The word “entrepreneur” typically doesn’t conjure up images of pastures and pitchforks. But we talked with Babson alumni who make a living on the land. Turns out, the entrepreneurial spirit drives tractors, too.

BY Donna Coco
in their fields
During the height of summer, when the hot, sticky days eat into the nights, Ken Nicewicz, MBA ’73, rolls out of bed ahead of the sun. He and his three brothers need to harvest ears of sweet corn before hitting the local farmers markets. “We pride ourselves on picking our corn fresh every day,” says Nicewicz. “I’ve always wanted to take a picture of us in the truck with today’s newspaper—you know, with the date on it, when it’s just getting light—and caption it, ‘This is when your corn was picked.’”

Corn is just one of the offerings from the third-generation Nicewicz Family Farm in Bolton, Mass., which Nicewicz’s grandparents bought in 1929. The brothers grow herbs and vegetables along with blueberries. But most of the 30-plus farmed acres of rolling hills contain row after row of fruit trees—apples, apricots, cherries, nectarines, peaches, pears, and plums. Picking plums is one of Nicewicz’s favorite tasks. “You have this piece of fruit in your hand, and it’s dead ripe,” he says with a slight smile. “And you see this little peck from a bird, and you really can’t sell it. So you have to do something with it. Some mornings I come down from the farm to the truck and say, ‘I think I’ve eaten 20 plums.’”

Nicewicz’s occasional indulgences aside, the majority of the produce goes to farmers markets—11 markets, six days a week—for direct sales to customers. “It’s a lot of fun,” says Nicewicz of the outings. “We get to know our customer base quite nicely, and they get to know us.” The family makes most of its money from these venues, although a newly renovated roadside stand brings in sales as does a pick-your-own side of the business.

The farm didn’t always operate this way. In the ’60s and ’70s, when Nicewicz’s dad ran the farm, they planted only apple and pear trees and sold mainly to wholesalers. “When you sell wholesale, you sell at a reduced price,” says Nicewicz. Realizing that retail would better benefit the farm’s bottom line, he adapted the farm to its current more profitable model.

He and his siblings (the lone Nicewicz sister, who works for a local school, pitches in on the farm whenever she finds the time) also sold the development rights to 70 of the farm’s 100 acres to the state’s agriculture preservation program, guaranteeing those acres will remain farmland. “We’ve put our blood, sweat, and tears into this farm,” he says. “We didn’t want a future [owner] to sell it off for housing.”

As the only one in his family who attended college and earned an MBA, Nicewicz says his education helps with all the decisions that he and his brothers make. “There’s so much that I gained from my education that I can’t put it into words,” he says. “It’s just the whole sense of the business. Farming is a business.”

**Cattle call**

Native Australian Tony Coote ’60 knows about business. For more than four decades, he worked for his family’s jewelry firm, Angus & Coote, half of that time serving as CEO and then chairman. When the business was sold in 2007, it included 350 stores. But Coote always has been intrigued by farming. “I worked on our own farm,” he says of his youth, “and I spent a lot of time on other people’s farms.”

The draw was so strong that in 1968 Coote bought a grazing ranch that raised cattle and sheep in Bungendore near Canberra, New South Wales. He describes his purchase as “very small” and “economically unviable.” “It wasn’t terribly rational,” he says with a chuckle. “The only rational part was it’s centrally located.”

Coote worked the farm part time for years, gradually expanding it and making it more viable. About 10 years ago, he traded his business suit and loafers for jeans and boots full time. Today
Mulloon Creek Natural Farms consists of nearly 6,000 acres, and eight families live on and work the land. They still raise cattle, directly selling the meat, and have added free-range chickens for egg sales. They also grow their own vegetables, butcher their own meat, and milk their own cows, consuming the raw milk and cream and making cheese and butter.

Until about 20 years ago, Coote followed conventional methods of farming and grazing, treating the land with pesticides and chemicals. “We drained and mined the soil, and we still weren’t economically viable,” he says. Then he switched to biodynamics, a holistic and regenerative organic farming system based on knowledge of the earth and the cosmos. Its unusual practices—planting by the lunar calendar, for example—might be considered fringe by some, especially the unfamiliar.

