



# THE PROFITABLE HOBBY FARM

HOW TO BUILD A SUSTAINABLE  
LOCAL FOODS BUSINESS



**SARAH BETH AUBREY**





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How to Build a Sustainable  
Local Foods Business

Sarah Beth Aubrey



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# Contents

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Acknowledgments .....   | v   |
| Introduction .....  | vi  |
| <b>Part One: Creation and Veraison</b>                            |     |
| 1 The Case for Small-Scale Farming and Local Foods Ventures ..... | 2   |
| 2 From Idea to Inventory: Planning and Assessing the Market. .... | 24  |
| 3 Funding Assistance. ....  | 41  |
| 4 Rules, Regulations, and Legalese. ....                          | 65  |
| <b>Part Two: Fresh Business Ideas</b>                             |     |
| 5 Creating a Cooperative .....                                    | 88  |
| 6 Agritourism: Recreation as a Business. ....                     | 103 |
| <b>Part Three: Selling, Marketing, and Prospecting</b>            |     |
| 7 Wholesale and Retail Pricing Strategies .....                   | 124 |
| 8 Where and How to Sell .....                                     | 149 |
| 9 Marketing Ideas .....   | 174 |
| 10 Keeping (and Keeping Track of) Customers .....                 | 198 |
| <b>Part Four: The First Year of Your Journey</b>                  |     |
| 11 The Lifestyle Change and First-Year Transition Tips. ....      | 224 |
| Finale: The Prints You Leave Behind .....                         | 247 |
| Resources .....   | 248 |

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|                                     |     |
|-------------------------------------|-----|
| Sample Business Documents . . . . . | 255 |
| Index . . . . .                     | 269 |
| About the Author . . . . .          | 275 |
| Photo Credits . . . . .             | 276 |

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*I fondly dedicate this work to my grandma,  
Dorothy Willard.*

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Oh, and there is just one more (heaven forbid I forget!): This one's for you, Ace. Here you go, you've gotten "the nod" in a book!

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# Introduction

I am passionate about bridging the producer-consumer gap. My purpose in writing this book, and for much of the writing and speaking I do, is to educate consumers about agriculture, cultivating local foods, and farming on scales both large and small. I also spend time educating producers about meeting customers' needs and desires and marketing directly to consumers.

I hope what emerges is consensus- and business-building for both sides. I believe that food producers have to respond (with attention, not irritation) to consumer tastes, and honestly, I believe that every consumer ultimately needs not only to understand where their food comes from, but also to have a measure of respect for the hand that produced it.

I am generally pleased to see that many Americans are interested in knowing the origins of what they eat and that many people want a choice in how they purchase foods and other agricultural goods. I am concerned that some groups are oversimplifying this choice and trying to create consumer misconceptions about one segment of the food-producing population or another.

There should not be a rift between traditional and alternative forms of agriculture. If all of us farmers are of the mind that we want to farm or create food or live a rural lifestyle, then we have more in common than we may at first realize. These goals are shared by people who want to start niche ventures in food and agriculture, whether they are lifelong farmers like me or simply long for a different life.

There seems to be a prevailing attitude that townie = liberal and farmer = conservative. These stereotypes may sometimes be true, but they aren't always. And if the goals of both groups are the same—that is, producing a wholesome product with good intentions, earning an honest living, and providing for a family—then we should not be at odds. Rather, we should enjoy the support of one another and the lifestyles we create for ourselves.





Everyone has to start somewhere.

Though I grew up as a farm kid and still see myself as that little girl in my heart of hearts, I've worked in both agriculture and consumer-oriented businesses before "retiring" from corporate life at 29 to become a full-time author and cattle raiser.

As a financial advisor (read: stockbroker with a modern, less stodgy-sounding title provided for my use), I worked directly with a variety of consumers. Money, like food, is a common need for all of us. I had women clients who were curious about the pictures on my desk of my husband, Cary, and me showing cows. Though my boss at the time scoffed at the photos as "totally unprofessional," they seemed to endear me to many clients, and eventually, that aspect happily helped free me from office life. You see, those clients realized I was a farmer and started asking me questions like:

"Do you eat those cows after you show them?"

"Do you love your animals?"

"Can we visit your farm and bring our kids?"

"Can we buy meat from you?"

They also began to make what I thought were rather amusing statements like:

“Well, I’m a vegetarian, but I *might* eat meat if it was from *your* farm.”

