

# PIETRO ISOLAN

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## Il Contadino John

A journey to our rural roots



An original idea of:

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[www.veraterra.it](http://www.veraterra.it)  
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# Thanks

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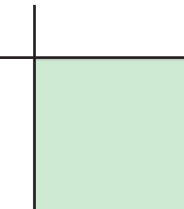
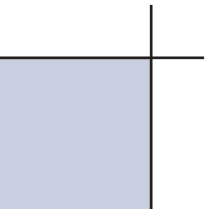
Thanks to the international citadel of Loppiano, especially to Fattoria Loppiano and Cooperativa Loppiano Prima, where I grew up as a man and as a professional.

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Thanks to the three marvellous stars who waited for Dad as he travelled, and who are the very first source of inspiration for what I write, do and tell.



# Foreword

This book is about the experiences we had and the spirit of innovation that we encountered when visiting the project countries and working closely with new friends and colleagues in Europe. The madie project was a sunlight that illuminated our professional lives. We became acquainted with unexplored realities in a place that was geographically far from home, but close to our intent to save the agriculture and rural cultures of our Europe.

When we started the project, we did not know what we were seeing. At first, it seemed to be unfamiliar,

but it came together at the right time. We were lost, trapped, in the hands of a system where we no longer understood the rules. We did not imagine there were other people in other parts of Europe who were thinking and doing something similar to us.

This project has made us aware of the hard work and sacrifice of the people. We saw their desire to improve the old economic system and to create something new and powerful. Pointing to inclusion, cooperation and the will to create multifunctional realities.

An absolutely human project and close to the territorial reality; I had the pleasure and the honor to know the agro-food products through typical and absolutely extraordinary dishes and drinks. This book is not a simple story of experiences through Europe; it represents openness to others, knowledge, sharing new techniques without fear of being overwhelmed or copied, but with the intelligence of putting together the forces.

With this project we are really Europeans strongly and consciously, as we realized that our wealth is the sum of all our enormous diversity; knowing that we share this heritage of diversity, we can only improve and feel like a great family.

Yes, we have felt the spirit of this project as the foundation of a new family.

Elia Renzi

# Introduction

This handbook describes a journey through three economic realities in three different European countries, it is the story of a farmer who goes around Europe looking for ideas, hints, hopes.

And from what he finds, try to put up something to be copied, something that gives hope to him and to hundreds of thousands of lovers of earth.

It pulls out some key words, in response to the crisis of values, money and ideas that go through

agriculture as we have understood it in the last few decades.

We are in the midst of an epochal passage, the abandonment of agricultural activity as the main activity of man, with all the productive, environmental and cultural implications that this entails.

This book tells stories, without pretending to be a real technical handbook, but hoping to give inspiration to those who want to create cooperation, to those who want to start with some form of multifunctionality such as tools to

repopulate our European campaigns, to generate income from marginal areas, to bring back the knowledge that is the basis of our culture in the eyes of new generations.

Pietro Isolan.

# Chapter 1: ... And the story begins

He started off one October morning at 5:00 AM. It was early Autumn and he knew things would not be easy. This trip was THE trip for him but also for his village.

Because of the serious crisis afflicting the agriculture of the area, the head of the village had decided to send Johnny on an exploratory mission to look for ways of helping to uplift the economy and social status of the townsfolk.



The rural areas of Ireland were really going through a rough period at that time. The worst thing was when the people realized they had lost contact with the food they ate.

Children, for example, no longer knew where the food on their plate came from, which is absurd in a place where food was produced since the beginning of time. From the outside, it looked like the scene from a film, one of those that imagine an 'end-of-the-world' scenario.

One example was the family of Brian, 35, the village chief. For generations Brian's family had been sheep breeders, managing the animals and the land so as to get the best products in the county.

These products were based on a perfect knowledge of the animals, their pastures, the transformation processes, the equipment, the climate, the best grass for healthy flocks and people, and so much more. But in the last fifty years everything had changed. Brian's three brothers had relocated to Dublin to become a teacher, a computer programmer and a mechanic.

Brian had stayed behind, but he studied law ("you must study!!" his father used to tell him) and ended up taking over the only law practice in town, and being named head of his village, something like the town mayor. But he knew nothing about agriculture or sheep.

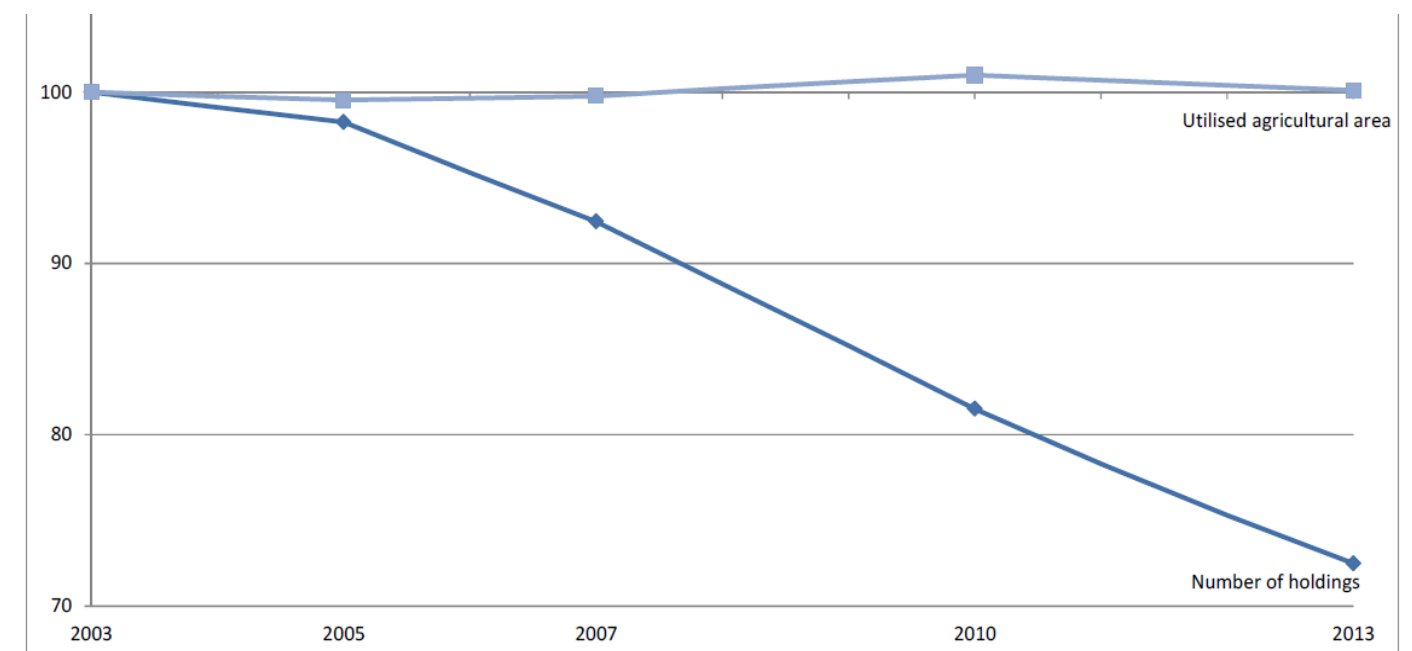
Even the other local families had gone a similar way and the town, with its population of about 400, ended up with very few farmers, and all of them in great difficulty. Because, what really turned the squall into a perfect storm was the market itself or, rather, those who pull the strings. Commodity prices skyrocketing and prices for the end products gone under the floor.



