

Preface:

Land — A Love Story

IN 1976, AT AGE NINE and growing up in the Chicago suburbs, I painted a picture of a barn and silo in art class. It came out so beautiful that my dad insisted on custom framing the creation and hanging it on the wall. That same year I pleaded with my mom to sew me a Laura Ingalls-inspired Halloween costume — complete with sunbonnet. I rocked the *Little House on the Prairie* fashion sidewalk runway that season.



Left: *Lisa Kivist's farm dream, circa third grade art class.*

Right: *Lisa Kivist channeling her inner Laura Ingalls, Halloween 1976.*



*Dutch oven bread
baking at Inn
Serendipity.*
JOHN D. IVANKO

Flash forward 40 years. I now own that barn, and Ma Ingalls would groove on my bread-baking bonanzas — especially in my Lodge Dutch oven. She'd want to sample my rows of jars of homegrown pickles and sauerkraut.

So, you could blame my parents for unknowingly encouraging me to become a female farmer. It took several decades and detours to get from the barn artwork on the wall to a barn on my farm, let alone more than 40 vegetable varieties growing in my farm fields. Other than my enthrallment with *Little House on the Prairie*,

the word “farmer” had never found its way into my career radar.

Though I grew up in a food-loving family that embraced gathering around the table over a meal, a separation existed between the turkey on the platter and the farm where it was raised. I was the classic suburban-raised kid of the 1970s, an era in which processed foods started popping onto our family tables and “convenience” was lauded as progress.

Post-college and armed with a communications degree from Northwestern University, I followed the expected career norm, marching into a corporate cubicle and working at an advertising agency. My first client: Hallmark. Parents were pleased, of course. Mom and Dad had important visions for what their only daughter should be. A dirt farmer was not one of them. On the outside, everything appeared normal: long hours under fluorescent lights, pre-approved credit card offers piling up in the mailbox, and take-out food in Styrofoam containers quickly consumed during 15-minute lunch breaks. But in reality, I was well on my way to a premature mid-life crisis at age 25. Paychecks and promotions didn't fulfill me in the way they seemed to satisfy most everyone else. Which left me challenged with the question: What will?

My self-created therapy in dealing with this lack of fulfillment consisted of weekend escapes to Wisconsin. A colleague in the cubicle world, John Ivanko, started a social group for us disgruntled young professionals called the Outing Club, organizing informal camping or biking trips across the border into the

rolling green hills of America's dairyland. Now, realize I had never been camping until this point; our family vacations always involved air conditioning and indoor plumbing. But something about John's hand-drawn Outing Club flyer in the office break room caught my eye. Or maybe John caught my eye first, as I quickly developed a crush on this guy who could pass for Harrison Ford's double. Whatever my reasons — an antidote for corporate malaise, true love, or my Han Solo fantasies — I enthusiastically signed up for the next camping weekend, a trip to the New Glarus Woods State Park.

Life's detours can entertain us and, if we let them, fundamentally sweeten our lives. The first time I met the guy behind that flyer, I knew I was destined to ride through life's journey with him. John, you see, was my soul mate and eventually became my husband. We shared a yearning for a different life path, but we didn't have a clear direction back then on what or where that would be. So as an immediate fix, we kept organizing those escapist Outing Club weekend trips. Getting physically and mentally out of the cubicle recharged us like no amount of double espressos ever could.

I never thought of myself as a farm girl or someone who wanted to live in the middle of nowhere. Heck, I never even slept in a tent until that infamous first camping trip. While my yuppie peers were talking promotions and corner offices, I found myself counting the hours till the next trip out of the city, when I could linger on those rural back roads, sip that 79-cent cup of coffee at the corner café, and see the Milky Way. It was the first time I smelled a freshly manured field and played with a barn kitten.