Coote, however, wasn’t swayed. “We had a severe drought in the early ’80s,” he says. “We saw another farmer about an hour away—a wild character—who did his farming using biodynamics. We went and had a look, and we saw the evidence of clover about three feet high above the ground and three feet rooted below the ground. And it was the dry season on top of a dry hill. From that point on, we started doing biodynamics.”

He contemplates that deep inside, he had an intuitive understanding that this was the right decision for his farm. “Entrepreneurs are motivated more by a feeling than anything rational,” he says. “Even Einstein intuited his great discoveries.”

The transition was tough at first, and some animals died. “The gene pool was weak,” he says, “but we never knew it because we propped them up prophylactically with chemicals. And we were eating those animals. But now we really do follow nature and learn lessons from nature, where the weak are supposed to die. You breed the strong ones.” Now the farm is 400 cattle strong, not to mention the 12,000 chickens that roam the fields.

Hydrating the land is another important concern of Coote’s. Dehydration from overgrazing and excessive clearing and cropping is a major problem in many parts of the world, he notes, including Australia. In 2006, he began a project on a three-mile stretch of the creek that uses Natural Sequence Farming, which aims to rehabilitate rivers and streams through biological solu-
tions. “The results are just extraordinary,” says Coote of the program, which received a grant from Australia’s National Landcare Program. The farm’s flood plains are more hydrated, the banks of the creeks sprout vegetation, and frogs have returned. “We have frequent meetings to show scientists how it’s working,” says Coote. “They’re amazed by the results. It will definitely affect laws and regulations.”

To share such knowledge with others, Coote set up The Mulloon Institute (themullooninstitute.org), which offers courses in various farming techniques and performs farm-related research. The institute also partners with the Australian National University and the University of Sydney. “We are one of a few teaching and research institutes in the world where all of the work actually happens on the farm,” says Coote. “We’re creating a model where others can take ideas and adapt them to where they are. It’s for the benefit of future generations."

Coote believes in the farm and institute so strongly, he has set them up to continue even after his death. “Our farm can’t be sold,” he says. “When I decide to leave the planet one day, the work can keep going.”

“City” farming

Turn right out of Babson’s campus onto Forest Street, drive about three-quarters of a mile down a winding road lined with houses and tall trees, and you’ll encounter Volante Farms in Needham. From the road, you first see the farm stand and greenhouses, and then a small field partially hidden by the buildings emerges. Most of the farm’s 35 acres, separated into three parcels, are elsewhere. “They’re all within Needham,” says Dave Volante ’03. He quickly adds: “Thirty-five acres in Needham is like 1,000 acres somewhere else.”

Dave, along with his sister and brother, make up the third generation of Volantes working on the farm. His dad, Al Volante ’75, took over the farm from his father in the ’70s. The farm is now 50 years old and counting. “This is the most citified of the fields,” says Al of the land next to the farm stand. “In the other fields, you don’t even see houses. It’s just beautiful. It’s great when you’re out there. There’s nobody around.”

Both Volantes try to get out in the fields as much as possible, but running a business makes that tough sometimes. Ongoing expansion and renovation plans that began with a state-of-the-art greenhouse and will culminate with an ambitious new farm stand next spring keep everyone busy—especially Dave, who is overseeing the new construction. Once finished, the farm stand will be open year-round, instead of closing for the heart of winter. The bigger change, though, will be its offerings. In addition to flowers grown in the greenhouses and produce from the fields, the stand will have a deli and a bakery and sell ice cream and other “companion” products, as Dave calls them. “It’s what customers want,” he says.

Being a farmer who sells retail means following not just the weather and pest reports but also such consumer trends. That’s why all three Volante siblings, even though they work on the farm, earned business degrees as did their father. “The stuff that takes up a lot of my time now is paperwork, regulations, and legislative issues,” says Dave, pointing to piles of papers that hide a desk. “But it’s the cost of doing business, and that’s the part that Babson helped me with. I had a concentration in law, one because it interested me, and two because I thought it would be pretty important. Turns out it has been.

