

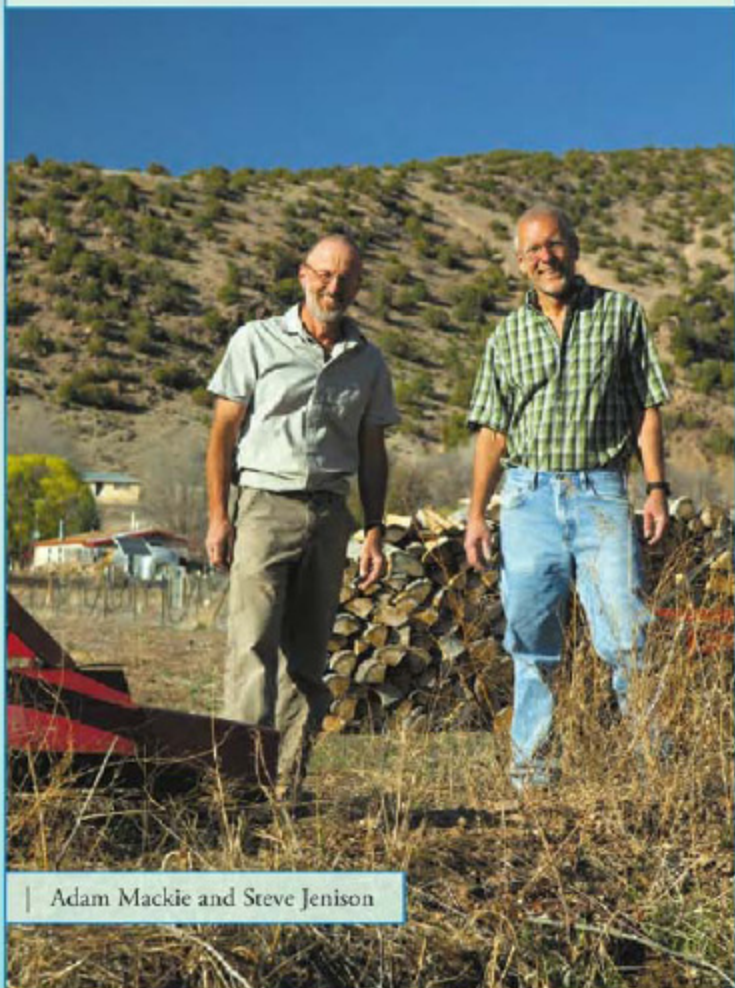
Gato

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“I spent 20 years working in a room without windows,” says retired anesthesiologist Adam Mackie. He’s certainly making up for it now. Working the Talon de Gato farm with former public health physician Steve Jenison, he gets as much open air as he can handle.

Talking to the duo in Apodaca, a tiny community on the Embudo River near Dixon, it becomes clear that their path from being physicians to farmers was a gradual one.



| Adam Mackie and Steve Jenison

Gato

Talon de

Steve and Adam moved from Seattle to New Mexico 20 years ago and in 1998 were living in Santa Fe when a friend bought a property in Apodaca and suggested they check out the adjacent land and farmhouse for sale. They visited one weekend, said, "Yeah, interesting," and drove back home to Santa Fe. They took another look the next weekend, and the next, and after four consecutive weekends took the plunge to buy it. They weren't ready to move their home north from the City Different yet, and they had no experience in farming, but Adam started growing food on a 1,000-square-foot patch of the land, just for their own consumption.

"I've been growing food to eat since I was a child and in Seattle had a pea patch in a community garden," says Adam. "We didn't buy the land with the intention of farming, but it became the obvious thing to do. One of the motivations was that we don't eat meat, so you want really good vegetables, because you can't hide bad veggies under a slab of

steak. I'd go to the supermarket and come out with an empty basket because nothing looked good."

The next step came in 2003, when they began selling at the Santa Fe Farmers' Market. Adam was on the market's board, but he recalls that this move was a huge leap for the nascent Talon de Gato farm. "There's a big difference between growing for yourself and growing for market, but I was retired and I don't play golf."

Steve, who has fond childhood memories of helping his grandmother on an Iowa farm, also thought setting up a booth was a great idea. He still worked as a public health physician for the New Mexico Department of Health, but he dove in to help sell at the Farmers' Market. "I love going to market; it's one of my favorite things. Talking to people for hours about food, it's like a party."

Both were still commuting between Santa Fe and Apodaca until they moved full-time into the renovated farmhouse in December 2007. "There's commuting, and there's commuting with a truck full of perishable vegetables," observes Adams with some feeling. "And Steve was working in Albuquerque, so in the morning I'd go one hour one way and Steve one hour another."

