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THE FOOD ISSUE

FARMING AND
COMMUNITY IN
AROOSTOOK
COUNTY

FROM BREAD
TO BEER,
LOCAL GRAINS
FIND A GROWING
MARKET

A CONVERSATION
WITH CHEFS
MELISSA KELLY
+ JAY VILLANI



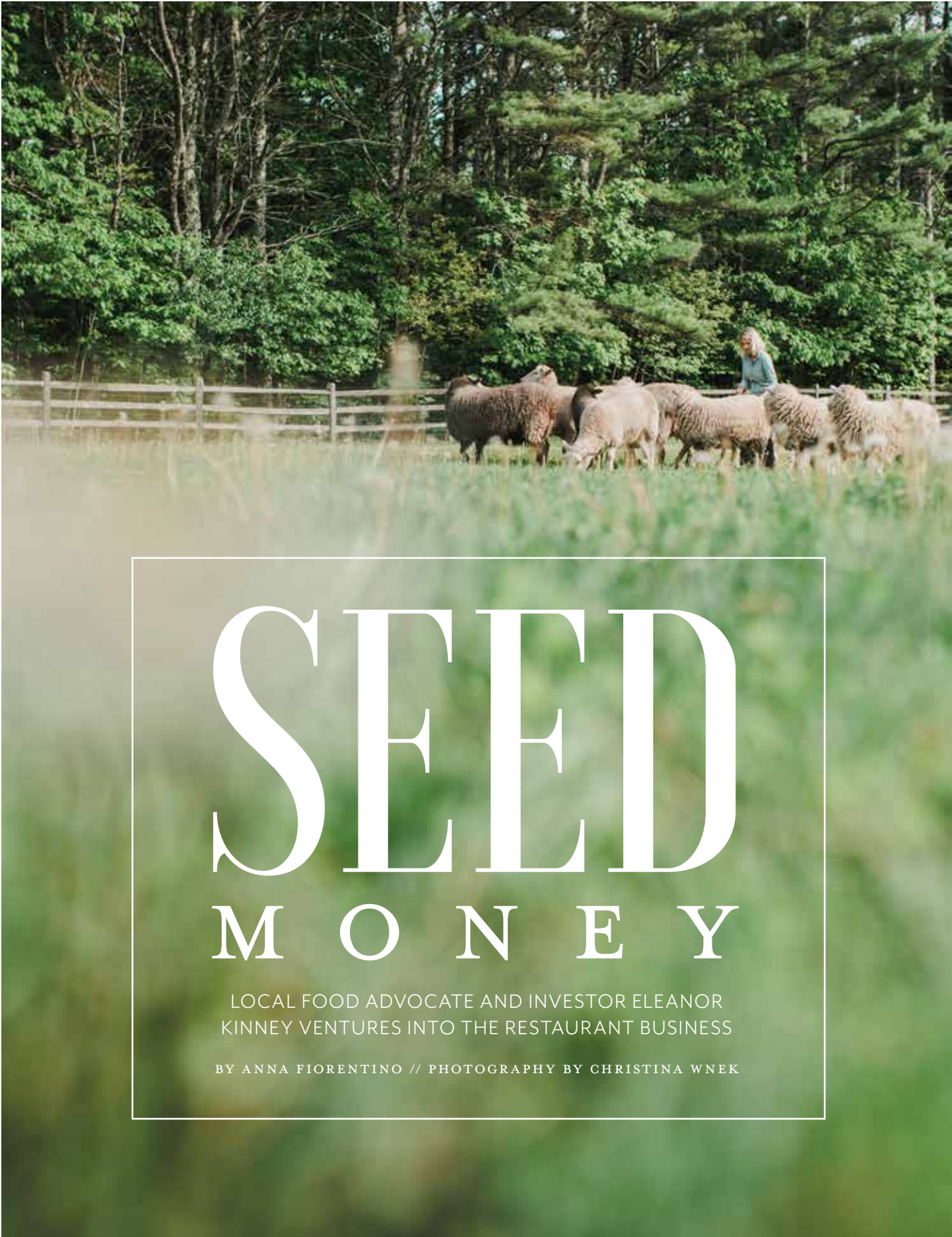
8 BLOODY MARYS
TO DRINK THIS FALL



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SEED M O N E Y

LOCAL FOOD ADVOCATE AND INVESTOR ELEANOR
KINNEY VENTURES INTO THE RESTAURANT BUSINESS

BY ANNA FIORENTINO // PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRISTINA WNEK