On some trips we upgraded from camping and stayed at bed and breakfasts or farm stays, especially if we were biking all day and craved a hot shower and real mattress. That was the case one sultry summer night when John and I and a half dozen other Outing Club friends arrived at Waarvick's Century Farm Bed and Breakfast, located near the Elroy-to-Sparta bicycle trail. The convivial hostess greeted us with homemade plum liquor, and we toasted the bounty of summer as the fireflies twinkled in the twilight. The next morning, I woke at sunrise with energy that outpaced anything I felt during the work week. I followed my nose to coffee brewing and zucchini muffins baking with a waft of cinnamon. I was given the task of harvesting rhubarb from the garden; thanks to her tour the night before, I knew what I was looking for. I wandered barefoot to the garden, toes wet with dawn dew. Pulling that pink rhubarb as the day broke and the doves cooed in the barn, I felt at happy peace for the first time in a long time.

Other trips introduced us to many more eccentric and creative farmer and rural types who had in common a love of the land and sharing it with others. Some were five-star quirky, like the host at Lonesome Jake's, who arrived to cook breakfast in head-to-toe cowboy regalia and holding a bottle of champagne. Maybe it was the coyotes' howl at night, the fresh scent of a field of cut alfalfa, or that 50-pound pumpkin I insisted we bring home, but what started as weekend flings over the border snowballed into a full-throttle love affair with farm life. Call it my homecoming.

Hanging out and dreaming together back at urban coffee houses during the week, John and I took our relationship with each other and our love affair with the country life to the next level. Together we plotted our move to a farm. We paid off student loans, saved as much cash as we could, and planned the transition from the corporate maze to living on a country road.

*Wisconsin's bucolic
rural countryside.*

JOHN D. IVANKO

For the first time in my adult life, something bigger than myself drew me in and pushed me forward. I studied real estate farm listings and tutored myself on septs and wells. This, of course, was before the online information super



highway. The local realtor who kindly adopted us would fax black-and-white farm MLS listings. My mind would fill in the picture with abundant vegetables, rows of resplendent flowers, and fragrant herbs. I imagined chickens running around and maybe, one day, a kid nestled up in a tree. My dream livelihood was more than a paycheck and company retirement plan. I wanted freedom to create and be myself on a farm.

No surprise, becoming a farm girl freaked out my parents. Much blame for these crazy ideas was laid on John. After all, he's the one who invited me to go camping in the first place. If only I had stayed in the mall, shopping at Target and Old Navy like normal, manicured women. To add fuel to their fire of irritation, John went back to graduate school for a degree in, of all things, leisure studies. Try explaining that topic to your future in-laws! The man to marry their only daughter studies what people do when they are not working. WTF? Some daughters go through that rebellious phase at age 16. Mine came at 25, when the word "farmer" entered my career vernacular.

But this was not an escapist farm fantasy game for me. I didn't want FarmVille. I demanded the real thing. My heart and mind synced with visions of running a farm business serving garden-fresh meals to bed-and-breakfast guests and feeling the late afternoon sun on my face as I weeded rows of fragrant basil and tomatoes. Just thinking about harvesting strawberries charged me with self-confidence in a way I never encountered crafting a marketing plan for Mother's Day cards at Hallmark. The farm vision gifted me with more than a fresh start; it enabled me to embrace the inner entrepreneur I never knew I had.

November of 1996 racked up to be a month of significance: John and I married; we moved to the five acres of Wisconsin ground we call Inn Serendipity Farm and Bed & Breakfast; we bid farewell to cubicles, high-heeled pumps, and suits and ties. A century-old farmstead, this property epitomized to us what Wendell Berry so eloquently proclaimed as having "faith in two inches of humus that will build under the trees every thousand years" and our willingness to "ask the questions that have no answers." Or at least questions that don't have only one correct answer.

