five years on a farm, you can go anywhere and do anything.

*ECD: What are some of the exciting aspects of New York ag?*

RB: This state has some of the best land in the country, and we have access to water. We have close to 36,000 farms, with an average of 200 acres. And we have all these growers within a couple hours of one of the biggest markets in the world. My job is to help connect the dots. It's not so much about knowing how to put a seed in the ground at the right time and knowing when to harvest, it's about building relationships with people who need that food.

*ECD: The biggest challenge?*

RB: It's not just about serving high-end restaurants. We have these food deserts, pockets of Albany and a place like the South Bronx, that have no grocery stores, no farmers' markets. The South Bronx has no

"I wasn't looking for a job; I had the job I had wanted my whole life."

*ECD: So how did you get tapped as commissioner of agriculture?*

RB: When Irene hit in 2011, our farm, like so many others, had been under eight to 18 feet of water, and we lost all our crops. I had helped put together a nonprofit group to help raise funds and get people back on their feet and in their homes. The governor had been here in the valley, so I guess he saw how we were rebounding and pulling each other through.

The governor's office called in the fall of 2013 and asked if I would consider serving as the commissioner of agriculture. I was flabbergasted, didn't see it coming at all. I wasn't looking for a job; I had the job I had wanted my whole life. But that conversation with the governor convinced me. He said he wanted someone in production agriculture to run the department and that in order for the upstate economy to grow, we needed to have vibrant agriculture. That was a pretty compelling challenge to undertake, so I talked with my kids who stepped up in a big way, and we found a way to make it work out. But I'm here every night and on weekends, there's always stuff for me to repair, and we all meet on a regular basis.

*ECD: What's your favorite part of the farm?*

RB: All of it! Plowing the land, repairing equipment, banking and

access to fresh fruits and vegetables, yet ironically, it's located at the gates of Hunts Point, the biggest terminal market in the U.S. There's something really wrong with that. How can we get affordable food to those food deserts? Let's connect farmers to consumers by expanding CSAs, developing more food box programs like Grow NYC and supporting farm-to-school programs to get healthier, fresh food into our kids.

For example, we have a program called "New York Thursdays." School cafeterias feature several New York-grown products on the plate. All the milk and apples in schools already come from New York State dairies and orchards. Let's now move to the center of the plate. How about the zucchini, the potatoes and squash? And then let's work on the protein. Getting kids to eat more healthfully now will have significant long-term benefits.

*ECD: What are you working on now?*

RB: The governor has tasked us to come up with a branding and marketing program for New York State products. It will be called "New York Certified." This will guarantee that a product was grown safely, here in the state, in accordance with the highest agricultural and environmental standards. Farms will voluntarily meet those standards,

and then we can market the farm and product as New York Certified. But we all know there's a ton of labels on food. So we are creating a label that brings clarity rather than add to the confusion. It's an incredibly exciting program for growers, buyers, chefs and shoppers.

*ECD: As commissioner of agriculture, you oversee the Great New York State Fair, which runs from August 25 to September 5 in Syracuse.*

RB: This is one of the top fairs in the country, and we host the second largest dairy show in the U.S. I had my picture taken with a half million dollar cow last year! Part of my job is to ensure that agriculture remains a central focus. Nearly one million people come to the fair over the course of 12 days, so the governor recognizes the importance of this event. We've made a lot of capital improvements to the architecture and layout. Long term, we are envisioning programs and educational components that will keep the facility in use throughout the year, not just 12 days each summer. The fair allows visitors to learn more about our agricultural heritage and future. It's pretty fun for a farm kid from Schoharie to get to be a part of developing this event!

*ECD: I can't end without asking how you cook!*

RB: I'll cook anything that comes off this farm. I don't follow a recipe. My wife, Shirley, does all the cooking, and she's excellent, but it's not unusual for me to make a lap around the farm around six in the evening, pick a few ears of corn, dig some new potatoes, grab a head of garlic, pull up a couple of onions, a little lettuce and tomatoes, and then head to the kitchen.

*ECD: What keeps you going?*

RB: I still get up every day early in the morning, step outside and look across the fields and feel so fortunate. How many people get to own their own farm? 1% of the population. And then I put my tie on and drive into Albany to the capital and think, how many people get the chance to serve in this fashion? I have faith that our efforts can help the next generation and ensure that agriculture remains a viable way to make a living in New York State. 🚗

## RAPID FIRE QUESTIONS FOR RICHARD BALL

*Edible Capital District: Breakfast today?*

Richard Ball: I came up to the Carrot Barn, had some fruit and grabbed a warm cider donut.

*ECD: Cake, pie or cookies?*

RB: Any kind of fruit pie. Pie is proof that there's a God.

*ECD: Most memorable childhood meal?*

RB: Breakfasts on the farm when I was a kid. Only time in my life I remember having more bacon on the table than I could eat. To be so full I couldn't eat another bite. Eggs, French toast, bacon, remarkable farm bounty.

*ECD: Guilty food pleasure?*

RB: Carrot cookies, carrot brownies from the café here. If I need a boost psychologically, I go for one of those.

*ECD: Midnight snack?*

RB: A little pie and high butterfat ice cream, like my dad used to make.



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