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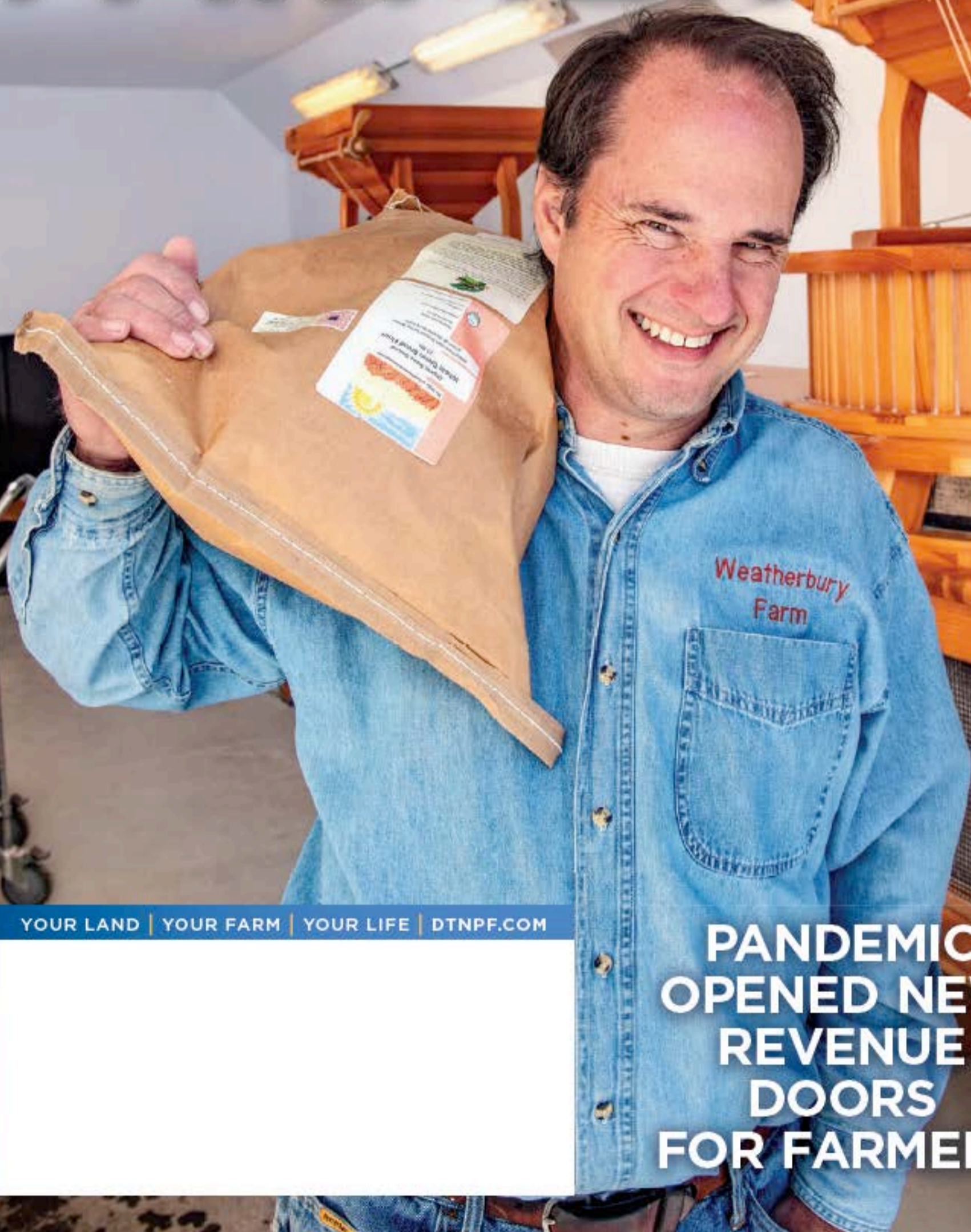
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LAND TO NATIVE PASTURE