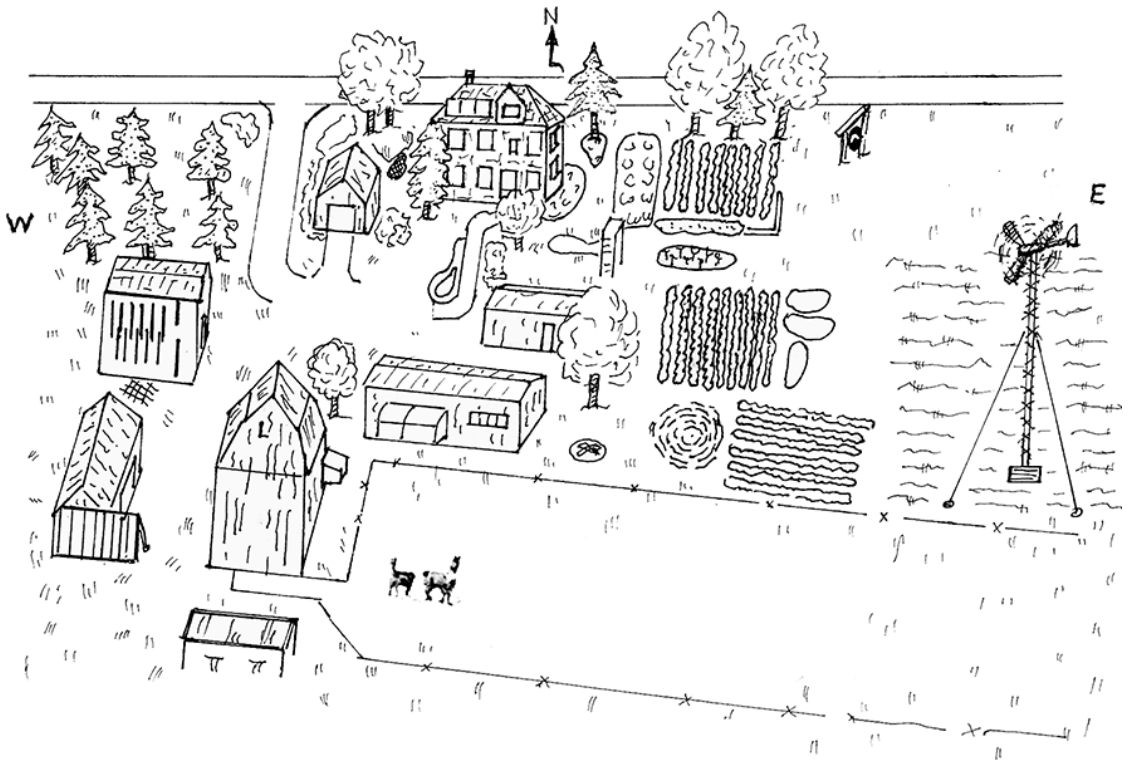
This would be the land on which we'd build a life and livelihood over the decades, in a rural county with twice as many cows as people. At age 30 I was finished with fast food, and I broke the earn-spend treadmill I had been on. I share my journey writing in the second-floor office in the farmhouse as the sun rises and life along County Road P awakens.



Inn Serendipity
farmhouse, Browntown,
Wisconsin. JOHN D. IVANKO

Today, we have an eclectic patchwork of business ventures, writing, and contract work. They keep both the farm fields blooming and keyboard clicking. I have the freedom to say yes to projects and opportunities I believe in. Gone is the commute to an off-farm job for a paycheck. Raising my own food, serving meals at the B&B, and selling produce to guests collectively make positive deposits into that account of life that give true meaning, the things that hold lasting value. Writing — whether through blog posts, magazine articles, or books — allows me to share inspiring stories and move people to personal action. It's done while peering out the window of my farmhouse office at the sprawling birch tree complete with a robin nest. Priceless.

The learning curve ran steep those first years. I lugged my trusted *Rodale Organic Gardening Guide* to the field to look up which direction to plant the



seed potatoes (eyes pointing up) or determine if I had tomato hornworm damage on my plants. The book's pages became soil stained as my knowledge base deepened and the harvest became more prolific.

Map of Inn Serendipity.