“Plus I could play baseball at Babson,” he says with a laugh.

Al’s main job these days is making sure the existing lines aren’t forgotten as business progresses. They’re planting a little more in the spring in preparation for filling some of those extra shelves with their own produce in May instead of the typical June. They can grow a little later into the fall, too, he says, as well as cultivate some crops in the greenhouse during the winter.
“What he’s basically saying,” explains Dave, “is ‘I get to be on a tractor and not in here.’ That’s the loose translation.” Al laughs, but doesn’t deny it. “That’s sort of the best part of the job,” continues Dave. “I can be here in the office for six hours, beating my head against the wall, and if I can get an hour outside, it sort of evens you out a little bit.”

Although sometimes frustrated by his job, Dave can’t imagine doing anything else. “There’s always something different going on. Working with nature, something you can’t predict—you can prepare as much as you want, but generally you’re reacting almost the entire time. And I like that.”

Reluctant farmers

A business need drove Hillary Hunter ’92 and Kay (pronounced “Ki”) Hilsberg ’93 to become farmers. In 1995 they founded Hunter & Hilsberg, a mail order and wholesale operation selling specialty foods and accessories in the U.S. and Germany (Hilsberg’s birthplace). When the couple started, plenty of vendors provided the type and quality of products the two sought. “We’d find companies that could make our recipes and pack them with our branding, and that was it,” says Hunter.

But then vendors of the jams, jellies, and other fruit-based offerings they counted on started disappearing. “We work with a lot of small- to medium-sized businesses with their own life cycles,” says Hunter. “They’d go out of business, or they’d sell their business, or there was a problem with what they were supplying. It became a question of how do we get good product?”

So their company, Hunter & Hilsberg, obtained a food production license, allowing them to produce fruit-related goodies to fill in the gaps. Not what Hunter wanted, but growing up she’d made pies, jellies, and preserves with her grandmother, so it wasn’t completely foreign. Then another roadblock arose. Finding fruits from local farmers became increasingly difficult.

Thus began their five-year quest for farmland in the Finger Lakes region of upstate New York, near their Syracuse home. “Our biggest obstacle was the depletion of available farmland due to the spread of residential development tracts,” says Hunter. “Few American farmers have the resources to retire except to sell off their land for residential development. In the end, we had to buy several [undeveloped] parcels at residential development prices and turn them back into agricultural land.”

The two now own 40 acres of mostly uncultivated farmland, which came as organic and will remain organic, says Hunter. Some fruits the land already provided. Wild blackberries grow “wherever and however they please,” she says. Wild strawberries and raspberries also abound, as do some apple trees.

But it’s the rarer fruits that pique Hunter’s interest—currants, elderberries, and gooseberries. With just the two of them manning the farm, they plant these treasures in small, incremental steps. “We say, ‘What’s the fruit we can’t find from somebody else right now? How much can we afford to plant in terms of budget and time?’ And then we plant,” says Hunter. Due to their efforts, cranberries also now inhabit the land.

Having worked with fruit farms and vineyards through their food business for years, the two felt more comfortable with the idea of farming than one might expect. And although Hunter recognizes that farming is vastly different from gardening, the latter has been part of her life since her youth as well. “We also did a lot of research and relied on the good graces of others in the agricultural community to provide tips and pointers,” says Hunter.

The farm (named Heidelberry Farms) has presented Hunter and Hilsberg with yet another challenge. Construction on their house derailed when it became clear that hooking up to the energy grid would be impractical and expensive compared to producing their own energy. Thus began their new quest: to create a completely off-the-grid production farm using renewable energy, which turns out would be the first in the country. “I know what we’re doing sounds crazy,” says Hunter. “Being off the grid came as a surprise. And I never intended for us to be producers or farmers. I think the entrepreneur is someone who is going to do something regardless of the obstacles. They’re willing to take a risk and have faith that they can do it and not be afraid of failure.

“Babson gave us the skills needed not only to manage the unexpected when it happens but welcome those challenges. Because we have acquired those skills, we can enjoy the process of turning lemons into lemonade.”