



Cluck & Trowel
Dartmouth, MA & Little Compton, RI
 Sarah Cogswell & Kate Levin
 Business Advising and Loan 2020-2021

CLIENT UPDATE

Farm History

Sarah Cogswell and Kate Levin, of Cluck & Trowel Farm in Dartmouth, MA and Little Compton, RI, have experienced more than their fair share of tumult. Through a barn fire, a farm relocation, a death in the family, and a global pandemic, the love of growing food has been their north star. Sarah raises certified organic vegetables, chickens, and pigs, selling their products primarily through CSA shares picked up at the farm and on nearby Cuttyhunk Island. Kate is their marketing and membership maven, creating their logo, website, innovative packaging, and maintaining a lively social media presence.

Sarah grew up in Dartmouth, and upon college graduation, took a job at the Southeastern Massachusetts Agricultural Partnership (SEMAP), where she got to know farming from “both sides of the coin.” Later, she worked for The Carrot Project and for numerous farms.

In 2016, Sarah and Kate rented a farmhouse in Dartmouth, where Sarah started her first farm-scale vegetable garden. When the barn there burned down in January of 2019, they scrambled to piece together their business, only to learn that the property was about to be sold. Kate sprang into action and found them three acres with a house in Little Compton. They then rushed to set up for the 2020 season, which would be marked by the pandemic, and the death of Sarah’s father.

Navigating so much unexpected change requires management superpowers, and “you can’t manage what you don’t measure,” says Sarah. While on staff at The Carrot Project, she took part in their financial management training, Making It Happen, and later participated in Julia Shanks’ workshop, The Farmer’s Edge, with a scholarship from Carrot. Sarah currently works one-on-one with Julia to parse out the profitability of each area of their operation. In 2020, Cluck & Trowel was awarded a MDAR grant with a matching loan from The Carrot Project and PVGrows to purchase infrastructure to increase efficiency.

Farm Snapshot

Vegetables, eggs, poultry and pork raised on 3 acres and sold through a CSA, wholesale, and pop-up farmers’ markets.

Innovation

Cluck & Trowel is certified organic and sells the only soy-free eggs in the region, in eye-catching 3 egg x 4 egg cartons packed with colorful eggs from different heritage breeds of chickens. Sarah enjoys creating pop-up markets when and where customers will be in need of her products.

Overview of Outcomes

Vegetable growing is Sarah's "first love," but she's also fond of raising chickens and pigs on their property in Little Compton. The vegetables are grown on 1.25 acres and in a 26' x 44' greenhouse for propagation and season extension. She raises two batches of three-to-four pigs per season, and five batches of 200-300 free-range broiler chickens. Her laying chickens are raised on the leased land in Dartmouth, a 30-minute drive away. To help mitigate the time lost to travel, Sarah used the funds from the grant and loan, described above, to build an ultra-efficient chicken coop, equipped with roll-out nests (just like a kitchen cabinet shelf that pulls forward), watering systems, and range feeders, all of which cut down significantly on labor and will allow her to increase her flock from 100 laying hens to 300 for the 2021 season.

Cluck & Trowel produces the only organic, soy-free eggs in the region, hatched from four heritage breeds of chickens, resulting in a colorful array of eggs displayed artfully in their signature, hand stamped 3 egg x 4 egg carton. In 2020, because of the pandemic, Sarah and Kate lost several of their most valuable wholesale venues in Boston. They began working with the food aggregator, Coastal Foodshed, and their virtual market through the What's Good website, and will be exploring new wholesale outlets for 2021. In addition to the CSA shares and wholesale venues, Sarah also sets up a farm stand on Cuttyhunk, adding locally sourced bread and cheese to the offerings.

Her ongoing work with The Carrot Project helped Sarah prepare her successful application for the MDAR grant. But **"the best thing business advisor Julia has given me," says Sarah, "are those spreadsheets!"** Spreadsheets which have helped her to keep her metrics organized, so that she knows how to make decisions like "should we remain certified organic? Should we remain soy-free?" And she is learning which parts of her operation are most profitable. "I feel really good about the meat birds now—they're totally dialed in, the pigs are solid, and the layers are almost there," Sarah says. "Next, I have to dial in the veggies."

On the Horizon

After the upheaval of the last two years, it isn't surprising that when asked about the future for Cluck & Trowel Farm, Sarah says that in many ways, she'd like to go back to 2018 — "the golden year" for the farm, which was running efficiently on one piece of land, with two employees. She had time to be active in her community — she started a junior grange and reconnected with her family's Quaker Meeting House — plus, she had time for an occasional trip to the beach. Currently, the focus is inward on the farm while Sarah, blessed with a wide range of skills including building, is doing almost all of the infrastructure improvement and farm labor herself.

On the agenda for this spring is building a cool-bot-based cooler, and this fall Sarah hopes to build a second greenhouse. "And then," Sarah says, "pasture management is the next frontier." She explains that very soon she'll have to move her broiler chickens—the first batch of meat birds is "light years" better than the later ones because they get first crack at all of the nutrition, plus, the piece of land they are on will soon be over fertilized. Her hope is to move both the broilers and the layers to a new, closer, piece of leased land in Little Compton.

Also on Sarah's to-do list is continuing to increase the efficiency of her vegetable growing systems. She is most passionate about the vegetables but also suspects that they are her biggest "time suck." She was able to purchase a paper pot transplanter with the MDAR grant, which will save time and contribute to more consistent plant growth.

A longer-term goal for the farm is planting trees—both to improve the condition of the land and also because, Sarah laughs, **"I really want some apples!"**