Besides the rain essential to my crops, I discovered I needed connections to the waves upon waves of women farmers who shared similar stories, fates, or epiphanies. Every opportunity to connect with a fellow female farmer strengthened my commitment to agriculture and refueled confidence and passion to get back in the soil. Whether it was a woman I serendipitously sat next to at a farming conference or a conversation struck up with a woman also loaded with food preservation books at the library check-out line, I left inspired. Together, we're more powerful than isolated trees in a forest. There's nothing like knowing you have a sister with a sun hat and calloused hands who both has your back and challenges you to push yourself.

Take Faye Jones, for example. As executive director of the Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Service (MOSES), the hub of organics in

the Midwest, Jones called out of the blue in 2008 and asked if I'd be interested in developing a women-farmer-training program. At the time, I had been increasingly writing on women farmers, telling the stories behind the wind-burned faces sporting Carhartts. Thousands of inspiring women are committed to not just growing fresh, healthy food but transforming our food system in the process.

But it took my soil sister Jones to ignite the spark to get me to think bigger. She saw in me potential I didn't realize I had. Jones created the opportunity and the platform to turn my work and passion to a vocation and — *voilà* — the MOSES Rural Women's Project was born. I've facilitated over 150 trainings, touching thousands of aspiring and seasoned women farmers and including everything from on-farm workshops, such as "In Her Boots: Sustainable Agriculture For Women, By Women," to Organic University conference intensive sessions. The feedback from attendees centered around one point: Please do more of all of this!

Soil Sisters provides that "more" in a take-home version, to reach a broader population of women who might not yet be connected with the farmer-training scene but share a dream like mine of harvesting strawberries, serving



*"In Her Boots" workshop
with farmer Barb
Kraus of Canoe Creek
Produce, Decorah,
Iowa.*

JOHN D. IVANKO

breakfast for farm-stay guests, and hosting potlucks. This book compiles the learning and insights from our trainings in the field in paperback form. It's the book I wished I had back when I started.

Most of the female farmer friends you'll meet through these pages earn much more of their income directly from vegetables they grow, animals they raise, or value-added products produced than I do. There is a patchwork of paths we women take to work toward changing our food system — different squares of the same quilt. Some farm; some cook; some teach; I write. Collaboratively we work together and support each other in the roles we play.

I'm grateful to and inspired by Jones and the women leading change in our food system I've met along the way. This personal connection and appreciation planted the seed for *Soil Sisters*: We have so much to learn and inspiration to draw from each other as women.

The two key words in the title exemplify this spirit:

Soil

Anyone who has planted a seed knows that soil is life. Healthy soil combines various elements, minerals, organic matter, liquids, and other organisms that together support plant life and all terrestrial life, right up the food chain. There are more soil microorganisms in a teaspoon of healthy soil than there are people on Earth. According to the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), "Millions of species and billions of organisms — bacteria, algae, microscopic insects, earthworms, beetles, ants, mites, fungi and more — represent the greatest concentration of biomass anywhere on Earth."

Soil can be improved through care, feeding it healthy nutrients just like you feed your own body. My farm's soil needed nurturing big time when we first arrived. Decades of former owners spraying chemical pesticides and herbicides had taken their toll. I've been on a mission to restore this soil to life through adding compost, manure, and "green manure" cover crops of hairy vetch, sweet peas, and oats. Over time, this loam took on such a rich, moist dark color that after it rains I do a double take and think it's brownie batter, ready to sample. Worms wiggle freely and life reigns abundant in the humus. Yields are up too.

As I worked to enrich the health of the soil in the fields, I found myself growing personally as well. The longer I lived in a place of natural and seasonal beauty, from the crisp night air in January to those first ripe, red, tender strawberries in June, the more I connected with my true self and calling. Cucumbers

and cabbage need that rich loam in the field to grow. We women thrive when we're surrounded by a healthy situation in which we can express our natural talents. We grow to our authentic selves when we're in a fertile, happy place. *Soil Sisters* poured from my overflowing mug of passion to help support other women, particularly those who might not yet find themselves planted in healthy soil and rooted in an environment of support. This book aims to help you to find your field, to connect you to your dream livelihood by sharing the experiences and ideas of other women further up the road but on the same path.

