

Old-World Ferments

Buoy Vegetable Farm



Above: Cabbages growing for ferments, market and CSA customers.

Right: Bocharova at the Saturday Anne Arundel County Farmers Market.

by LEIGH GLENN

Farming is in Oksana Bocharova's DNA. Growing up in the Belgorod region of Southern Russia, with its chernozem (dark-land) soil, she liked visiting the collective farm her father Yury managed. Part of that farm had been in her family for years, with her great-grandfather farming it until the farm was collectivized under Stalin.

By the time she was seven, she knew she wanted to farm. After secondary school, Bocharova earned a master's of science in agronomy and returned to manage 5,000 acres of the 36,000-acre farm. With Perestroika came a new opportunity: Some of the farm was privatized and Bocharova



and then-husband Peter used 10 acres they were allotted to grow produce, which they sold in Moscow, some 400 miles away.

That was in 1992. Fast-forward seven years when Peter saw a news-

paper ad: The University of Wisconsin-River Falls and an international staffing company were recruiting student-trainees to study dairying. So the family, with a daughter and son, moved to Minnesota to work. At the dairy, they were amazed at the Posilac-induced yields. Bocharova didn't know it at the time, but it would not be long before she would turn away from chemical and biochemical agriculture.

The couple's move to Maryland's Eastern Shore and Horizon Organic Dairy coincided with Bocharova's increasing command of English and knowledge of organic agriculture. After two years at Horizon, the couple moved across the Chesapeake Bay to Gambrells and went to work at Maryland Sunrise Farm, the former U.S. Naval Academy farm that used to provide dairy to mid-shippers.

At Maryland Sunrise, Bocharova returned to her first love — vegetables — which she sold at the Anne Arundel County Farmers Market. She also set up a corn maze and hired seasonal employees to work it, hosted school tours and handled administrative tasks. The corn maze and tours were profitable from the get-go; the garden began to turn a profit in the sixth year.

EDUCATION ON, OFF THE FARM

Although Bocharova and her family could taste a difference in the food they bought in the United States,

they did not know how different the production methods were from the ones they knew in Russia, where other than with potatoes they did not use chemicals. A local natural-foods store owner/manager helped to enlighten her. Leric Wood, who runs David's Natural Market in Gambrills, took an interest in Maryland Sunrise.

Once at a potluck, he asked Bocharova about what she had brought to share. It had come from a membership-based, big-box grocer/retailer.

Asked why she didn't come to David's, she said, "I can't afford your place."

"I'll give you a 20 percent discount in the store," she recalls him saying. "I don't want your family to eat that."

Through Wood, Bocharova began to understand how food is grown and processed in the United States as well as how those methods affect soil, plant, animal and human health. Through Wood she was able to find food that tasted more like what she and her family were used to.

During her years at Maryland Sunrise, Bocharova also sought an education in farming practices that were organic, sustainable and beyond by attending various conferences, including the Acres U.S.A. annual conference and a biodynamics conference in New York State.

By 2011, Bocharova was ready for a change and more responsibility, and she began to look for land. Upon leaving Maryland Sunrise, she entered a time of deep economic uncertainty. She worked at David's, in the produce section, while she paid off debt and searched for a farm to buy.

FINDING LAND AND A LOAN

High land costs in Maryland initially prompted Bocharova to search elsewhere. She found farms in Kentucky, Oklahoma, Arkansas, and even Louisiana, where a manager position for a food shelter's garden was open. Along the way, she met people who helped to steer her to various opportunities, including the possibility of securing a Farm Services Agency (FSA) loan. For the loan, she would need education or three years' experience in ag (she had both), and a business and marketing



A buffer strip at Oksana Bocharova's farm.



Bocharova sells a variety of hand-crafted krauts, pickles and seasonal items.

plan, including letters from people – such as Wood – who would buy her produce and products. And the need for that brought her back to Maryland, where she already had a market. She homed in on FSA loans that were specific to beginning farmers, women and immigrants.

For a couple of years, Bocharova encountered bad timing. A property would be available, she'd have a contract in place, but wrangling in Congress meant the FSA loan program was not funded. Finally, when everything aligned – properties and FSA funding – there were five places she was con-

sidering, and she had about a month to choose what she felt was the best, put a contract on it and secure the loan.

To qualify for the FSA loan, Bocharova had to show that she did not qualify for a conventional loan; that she had run her own business (her management of Maryland Sunrise served in that capacity); and she had to present a current balance sheet and projected income and expenses. The business aspects of farming were familiar to her, not only through her experiences in the States, but also a

certification in ag economics she obtained in Moscow in 1996.