So the farmers were forced to produce ever growing quantities of produce just to have enough money to feed their families. This brought a general malaise, an unbridgeable uneasiness. These same farmers had the knowhow to do things right, but they were forced to produce on a massive scale, and quickly, so they were obliged to make use of chemical products and spend half their time driving enormous machinery and using up heaven knows how much diesel.

## STATISTICS ON THE SIZE OF FARMS IN RECENT DECADES

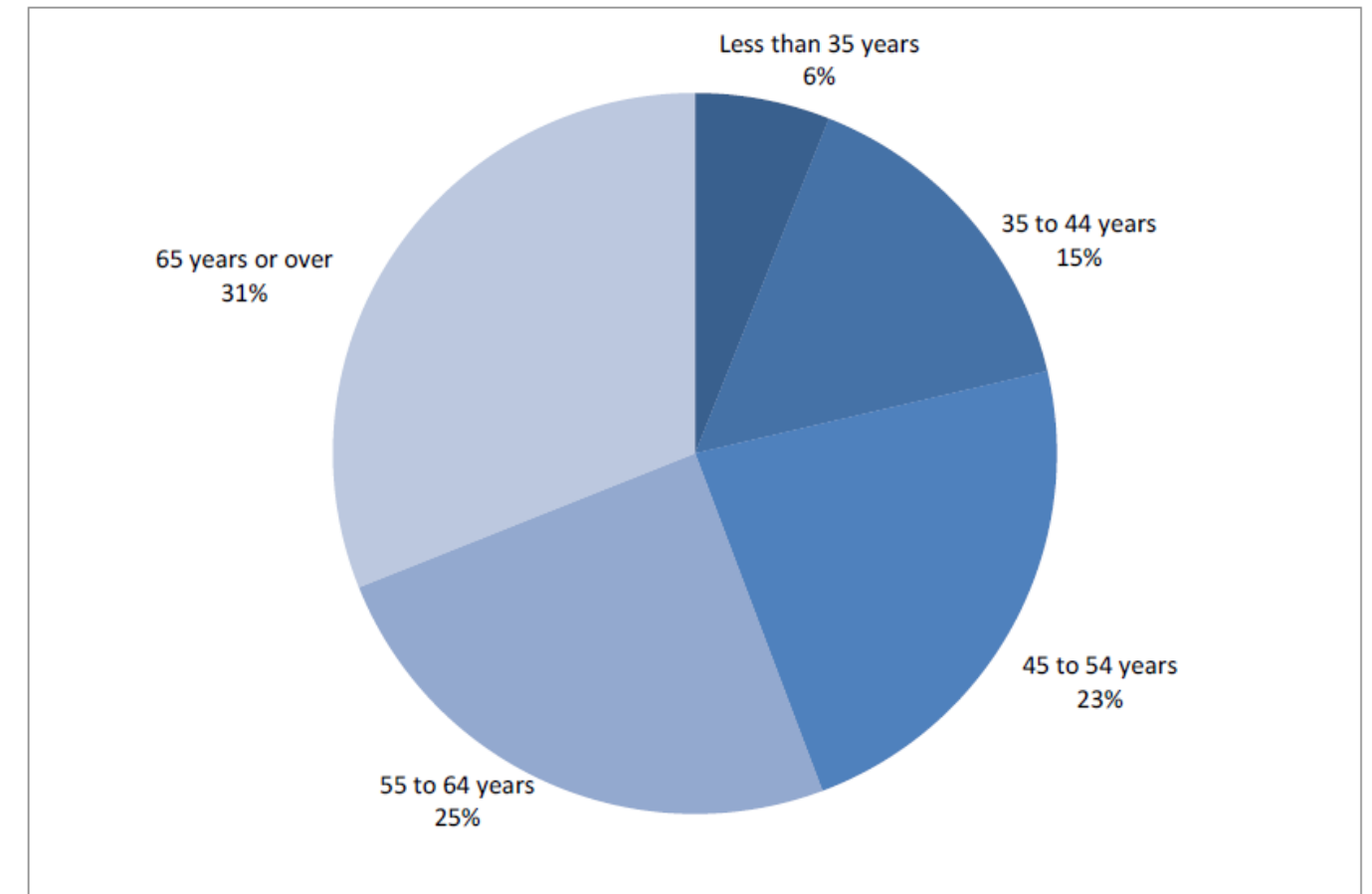
“In the European Union (EU), there were 10.8 million farms in 2013 working 174.6 million hectares of land (the utilised agricultural area). Between 2003 and 2013, slightly more than 4 million holdings disappeared in the EU, while the total area used for agriculture remained almost stable. This means increasing agricultural concentration, with the average area per holding growing by 38%, from 11.7 hectares in 2003 to 16.1 hectares in 2013”



\* EU aggregate excluding Croatia for which the whole time-series is not available.