Since Steve retired last year, he's gotten more involved with the growing as well as the selling. "I'm cheap labor," he says, acknowledging that his first harvest had its tedious moments. "Small tapas peppers take all

day. You start at six in the morning and spend twelve hours picking peppers."

Despite a few rueful jokes, there's no sense of regret about exchanging the more cloistered life of a doctor with the grittier life of a farmer. When I ask what the couple's medical colleagues make of it, Adam quips: "I still have to work hard, but they're jealous that I'm in a cash business and I don't have to deal with insurance companies."

In fact, the duo sees this work as an extension of their previous careers. Steve is convinced that to improve public health, it's vital to inform people about the quality of food, the quality of the environment and how the two are interrelated. "You're directly improving people's quality of life," says Adam. Not just by growing nutritious food, but in the social aspect of the farmers' market, where people chat with strangers and share tips on how to cook the produce. Adam notes that if you work in a cubicle, visit the drive-through and shop in a supermarket, you can go days without having a proper conversation. "It's bad for the spirit," he says. "People interacting at the market together, cooking



together—it's all good for health."

He also thinks his scientific and biological training transfers well from the medical field to the farm field. "You test, observe, reconsider, analyze and, hopefully, improve as a result of those observations." The biggest lesson was discovering by trial and error what he could grow. "The first year the climate was benign, and I got away with some things that I wouldn't now."

They now cultivate three of their five acres, and crops include arugula, spinach, broccoli rabe, butternut squash, wild asparagus, leeks, onions, garlic, shallots and peppers. "The rhubarb that I planted just for myself has become very popular," says Adam. It was once a more common local crop, but the tradition has been lost, and the farmers are used to customers exclaiming that they haven't seen rhubarb since their grandmother in Taos grew it.

"The best thing is having a successful market, having other people appreciate what you've grown," says Adam. They also give away spare eggs from their 12 hens, or Steve trades with the Blue Heron microbrewery in Rinconada. The exchange rate is a dozen eggs for half a growler of beer. Steve himself is a keen brewer and built his own hop yard with poles from locust trees to bear the vines. "They're good for poles, because they don't rot."

Listening to talk of non-rotting poles,

rows of cabbages wiped out by flea beetle and pepper crops ripped out by the roots in the wind, it's hard to picture Steve and Adam in their former incarnations as doctors. They seem at home discussing their commitment to preserve Talon de Gato so it can continue to feed people, as so much of New Mexico's irrigated land gets sold for development. "And you never get it back," says Adam.

Still, there were moments of decision about how far to invest in this "borderline economic" farming, with the expense of a tractor, new greenhouse and a drip irrigation system. "That tractor was a major purchase," Adam notes, "but Steve pushed me over the brink and then I had to justify having it, and here we are."

The apparently indefatigable Adam also launched the Dixon Seed Exchange. A few dozen people attended the first exchange in 2003. Last year more than 500 people came from New Mexico and beyond. "Seed exchanges are gaining a lot more attention because of the rapacious behavior of industrial seed companies," he says.

His load is eased now, with the help of Steve—and two summer interns working the farm. "When I was doing it all on my own, I'd be silly tired by the end of the day." They hadn't planned to have interns, until a farmers' market customer decided that her granddaughter in the UK would be better off at Talon de Gato than the farm where

she and a friend had planned their internships. Adam and Steve agreed to give it a try, expecting two interns. Instead, a group of three turned up from England. The experiment obviously worked out, as they joined the WWOOF and ATTRA networks and will be using more interns.

"I'm quite happy to spend the rest of my life here," says Steve. Though neither of these guys waxes too lyrical, he praises the early morning and evening light on the Truchas Peaks, while Adam says he enjoys Monday evenings when they irrigate from the Acequia de Apodaca, "watching the light on the water."

As this happens to be a Monday, Adam keeps checking on the clock. It's nearing 2 pm, the point at which Talon de Gato's ten-hour watering rights begin, and he's not going to lose a minute of opportunity. We leave the cool kitchen of the century-old farmhouse and head through the Talon de Gato greenhouse, built on to the back of the house. It's filled with thousands of seedlings, drenched with light from panes of glass two stories high. I'm tempted to ask Adam if these are windows enough for him, but he's gone already. Outside he opens the acequia, and precious water bursts forth, flooding two channels down to the waiting crops. Chickens cluck contentedly in the warm afternoon sun, and a vibrant green globe willow offers a promising hint of spring.

"Born again with new hope," says Adam, gazing over his fields.