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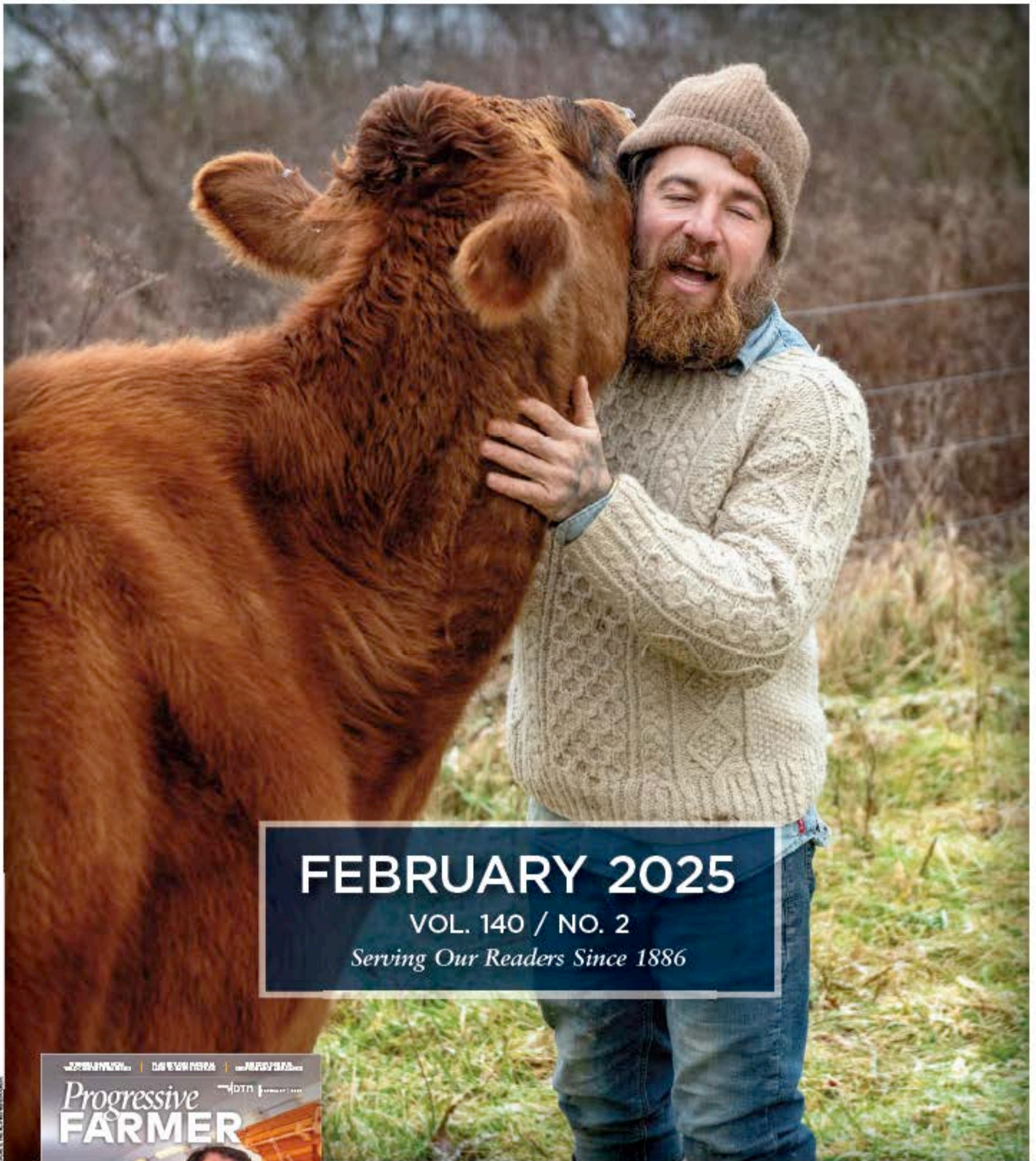
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# Progressive FARMER



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**PANDEMIC  
OPENED NEW  
REVENUE  
DOORS  
FOR FARMERS**



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JOEL REICHENBERGER



**ON THE COVER**

Nigel Tudor's direct-to-consumer flour business was minimal before the pandemic but has flourished since.

PHOTO BY JOEL REICHENBERGER

After the COVID pandemic, a world of challenges and opportunities opened up for farmers willing to take the risks.

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# The Great Shift

*The COVID pandemic five years ago left a new world for many farmers in its wake.*

**W**ith a beanie, a bushy beard and a thick, wool sweater, Jake Kristophel looks like he belongs at a farmers market, fittingly because he's spent plenty of time at them through the years.