This, among other things, meant they didn't have enough time to transmit their knowledge to their children. They ended up in their sixties (like Brian's dad) and all they passed on to their children was the anger they felt at being in such a predicament, instead of the wealth of knowledge they had in their head and hands. Contributing to this was the underlying opinion that considered farmers' knowledge to be a sort of sub-culture overtaken by technology, chemistry and modern mechanics, and therefore stopped being passed on to the next generation.

## THE AVERAGE AGE OF FARMERS



One can easily imagine the consequences of this sad state of affairs. Land and animals exploited to the limit of tolerability, an entire generation of farmers frustrated by the over-exploitation of land they would never had wanted to treat that way, and two more generations that wouldn't know how to reap the benefits from their own very fertile soil.

*Tragic....*

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This situation lead Brian, the head of the village, to ask John to go on an exploratory mission, and he allocated part of the town's emergency funds to pay for the trip.

At first, John couldn't believe his ears. He didn't think a solution was possible and he was, like everyone else, rather tired and disappointed. But Brian, who was more farsighted, insisted and gave him three specific destinations: Italy, Norway and Hungary.

He believed that each of these countries had particular economic conditions worth studying, in order to start finding remedies for their beleaguered little town.

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# Chapter 2: Departure...

## ...First stop: Italy...

In Italy he was to visit an agricultural enterprise made up of four farms.

The place was called Loppiano, in the municipality of Figline and Incisa Valdarno, near the great historic city of Florence.





John decided that he would tell the story of what he saw by using the tree metaphor. Ever since childhood he knew that only what was deeply rooted could bear decent fruit, and that was true not only for plants, but for people, animals, businesses and lots more besides.

Therefore, regarding the reality of what he was visiting in Italy, his report began at the roots: the first of which is the HISTORY of Loppiano.

## The first of the roots is the history

1965. Near Incisa Val d'Arno , in the province of Florence, "Loppiano" was born from a first series of citadels of the Focolari movement, which later was to spread across five the continents. Loppiano rose like the sketch of a "new world" both for the international character of its members and for the culture of "giving" which pervades all of its relations and which underlines, in its unity, the beauty of diverse peoples and cultures.



# COOPERATIVA LOPPIANO PIRMA



From the very beginning there was the need to put to good use certain long abandoned areas of farmland on the outskirts of Loppiano and so, on the 19th of May, 1973, the Cooperative of Loppiano Prima was established as a clear expression of the movement's lifestyle.

With the share capital of a few founding members, on 28 December 1973, the "Tracolle" Farm was bought together with some machinery.



Gradually the number of members started to grow, turning its membership into a broad-based shareholding system actively involved in the financial aspects of the venture, and contributing to add value to the business.

The Cooperative's main focus is on the agricultural products (wine, olive oil, cereals) which are seen as the custodians of the soil and the

ecosystem, while always being fully respectful of people's health and establishing relationships of trust with suppliers and stakeholders.

Today there are 3500 members who share the core values of the farm and contribute with small sums the capitalization of the venture.

The members are also the first buyers of the farm's agricultural products.





2005. The Loppiano Farm is born. By Italian law, cooperatives like Loppiano Prima are no longer allowed to run the agricultural side of things so the decision is made to keep the property in the name of Loppiano Prima and to entrust the

management of the farm to a new entity: Fattoria Loppiano Soc. Agr. Coop, a cooperative made up of nine working members of Loppiano Prima who carry on the work based on the same principles as the original coop.

# FATTORIA LOPPIANO

## BIO-AGRITURISMO IN TOSCANA







2010 - In order to achieve greater sales of their products and a better promotion of their activities, the various entities under the Loppiano name (the Farm, the Coop, etc...) as well as other farms operating under the same or similar ethical guidelines, all join forces in a single partnership called “Terre di Loppiano” (Lands of Loppiano), under a single label, bringing together producers of over 200 different products sold by an e-commerce website which also allows for the various partners to promote this new economic culture and create synergies between the different producers.

What’s different about Terre di Loppiano is that the partners in this project have been able to overcome the mutually competitive relationships. Instead, they decided to pool their potentialities and share their experiences to the benefit of all stakeholders.



2014 - The Veraterra Association is born which deals with sustainable agriculture in terms of design, dissemination, training and education.

Veraterra designs and runs training courses for adults, teens and children related to sustainable agriculture, environment, landscape, both nationally and internationally.

The activity takes place on its own or in collaboration with farms, educational farms, associations and public bodies.

One of the strengths of Veraterra is the belief that teaching people to till and keep the land goes hand in hand with education of the soul.

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John tried to get a good picture of all this by visiting the various farms, and meeting with the people. He started by asking questions to Giorgio Baluzzi, president of “Terre di Loppiano”, the company which sells the agricultural products. He told him about why and how he was travelling and asked:

- How was Terre di Loppiano born?

For many years Terre di Loppiano was the stuff of dreams. Our passion for food produced by agriculture on a human scale has always been at the heart of this dream which then became a reality.



The other thing I've always considered fundamental is the establishment of synergies between companies. Alone we make much more effort, whereas working together and trying out strategies from which we can all benefit makes sense both ethically and economically. At the start we had to abandon the old patterns related to fear of partnerships, and move towards the idea of networking at all levels. These concepts are in the name itself: Terre di Loppiano. "Terre" ("lands") because the land is what yields exceptional products of excellent quality if it is treated well and respected; and "Loppiano" because the idea of being able to allocate part of the profits, to

people and businesses that need help, has always been part of the spirit that animates Loppiano, with its shared economy, which has been at the heart of a company ethos like ours.

