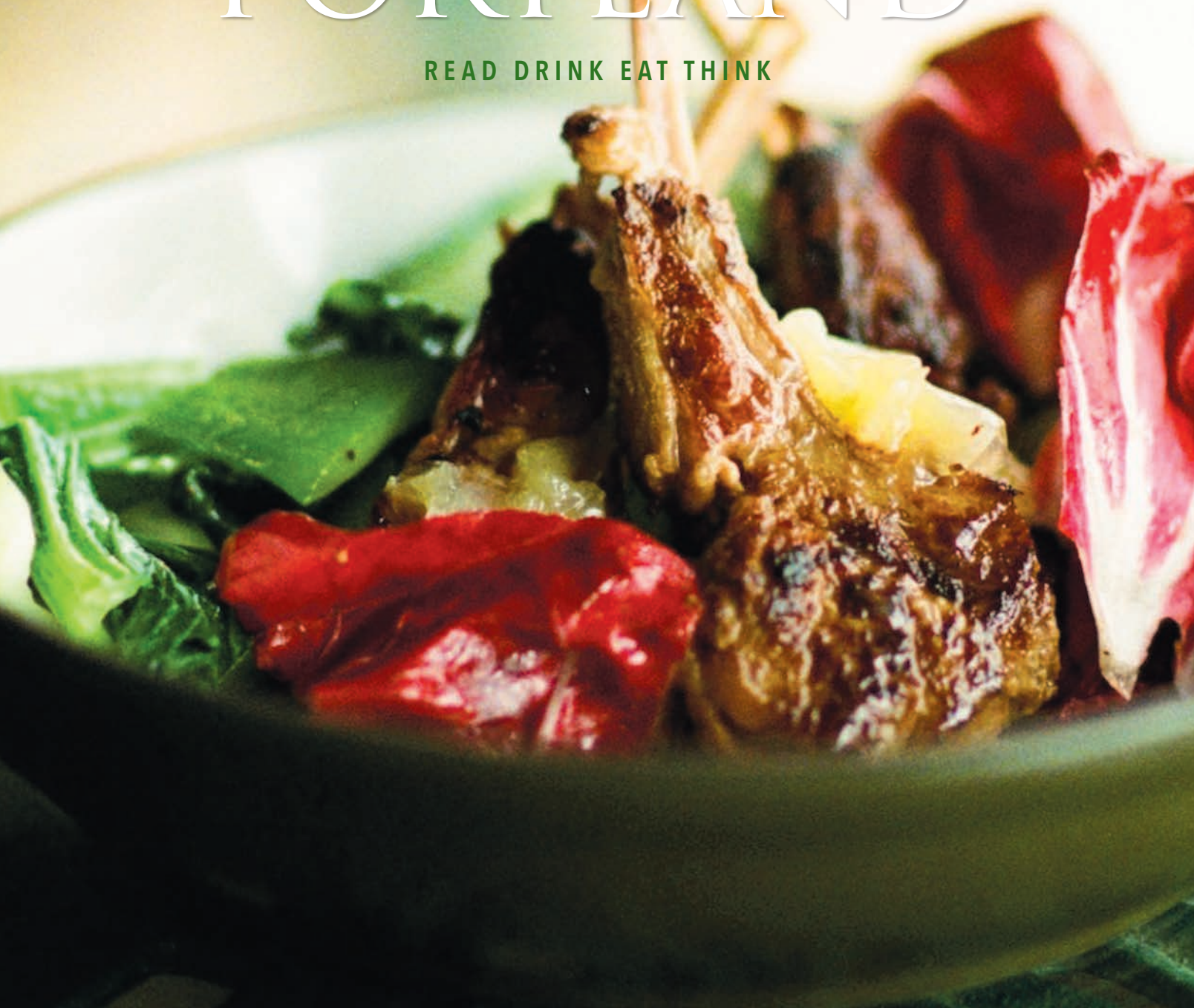


Summer 2024  
Volume 11 / no. 2

# *edible* PORTLAND

READ DRINK EAT THINK



Member of Edible Communities



## Water is Essential to Farming It's Found in and at The Ground

By Tracy Ellen Beard | Photos courtesy of The Ground

**H**usband and wife team Brenda Smola-Foti and Frank Foti own The Ground, an umbrella company encompassing their ventures in Yamhill County, which includes Tabula Rasa Farms (now part of Source Farms), Humble Spirit Restaurant and Catering, the original Farmhouse B&B, Inn the Ground, the garden, the event center, the store and Yamhill House. Brenda began Tabula Rasa Farms as a regenerative agriculture farm in 2015, and she soon learned that Yamhill County, and much of Oregon, is not filled with water. Brenda and Frank have gone to great lengths to increase water redundancy and efficiency on their properties for the betterment of all their businesses.

After Brenda began the farm in 2015, she added animals in 2017, and Frank joined the fun in 2019. Frank focused on cultivating connections. Initially intended to be a 33-acre homestead farm, the farm grew when Frank sold his business in the city, became enamored with country life and began using his industrial background and skills as a people and culture-builder to expand the business. The couple believes that farms and agritourism are essential

and must be sustainable. Yamhill County is short on water and accommodations, so if they were to create a leadership culture and host educational tours and workshops in the area, they would have to build a place for guests to stay.

Water is life, and it is critical for farming. Farming requires five essential components: sunshine, soil, fertilizers, labor and water. Plants need water for photosynthesis, transpiration (the most substantial use of water for a plant), and the maintenance of its cell structure. Most businesses also need and use water in multiple ways.

