



## **A Conversation with Jill Isenbarger**

Jill Isenbarger is the newly appointed Executive Director of Stone Barns Center for Food and Agriculture. Prior to this appointment, Jill served as Chief of Staff for The Nature Conservancy, the world's leading conservation organization. While at The Nature Conservancy, Jill worked to advance climate change initiatives and bring the Last Great Places to urban dwellers through innovative marketing projects including the international traveling photography exhibition *In Response to Place*, and a National Public Radio series *Stories from the Heart of the Land*. She has been a critical advocate in support of eco-system services and eco-regional planning.

### **You spent the last ten years at The Nature Conservancy, the world's leading conservation organization, with operations in 34 countries. What brought you to Stone Barns Center?**

There are many aspects of the Center that I find very compelling, but three stood out and really drew me here:

First, the potential of the Center. For a five-year-old not-for-profit organization, the Center has achieved so much in such a short time. With strong education programs, young farmer training and public visitation, the Center has rich and diverse offerings. I was drawn to the incredible opportunity to guide the next phase of the Center's development—helping this wonderful institution grow, mature and become even more influential.

Second, the Center's partnership with Blue Hill at Stone Barns restaurant. More than just a great place to eat, Blue Hill at Stone Barns is a thoughtful group of chefs, artists and compelling storytellers who love farmers and good food. This alliance provides an incredible platform to deliver value-added farm products, to experiment with nutrition and flavor, and to deepen the public's relationship with food and agriculture.

Finally, my own very personal and emotional connection with the place. The first time I visited Stone Barns, I was immediately struck by its magic and beauty. Beyond the sensuous rolling landscape and the richly textured buildings... The farmers are incredible. The barns are beautiful. The soil may be rocky, but you can eat food that comes from the landscape around you. I've spent the last decade living in urban environments, so I knew that if I immediately felt such a strong connection, I could help others connect with this place as well.

### **What points of intersection do you see between current trends in conservation, and sustainable food and farming?**

Conservation is moving away from Muir's idea that using natural resources and preserving healthy ecological systems are necessarily at odds. This idea was inculcated throughout American history and reinforced by our cultural image of *America the Beautiful*, which for many is embodied in Ansel Adams' photographs of stunning natural scenery with no sign of humans in the landscape. This understanding of nature as wilderness is and remains powerful and lasting. However, in recent years, conservationists have begun to focus not just on protecting pristine natural landscapes, but also on managing "working landscapes"—fields, forests, and farms.

The kind of agriculture practiced at the Center is a great example of an open, living landscape that is productive and environmentally healthy. Ecologically functioning landscapes take many forms and have, for thousands of years, been sources of nutritious and delicious food. Places

can be productive and sustainable. Understanding this brings conservationists and farmers together.

I have worked with conservationists who spent their careers developing incentives for farmers to keep cattle out of streams and erosion in check, or to keep livestock on the land and suburban sprawl at bay. There are dozens of examples of farmers and those interested in sustainability, ecology and biodiversity coming together in the past decade. Presuming that there is some unspoken principle that puts these parties at odds is bunk.

For sustainability to be achieved, conservation and farming need to be commonplace, and the public needs to understand how this affects their future and the future of their children. So long as either of these efforts is viewed as contradictory to making a living, or to making progress, they will fail.

As conservationists move toward a recognition of the importance of working landscapes, farmers must continue to move toward small-scale, community-based, sustainable farming techniques and away from destructive, industrial agriculture. The trends begun in recent years can help us all find a better, healthier, and more sustainable future that protects our natural environment and sustains communities.

**As Stone Barns enters its fifth year, how do you envision the Center's role in bringing about a healthier food and farm system?**

I'm still working to answer this question. There are still many conversations to be had with the talented staff at the Center, supporters in the community, and leaders who have been working to advance issues surrounding farms, community-based agriculture, and sustainable food production for decades.

Nonetheless, everyone at the Center thinks that we have a bigger role to play. We want to do more to improve our food system—whether that involves thinking more carefully and critically about New York City's foodshed and using that understanding to influence urban and national policies; working to educate, support and cultivate the next generation of young farmers working in the mid-Atlantic region; helping to build an ethic about farming and natural resource protection with children in our community; or conducting innovative experiments on nutrition and taste. I plan to focus on determining how the Center can best use its unique assets—a spectacular place; a world-renowned restaurant; talented and hard-working farmers; and proximity to a complex and changing urban infrastructure—to make the world a better, healthier, tastier, and more sustainable place.

**As spring approaches, what do you most look forward to seeing or experiencing on the farm?**

Bees. Visitors. Migration of the Canada Geese to somewhere far, far away. Ramp martinis. I've heard fabulous things about Blue Hill at Stone Barns' ramp martini, although I remain unconvinced. However, all other rumors have proved to be true thus far, including that we here at Stone Barns harvest a fabulous crop of rocks from our fields each and every spring. Thanks to a day volunteering with farmer Jack, I got to experience that first hand.

For more information about Stone Barns Center for Food and Agriculture, please visit [www.stonebarnscenter.org](http://www.stonebarnscenter.org) or contact 914 366 6200.