“Do you actually like living in the country?”

“You don’t *look* like a farmer.”

So what did I eventually do? The only honorable thing a farm girl who was dying to be an entrepreneur could: I quit, shocking my husband, and went from a good living to a start-up meats business.

Ultimately, it was through the creation of Aubrey’s Natural Meats, LLC, that Cary and I began to educate urban and suburban consumers. The first thing I learned was that listening to them and explaining clearly and sincerely what we did on the farm not only sold more meat, but also created a loyal customer base almost immediately.

That happened fast, but in the last five years more realizations have emerged from the connection I created between farm and plate. I began to have conversations not so much about our product, but about how we raised the product, how we liked living in the country, and what it was like to sleep on a quiet road in total darkness. Now, if you live in the country and raise livestock, that seems ordinary; but if you don’t, my life may be a novelty to you—one that you may want!

Yes, Cary and I began to see earnest desire in the faces of some customers. Yes, there are many, many people who, for very different reasons, want to make the transition from consumer to producer. If you are one of those people, you’re reading the right book. I have a farm background and continue to live on my farm today, but I realize the challenges are different for someone who has come to this lifestyle from another set of circumstances. So in each chapter I profile nonfarm folks who have taken steps to establish a local food business or small hobby farm *with no background at all in farming or even in rural life*. These successful individuals and families will inspire, encourage, and educate you. (If you’d like to read more of my essays or my blog, go to [prosperityagresources.wordpress.com](http://prosperityagresources.wordpress.com).)

## *Inspiration*

Perhaps the best example of a townie turned farmer in my life is my grandma, Dorothy Willard of Rossville, Illinois—the area where I was born and raised and where the vast majority of my farming family still lives.

*Townie*, a not-necessarily-negative term that, by my definition, means “a person of nonfarm heritage,” is a word I would never have dreamed applied to Grandma. She was my image of the perfect farm woman of her era.

Having been raised to believe that farming men and women were heroes and that friends from town were “not quite the same,” I have to admit, when I found out that Grandma had been raised in town and had not a clue about farming when she married my grandpa, Ray Willard, I was absolutely horrified. This truth, though I certainly wasn’t willing to believe it at first, was far worse than finding out that Santa Claus is a myth. Really.

Grandma was farm life embodied in a person. And in the soft, hazy memories of my youth, I picture us in a light much like the blurred edges of daytime during a humid Midwestern summer as we went about all things rural. I planted, weeded, and harvested the garden with Grandma, she in her massive straw hat and bandana. When I visited, every morning we took scraps out to the sows, who grunted and ambled toward the fence and Grandma’s billowing nightgown as we tossed the greedy porcines potato peels and coffee grounds.

Along with my cousins, we walked through the wheat field that had been cut for straw back to the creek that ran shallow but cool on hot days and picked cherries, peaches, and walnuts from her orchard. We chatted enthusiastically about my 4-H projects in hogs and cattle, and she knew everything about taking care of wayward barn kitties and even shot at the occasional honking goose that caused a disruption. To this day (when this book is published, Grandma will be 84 years old), she is comfortably conversant and knowledgeable enough to talk with me about our natural meats business, our show cattle business, and commodity prices for corn and beans. Townie? Surely not!

Still, truth was, in 1946 when Grandpa returned from World War II and they were married, Grandma said she couldn’t even light the stove to boil water. Grandma not know how to cook? She’s an amazing cook! I didn’t believe it.

Yes, Grandma told me, she’d been raised the only child of an aspiring artist and poet mother and a local entrepreneur father (he owned a grain elevator). Although the family was not wealthy, Grandma was raised with luxuries I never would have thought of as normal, such as a laundress. Before she got married and moved into the brick home her new in-laws had vacated so that Grandpa could take over the farm, Grandma had never cooked, nor had she performed the litany of tasks I always attributed to her with a kind of pioneer heroine worship. She didn’t know how to garden or preserve every known vegetable in the garden; she’d never picked and pitted cherries to make preserves and pie; she’d never come near a hog or driven a tractor.

In later years, I often wondered just how she did it—that is, convert herself into a bona fide country woman. Volunteering with the pork producer’s association, balancing a farm checkbook, leading a 4-H club, and hosting the local Ladies Home Extension (which she still does) must have been far from her mind as a young woman of 20. Yet Grandma made the

My grandma is the most practical and pragmatic person I know. I asked her once how she always managed to look at things objectively and how she seemed to take disappointment and irritation so well. She laughed, and then, when pressed, she shrugged. “You know, Sarah Beth, what are you really going to do about it, anyway? You’ve just got to go about your business and enjoy life.”

