Darrell grew up helping his family manage one of the last remaining operating mid-sized dairy farms in Massachusetts—Turner Farms, Inc., in Egremont, MA. The farm was started by Darrell’s great grandfather and has been in business for more than 100 years. After a decade off the farm to get his degree in mechanical engineering, Darrell rejoined his father and uncle to care for their 130 head herd and work their 600 acres on “Turner Hill”—the affectionate local nickname for the farm with stunning views of the Berkshire Hills. “We Turners love our machines,” Darrell says—and now they’ve leveraged that love into a new incarnation of the farm, in which Darrell is now a full partner: Turner Farms is now into their sixth season doing custom fieldwork for area dairy farms, a niche that has given the farm a new foothold in long-term sustainability. They’ve also introduced milking robots in their own operation, leaving Darrell with more time to work on his malting.

Back in 2015, Darrel was having a beer and chatting with the bar owner of a local brewery. The brewer was passionate about local ingredients but couldn’t find a source for the principal ingredient in beer, malted barley. Most of the malted barley was coming from huge malt houses in the mid-west U.S. or Canada. This sparked a brainstorm for Darrell—and after visiting several more local brew masters who cited the same issue, he decided to build a local malt house.

Darrell needed to come up with the capital to design and build a 15’ x 15’ small-capacity malt house. His proposed facility would be capable of producing his test-batches of malted barley and then ramping up to four small batches a month. Without much credit history, Darrell didn’t think he’d have good luck at a bank, but his proposal was well received at The Carrot Project, who, in 2017, approved a micro-loan for Darrell’s project.
In the coming years, Darrell plans to keep building steadily on his success to date, so that he can continue to boost production and increase his sales base accordingly. “There could be so much more beer that is not only brewed locally but made of local ingredients,” he says, stressing that what he’s been able to produce to date, “hardly puts a dent” in brewers’ demand for a local malt.

Someday, Darrell would like to experiment with growing raw barley on his family’s land. In general, the tendency towards wet weather in the Northeast makes this climate not ideal for growing barley. However, Darrell has been following the developments at Cornell University and Hartwick College, where botanists have been conducting research and field trials to breed a barley variety tailored to the Northeast. If and when that variety became available, Darrell would scout out a well-drained location with lots of air circulation among his family’s 600 acres and do some tests. If this could be successful, not only would it shrink Darrell’s costs and his carbon footprint for shipping grain, it would also fit into Turner Farms’ current crop rotation plan (barley likes to follow soybeans, just like corn), and it could provide another income stream towards the dairy farm’s long-term sustainability.

“Being able to get more local products into any of the beers would be win-win,” Darrell says. Meanwhile, he wants to help make the link for people that, “it takes four square feet of land to produce the grain for every pint of beer you drink—and 18 for a loaf of bread!”—so imagine how many square feet of local farmland you could support by eating and drinking products made with local grain.