What has the mob in the paddock so docile isn't entirely clear at first: it could be Eleanor Kinney, or the white bucket she is swinging in front of the flock. The 13 sheep crowd in as Kinney reaches for a handful of oats, a treat on Hart Farm in Bremen.

"They are very vocal; they talk to me all the time," says Kinney, who is flaxen-haired and petite. "Luna is my bottle baby. As a lamb, she wasn't nursing so I'd come out every night with a headlamp on to feed her, and she'd come running. Lily is the matriarch, and Agora is the friendliest. Winter is the most beautiful." In a week, Winter's coat, like the others', will be shorn and dyed with marigolds and indigo from the yard so Kinney's daughter, Eloise Kelly, can weave scarves and blankets from the yarn while away at college. Kinney sets down the bucket of feed by the gate, walks toward the barn, and the flock follows. For six years this loyal, collective "carbon neutral lawn mower" has been roaming her 650 acres—the land that's not conservation forest—overlooking Biscay Pond.

The mosquitoes are bad on this particular day, incessantly buzzing over piles of compost outside the chicken coop. What's left of Kinney's vinegar-based bug spray will become insecticide for the peas and rows of lettuce and cabbage in the garden and for the small vineyard sloping toward the bank of the pond. The wine grapes will be crushed by Oyster River Winegrowers in Warren, and the table varieties will be sold at the Damariscotta Farmers' Market by Morning Dew Farm, the seedling supplier for the edible pansies and nasturtium now growing in Kinney's geodesic dome, which looks like an igloo. "I used to have a whole citrus grove in there," she says. "It smelled amazing."

The homestead lives up to its designation: Hart Farm, after Kinney's middle name. "I feel grounded on the farm in my love for my family and for Maine and the work I am doing here," she says.

Business is always personal for Kinney. After inheriting stock in tobacco, fast food, and fossil fuel companies in college, she

slowly sold it off to align her money with her values. In 2002 she and her ex-husband, an artist and a sailor, purchased an idyllic 133 acres, which grew into 650 as neighbors sold their land. And in the years that followed, Kinney very intentionally became one of Maine's key agricultural investors.

In 2005 she led a successful grassroots campaign to stop a Walmart Supercenter from coming to Damariscotta by limiting the scale of retail development allowed in town, prompting Newcastle, Edgecomb, and Nobleboro to follow suit. "The Walmart fight was pivotal in my evolution as an impact investor," says Kinney. "I had always been an environmental activist, but the economic and community development issues that emerged during that campaign convinced me to start investing in local food systems."

In 2011 Kinney oversaw Maine Farmland Trust's acquisition of the would-be Walmart site and helped Morning Dew organic farm lease the 60-acre parcel of prime land. She later provided gap money for the farm's pur-



chase of the land in 2017. She backs Maine's burgeoning local food movement by investing in other farms and food businesses with Slow Money Maine, a group of 1,750 investors who have funneled \$15 million in loans over the past eight years into the state's farms and fisheries and the ecosystems that sustain them. She also co-launched No Small Potatoes, an investment club that's part of Slow Money Maine and provides micro-loans to Maine farmers and food businesses.

Since 2012 Kinney has invested in Tide Mill Organic Farm, a ninth-generation organic farm and poultry processing facility in Washington County, which she's advising on becoming certified to supply organic chicken across New England. She also backs Common Wealth Poultry Company, a processing facility in Gardiner serving farmers in Maine and six other states. Meanwhile, she's addressing climate change as a major investor in a Wiscasset-based renewable energy company named Peregrine Turbine Technologies.