**A rather simple recipe—**but if it keeps a smile on your face for 84 years, it’s a rather useful one at that.

transition from town to tractor (though not seamlessly, she says) and raised all her children and grandchildren to grow up on farms and in the rural lifestyle.

You can probably tell that I think a great deal of my grandma. She also attempted to teach me to sew, took my side when I fought with my parents as a teenager, and still shares my love of good books and crossword puzzles. It’s because of Grandma that I was inspired to write this book for you, the aspiring small farmer or local-foods business owner. Whether you want to create a small business or just farm for the pleasure of it, this is the book for you. If Grandma could do it, so can you!

## *How to Use This Book*

Maybe you’ve come to your hobby-farm idea by default, maybe you’ve been pondering it for a long time, and maybe you’ve just ended up in a place where you’re looking for something meaningful to do. No matter; you’ll find a fellow and maybe even a friend in any one of the profiles in this book’s pages.

While you’ll find much inspiration, motivation, a bit of editorializing, and lots of how-to, this book is meant to genuinely help you start something new. To accomplish this objective, I’ve organized it so that you should be able to look for a topic in the table of contents and find a section that covers it.

At the beginning of each chapter is a list of learning objectives to help you gauge the scope of what’s covered. Each chapter contains profiles of other nonfarmers who’ve made a life for themselves and their families as

farmers. Also in each chapter, I offer my best tips and ideas. And finally, you'll find a box with a list of best practices—wisdom and experiences from the entrepreneurs profiled that are relevant to the specific topic at hand. The box encapsulates their wisdom into a quick checklist for you to refer to again and again.

Having worked for a time with corporate training in the agricultural business sector, I learned the importance of letting adults know in advance what they can expect to learn along the way. So, in that spirit, I offer the following learning objectives.

By the end of this book, you should be able to:

- Understand the trends in niche agriculture and local foods
- Create a business plan for a small-scale or hobby venture
- Assess your home marketplace and uncover niches not yet served
- Learn about financing options, especially grants and cost-sharing programs
- Learn how to start a CSA (community-supported agriculture) or a food cooperative
- Learn how to start an agritourism business
- Identify and implement free or low-cost marketing ideas
- Choose from a variety of selling venues for your products
- Pick up tips on getting chefs and other local businesses interested in your products
- Create, administer, and grow an e-mail customer database and send newsletters and correspondence that generate sales
- Understand basic strategies for surviving the first year in business

Because there are different stages in the entrepreneurial process, the resources section will be very useful when you are seeking information or ideas. You'll find contact information for organizations ranging from financial groups to trade associations. Contact information for every person profiled in the book is included as well. Finally, you'll find sample forms and documents in the chapters and in the appendix. I've used every form here, and the template has worked for me.

### *Sarah's Rural Best Practices*

Friend to friend, I offer for you a few country commonalities that you just might want to know. (And by the way, there's no such thing as cow tipping or snipe hunting.)

- Rural people still drop by unannounced and want to chat. While they don't necessarily plan to come into the house, they probably do expect you to at least *offer* them iced tea or a beer.
- Drive slowly on rural roads. It's rude to fly by someone's house kicking up gravel and dust.
- In the same way that you wouldn't pass a stopped school bus carelessly, give slow-moving farm vehicles space and courtesy.
- A person you don't know who waves with one or two fingers is not giving you an internationally impolite sign. It's more than likely a "farmer wave," and you're welcome to return it.
- Neighborhood dogs may wander. Don't be alarmed unless they appear unfriendly. It's also nice to call around and see who's missing one.
- Coyote and deer at night are common, especially during grain harvest and hunting seasons, so keep your eyes peeled.
- Cows are usually friendly, except when they have little calves.
- Yes, pigs and horses can bite; ask first before petting.
- Sheep do tend to scatter and follow at the slightest whim.
- Goats will eat anything.
- If it's a wire fence, it's probably hot (electrified). If you must find out for yourself, it won't kill you, but you won't forget it, either.
- The funky smell in the air is the smell of money to someone, and that someone was there before you.