- What is currently the corporate structure of Terre di Loppiano?

It is a limited liability company owned by four partners who have each a stake in the company capital.

I really wanted this corporate form, as I think it's possible to do business, to have a profitable

company, but with a strong ethical focus on the environment, on solidarity and on consumer health.

- How do you select your suppliers?

For every product we start by looking locally, as small a distance as possible from our offices, and then, if we don't find it, we look further away, outside of our region. The values we look for in companies that work with us are honesty, respect for people and the environment, honesty in relationships, and a sense of the common good.

In fact the real wealth of our company is in its

suppliers and the relationship that we create with them. It's the exchange which then creates confidence, and freedom to tell one another how to improve a product, all the way to any economic difficulties that we all have to face in this particular period of economic crisis. Listening is often not perceived as an element of economic behavior, but I can testify that the fact of listening to our partners has been a major factor contributing to the good operating performance of our business.

- What is your relationship with your suppliers, and what types of control do you carry out on products that you then resell?

We have collaborations with people not related to the producers, experts in each category of products that we resell. We have the supplies tested by these consultants at regular intervals. Also, when we start working with a new producer, even if the first tests went quite well, we also test the product in the store, to get feedback from the people who buy directly from us. Then we then enter a limited amount of packages in our e-commerce and, finally, if previous tests were successful, we increase our purchases and bring the new vendor up to speed. The entire process typically takes about a year.

- On average, which parameters define the final price of the product, and what percentage goes to the producer?

This is a key parameter for effective feedback on the ethics that underlie our business.

It starts from the proposal of the manufacturer, comparing it with the market price, after which a markup is applied (50% on average), communicating the final price to the producer, so as not to create situations of competition between us and the producer that would damage us both. Behind these numbers there is the belief that to

produce high quality, healthy food producers should be paid accordingly, in a manner commensurate with the work they do.

At the same time, in our particular corporate culture we are strongly aware that we are ethical entrepreneurs, where fees are commensurate with the duties and merits, and where a dividend is still paid to those who have invested their own capital to start the business. We can now say that this is all working out as planned, and the company's balance sheet has been positive for years now, to our great satisfaction and to that of our suppliers.

- What are, in your opinion, the points of the Terre di Loppiano project which could best be replicated? In other words, what aspects of your business could be more easily replicated in other contexts?

Let's try to rate this "replicability" from 0 to 5.  
A few suggestions:

Only link between producer and marketing company (0-5) 5.  
This is fundamental, it's one of the cornerstones of our business ethos.



Selection of suppliers (0-5) 5

As above, our products are our real wealth.

E-commerce (the entire system, shipping included)  
(0-5) 2

We noticed that for the category of products that we sell ourselves, very often people want to see the product first, and maybe try it, and this takes place at our offices, where there's a café and restaurant service. I therefore believe that e-commerce doesn't play a vital role in the success of our activity.

Exclusive contract with a local company for a range of products (0-5) 3

To start a partnership like ours with Fattoria di Loppiano there have to be special conditions: for example, the producer does not market at that time, and needs a strong partnership, and maybe the trading company needs to start with a strong identity linked to a territory. Also, there must be great mutual passion, and willingness to find beneficial agreements for both, and passion for the product and activity.

Bar and catering services (0-5) 4

To have a catering service is important to create the environment where clients can sample the products.

- Is there anything else you'd like to tell us, something related to the work you do here in Terre di Loppiano?

A key part of our society is the relationship that we try to create with our employees. Our goal is that everyone feels like he or she or is not just a number, but feels the responsibility that comes with the position and the role he or she plays in the company. In particular, we have also done confidence building work with people with social disabilities or family issues, with great success for these individuals and for the company too.

Another aspect is related to tax clearance, personnel management and so on. Our policy is that every single Euro that comes into the company is accounted for, and every individual who works with us, even if it's just for a one-off event, gets a regular contract.

This is part of our DNA.  
Helping others to be more than just a number, to learn another skill.

John was very impressed by what he heard.

Accustomed as they were to sell potatoes and other products a few cents a pound, it all seemed like science fiction. Dealers who looked out for producers. Enough to knock the farmers of his village off their chairs. Yet, Terre di Loppiano was right there, living proof of what Giorgio had been telling him about.

John was quite surprised. He knew there were shops around which sold organic products, but after all, he thought it was a niche for the radical-chic. But here there were solid foundations, ties to the territory, ethical entrepreneurship.

He had no more appointments, so he decided to take a walk around the farms of Loppiano, and ask some questions.

Walking next to an olive grove, he noticed a man about sixty, straw hat and boots, who was handling some nets. It was Carlo, one of the workers of the Loppiano Farm, who supervised farming work. He came up and introduced himself.

- Hello! What are you doing?
- I am laying down the nets to gather olives, said Carlo, working at his nets. - Do you mind if

I continue with my job as we talk?- John liked his answer very much. He knew what work in the fields is like, and how precious time is.

John explained to Carlo what he was doing there, and about his conversation with Giorgio.

- Well, would you like me to tell you some more?
- Of course, it was exactly what he wanted.
- First, do you know why I moved here, 31 years ago? I come from generations of farmers, and with the industrialisation of agriculture, which took place starting in the 1960s, I found myself poisoning the earth and the animals, with substances I didn't even

know. It seemed the only economically feasible way to produce, it was progress, you know. At a certain point, in the mid 1980s, I couldn't sleep anymore at night. Even though we were in good faith, I was beginning to understand what we were doing to the earth and to ourselves, and as soon as they invited me to come here, I gave up my family business and moved here, where already then they were respecting the ecosystem.

A sixty-six year old man, who already back in the 1980s could no longer put up with what was happening to agriculture.

- This is the key feature of Cooperativa Loppiano Prima, right from its birth: the property belongs to 4000 supporting members who invested small shares to fund the beginning of the activity, in 1973.

