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# THE NEW MIGRANT WORKER

*Farm interns work for little pay but valuable education in the North Fork Valley*

By Nelson Harvey



Thistle Whistle Farm intern at work.

**T**yson Schneller hefts a 50-pound bag of potatoes onto his shoulders and totes the sack across a hangar-like packing area toward an awaiting box truck. The room is littered with similar bags, full of fall root crops ready for shipment to restaurants and grocery stores in the Roaring Fork Valley. It's a big job, but Schneller moves with ease. And though he's only 26, he has already brought in seven potato harvests.

Schneller is a farmhand at Hillside Acres organic farm on the outskirts of Paonia, where he arrived in 2005 after two unfulfilling years at the University of Colorado at Boulder. The Denver native is emblematic of a new kind of farm worker, one vital to the survival of many small farms in the North Fork Valley, Aspen's breadbasket 90 miles to the southwest.

Farm interns, often young, well educated and hailing from urban areas, are playing a vital role in everything from seeding to sale for

many Western Slope farmers. In exchange, they get some combination of pay, housing and education in the vagaries of small-scale, ecological agriculture.

"When I first got here," says Schneller, "I didn't even know potatoes came from the ground!"



Zephyros Farm intern (on right) instructing visiting culinary students.

"Interns have been stepping up lately, since the labor force just isn't there, with the crackdown on migrant laborers coming to the area," says Elaine Brett, who runs Slow Food Western Slope along with her husband, Jim. That crackdown, a result of tougher immigration laws recently introduced in many states, has left many farmers shorthanded. With guest worker programs sanctioned

by the USDA too expensive for many small farmers to afford, some have turned to interns to fill the void.

And interns, for a range of reasons, have answered. Some, like Schneller, are disillusioned by college and crave more tangible work,

while others, like 23-year-old Casey Bowen of Denver, start farming as an extension of what they learned in school. Bowen, who spent the 2010 season at Thistle Whistle Farm in Hotchkiss and now works as the garden assistant at Carbondale's Colorado Rocky Mountain School, was exposed to food issues during her time at Colorado College, where she stayed in a sustainable living co-op and read the works of Michael Pollan.

"It seems like changing the way you eat is the best way to make an impact," she says, "and with farming, hands-on experience was the best way to go."


Farm interns live close to the ground, often dwelling in farmer-provided trailers, barns, bunkhouses and yurts. Some lack a car or even a cell phone, and many go without health insurance. Although interns often embrace the simple life, there are stories of internships more defined by exploitation than the education they advertise.

"I had a friend at a farm last year who was putting in the same hours as migrants, but getting paid much less," says Bowen. Such low pay is justified by the instruction that interns are receiving, but that "instruction" can sometimes look a lot like the work that all employees do. And because farmers often count room and board toward an intern's wages, their pay on paper can be less than minimum wage (currently \$7.63 in Colorado), putting some internships in ambiguous legal territory.

The pay can also make farm internships unrealistic for those saddled with student loan debt or other financial obligations. "I came at it from the position of not having to pay back student loans, and I'm also on my parent's health care plan," says Jessye Weinstein, 24, a Massachusetts native who spent the 2011 season at Thistle Whistle Farm. "We got a monthly stipend, and although I didn't come out on top, I was able to cover my expenses." An extra monthly bill or two makes an equation like this hard to maintain.

Internships can be a mixed blessing for farmers, too. Paonia's Zephyros Farm, which has run a popular internship program for the last seven seasons, won't employ interns in 2012. "They don't come back year after year, and it's hard to retrain them every season," says Zephyros co-owner Don Lareau. Though he's not sure precisely where his labor will come from, he hopes to hire locals. "But I'm going to miss the educational aspect—teaching people how to do this work," he says. "We've had interns who have gone on to start farms of their own."

By making the North Fork Valley a mecca of farming education, local food advocates there are hoping to entice more transient interns to put down roots in the area. Programs like the three-year apprenticeship at The Living Farm and the lecture and potluck series for interns organized by the Valley Organic Growers Association (VOGA), are examples of efforts to integrate interns into the local community.

"I believe interns are the driving force behind farms around here," says Elaine Brett of Slow Food Western Slope. "Whether it's getting to market on Saturday or getting everything harvested on time, a farmer can only do so much. Farming is a group effort." 



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