

FROM FARMERS' DAUGHTER TO FARMERS MARKET MAVEN

Kathleen Valenzi Knaus

Local food advocate **Nina Planck** propagates farmers markets and new views about old-fashioned foods the way she once cast seeds on her family's Wheatland Vegetable Farms in Loudoun County.

Nina Planck doesn't remember much about her family's move in 1973 from Buffalo, New York, to Loudoun County, Virginia. The future local food advocate, author, and entrepreneur was only 2 when her parents, Chip and Susan Planck, apprenticed themselves to college friends Tony and Mariette Hiu Newcomb, who operated Potomac Vegetable Farms.

But Planck sure remembers her move from the Newcombs' farm, at age 8, to the farm her parents bought in the unincorporated community of Wheatland. Located north of Purcellville and south of Lovettsville on Route 287, the property was "wild and rugged," she says recalling her first sighting. "I thought it was all over for us. We had a wood-burning hot-water heater and needed to light a fire to make a bath. The pipes froze in the winter."

Even so, Planck says, the land was "irreplaceable," and wrestling what is now her family's vibrant Wheatland Vegetable Farms from the clutches of Mother Nature got easier over time: "The summers on the farm were glorious. We ate good food, and we worked with some of the best people I've ever met."

ESTABLISHING ROOTS

To pay the bills, the Plancks sold their farm's first crops at roadside stands in nearby towns. Sales were limited, and that first winter, her parents took part-time jobs to make ends meet.

The following year, however, the Arlington Farmers Market opened. Area residents, yearning for an alternative to the unimpressive produce being sold at chain supermarkets, flocked to the Plancks' silver Ford Econoline van, brimming with fresh beets and chard.

"I was only 9 that year," Planck recalls. "People would come up and ask, 'Are you organic?' We said, 'No, but we're local and use ecological methods.' Soon, we stopped

using chemicals entirely. We quickly discovered that people only asked for organic because they didn't yet know how to ask for good produce grown locally."

The Plancks began selling exclusively at farmers markets, some of which they helped to establish, like the producers-only Takoma Park Farmers Market in Maryland. By age 12, young Nina was running one of her family's market stands entirely on her own.

There is a picture of her at that time, bagging fresh green beans for a customer, her mother's handmade brown-striped apron tied around her thin waist. So intent is she on filling the paper sack, one wonders whether she was aware of the lessons she was learning that day, and on countless others just like it, about quality and value, service and honesty. Before she headed off for college in 1989, the weekends she spent selling tomatoes and cucumbers, bell peppers and pumpkins would shape her future as inexorably as her hands had shaped the soil for their seeds.

SOWING FAR AND WIDE

After graduating from Georgetown University, Planck detoured from the farming life to work as a congressional staffer, a reporter for *Time*, and a speechwriter for the United Kingdom's American ambassador. While she enjoyed living in London, she missed the availability of good local produce. So she rented land near her home, recruited some farmers, and established the Islington Farmers Market—London's first—on June 6, 1999. "I called it 'D-Day'—a different kind of American invasion, of local English food!" she says.

Its immediate success prompted the opening of 2 more markets by summer's end. In January 2000, she quit her speechwriting job to focus on expansion. In 2008, the London Farmers Markets company she founded opened its 16th market on Parliament Hill.

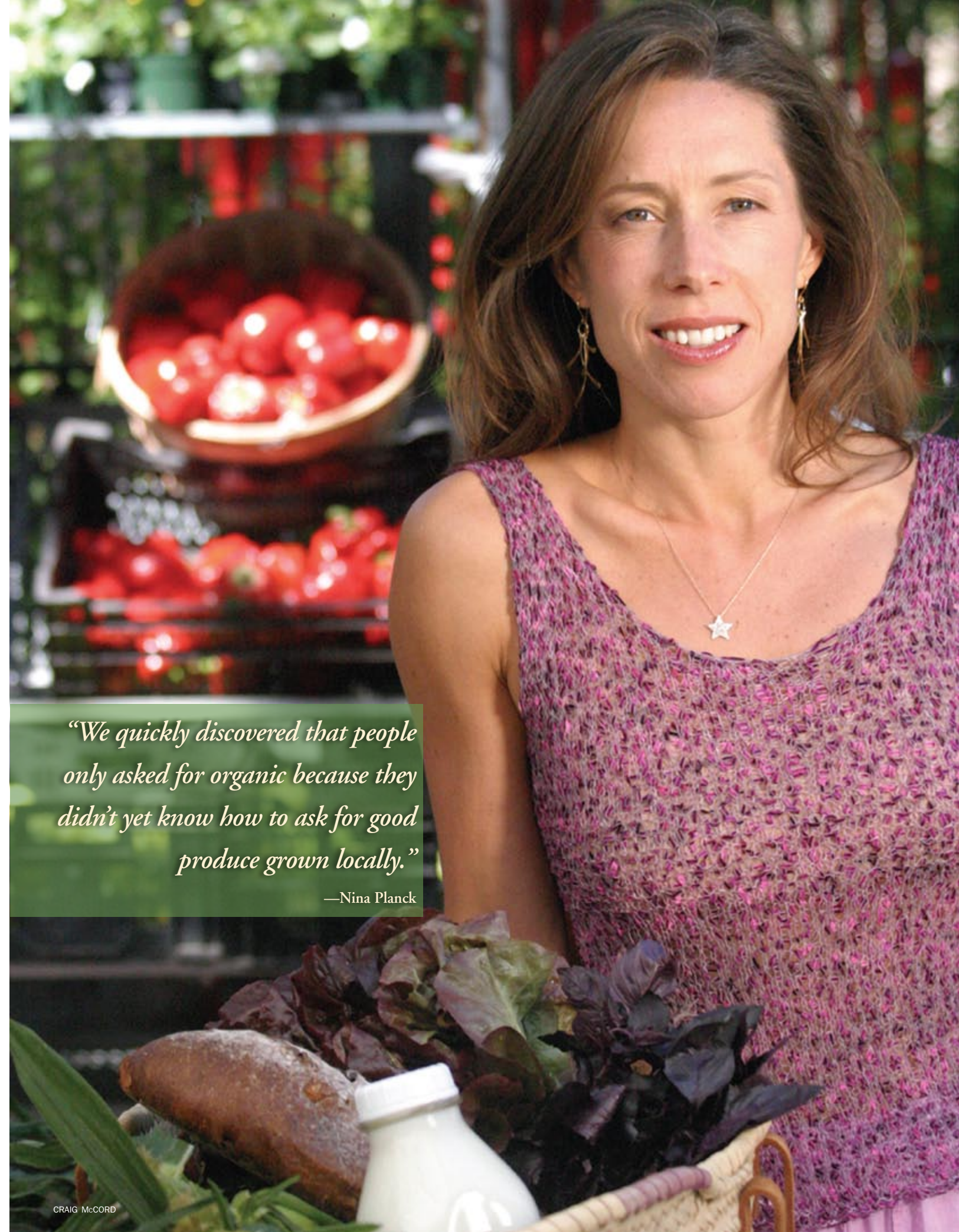
While in England, Planck also wrote her first book, *The Farmers' Market Cookbook* (now out of print), and hosted *Farmers' Market*, a 13-part series for British television.

