



INNER SPACE

A 224-YEAR-OLD ORGANIC FARM BLENDS AGRICULTURE & ART

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PHOTOS COURTESY OF SPACE ON RYDER FARM, DAVE BROWN, TALYA CHALEF, SOPHIA LAUWERS, NELSON MALUSHIZKY AND JESSE PATCH

IF SOMEONE

emailed you out of the blue, told you she was a fourth cousin, once removed, and asked if she could come up to your place in the country to visit for the day, how would you respond? Some people would immediately click delete. Fortunately, ten years ago when Betsey Ryder received such a missive from her distant cousin, Emily Simoness, she not only said “yes” but also welcomed Simoness to Ryder Farm with open arms. That one hospitable gesture forever changed the destiny of the farm and, remarkably, ensured its future.

Ryder Farm sits on 127 acres that straddle the Brewster/North Salem border. The property has picturesque pastures, crop fields, a barn, various antique outbuildings, a pond, and access to Peach Lake. The original homestead, “The Sycamores,” has been continuously owned by Ryder family descendants since 1795.

By 1978, the once thriving dairy farm lay fallow. Under New York State law, Ryder Farm was in danger of being designated “residential,” a distinction that would have resulted in prohibitive taxes and forced the sale of the beloved property.

The extended Ryder family struggled with how best to deal with the pressing tax situation. After considering various scenarios, it was finally decided that family member Hall Gibson would take early retirement from his government job and become the full-time farmer. But he needed help.

That’s when Betsey Ryder showed up. On a whim, the 22-year-old who remembered happy childhood visits to the farm with her father, called Gibson (her second cousin, thrice removed), and asked if she could make a pit stop to break up a long drive from Boston to Long Island. The young, newly minted nurse who was about to launch her life and career in Boston, had never entertained the notion of growing anything, let alone farming, but as luck would have it, she was looking for a place to live and the farm was so beguiling.

TRANQUIL SPACE
Life on Ryder Farm includes writers and artists, farm-fresh produce, and flowers; and for a limited time, farmers Betsey and John Ryder (top right).



"I knew nothing about farming," says Ryder. "The last time I'd grown anything was in third grade when I put a corn seed in a Dixie cup." Before she realized what she was doing, Ryder enthusiastically pitched herself to be both tenant and co-farmer. Despite initial misgivings about her suitability for the position, her offer was accepted, and her life changed forever.

Though the learning curve was steep, Ryder was an eager student who soaked up agricultural knowledge from every source she could find. Gibson knew their small, organic farm couldn't compete with larger operations, so instead of growing standard-issue vegetables, they opted to grow more exotic fare—bok choy, daikon radish, and mizuna. Every Saturday, the duo would drive down to the green market in Union Square to sell their produce, plus fresh herbs and beautiful bouquets of flowers.

As Gibson grew older, Ryder assumed more responsibility for the farming operation while also working full time as a nurse. Years slipped by until 2009 when 24 year-old Simoness, an aspiring actress, visited the farm for the first time. She was smitten with the property's serenity but also noticed some of the buildings were shuttered and in disrepair.

Being part of the theater world in New York, Simoness knew that rehearsal space was at a premium. She also knew that the farm had an abundance of space but needed lots of TLC. An idea began to form: What if she brought her theater friends up to spackle, paint, and renew the place in exchange for having access to it as a creative retreat? She pitched the unorthodox idea to Ryder who once again said "Yes."

Soon actors, directors, and playwrights were making regular pilgrimages to Ryder Farm to paint trim, weed, and do repairs. Established theater companies got wind of the magical place in close proximity to New York and asked to come up too. Mutually beneficial deals were struck and finally, in 2011, Simoness launched SPACE on Ryder Farm, a non-profit res-

ACTIVE SPACE
Residency programs are open to theater artists, writers, poets, visual artists, and musicians. Family residencies are also offered, allowing artists to bring children.

"THIS PLACE WAS CREATED BY ARTISTS FOR ARTISTS"

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"There are only three requirements of residents," says Simoness. "They need to attend communal meals daily, give back two hours to Ryder Farm, and share some of the work they've developed with fellow residents at the culmination of their residency."

To date 1,200 artists and activists have participated in this innovative arts program. Numerous plays developed at SPACE have gone on to have world premieres on and off Broadway as well as across the country.

Today, "The Sycamores" has been brought back to life by the very artists who live and work there during their residencies. Stages have been built in the barn and outdoors by the old bowling green. A trail to Peach Lake has been blazed through the underbrush where a new dock, canoes, and paddleboat await. To provide additional creative quiet space for artists, a yurt has been erected near the pond.

"I see SPACE as a creative co-op," says Simoness. "This place was created by artists for artists so it feels right to have people contribute to that life cycle to help ensure its sustainability. It's wonderful to know that I am a part of this lasting contribution and that there will be a Ryder Farm 100 years from now."

This spring, Betsey Ryder will officially retire, and SPACE will assume all farming operations and continue the tradition of selling organic produce at the Union Square Green Market. Though Ryder has mixed feelings about leaving, she is grateful for what Simoness has brought to the farm. "She is competent, vibrant, and full of ideas. She has enhanced the farm in so many ways, both spiritually and physically, and she definitely broke the farm open to being shared with community."

After forty years of stewardship of one of the oldest organic farms on the east coast, Ryder eloquently sums it up: "The success of the farm didn't ever fall to any one person. After 224 years, we are all owners of this special place." ■