Numerous techniques have been implemented at The Ground to manage seasonal rainfall for the farm, animals and various buildings. Both owners and staff at the farm are determined to join the permaculture and regenerative agriculture movement, utilizing conscious design and maintenance of agriculturally productive systems that have the diversity, stability and resilience of natural ecosystems. They are committed to raising animals naturally and respectfully.

According to Brenda, "The goal for the farm is for the land to thrive on its

own devices, with natural water resources hydrating nutrient-rich soils and plant life that are devoid of synthetic pesticides and chemicals. And that animals will flourish here in a humane setting, eating and living healthily and ultimately providing all-natural, hormone and chemical-free food that, in turn, helps our families and customers live their healthiest lives."

### Efforts to Increase the Water Supply

What water Yamhill County has is profoundly deep in the landscape. When Brenda initially searched for usable water, she found salt water or no water four different times. She educated herself in water witching and finally discovered water on the property. Unfortunately, it was only at 1.5 gallons per minute. To consider a source truly usable with enough to store adequately, it needs to run at a minimum of 5-7 gal per minute. Brenda continued on her quest to find and store water. She soon developed a rainwater collection system but continued to search for better sources.

Zachery Weiss from Elemental Ecosystems is the protégé of the famous Austrian farmer Sepp Holzer, an international consultant for natural agriculture, also called Holzer Permaculture or Agro-Ecology. Zach is the first and only person to earn a Holzer Practitioner certification directly from Sepp, which he attained through a rigorous two-year apprenticeship. After learning from Sepp, he created Elemental Ecosystems, an ecological development contracting and consulting company specializing in watershed restoration and ecosystem regeneration. Brenda and Frank, with the help of Zach and his team, want The Ground properties to be as self-sufficient as possible and not wholly reliant on the whims of nature.

### The Water Projects

Brenda contacted Zach, and three months later, he came to the property. The two brainstormed about how to build resiliency using techniques and modalities to find the best ways to get the clay ground in the area to hold water.

The answer became clear: they needed to use a variety of methods. They were determined to do a few significant projects over a couple of years.

The first was a pond project with spillways or bioswales, which are linear, vegetated ditches designed for stormwater collection, filtration, conveyance, and infiltration. The bioswales are long paths that allow the rainwater and water from the pond to slow down and sink into the deeper ground. The first pond and bioswales took five weeks to build.

The following year, supplementary vegetation was planted around the outer rim of the pond, and additional ponds were constructed, along with hugel beds and more bioswales and terraces. The hugel beds were created by digging 3x3 foot trenches and then filling them with logs, creating a dish that composted the wood. Soon, the beds began to self-irrigate the land. Today, there are ten ponds on the property, and after a few years, the underground water has increased threefold. Most of the farm is still considered dryland, but plenty of water is stored under the ground for future use if needed.

The Ground is one of Zach's most significant installations in the area. Today, there are more birds and dragonflies, and Brenda is building beautiful places for people and animals. Shangri La will be a paradise in five years with fruit trees and white oaks.

#### Animals on the Farm

The Ground breeds and raises 80 Deven and Dexter cross calves, 75 Heritage Cross hogs, 500 laying hens, 300-400 turkeys, and sometimes ducks yearly. The farm alone has 4 to 5 people working, depending on the season, but the sum of businesses within The Ground employs about 80 individuals. The animals on the farm benefit from the water source by eating the rich green grass and drinking the water from the ponds and runoff.

#### Fruits and Vegetables on the Farm

Justin Peterson, a 20-year veteran market gardener, works with Chef Brett Uniss and Chef Sara Schafer to plan the

garden. Justin runs the garden and sells products from the store to the public, the CSA, restaurants in the area and local farmers' markets.

#### Humble Spirit Restaurant and Catering

Chef Brett Uniss and Chef Sara Schafer are co-executive chefs at the restaurant. These two chefs highlight the produce



and the meat produced on the farm by serving it in spectacular ways at Humble Spirit. During my time at The Ground, I toured with Heather Miller, who oversees Community Engagement. She said,

"People come to Oregon to enjoy the outdoors, and everyone has a right to see where our food comes from."

#### Inn the Ground

When Brenda and Frank designed Inn the Ground, they used reclaimed wood from a previous building on the property. They built Inn the Ground with minimal impact on the hill. Brenda said, "Frank and I were intrigued by houses built into the hills. Since the construction, the neighborhood has not changed, and we have maintained the view."

Wildflowers fill the living rooftop above Inn the Ground, and this terrace conserves additional water on the property. Inn the Ground is an environmentally energy-efficient building with solar panels.

#### More Projects on the Property

The Ground also owns Stillwater in McMinnville, an excellent venue for larger events. At Inn the Ground, events are more intimate and private, with only 20-30 people attending for an intentional farm-focused experience.

There is an unassuming barn where all the garden vegetables are harvested and washed, and guests can access the fitness facility on the property to play pickleball and tennis.

#### Experiences at The Ground

Jordan leads the wellness experiences with a forest walk, and Heather leads the in-depth farm tours. Every guest can walk the trails and view the property with a farm person.

Water is essential to farming and most businesses. Brenda, Frank and Zach have made great strides in increasing water redundancy and efficiency at The Ground. Each project and property adds to the community by providing excellent produce and meat, offering exceptional accommodations, or bringing additional beauty to Oregon and Yamhill County.

Heather Miller summed up the corporate mission by saying, "The Ground is the Northern Light for us. It is our collection of businesses purposely connecting farms, food, and people with hospitality." 