Homesick, Planck returned to Washington, D.C., and founded Local Food, a nonprofit group that develops markets for food producers. In May 2003 Local Food opened the Mount Pleasant Farmers Market, with producers from D.C. and five states, including Virginia. "This market makes great



In 1980, Planck started selling produce from the farm she worked with her parents, Chip and Susan Planck, at farmers markets in Northern Virginia.

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—Nina Planck

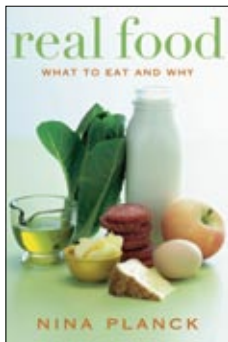
use of a small public space,” she says. “It serves a broad community beyond the immediate neighborhood, serves farmers, and meets a demand.”

It proves the point, she believes, that other “pocket markets” could be established and achieve similar success. “The problem isn’t the supply or the demand,” she says. “It’s the middleman, the person willing to organize the market and bring the farmers and customers together.”

THIS SEASON

In July 2004, Planck was recruited by Greenmarket, the largest U.S. network of farmers markets, to direct its 42 markets in New York City. A difference of opinion about how the markets could be improved led to her dismissal 6 months into the job. Undaunted, Planck drew on her experience and, in 2006, opened 2 test pocket markets in New York City under the name Real Food Markets.

That same year her second book, *Real Food: What to Eat and Why*, was published to wide acclaim. The book refutes dietary fads and offers evidence about why traditional foods like butter, grass-fed beef, and raw milk are healthier choices than their synthetic, hormone-enhanced alternatives. “Unlike industrial food, real food is fundamentally conser-



ANTHONY T. NIGRELLI

The foodshed supplying D.C.’s Mount Pleasant Farmers Market (shown here during the Fiesta DC festival), which was started by Planck in 2003, incorporates Virginia, West Virginia, Maryland, Delaware, and Pennsylvania as well as the District.

ervative,” Planck writes in *Real Food*. “It is the food you already know: roast chicken, tomato salad with olive oil, creamed spinach, sourdough bread, peach ice cream. To me, that’s a relief. When you rule out industrial foods altogether, it does simplify things a bit.”

These days, the former Loudoun County resident spends her days writing (her next book, *Real Food for Mother and Baby*, is just hitting the shelves now) and enjoying life with her partner, cheesemonger Rob Kaufelt, and their 2-year-old son, Julian. They’ve bought a farm in New Jersey, and she dreams of raising chickens and vegetables there one day—but only for her family, not to make a living.

In winter, Planck incorporates more stored foods, like root vegetables, into the family diet, as well as exotic foods, like mangoes, which she won’t buy when local fruits are in season. She also orders organic citrus from small, independent, ecological producers.

And she shops at supermarkets. “In the winter, I have to make the same choices as other cooks,” she says. “Like whether to buy local greens grown in greenhouses, which require a lot of fuel oil to heat, or the head of lettuce available at the corner shop. Often, it’s the corner shop, because a daily green salad is important to us.”

Kathleen Valenzi Knaus is the former editor of Albemarle magazine and the University of Virginia’s alumni magazine. When not writing, she provides deep-relaxation and personal coaching to people through her business, Red Repose. She can be reached at kathleen@redhill.net.



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