These 4000 shareholders at first consumed nearly all the output. Today, the way people drink has changed, they drink less, and now we also have to deal with the marketplace, through direct sales. In any case, shareholders at certain times of the year support us with their work, for example during the harvesting season. This is something of great value for us and for them, since they have an opportunity to live for a few days in the

country, contributing to a project which maintains a business and a territory. They feel the farm to be really theirs.

Suddenly, the noise of a Diesel engine, the old soul of a small van which was still able to stand up to fatigue and bad weather, immediately followed by a tractor.

This is Antonio, Attilio, Marco and Massimo, all of them Carlo's fellow workers.

A really golden opportunity for John!

He greeted them, and the young men stopped.

- Working hard, aren't you?

The men greeted him, trying to figure out what this strange red head wanted.

John quickly explained what he was doing there, and shot out a question:

- I've been told you are a coop, you grow organic food and a lot of other nice things! But how are you organised, how do you decide what to do during the week, or the day?

Marco answered: - Nearly every week, we meet for about an hour to see what work there is to do. There is a work coordinator who supervises, but everybody contributes with their own experience and ideas.-

Antonio added: -also because in a medium-sized concern like ours, everybody also has other roles. I for example deal with farming tourism, Attilio with the wine cellar, so we have to coordinate the time we are in the field or doing other things.-

Marco went on: -Then every morning at 8 o'clock, if necessary, we spend some five or ten minutes

discussing how to move, which machines to use, what work to do, always listening to everybody's opinion.-

Attilio added, - it's all in the spirit of commoning businesses. Everybody feels he is part of a project which is greater than the business itself.-

Massimo pitched in, - it's not always easy, in such a complicated situation as this, there are problems, and sometimes contrasts, the economic situation is anything but easy now, however we try to do our best.-

John thanked the young men cordially, shaking their hands one by one, and watched them leave with their van and tractor. He thought farming people really resembled each other all over the world. Few words, many deeds, big hands and big heart.

The last appointment of the day was with Pietro, another who came from the country.

He had heard that Pietro was beginning a start-up involved in teaching agriculture and multi-functionality, which he had called Veraterra.

Pietro came wearing a straw hat, boots and working clothes.

- Hi, John, we meet at last!

John didn't know it, but Brian had met Pietro several years before, during a project on educational farms.

- So, I'm famous then!. Exclaimed John. - Hi, Pietro, I'm impatient to hear about what you are doing with Veraterra.-

- Well, Veraterra is an adventure that began a few years ago, when I realised I knew how to design

and cultivate a vineyard, but had completely forgotten how to grow a vegetable garden, raise a few animals, in other words do the basic things to grow and raise my own food. So I started studying and researching, understanding at last that my 'craze' was how to grow things in unity with nature. There are lots and lots of people with my same craze - , says Pietro laughing.

- Ok Pietro, very interesting. Then what happened?.

- Then I felt the need not to keep all of this to myself, but to communicate it, teach it. Gradually, a



lot of opportunities arose for working with schools, and then I and my colleagues Elia and Emilio were asked to design spaces inside schools and public structures, where one could grow things. Let's put it this way, we have become multi-functionality experts.

- Shoot away, Pietro. When we wrote to each other by email, I told you the situation in our village; what would you do in my place?
- Look, John, I have no magic potions, I would have to come to where you are and get to know the place, the land, the people. But I can tell you

what we are setting up here, maybe it will give you some idea. I am creating a small network of farms, including vegetable gardens, wine makers, people raising animals and others, who support tourism and social agriculture. In a way, it is an idea of a widespread educational farm, where Veraterra will take orders, handle customers, train teachers and do everything else needed to manage an educational farm, while the farms will provide land, accommodation, products. As you can imagine, this will be advantageous for both parties. One of the biggest hurdles for a producer who wants to do multi-functionality is to do it professionally and setting up a partnership like this makes it feasible.

We are starting this project this year, I'll keep you posted!

- Thanks, Pietro, yet another person giving me a lot of ideas, thank you really!

They said goodbye, promising each other a good glass of wine and a good mug of beer.

John left Italy with a lot of good ideas and a touch of nostalgia.

He knew very well that he couldn't simply copy and paste a project from one country to another; but he did have a clear idea of the issues which could become the backbone of a project for rural development for his land, his villages and his people.

The basic ideas were: cooperation, multi-functionality, short supply chain.

Going into greater detail, what appeared most valuable to him, and what he would go and tell the leader in his village, was:

- widespread shareholding and cooperation among the members of Cooperativa Loppiano Prima.

- the organic cultivations, transformed into finished products, of Fattoria Loppiano, with works managed according to the principles of a commons-based economy.

- the creation of an international sales network by Terre di Loppiano, including among its suppliers dozens of other organic farms.

- the network of local farms which Veraterra was creating, where it was possible to carry out tourism, teaching and social farming.

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Chapter 3: Magic Sand...  
...Second stop: Hungary...



He got to Hungary after a quiet Florence to Budapest flight. Getting off the train which took him to Kecskemét, a short distance from the capital, he was struck by the soil of the area. Sand, sand and more sand!

He visited a tourist farm partly based on the Magyar horse-riding tradition, and the enormous riding school which they had set up needed no adjustment to the soil, the sand was already there. The Danube had created the plain, which bore its mark in full.

An old friend of Brian introduced him to Agnes – whom his friend had suggested he speak to.

Agnes had the authentic expression and handshake of a real person, marked by joy and suffering.

This feeling was rather hard to pin down for John, it was something that happened with few people. He began to feel a kind of distillation of joy and suffering – he rarely made a mistake.

Just a few years before, Agnes had started out on an adventure, taking over the old family farm. She

came from a career which offered many satisfactions but was terribly demanding. She was in a way the prototype of the movement they are talking so much about in Europe, of young people who move from the city to the country, sometimes giving up successful careers to go and work in the fields.

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In front of the ancient stone oven of Agnes' farm, where a mysterious typical Hungarian dish was cooking, John started asking a few questions:

- Why did you go and live in the country, and what did you do before?
- I have a degree in hotel economy, with a specialisation in eco-tourism.