Kristophel has big ideas about the American food supply—what goes into it, what comes out of it and the community that arises around locally grown food. He contributes to the local economy mostly with sheep and hogs these days, though not for lack of trying other animals. Working on land reclaimed from a strip-mining operation in Plain Grove, Pennsylvania, he's raised everything from rabbits to turkeys, with plenty of vegetables in between.

When COVID hit five years ago, he was already five years into running Fallen Aspen Farm, feeding animals and mending fences during the week, and working farmers markets on the weekends.

Even he was shocked at the tidal wave that emerged from the pandemic, waking up to a new reality as shoppers flocked to farms like his in the face of empty store shelves.

"We already had a decent following before that," he says, "but that COVID year—that year was booming."

*Jake Kristophel has found a sweet spot with sheep and hogs at his Pennsylvania operation, Fallen Aspen Farm.*





In many ways, nothing was the same after the pandemic swept into America in the early spring of 2020. It's changed where Americans work (from home) and what they store (toilet paper). Somewhere high on the list of what's changed is the country's relationship with food: what's in it, where it comes from and where it can be found when grocery shelves are empty.

For farmers, those changes led to unique, even life-changing, opportunities, as direct-to-consumer sales exploded, and the world of Saturday-morning markets turned into a new way of life. Even now, after the tides of panic have receded, and food has long since returned to traditional stores, farmers swept up in the initial craze have not returned to normal.

The shift that began five years ago, to many farmers, now means there's no going back.

## > GRINDING IT OUT

Nigel Tudor initially reacted like the rest of the country when the COVID pandemic became more and more real. There was disbelief and concern. Then, expecting to be stuck at home, he vowed to finally finish some



lingering projects around his family's home and small Avella, Pennsylvania, farming operation.

Tudor had little idea how the next few weeks would reshape the next few years and how five years on, he could look back on the wild days at the start of the pandemic as the time that forever changed his family farm.

He never got the chance to get to those around-the-house projects, because starting with a trickle then turning into a roar came hundreds of online orders for the stone-ground flour his family had already been grinding for years. The direct sales of their flour had been an insignificant portion of their overall operation initially, but suddenly, customers clamored to buy it.

"Everyone started baking. They couldn't find any more flour in the supermarket, so they went online and found us," Tudor explains.

He and parents, Dale and Marcy, make up Weatherbury Farm. Their small fields tuck into hills southwest of Pittsburgh, where large-scale production agriculture has never been an option on their limited acreage. Instead, they've found other ways to make ends meet. Most of their land goes toward a grass-fed beef business, but about 15 years ago, they started leaving 65 acres free to plant grain. ➤



Stone-ground flour has proven an enduring hit for Nigel Tudor and his family. The farm grows 13 different varieties of grain.



The family sells much of that to local craft distillers, but they've always ground everything they can into flour on a pair of petite European mills.

*The Tudors grind their grains on a pair of European mills that fit inside an old outbuilding.*

But, there wasn't always a ton of demand. Prior to COVID, they were lucky to get 10 customers a month to their farm for flour, and most of the product went to a local co-op selling farm-to-table ingredients to restaurants. Even that avenue closed just before the pandemic, as the co-op shut down entirely after selling to a larger company.

That was right about the time the Tudors' email began to ping and the phone began to ring.

Suddenly, everyone was looking for in-stock food staples, including—as the pandemic-era sourdough craze took hold—flour.

The Tudors' monthly customers ballooned from about 10 to more than 120 in May 2020.

Nothing was ever the same.

## > THAT'S THE HUB

One thousand miles away, in south-central Kansas, Rick McNary, photographer, writer and all-around Renaissance man, saw the winds shift just as the Tudor family had, albeit without an onslaught of emails or phone calls.

McNary had picked up steaks from a local market one early pandemic afternoon and later heard tales of panicked shoppers wandering barren supermarket aisles.

That seemed strange to him at the time given the steak he had on his plate and the knowledge that the ranch from where it had come was well-stocked. This gave way to an idea that would become a wide-reaching organization intent on helping connect curious consumers to farmers' consumables.