Of the five properties she looked at, she liked one that was close to Route 301/50, which provided access to the markets and customers she knew. She tested the soil and settled on that 6.8-acre parcel, with a house and storage outbuilding, east of Chestertown, about an hour from Annapolis. She named it Oksana's Produce Farm – A Cornucopia of Delights.

One thing Bocharova likes about the FSA loan is that there was no

down payment required – something she feels would be an advantage for many first-time farmers seeking their own land. Also, she says, the loan can be paid yearly, if need be.

The land Bocharova settled on had been planted in conventional soy. The roughly 5 acres in front of the house is sandy loam with 1.6 percent organic matter, but Bocharova believed she could work with it to increase the levels over time.

With her background in soil science and years of hands-on observations, Bocharova thinks of the soil as a living organism.

“Learning all that has given me the idea of what is going on in the soil and the importance of organic matter in the soil,” she says.

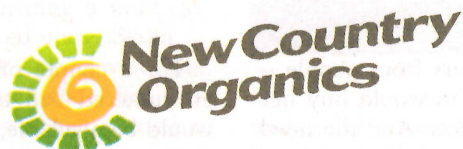
When she moved in, in August 2013, she began planting right away – kale, chard and cabbage. But there were not enough nutrients in the soil, and she lost the crops. She began cover-cropping with rye to overwinter and planted lavender and rosemary around the edges of the field. Along the farther edges, she seeded pollinator plants, including poppies, Echinacea, Solidago and lupine. She also planted hibiscus along the sides of the ditch that runs between her land and the road to discourage high-



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Crimson clover in bloom.



way maintenance crews from mowing too closely.

VALUE-ADDED CARRIES THE FARM

The following year, 2014, proved a little better – not so much for vegetable production as for Bocharova's fermented foods.

When she worked at Maryland Sunrise, they had a surplus of cucumbers and she did not want to have to compost them. "I was looking for ways to do pickles," she said. She thought a lot of people were doing ferments, but found that most of the pickles were made using vinegar – not the way she, her mother and grandmother did it, with lactic acid fermentation. So, in 2009, she began investigating what it would take to bring fermented pickles to market and took a course on understanding acidi-

fied foods, offered by the University of Maryland Extension.

She began to work toward inspection and licensure in 2012, so that when she bought a farm, she could start making ferments right away while giving herself the time and freedom to improve the soil and explore what works best, in terms of crops, layout, managing weeds and insects, attracting pollinators and utilizing the sun and water flows through the property.

KRAUTS FOR ALL TASTES

Every Tuesday, Bocharova heads to a church with a certified commercial kitchen in Stevensville to make a variety of krauts, pickles and seasonal items. Although ferments are gaining in popularity in the United States, they were a staple growing up in Rus-

sia. Bocharova felt that plain Russian sauerkraut was kind of boring, so she began to experiment by adding different kinds of spices.

Today, she offers at least four krauts, including Traditional Russian, Smoky Thai, Pink Sapphire and Cabbage Kimchi along with Pickled Carrot Salad. Then, depending on the season, she also sells Chow Chow, pickles and fresh salsa. She is seeking certification for others, including fermented cherry tomatoes and an apple-cranberry kraut for the holidays. The ferments also help Bocharova to turn not-too-spectacular-looking veggies into something she can sell.

As more people clamor for real food, ferments seem to be moving from fad to staple. Downtown Annapolis even sports a restaurant, all of whose dishes – from appetizers to

desserts – involve fermented ingredients.

Bocharova's ferments have become so popular both at the farmers' markets and a few other area retail outlets that she has been able to hire one employee to help her on Tuesdays.

FOCUSING ON ORGANIC MATTER

Bocharova considers 2015 the first full year on the farm. She launched a 14-member CSA, which helped with early-spring expenses. She applied chicken litter to the field, but less than her nutrient-management plan allows. Because so much of Maryland lies along the Chesapeake Bay, all farmers who gross \$2,500 are required to have a nutrient-management plan.

"The soil is so poor, I could add three times more chicken litter than I added this spring," said Bocharova. "I did not have money to do that – it's still extra. I'm trying to look at yields and see how they perform, instead of just adding as much as they told me to."



Bocharova is planning to use mushroom compost to improve the soil structure. The compost should help the soil better retain moisture and provide food for bacteria.