Sisters

Kudos if you have a biological sister with whom you're on the same page and tightly connected. As an only child, I'm often asked, "Weren't you lonely growing up?" No, I reply, despite coming from a small family with barely any female relatives aside from my mom. Motivated by the lack of sisters or female blood relations, I sought out women outside my family ties, creating my own "sisterhood" of kindred spirits.

It's a powerful force to know you're not alone and someone has your back. You feel empowered when you can expand this definition of "sister" to other women who support you and will catch you when you fall, female friends who will dust you off, give you a hug, and set you back on the tractor.

Introduction: About This Book

I WROTE *SOIL SISTERS: A TOOLKIT FOR WOMEN FARMERS* as a platform, a springboard, to keep our women farmer movement propelled forward, mobilized, and collaborative. Just for the record, this book is not motivated by a lack of general beginning information or resources on farming. As a matter of fact, there hasn't been a better time for beginning farmers of any gender, experience level, interest, and background to tap into the wealth of resources, many available free or at low cost (such as self-guided online portals through the USDA and Extension or formalized curriculum at local community colleges). There is a slew of hands-on, on-farm apprenticeships. You can work at a variety of farms through World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOF) or take a free organic transition course online with the Rodale Institute. Connect the resource dots and fill in knowledge gaps to meet the needs you might have. This book will touch on many.

What's missing from this resource mix, however, is the female farmer voice. Women bring to the training table perspectives, issues, and needs that either get diluted or are absent entirely from current farmer training. Plus, their inspiring stories and experiences pack a practical punch. Each of us comes with our own "operator's manual" that we've self-developed over time that, thanks to the collective nature of this movement, we're eager to share. Like the diversity and abundance found in nature, we represent myriad manifestations of transforming our food system.

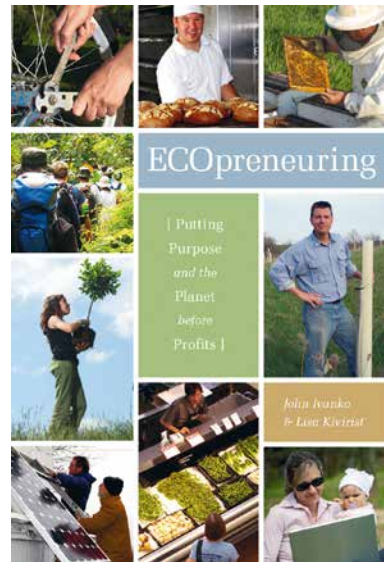
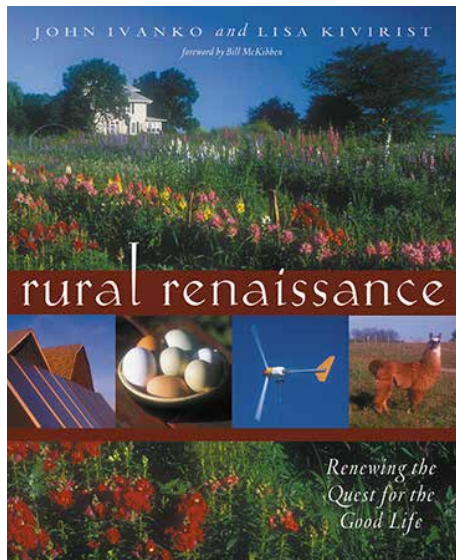
This book will connect you with over 50 of these fellow "soil sisters," inspiring women from a range of backgrounds and perspectives who offer

pragmatic nuggets on crafting a livelihood in agriculture. Though the bulk of the book focuses on the farmers themselves, it also includes stories from women who are launching various ventures inspired by and related to agriculture and women farmers, although they may not be the ones literally planting the seeds in the field.