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Part One

**Creation and  
Veraison**



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## Chapter 1

# The Case for Small-Scale Farming and Local Foods Ventures

### Learning Objectives

- ✿ Understand some facts about the number of new small agriculture and food ventures and who's starting them.
- ✿ Learn about organizations that are supporting these types of start-ups.
- ✿ Review data on the size of the market for new local foods businesses.
- ✿ Meet the unlikely Lavender Queen, Jeannie Ralston.
- ✿ Discover compelling personal reasons to move from town to country.

## *Creation and Veraison*

The first half of this book is devoted to the process of going from an idea to a real business plan and actually getting started. It's a time of critical change, which is why I call part one "Creation and Veraison."

What do these terms mean in the context of this book? Of course, creation is the genuine start of something from the root or the source. Creation can imply something wholly spiritual or as concrete as production and manufacturing. Creation can involve one person's ideas or a twosome, such as pollination in plants. No matter what images come to mind, when you read the word, the notion of beginning is always there.



The first half of the book covers that initial impetus, but also the evolution of a little idea into a real action. That's why the word *veraison* is also appropriate. *Veraison* is a wine-making term that refers to the critical time when the green grapes begin to change to their true varietal color. It's the stage at which most of the ripening takes place—when the sugars begin to materialize and the grape comes into its proverbial own—and is critical for the wine.

For your business and hobby endeavors in niche agriculture, your personal *veraison* is the early stage, beginning somewhere between idea and start-up. Your *veraison* occurs when you truly begin the long process of becoming something new.

Every one of us arrives at the precipice of creation and *veraison* from a different point of view and with different goals. What we share is that we are part of a growing trend. After three or four consecutive generations of leaving the farm and the kitchen in search of convenience and a faster-paced lifestyle, people are coming back to agriculture.

What is driving this trend, and where is it headed? Some statistics claim organic farming alone is doubling every year or so. So is the market for local foods and niche agriculture already flooded, or is there room for you when you get here? How difficult is it to move from urban or suburban to rural, and how different is the lifestyle? Can you really make a new business work?

## What Are the Trends?

In this chapter, I'll examine some of the trends and the size of the marketplace in small farming and local foods. I'll also introduce a few organizations and associations that support these trendsetters through membership, promotion, and education. (For a longer list of organizations and groups to contact or research on your own, see the Resources section in this book.)

The list of niche agriculture and food ventures that nouveau foodies and farmers are creating is nearly endless, and is as boundless as the imaginations of the proprietors. Many niche businesses are marketed by appealing to consumers with an interest in foods labeled as natural, organic, or free-range. In fact, that segment of the food industry is about to outgrow the term *niche*. And the market is not anywhere near its zenith.

In the chart on pages 5 and 6, I've listed some common types. Clearly, there is a broad diversity of niches and business ideas. In this book, you'll meet producers and urban foodies who have started hobbies and businesses in all of these areas and more.



A field of lavender was one woman's entry into the world of small-scale farming.

Some of the terms in the chart are farming ideas that are also marketing ideas, and are commonly combined together to best meet the target customer's wishes and needs. Packaging these features can seem daunting. And if it's not based on a solid foundation and done well, marketing in small-scale agriculture can confuse the customers. Using examples of peers who have created a small farm or food business, I'll not only excite and motivate you, but also show you how to effectively bundle together these niches to create a profitable business.

Before I go too far into the facts and figures, let's meet someone who epitomizes that journey from townie to farmer in such an interesting way that she wrote a book about it. Her personal story makes a case for starting a food or hobby farm business better than any other tale I've heard. And her journey to starting a rurally based lavender business shows that no matter how you arrive in the country, there's a business idea waiting for you.

| <b>Niche Markets in Local Agriculture</b>   |  |  |
|---|--|--|
| <b>Agriculture and Animal Production</b>  | <b>Cooperatives and Community Organizations</b>  | <b>Local Businesses That Support Small Farms</b>                       |
| All-natural (including no hormones, no antibiotics, no preservatives)                 | CSAs (community supported agriculture, a community of individuals who pledge support to a farm operation so that the farmland becomes a kind of community farm with shared risks and benefits) | Local delivery services (delivering local or organic farmers' goods)   |
| Organic   | Food cooperatives  | City markets and farmers markets                                       |
| Grass-fed   | Buying groups or consumer buying cooperatives  | Retail shops that stock local foods                                    |
| Breed-specific (such as Berkshire hogs or Belted Galloway cattle)                     |  | Artisan cheeses, soaps, and handmade foods made with local ingredients |
| Free-range  |  | Wine making using local fruit or purchased grapes                      |
| Nutrient-enhanced (such as adding omega-3 fatty acids or vitamin E in the feedstuffs) |  |  |
| Locally raised  |  |  |
| Insecticide-free or pesticide-free  |  |  |