Late in 2014, she planted rye again, plus crimson clover, and allowed the clover to flower before tilling it in May 2015. Bocharova says she is realizing the need for planting *into* the cover crop – having something ready to go – so that the follow-up crop can utilize the nitrogen generated by the cover.

This fall, she'll have seeded a green manure mix of winter rye, field peas, crimson clover and hay vetch along with a cover of oil-seed radish, with extra-long taproots.

"Ideally I'd like to see my field covered in wintertime," she says.

She expects the radishes to help control nematodes and may try to ferment some of them. She plans to make the green-manure rows just wide enough for her mower and alternate those with the radishes as well as onions. In late spring, she's likely to plant tomatoes and peppers into the mowed green-manure mix. In areas where winter greens are coming out, she'll probably plant field peas. And next summer, she's considering red clover and buckwheat. She also plans to sow insect-repellant plants among the crops as she develops a rotation.

Bocharova does a soil test after each cover to monitor what's going on. She wants to get enough of this data to track subtle changes over time.

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In the meantime, her brain is “exploding” with ideas, she says, including the addition of pastured poultry in some kind of rotation with the cover crops, so that the chickens could add their droppings and would also work in the cover crops prior to her planting an annual vegetable crop – something she was inspired to consider by Harvey Ussery, author of *The Small-Scale Poultry Flock*, whose homestead in northern Virginia Bocharova visited in June.

“I think it’s a brilliant idea, and it suits my needs here,” she said. “My main hurdle is figuring out the coop

and how to move it – build a coop that will be movable in that area or maybe a chicken coop that’s stationary and an electric fence around it to move the birds. I don’t know the predators here yet – or how much I have to protect [the birds] from them. I’d like to figure out how to let the chickens run free and not be destroyed by predators.”

Bocharova does not speculate about how long it will take to increase organic content of the soil.

“I don’t have a deadline or a plan for that,” she says. “Experience will tell.”



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Does she ever long for those chernozem soils of home?

"I do miss those soils," she says. "But the amount of rain we got this year, I was glad for what I have. On my chernozem, I would not be able to do anything with this much rain – I would not have been able to plant for two months. Sandy soils are not bad for growing vegetables; you just have to amend it. It's easier to work with than my soils back home."

Bocharova also plans to utilize a new greenhouse she was able to buy with the help of a Natural Resources Conservation Service grant. She sited the greenhouse in back, and plans to use it for winter and early-spring greens; strawberries; vegetable starts, both for herself as well as to sell at market in the spring; and early-season tomatoes, peppers and eggplant. She plans to create some berry rows near the greenhouse as well.

Bocharova expects to break even on vegetables in five years. What she charges at market is comparable with

what other local farmers who do not use chemicals charge. When she has to hire labor, such as for weeding or for help seeding, she pays a fair wage.

"My goal is to produce real food that is grown for taste and grown in a way that pays people a good wage for their work," she says.

Bocharova sees small farms like hers as a primary contributor to our future food supply, but also as being supportive of beautiful, diverse and productive ecosystems.

She continues to seek outlets for her vegetables as well as alliances that may lead her to grow things she has not considered and which other farmers are not interested in growing. One such alliance is with the chef of a German restaurant in Edgewater, Maryland. He actually found her through Facebook. Her kraut did not meet his needs for something without spices and more sour than what she likes to make. But they are planning to work together on different crops that he can use in the restaurant as well as,

perhaps, a different kind of ferment.

Bocharova encourages would-be farmers to have a plan and work

NEED MORE INFORMATION?

For more on Oksana's Produce Farm visit [facebook.com/oksanasproducefarm](https://www.facebook.com/oksanasproducefarm) or call 410-487-1925.

it, "and, eventually, it will come." When her former husband returned to Russia and took over management of the largest dairy there, she had one income and was unsure she'd be able to make a go of it. But in five years, she paid off outstanding debt and saved money by living on-farm, which is something

young people could do, she says.

"If I could get it done being a first-generation immigrant here, people who are born here and know the system could get it done more easily – if they have a plan, if they're certain it's what they want to do."

Bocharova sees small farms like hers as a primary contributor to our future food supply, but also as being supportive of beautiful, diverse and productive ecosystems. She hews to the Abraham Lincoln quotation; "The greatest fine art of the future will be the making of a comfortable living on a small piece of land."

Staying in the United States and buying the place near Chestertown were the right decisions, Bocharova says.

"I'm not 20 years old anymore. If I'd waited longer, I may have lost the chance to finance or something may have happened in my personal life. I'm glad I did that, and I'm working on my dream – and living it."

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