After graduating, I tried out many things, I worked for a year and half with the Hungarian National Society of Conservationists as coordinator of international projects, so I travelled a lot and got to understand working in NGOs.

I worked as a manager in various Hungarian hotels, a very satisfying job. In a sense, I never needed to look for work, it came spontaneously to me. In the end, the director of the Aranyhomok hotel (which in Hungarian means golden sand) called me to run a hotel in my city, Kecskemét. I kept this post for four years. I finished my career in the hotel business when I started my family. My job, in fact, was not suitable for the mother of three children. I used to work for 16 hours a day, often in weekends and late into the night. When my second child was born, I decided to help my mother as an accountant. However, I had always been interested in our family estate, in fact I had already written my graduation thesis



on tourist development of the farm. So I decided to launch myself into the adventure of making our farmland productive again. We slowly started restoring the buildings, creating suitable places to receive guests. We learned the traditional way to cook food in the oven, so as to offer our guests food we had grown, prepared and cooked in the traditional way. After My father died, I inherited the whole farm and today 75% of its surface is cultivated organically.

Actually, what Agnes told us resembled the story of so many young Europeans who are going

back to the farms, intending to lead a life which is probably less profitable, certainly no less tiring, but is tied to the very roots of human culture.

John asked: - what kind of works do you do? -

- Fruit production covers 8 hectares, vineyards 3, organic cultivations 1.5, seeds 4.5, meadows 6: I do farming tourism and tasting of our products – jams, pálinka (a traditional Hungarian fruit-based drink, something like schnapps).

- So many different kinds of products and services! But how do you organise your daily schedule?



John could imagine the farmers of his village complaining, - but you can't set up so many different products! Farming tourism? Oh come on, we raise sheep, not tourists! -

- Actually, I mainly work in the advisory office, together with my mother and another person. Luckily, it is a flexible job, I can work in the morning or late at night, we have no opening hours. During the harvest season, from June to October, I spend four or five days a week at the farm, then work goes down to one or two hours a day, or to one day a week.

- The people who suggested I talk to you told me something about cooperation with other producers. How do you work together, or set up a network?

This was another matter which was very important for John, he had seen it in Italy, he had read a lot about it, but he had also personally experienced how hard it was to go beyond small personal interests and how much fear there was of sharing with others.

- Our cooperation consists basically in sharing professional, practical experience, in this

particular case for organic elder-based products, we help each other with sales.

Then I am a member and vice president of the Kamratúra Association. This organisation represents 30-35 farming businesses. Our aim is to develop opportunities for shared sales.

In some ways, we are already present on the market and in fairs, and we are setting up a work team in the field of short production chain, we will ask for European funds to develop this sector. We meet regularly to plan the future and share experiences.

I also work as an accountant for 8-10 farmers, so as to be constantly in touch with them.

- Listen Agnes, among the people in my land, I have found it very difficult to bring them out of their small world, make them cooperate with others. Have you had the same experience?

- I have invited many local farmers to join the Kamratúra Association, but there was a complete lack of interest, even though those we invited included producers of asparagus and honey. In my experience, I see a lot of lack of trust and lots of people who cannot see beyond their individual

interests, who do not believe in the success of producers' organisations. I think the main cause is the failure of local cooperation experiences in recent years.

I too believe more in self-organisation, as in the case of the Kamratúra Association, where there are members who are ready to act. The old forms of cooperation involved a lot of bureaucracy and there was often corruption.

I could believe in a local government enterprise, which should act as a consortium to create a transformation plant, but so far there is nothing concrete.

- I understand. We have much the same situation. Cooperation is a slow process, but it is worthwhile to try, make mistakes, copy from those who have managed to do something good; after all, that is why we are here! Another question: are part of the farm products for self-consumption?

- Of course, the products we grow are treated for preservation (putting in jars, freezing) both for sale and for self-consumption.

- What products do you sell?
- Jam, wine, schnapps, fruit and vegetable, fresh of course.
- Fantastic! And now the crucial question: are you able to pay production costs?
- Unfortunately it is different every year. The market price for fruit and vegetables changes season by season, we can say it is unpredictable. For example, in 2015, 1 kg of biological parsley root was worth between 500 and 700 florins, in 2016 it was worth 250-450 florins (1 euro =

310 florins). The biggest problem is the low and unforeseeable price. It is impossible to make plans on this basis.

- But in such conditions, how do you manage to pay for your work?
- Some years I manage, some years I don't (for example in 2016)

Exactly what was happening in Ireland and all around Europe. That was exactly the reason why John was travelling, that is why forms of cooperation,

of multi-functionality, of ethical commerce, had to be found to give an answer to this.

- Are you doing some kind of tourist activity?
- Yes, and this helps keep the farm going and preserve and maintain buildings which are now 100 years old.  
Besides, this gives us a lot of emotion and satisfaction, we have a lot of regular customers and they confirm that our work really does mean something!
- And where do the visitors come from?

- 95% from the hinterland, especially Budapest and Kecskemét, but also from all over the country.
- Tell me Agnes, what were the beginnings like? You told me you inherited the farm, but how did you think of making the fields and buildings productive again, what were and are the stages involved?
- Basically, I inherited the whole farm 6 years ago. I increased the fruit and vineyard area from 8 to 12 hectares, renewing the existing part, and moved over to organic farming.  
Concerning buildings, rebuilding is an issue which

is always present, but it needs a lot of investments. Secure and foreseeable income from primary farming production cannot be achieved at this moment. We should spend much more energy on transforming products, marketing, and farming tourism. The problem is that I cannot produce enough income to make investments, so we move slowly. We are asking for European funds, because today this is our only opportunity for moving ahead more quickly with investments. We want to have more rooms and new transformation plants where we can produce dried fruit, fruit syrups and jams.

This is another important key for small farms: transforming raw materials directly at the farm. This is something that is felt very strongly in Italy too.

Besides admiration and respect for such a person, this is what I brought away with me from my meeting with Agnes:

- the idea of putting together a sales network based on cooperation among farming producers.
- not thinking of farming as the only activity, but combining it with another job, in Agnes' case that of accountant; this was something not to put aside lightly.