(continued)

| Agriculture and Animal Production  | Cooperatives and Community Organizations | Local Businesses That Support Small Farms |
|--|--|---|
| Bird friendly, predator friendly, or fish safe (among numerous other ways of indicating that no wild animals have been harmed in producing these products) |  |   |
| Sustainably or biodynamically farmed (grown in a way that views the farm as a self-sustaining organism)  |  |   |

## *Jeannie Ralston, an Unlikely Small Farmer*

I spent a fair amount of my time chuckling at Jeannie Ralston's lack of understanding of the rural lifestyle as I read her 2008 book, *The Unlikely Lavender Queen: A Memoir of Unexpected Blossoming*. It's a sometimes funny, sometimes bitterly personal, and sometimes painful story. When Jeannie moved to Texas from New York City to follow her new husband's ambitions, it was obvious she had no clue about country living.

She was still trying to adjust to country life and motherhood when her spouse insisted they start a lavender farm. Jeannie is married to Robb Kendrick, an internationally acclaimed photographer who travels extensively for his work. Although lavender was his interest, not hers, she knew she would end up running the farm. "I have an immense respect for people who make their living off the land, but farming was so foreign to me it threatened the image I had of myself," she wrote.

In her book, Jeannie recounts her initial disdain at planting lavender, harvesting, and then marketing the flowers to local stores (not to mention her limited tolerance of the oppressive Texas heat). The more I read, the more I saw her as the ultimate townie—the antithesis of me. And that's exactly why I wanted so much to interview her for this book.

Jeannie went from city to country kicking, screaming, and crying, and yet found out that she loved the life and loved her rural small business. Jeannie discovered things the hard way and learned a lot of lessons through trial and error.

Like me, she is both a small farmer and an author. What we don't have in common is how we arrived at our place in the world. I'm a farm girl many generations back, looking to carve out my own small farming niche while writing for the likes of *Country Woman*, *Beef Today*, and *Farmworld*. Jeannie, a city slicker, writes for the *New York Times*, *Allure*, *Parents*, and *National Geographic*.



Jeannie Ralston, her husband, Robb Kendrick, and their children.

Jeannie's story is compelling, but the real reason I asked her to be part of this book's first chapter is because it is not entirely unique. If you're reading this book, you've got at least something in common with Jeannie, whether it's a strong desire to begin a hobby farm or a strong desire to find a good use for your energies while living in the country. Either way, the migration to local foods and niche agriculture is growing faster than anyone predicted.

## How Big Is This Market?

After generations of leaving the country for cities and suburbs, Americans are coming back to the country—or at least to a rural-esque lifestyle. And they are seeking something more than to simply live in the country; many families want to experience a bit of the rural life by raising small flocks of animals or growing large vegetable gardens in town. These individuals are starting small local foods businesses, farmer and consumer cooperatives, and farm-fresh delivery services. Mail order and Internet-based food businesses and new farmers markets are appearing every year.

### Farmers Markets

Since 1994, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has been tracking farmers markets and publishing a directory every two years called *The National Directory of Farmers Markets*. Growth in the number of markets



A group of shoppers enjoys a fall farmers market. The number of farmers markets is increasing just about everywhere.

has not been explosive, but it has been steady. While many commercial sectors seem to expand and contract through various economic conditions and the political parties in office, the number of farmers markets in the United States continues to grow every year.

From 2006 to 2008, the USDA reports that the number of markets increased by 6.8 percent, from 4,385 in 2006 to 4,685 by August 2008. That means that since 1994, when the USDA officially began attempting to keep track of market numbers, more than 3,000 farmers markets have been added across the United States. (I say “attempting” because markets change so often, and while the USDA encourages participation in the surveys it uses to keep the directory up-to-date, there is no requirement to participate, nor is there a requirement to register with the USDA to open a farmers market. I personally know of several markets that aren’t included in the USDA’s directory, even though the USDA works with state departments of agriculture and farmers market associations at the local level to collect information.)