"I created a Facebook group and invited some farmers I know who did direct-to-consumer sales," McNary explains. "You name it what you want people to do, so I named it Shop Kansas Farms. The intent was to connect you to the wonderful farm and ranch families of Kansas, so you could purchase the food they raised."

After starting with a handful of invitations, there were 400 members within three hours of the page's

creation. Just 24 hours later, there were more than 5,000 members, and for weeks, the page was adding as many as 10,000 new users each day.

Consumers were craving to shop local.

The pandemic food-supply crisis had tapped into an idea that had been lingering in the back of McNary's head for years—a local food network. There had been problems when he'd considered the idea before. There wasn't appropriate processing capability, like small-scale millers and butchers, and there was no obvious means of distribution or a hub for products.

In a flash, his impromptu Facebook group offered at least some of the solutions.

"I realized I had created that hub, a digital hub," McNary says.

He had to establish rules to keep the swiftly growing community aligned with his vision. His hub wasn't a place to sell a tractor or hire harvest help. It was only for consumable food. And, it wasn't a place to bicker about pricing or farming methods. The message to users was this: "If you don't like it, keep scrolling."

Organic or conventionally farmed? Both are welcomed.

## > CONNECTING TO FARMS

Soon, several trends began to really stand out.

Consumers were eager for the options provided by farmers on the Shop Kansas Farms page, and the farmers themselves—often younger than your average American farmer and many times women—were seeing new opportunity.



McNary sold his Shop Kansas Farms organization to Kansas Farm Bureau in 2022 and continues to help as a consultant. The Facebook page has 168,000 users and regularly posts offerings of beef, lamb, eggs, milk and honey, among dozens of other items. There's also an active website under the Shop Kansas Farms brand where nearly 500 farms and ranches have a presence with a list of their goods, contact information and often a family photo.

The more personal their appeal, the better they fare, he notes.

That idea fits well with Kristophel's Fallen Aspen Farm operation. He keeps up an active social media presence, showing off his land, animals and available products to an eager audience while attracting hundreds of likes, views and comments with each post. The COVID rush acted like lighter fluid to his flame.

The initial surge eventually slowed, but he's retained plenty of customers from that time, enough to make him question his future at time-intensive farmers markets and instead go all-in with pickup and delivery sales.

The Tudor family, of Weatherbury Farm, embraced a similar approach, finding ways to highlight what makes their operation different. They grow 13 varieties of grain, including four different varieties of hard red winter wheat, rye, oats and rare grains like spelt and cinkorn. They describe what each is on their website and sometimes even how it came to be planted in Pennsylvania soil. Nigel grew the obsidian black winter emmer, for instance, from 12 kernels he brought back from a trip to a trade show in Germany.

Each bag of flour from the Tudors' farm comes with a scannable QR code detailing that season's growth of the crop.

The family goes even further to connect the customer to their hilly fields by including a scannable QR code on each package of flour that takes buyers to a page detailing the farming of that product. A bag of



organic rolled oats, for example, shows the crop was planted March 21 and harvested July 26. There are 10 updates with photos in between.

"We have to keep all that information to have it certified organic anyway, so we just keep a camera in the tractor, and every time we're in a field, we stop and snap a picture of it," Tudor explains. "Customers love it."

## > A NEW NORMAL

Many farmers and ranchers who turned to direct sales reported a dip in 2021 after the initial COVID panic abated, and grocery store shelves were again mostly stocked.

The month of May 2020 did represent the high-water mark for the Tudor family and their organic flour grinding operation. Business had slowed considerably by early 2021. But, they didn't revert back to the 2019 business model, and new customers kept finding them. By the end of 2024, they were doing nearly as much business as they had in the very height of the pandemic craze.

The experience has been similar across the spectrum.

"It'll continue to grow," McNary says of the larger direct-sales movement.

He's helped Shop Kansas Farms reach new markets, partnering with both government agencies and even local school districts to find outlets for producers, looking for opportunities that simply didn't exist five years ago as COVID-19 burst into the headlines.

It's become a new normal, he says, a new way for farmers and ranchers to survive.

"This direct-to-consumer movement is a way to keep family farms afloat, or at least to give them hope because they can't afford another 10,000 acres or don't want another big operating loan," he says. "You just have to think differently." ///