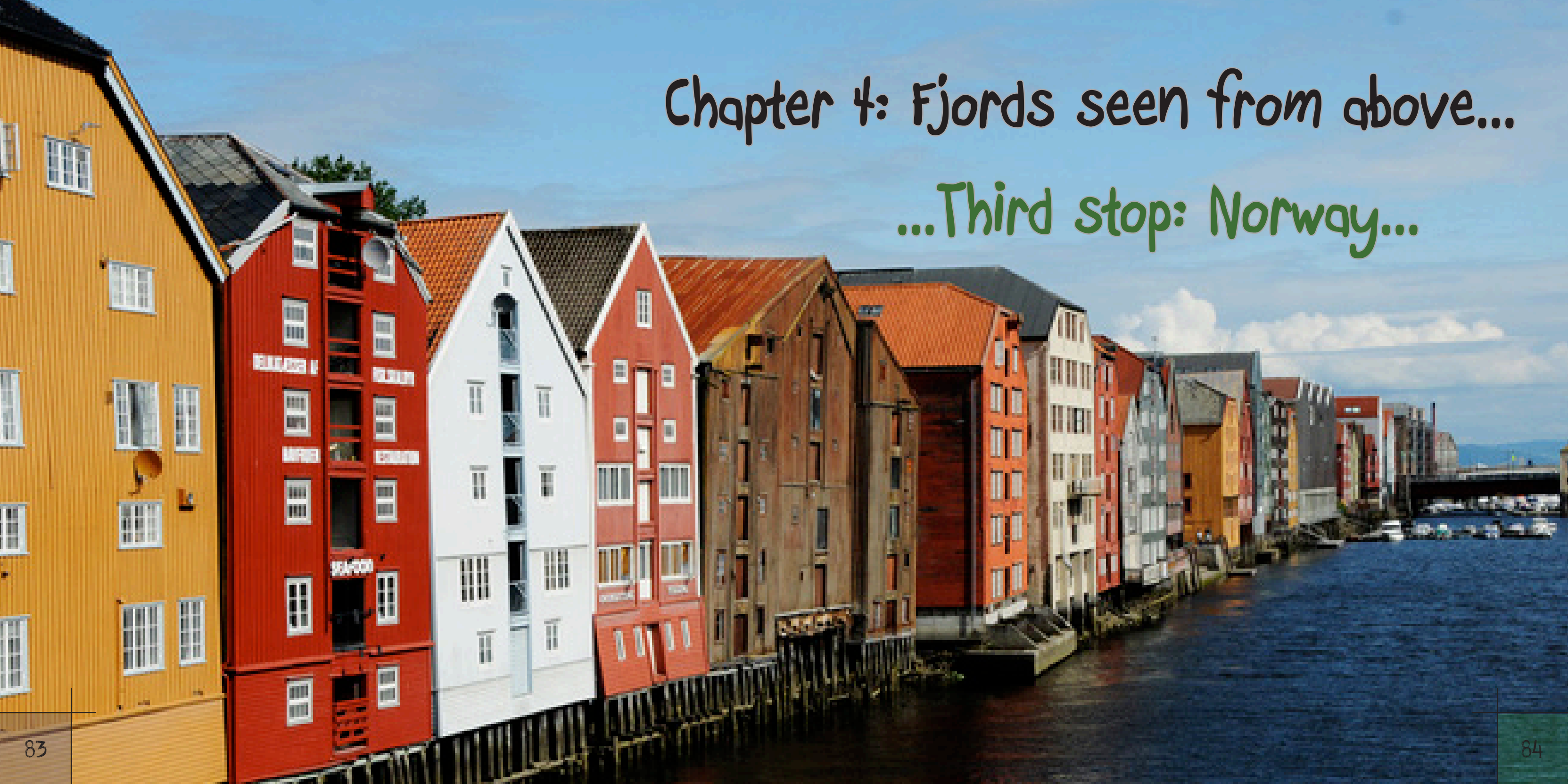
- the way she planned her tourist farm, based right from the start on the ancient traditions of the place for producing, preparing and cooking food.
- the fact that entrusting production to wholesalers was not a good idea. f

So John left the sandy Hungarian plain, richer in experience but especially in Agnes' friendship.

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Chapter 4: Fjords seen from above...

...Third stop: Norway...





After a few hours' flight, with a scenic landing at the airport of Bergen (my God, all those fjords seen from above!), John had a beautiful car ride with his first Norwegian contact, Tonje, friend of friends who made him the great favour of driving him to the Hardangerfjord, a wonderful place, where earth and sea met over the cliffs, hosting orchards, fishing boats and whales.

When they got to their destination, Tonje parked her car near a house, with a warehouse next to it, in the midst of an apple orchard, on an almost unmanageable slope. They said goodbye, and John took a short walk, waiting for the owner.

Even before seeing the tractor, John recognised its brand from the sound of the engine – a typical professional quirk of any good modern farmer.

A young man, about thirty, came down from the tractor. Tall, fair haired, wearing overalls and safety footwear, with safety earmuffs around his neck. A real worker.

They shook hands – firmly, but also feeling to the other's handshake.

- Olav, how nice to meet you, I've heard a lot about you. I am a farmer too, in Ireland, maybe they told you. I am on a mission, sent by the people from my village, looking for a way out of the crisis which



is impoverishing us and emptying our countryside.

- Hello, John. Well, I don't have any solutions, I have only tried to do something
- I am all ears! Tell me, why did you go back to live in the country?
- My family has been owning this land for centuries, and this too is part of what brought me back here. Actually I like the people, the nature and the opportunities I have come across here.

- Opportunities? Olav, where we are, farming is dead. What opportunities? What do you do exactly?
- I run the farm and produce apple cider. I handle production and transformation. The climate here is quite special, we are on the sea coast, yet there is a mountain climate because of the latitude. So the apples here have unique features!
- From colleague to colleague, how do you schedule your days, how do you organise?