Kinney's newest venture—a small storefront overlooking the river in the heart of Damariscotta—is her first foray into the restaurant business. River House opened this summer and offers fresh, local farm-to-table cuisine, using what's in season and avoiding needless waste. Hart Farm supplies the firewood for the restaurant's monster wood-fired grill, along with eggs, edible flowers, and solar power credits left over from its four arrays. Meats, seafood, and produce are sourced from Morning Dew and other local farms and fisheries, and the oysters are harvested along the river. Hart Farm's newest litter of pigs is devouring the leftover scraps.

Kinney, who purchased the building with the sale of her fossil fuel stocks, may not have a culinary background, but it's clear she knows food. Heading up the kitchen is chef Jonathan Merry, who walked through Kinney's conservation forest and into her business from neighboring Springtide Farm. "Do you want the real story?" Merry asks, glancing at Kinney with a smile. "Eleanor needed a lamb castrated so I came out to help."

Merry grew up in Bath, attended the Culinary Institute of America, and spent six years at celebrated eateries such as Toro Boston and Craigie on Main before moving back to Maine for a geographical cure. After working at Solo Bistro in Bath and Hoote-nanny Bread in Damariscotta, Merry began raising cashmere goats at Dragonfly Cove Farm in Dresden. Farming led him to sobriety. "When I got back to Maine, I went from drinking a lot to drinking more," says Merry. "I wouldn't be here if I didn't start farming, that's for sure." With his wife, eight-month-old baby girl, and goats, Merry moved to Springtide Farm to become a next-generation cashmere farmer, working with longtime owners Peter Goth and Wendy Pieh.

He returned to the restaurant industry six years sober, with a new appreciation for food and its value—one shared with his neighbor and business partner. Their dynamic, like their philosophy on food, is earnest. "We want the farmers to get equal credit for the food," says Kinney. "It's a small menu that shifts, with a focus on the whole animal,"

The chicken coop at Hart Farm. **Opposite:** Kinney, an agricultural investor, in her pasture with her king shepherd, Ollie.





adds Merry. Tonight at Hart Farm, that's a chicken cooked over an open flame.

The solar tracker shifts as the sun lowers. Merry rotates the bird and takes stock of the beef from Kinney's last cows with sous chef Max Vivado—Eloise's boyfriend. Seated around the fire to preview the River House menu are Kinney's three children, including teenagers Anna and Ridgely Kelly, and her life partner, Steve Page, an aquaculture entrepreneur and a founder of Maine Farmland Trust.

Kinney, a native Rhode Islander, grew up summering on Mount Desert Island. She returned while attending Yale University to research Mount Desert Island's social and economic transformation from an 1800s farming and fishing town to a tourist destination, and again for graduate-level work on the effects of nitrogen inputs from a landfill. As director of Rhode Island's largest land trust, Kinney worked to protect that state's last old-growth forest before moving to Maine for good.

Over the years, she's invested in Maine Grains, Crown O'Maine Organic Cooperative, and the now-defunct MOO Milk, and served on boards for Coastal Rivers Conservation Trust, the Maine Community Foundation, and the Natural Resources Council of Maine. "When I saw I had Monsanto in my portfolio, I immediately gave the stock to the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association in support of their GMO-labeling campaign," says Kinney. She finds that what she may have lost in financial return comes back as a big, and lasting, social and environmental impact.

"I call it putting my money where my mouth is," says Kinney, taking a last bite of Merry's rhubarb crumble, on rotation at River House. +

From top: Kinney opened River House this summer at 27 Main Street in downtown Damariscotta. The sheep are shorn, and their fleece is spun into yarn for her daughter Eloise to weave blankets and scarves. **Opposite, clockwise from top left:** Meat, fish, and produce sourced from local farmers and fishermen are cooked on a wood-fired grill at Kinney's home and at River House. Kinney savors seasonal flavors by neighbor-turned-business-partner Jonathan Merry, chef at River House. A home-cooked meal with family and friends, from left to right: Eloise Kelly, Kinney's daughter; Steve Page, Kinney's partner; Kinney; Merry; Ridgely Kelly, Kinney's son; Anna Kelly, Kinney's daughter; and Max Vivado, sous chef at River House and Eloise's boyfriend.