## Food and Agricultural Cooperatives

The concept of a cooperative has been used in rural communities for millennia, as farmers and citizens of small towns helped one another with



everything from protection to harvesting to medical care. While this kind of community has all but faded into history, food cooperatives and community-supported agriculture (CSA) are reversing that trend.

CSAs are a type of cooperative. They're usually formed by one farmer or a group of farmers who then sell shares in the CSA to the public, making those shareholders members of the cooperative. Members of the CSA receive food items and agricultural goods regularly; many go out to the farm to pick up their produce, herbs, meats, and other goods every week during the summer.

Sources vary about the exact date, but in the mid-1980s the concept of the CSA was brought to the United States from Europe, where these organizations had been growing for almost 20 years. Growth here has been steady, as with farmers markets. The National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service reports that there are almost 1,100 CSAs; other trade groups record a number closer to 1,500.

Expansion has been rapid since 1999. While CSAs are scattered across the nation, the burgeoning hotbeds seems to be on the two coasts and in the upper Midwest, in states such as Wisconsin. These areas, according to the Robyn Van El Center (a nonprofit educational center that supports the development of CSAs), each have between 4 and 10 percent of the nation's CSAs. Geographical and size data for CSAs in the interior of the continent seems a bit hit-or-miss, so estimates are really just that. Additionally, an estimated 10 percent of CSAs are organized as nonprofit groups. I believe unprecedented growth in this niche is coming soon as consumers seek ways to become involved in small farming and as the interest in locally raised food continues to expand. That's why I have devoted chapter 4 to exploring this local foods and sustainable agriculture model. I've also assembled a large group of resources in the appendix that will provide you with contact information for many of the groups listed throughout the book.

## Natural and Organic Foods

Any book about opportunities in local foods and small agriculture would be incomplete without a discussion of how natural and organic products have fueled the growth of all market segments. In fact, I could write a whole book about just these two segments—another time, perhaps.

When talking about food trends, we need to start by understanding the difference between *natural* and *organic*. In 2001, statistics from the USDA Certified Organic program showed that up to 75 percent of Americans surveyed thought *natural* and *organic* were the same things. They are not. The simplest way to distinguish them is that food labeled as USDA Certified Organic must meet the standards set forth in 2002 by the Organic Foods Production Act. These include a stringent set of criteria for feedstuffs and other production practices.

## How Does a New York City Writer Become the Texas Lavender Queen?

"This is all Jeannie Ralston's fault." That's what the residents of Blanco, Texas, say about the increased taxes and traffic, and Jeannie laughs when she repeats the remark. Blanco is where she and her husband, Robb Kendrick, founded Hill Country Lavender in 1999, and it's true that a steady growth in property values and tourism has bloomed in what is now the official Lavender Capital of Texas (a distinction Jeannie fought hard to obtain from the state legislature). Blanco has become an agritourism destination based around lavender.

Jeannie also helped start the annual Lavender Festival that draws thousands of tourists and lavender growers each June. And she hosts workshops to teach budding entrepreneurs the tricks of the heavenly scented trade. "It's not just about me and my husband," she says. "The town saw this as an opportunity and used lavender as a part of its image; they just embraced it."

While she found her rhythm in the undulating purple haze of her lavender fields, Jeannie didn't start out to become the Lavender Queen. Her business started out as a kind of obsession of her husband's. The family spent some time in Provence, France, where Robb was photographing for *National Geographic*. Jeannie loved Provence and the fields of lavender, calling them a "mélange of Van Gogh colors." But it was purely an abstract interest. Robb, however, had other ideas. He spent his free time in Provence asking a local farmer about how lavender is grown. When they all returned to

*Natural* is a much broader term. It is usually not governed by any specific labeling requirements, though Country of Origin Labeling (COOL) regulations, which went into effect in March 2009, may change that. COOL makes labeling the country of origin mandatory on most fresh meats, including beef, chicken, pork, goat, and lamb, as well as on other perishable agricultural commodities such as produce. Because labels are now required for these products, there may be additional requirements for label claims as this legislation gets implemented over time. (For more information on COOL, check out [www.countryoforiginlabel.org](http://www.countryoforiginlabel.org).)

### Market Growth

Once considered niche markets, natural and organic products have gone mainstream. In 2007, the organic market yielded a startling \$20 billion in annual sales, up from less than \$1 billion in 1990, according to the Organic



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