Small farms make towns a better place to live: That might be the motto of Annie Farrell, who is determined to promote local agriculture and see small farms thrive, even in as unlikely a place as Westchester County, home to many of New York City’s most prosperous bedroom communities.

When I last saw Farrell, she was chucking the chin of a five-hundred-pound Large Black pig, but she seems just as comfortable in the library of the elegant Bedford home where our paths now cross again. She has just come from her yoga class, more energized than meditative.

Farrell is currently helping to establish Rainbeau Ridge, a gracious Westchester property and soon-to-be sustainable farm. By the summer of 2003 the garden, orchard, and expanding goat herds and chicken flocks will be humming, all within earshot of Metro North’s commuter railway. A pilot Community Agricultural Project (CAP) will provide area families with nearly customized crops from a local working estate.

“We’re not a showcase, not a foundation. We’re driven by a mission and a desire to preserve and build community. I like direct hits, a direct connection between consumers and farmers,” Farrell says. “At Rainbeau Ridge we’ll have the ability to grow a model—my neighbor’s garden, something intimate and close to home. It’s a simple model that could be replicated elsewhere. We’re going to resurrect a farm, and from our experience create a kind of handbook for growing food in suburbia.”

Clearly, Farrell believes that the quality of life is enhanced by preserving the farmscape, as well as by the health benefits of local produce and livestock farmed on a small scale. Her interest in heirloom varieties and heritage breeds is neither nostalgic nor romantic, but part of a vision of farming that is aptly rendered by the French term terroir. The quality and taste of farm products reflect the unique climatic and soil conditions of the particular bit of land on which the animals are raised or the fruit and vegetables grown. Farrell seeks to preserve and develop this terroir, this character of the landscape, and to convince the public to cherish it. “It’s part of the human condition,” she says. “We need to be able to see a little green, to just sit on the ground.”

She opens the photo albums she’s brought to show me, which document her long involvement with sustainable agriculture. Farrell seems to know everyone in the field, and her World Wide Web is of the old-fashioned kind: an incredible memory. Her mission is to bring farmers to market and information to farmers, as well as to demonstrate what can be done to save small farms. “I want to put a face on the farmer,” she says. “You know me; you understand my thinking. You buy based on what you know, my farm to your table.”

A New York City native, Farrell grew up summering with her grandparents in northern Westchester County. “When I was a kid, I saw the mowers and tractors and said, ‘I want to do that!’ I had no agenda; I just wanted to drive the tractors.” In the 1980s she began growing mesclun on her own Catskill farm in Bovina, New York, for the likes of chef Paul Bocuse and the Union Square Greenmarket. Her scrapbook holds a picture of one of her five children, lining up green beans for market. Now that daughter’s family is farming in Bovina. “I did my job right if she wants to be a farmer,” Annie says proudly.

In another snapshot Farrell appears with several pioneering Hudson Valley artisanal producers, with Bocuse’s toque looming above them. Her work with these producers convinced her in 1993 to become the manager and front person for Cabbage Hill Farm, a two-hundred-acre, non-profit, experimental farm deeply committed to the survival of agriculture in the Hudson Valley (the farm was underwritten by philanthropists Jerome and Nancy Kohlberg). After nearly a decade, in the summer of 2002 Farrell left Cabbage Hill, having helped to ensure that its thirty-five acres of pasture would be preserved in perpetuity. Though she considered returning to the Catskills, she decided instead to stay in the suburbs to support “a unique effort by a handful of people” to keep the little remaining open land in Westchester available for farming. This land currently amounts to only twelve thousand acres.

A recent study by Claggett and Wolfe Associates commissioned by the Agricultural and Farm Protection Board illustrates how precarious the situation is for this affluent area so pressured by development. At the same time, the
study finds evidence that the residents value quality of life, the environment, and open space. Because small farms can address all three priorities, Farrell is using her networks to rebuild the infrastructure of the fertile Hudson Valley, which not so long ago, via horse and carriage, train and boat, supplied New York City with fresh, high-quality food. "Farms preserve the viewscape, they maintain some revenue for the community, and they provide public use of private lands. At the same time they address the primal well-being that comes from touching the land," explains Farrell. Neither dense city nor rural countryside, suburban communities are often overlooked when people think about farming. Along with a handful of similarly affluent counties in the nation, such as Fairfield County, Connecticut; Suffolk County, New York; and Marin County, California, Westchester is almost past "maturity," as people in the field term it. "It's almost too late," says Annie urgently.

But with Farrell as advisor, Rainbeau Ridge stands an excellent chance of success. Her track record speaks for itself. In addition to managing Cabbage Hill, she helped establish the popular Flying Pig Café in the Mt. Kisco train station and the Mt. Kisco Farmers' Market, both of which serve as showcases for local farmers. "The healthiest food is close to home," advises the sign above the café door. She also helped establish the Northeast Livestock Alliance (NELA), preparing handbooks on how to raise heritage-breed chickens, turkeys, Large Black pigs, and Highland and Devon cattle. Another of Farrell's projects involved setting up Stafford Enterprises' state-of-the-art slaughterhouse in Stafford Springs, Connecticut. Designed by Dr. Temple Grandin, the livestock handling facilities there promote humane slaughter, and the slaughterhouse has evolved as a tremendous resource for local, small-scale livestock producers. Stephen Schneider, of the biodynamic Hawthorne Valley Farm in Columbia County, New York, notes that "It's quite a distance for us to travel, but after I visited Stafford Springs, there was no question in my mind. The cleanliness, concern for the animals, and state-of-the-art facilities are outstanding. No other facility compares."

As if these projects weren't enough, Farrell also oversaw Cabbage Hill's aquaponic operation, in which mesclun and herbs are grown in a closed, re-circulating system nourished by the filtered wastewater from huge tanks filled with tilapia. More recently, she wove together a network of farmers who raise native turkeys like the blue-headed Narragansetts she had at Cabbage Hill. She has already helped match sixteen hundred dark, richly flavored birds to Thanksgiving tables nationally in an effort Slow Food has taken over and dubbed The Turkey Project. "I learned to slaughter a turkey when I was twenty-five from the old-timers. But we’ve lost the connection to where our food comes from. Now the small farmer has nowhere to go with his products.” Farrell is working to connect farmers with chefs, knowing that restaurant menus can shape demand and encourage the critical farm-to-table connection.

With her latest project, she continues her efforts to link what is grown to where it is sold. Farrell admits that “we’re not inventing the wheel here. Historically people ate close to home.” She points to a poster of a Hudson Valley cauliflower-growing cooperative that was still around in the 1950s. "I appreciate the organics in the supermarket, but this is not Niman Farms, this is not Cascade. It’s wonderful that they are converting big tracts of land to organic farming and ranching, but that doesn’t address local farming. I’m trying to do something else here.”

Before I leave, Annie proudly shows off her new territory. We crunch through the snow under the soon-to-be-rescued fruit trees toward a small red barn. The garden and orchards are still dormant, but hoops will soon rise over raised-bed vegetable gardens modelled after Eliot Coleman’s year-round Maine garden. The goat barns are just over the rise. Annie Farrell aims to make sure that the next generation of suburbanites can have fresh, local produce and beautiful vistas to enjoy.