The intent of *Soil Sisters*, as a toolkit, is to connect you with resources, tips, and new visions that might help guide your journey and achieve the success you've dreamed about, whether you rank as a seasoned grower or this is the first agricultural publication you've picked up

Be open as you read these pages; there may be concepts you haven't yet thought about. Embrace the possibilities and widen your outlook. Trust me, I didn't have a vision for running my farm on renewable energy when my husband and I first arrived. When the laundry kept blowing off the line, it sparked the idea that perhaps this site was windy enough for a wind turbine to power our farm. A toolkit is about empowerment, the ability to feel confident and prepared to handle any situation. More than a wrench used to tighten the bolts on a moldboard plow, this toolkit gives you the practical means needed to cultivate your dream farm livelihood.

This book complements and builds upon the first book John and I co-authored: *Rural Renaissance: Renewing the Quest for the Good Life*. *Rural Renaissance*



narrates the story of our move from Chicago to our five acres in Wisconsin, including starter resources to get you going in anything from organic growing to renewable energy systems and green design. *Soil Sisters* also partners well with our second book, *ECOpreneuring: Putting Purpose and the Planet before Profits*. *ECOpreneuring* details the business how-to behind creating a livelihood reflecting your sustainability values. The nicest compliment on the book was that it taught the reader everything never covered in business school. It even includes a copy of our tax records so you can better understand how we make our numbers work, like our use of depreciation, investments in renewable energy, and the documentation needed to support such items.

Soil Sisters builds on these themes but viewed through a female lens. Women power the pages of this book: All the quotes and stories, right down to recommended books, come from women who own farms or work in the food sector.

Explore the following *Soil Sisters* themes, organized by book sections:

Part 1: Understanding Our Roots

Women farmers come from a complicated history of growing food for centuries, rooted in discrimination. We bring different experiences and perspectives to our farm visions. By understanding our past and how we fit in to today, we empower ourselves to cultivate a healthy, successful future.

Part 2: Gleaning Knowledge

Develop an understanding of the organic market and how to amp up your knowledge base to succeed in your farm business.

Part 3: Plowing Ahead

Explore various farm business ideas — such as field production, farm-to-table meals, and value-added products — that diversify and thereby strengthen your venture. Explore business planning, marketing, tools, and ergonomics through a female lens.

Part 4: Cultivating Quality of Life

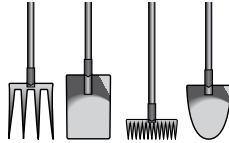
Learn from fellow soil sisters about how to plow your own way. From finding our tribe and dealing with discrimination to integrating family and keeping life in balance, we grow stronger with the support of other women. On a final note, we'll look at catalyzing women's leadership and the role we can play in transforming our food system.

4 Soil Sisters

Look for these identifying icons throughout the book as you harvest tips and ideas:



Start-up Stories: “How she sows it”
“How I got here” stories from seasoned and successful women



Tool Shed
Practical tips and resource lists



Idea Seeds
A diversity of inspirational quotes from farmers and others related to agriculture and women’s issues



Tip Jar
A collection of advice nuggets from fellow soil sisters to kick off each section

With two decades of farming under my tool belt, I’ve been through the growing season cycle enough to know that snap peas can go in as soon as the soil can be worked up, but hold off on those green beans until after our mid-May frost date. It’s tempting for me to get overly excited and move ahead too fast in the fields, only to lose tender plants to a late frost. Take things slow and steady, I’ve learned. Quality takes time. Practice. Be observant, noting subtle changes or the appearance of a Colorado potato beetle. Where there is one, there are many.

I especially need to nurture my cukes because as soon as summer rolls in, my parents will be asking, “Where are my cucumbers?” After nearly two decades, my mom and dad finally warmed up to the idea of their daughter,

the farmer. They may not fully understand or embrace everything I do in a place my mom still calls “the boonies.” But when I bring them that bushel of fresh pickling cucumbers, their faces light up. Farm life and the bounty it produces can bridge many divides. My 90-year-old father loves these cucumbers so much you can even catch him slicing one up for a summer breakfast, sitting in the house where my barn and silo masterpiece still hangs on the wall.



Lisa's son, Liam, with cucumber harvest bounty. JOHN D. IVANKO