

Foggy Bottom Farms

One Estillfork farmer's mission of change

Tucked away discreetly in a beautiful corner of Northeast Alabama, Foggy Bottom Farms sits at the crossroads of future and past.

This 77-acre farm in Estillfork is home to John and Marsha Langlois. They exchanged the corporate world for a family farm partially supported by money earned designing websites.

When he retired as vice president of business development for Raymond James, a securities firm, they wanted to live in the mountains.

"I ran into a friend of mine at an Alabama ball game one weekend," he says. "He told me the place next to his was for sale, so we came to look. The waterfall in the back sealed it for us. Marsha saw it and said, 'Get your checkbook. This is it.'"

The farm generates less income than the financial sector, but there are trade-offs.

"I have just as much disposable income," Langlois says. "The tax bite is different, and expenses are a lot less. Property taxes for the same size house in Atlanta were considerably higher. Those kinds of things play into it. It can be less stressful, but it's still hard work, and if you are solely dependent upon farming for your income, it will be very stressful because the market is not friendly to what you are offering."

As organic farming grows in popularity, he hopes to see more farmers prosper.

"I'm encouraged to see a move toward Community Supported Agriculture agreements where groups of people agree to pay the farmer to grow their vegetables for them. It's a subscription service where they pay so much per month or year in advance. They get what he grows and as much as they want to eat. It's less convenient than

going to the grocery store, so that's the trade off. There are also the perishable aspects."

As they worked to build their farming operation, Langlois saw web design as a way to pay the bills. "In 1995, I built my first website," he recalls, "but I wasn't in the website building business. I was a financial planner who wanted a website. I couldn't get the I.T. department to give me an HTML email, which was kind of a cutting-edge idea at the time. I wanted to send it to the prospects.

"My boss said to do it if I could," he continues. "I bought a copy of Dreamweaver and cranked it out in two weeks. It was then I realized, if I ever want to do this, I can."

When the husband and wife team aren't producing websites for clients like the International Services Council of Huntsville, they focus on producing registered Dexter cattle.



John Langlois inspects his Dexter cattle on Foggy Bottom Farms. He said the Dexters, which come from Ireland, are a rugged breed with a good temperament.



“Dexters are a rugged breed from Ireland,” says Langlois. “It can be eight degrees and raining, and they’ll just look at you. I’m amazed by how tough they are.”

Foggy Bottom Farms sells the grass-fed beef in a private sale.

“It’s still an inspected process, but not USDA-approved, which means I can’t sell it in a grocery store. The downside of it is you have to be prepared to carry home 300-pounds of meat. If a tornado comes along and you lose power for five days...”

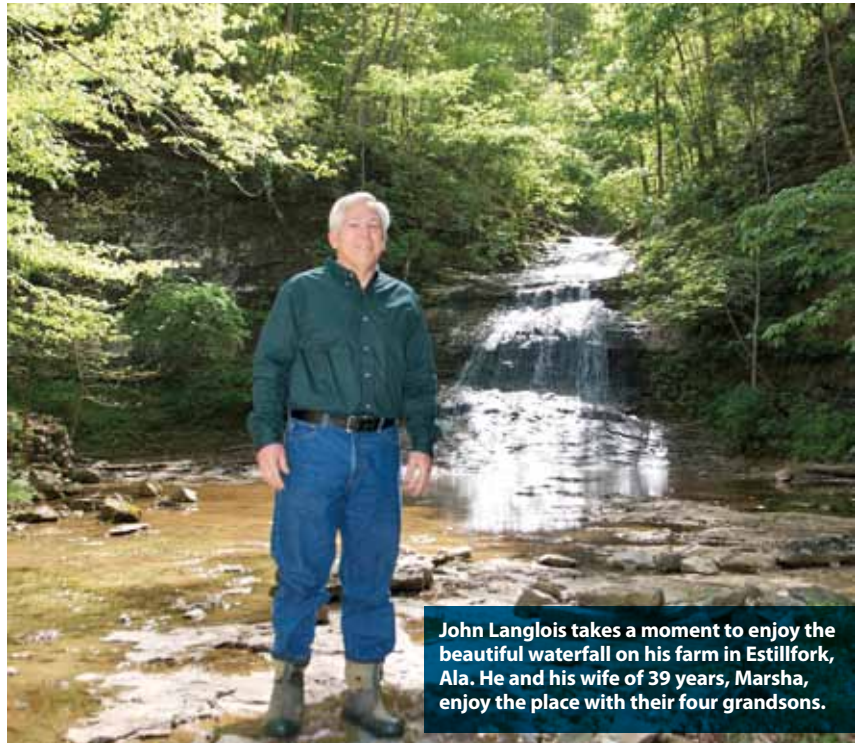
Luckily, that rarely happens, but the traditional marketplace presents risks of its own.

“We have engineered ourselves into a dangerous situation where you have large numbers of people aggregated into cities,” he says. “If the distribution system breaks down for any number of reasons — from a trucker strike to a natural disaster — there’s seven days of food in the grocery stores. After that, it’s gone. That system is all predicated upon constant replenishment. As long as that system keeps rolling, we’re all fine.”

“Kids today think grocery stores make the food,” Langlois continues. “They don’t see them as a distribution channel. Children get a kick out of being on the farm. They understand the food is directly tied to that animal, and meat doesn’t grow on a tree.”

Langlois began losing faith in the corporate food establishment when doctors treated his infant grandson’s diarrhea with repeated rounds of antibiotics.

“I’m not a farmer by background,” he says. “Everything I know, I’ve learned from research. We learned my grandson was missing probiotics that needed to be in his colon. I thought, ‘these guys are on to something,’ so I looked deeper. When you start researching it, there’s a



John Langlois takes a moment to enjoy the beautiful waterfall on his farm in Estillfork, Ala. He and his wife of 39 years, Marsha, enjoy the place with their four grandsons.

lot you really don’t want to know.”

John Langlois reads research by the Weston Price Foundation and publications like AcresUSA, the magazine of organic foods.

“I don’t blame farmers for using cheaper or easier shortcuts,” he says, “but it’s sort of the law of unintended consequences. You can’t cheat nature on one side and not expect to pay the dues on the other. The food most people eat lacks nutrients. And, bacteria help the body assimilate minerals and nutrients through the digestive track. This is why people who eat processed food all of the time are less healthy than those who can get better food.”

Langlois says if more Americans decided to eat better, the nation’s farmers would not be prepared. “I have more demand for my beef than I can supply,” he says.

Consumers should also look deeper at the market, he says, because some companies use deceptive labels to charge

twice as much for the same foods.

“If we made a national effort to replenish all of the small farms in America, great, but if you don’t get out in front of the big corporations that handle most of our food, they will steal whatever goodwill is out there, just like they did with organic milk.”

My cows are grass-fed the whole time,” Langlois says. “If they are injured or have a birthing complication, I will give antibiotics to them, but I also pull them out of the rotation. You want to breed for animals already resistant to the diseases that you need antibiotics to get over.”

Langlois has a mission to provide food that is safe and sustainable to his community. I can’t change the world, but I can deal with the piece of it that I live in.” ■

For more information, visit their website at foggybottomfarms.com.