- Dear John, I am a very mixed up person! Really creative and really chaotic - answered Olav laughing - but I try to plan my week on Sunday, or Monday, so as to see how the work will go. I start at 8 in the morning, and I have two people who work for me.
- Olav, one of the things I am most interested in is cooperation, this is how, together with my village leader, we chose the people I should meet during my trip. What kind of cooperation do you set up with your fellow producers?

- Cooperation is very important. At this point in history, it is really vital to get over the idea that your neighbour may compete with you, or has a bigger tractor than you. Imagine, I share a lot of my equipment with my neighbour, and this halves our investment costs. We also work on procedures and know how, without being afraid of letting each other discover our “little secrets”. If everybody in a certain area makes good cider, everybody wins. The region will stand out, public opinion will see it as a district of quality, and people will be ready to pay more and buy more.

- Olav, this is revolutionary, do you realise that?
- Actually, John, if we go and see what our grandparents used to do, you will discover that farmers helped each other, they shared labour and means. We are not discovering anything really new. It's the world that has changed, and we must make these good practices become reality, suitable for the marketplace and for the way business is being done these years.
- Ok. Sorry if I don't beat around the bush. Do you really have a margin? Does your business stand on its own feet financially?



- I have a good margin, and I think that in a few years' time, I'll be producing 50,000 litres of cider and 30,000 litres of apple juice.

Straight and clear, and not too many details. A true farmer.

- What is the hardest thing you have to deal with. I mean, it isn't easy to run all this, even though you have found a way to make it profitable.
- I've had to face several challenges, right from the start. At present, the hardest thing is finding myself in a situation where I am the first to implement

certain kinds of solutions, so I have nobody to share with, at least in the neighbourhood. On the other hand, this is the most fascinating part of what I am doing.

- If I understand rightly, the greatest step was moving from selling your apples to producing your own apple cider. How did that come to your mind?
- Well, it was something of a challenge convincing people to try my products. Production and sales are improving very quickly. With the appearance of small beer breweries and other small food and drink producers, the public's

attitude towards trying out new kinds of food and drink, has changed. I really feel there is a very positive attitude, people get enthusiastic when they visit my farm and buy my cider.

- Great, Olav. My compliments, really, I'm telling you I'm going to copy lots of your ideas!
- That would be great, John, but now I want you to taste something.

Olav took his guest into the cider production area. A small plant, but with state of the art machinery, from the fermentation vats to the analysis instruments,

the filters and all the rest. What is special is that it was all purchased in cooperation with Olav's neighbour. Simple and brilliant.

Olav took a pitcher and took some cider out of a vat for John to taste.

In many countries, cider is seen as a second class fermented product, compared to wine and beer, we don't have a culture to distinguish between good and bad cider, and even less to distinguish among different varieties of apple cider.

Well, that cider was something wonderful, a nectar of the gods, with the right degree of bubbles, acidity, sugar. With no need for words, one could perceive the passion and the research of its creator.

- This won the first prize, the best Norwegian cider -, said Olav, with a smile of satisfaction and pride.

John didn't know how to thank Olav, and reassured him that his story would be of inspiration for farmers of his area, and perhaps for many others.

The left each other like brothers, if not in blood, brothers in earth.

From Olav, he felt he had received these ideas:

- transforming one's product, or at least making it ready for retail selling, is fundamental if one wants to be able to handle sales

- cooperating without jealousy or fear, but with clear agreements, is a winning idea. Olav had purchased all the machinery together with his neighbour, cutting down investment costs by half.

- it is essential to reason in terms of local district, in order to have a greater impact on public opinion and institutions; and you also create better synergies and agreements among producers.

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# Chapter 5: Come back to Home...





Now, at the end of his journey, John could say this much. That he had found earth brethren.

People who had understood that the things were not going the right way, that the earth was not something to submit to boundless exploitation and with one-way thinking, but was something to guard with great intelligence.

That working the land with conscience while thinking of selling with the parameters of the current farming system was something unthinkable, so new solutions were needed.

That relations should not only focus on profit, or on showing oneself to be better than somebody else. That cooperation did not necessarily mean creating cooperatives, but could also mean a shared agreement to sell, produce, share knowledge.

In his notes, he tried to sum up everything that seemed interesting and could be copied, to tell it to Brian and the people in the village.

- Transformation  
to add value to products, one needs to transform them, make them available to the consumer: the

suppliers of Terre di Loppiano had taken this step, and so had Agnes and Olav who had changed their gear, turning fruit into jam, distilled products, cider, apple juice

- Sales.

Building sales channels alternative to wholesalers in order to distribute their transformed products: in Europe there are hundreds of examples like those of Terre di Loppiano and of the Hungarian association Kamratúra

- Cooperation

sharing spaces, equipment, sales channels. One can no longer succeed in many things which, until

a few years ago, one could do by oneself. This means going beyond the idea of competition as we knew it until a short time ago, and developing agreements based on trust.

- multi-functionality

the way to communicate one's product has changed. One must communicate the experience of one's own farm, one must communicate one's own passion, letting it live directly to people, whether these be tourists, schools, customers.

Accessory economic activities must be well thought and gauged, in economic and logistic sustainability.

As Veraterra shows, in the logic of cooperation, one can set up synergies which do not force the farmer also to be a hotel keeper, teacher, sommelier, cook or anything else, at least not all these things at once.

Inside himself, John again thanked each of the people he had met, and gave a thought to Europe, hoping it could rethink its relations with its roots, with the earth, through the experiences of those who were not willing to give up, those who wanted to get to know those roots again, recognise them and get to know them in depth.

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An Irish farmer, he travelled to Europe to seek experiences and ideas that he could use to revive his small rural village.

He realized that his problems were the same as the friends he met in his travels around the world. Many people shared their stories, anxious to see them exported and reproduced.

Pietro Isolan, the son of a generation of farmers, has a passion to live by teaching, working and writing tales about the unity of man with nature as shown in a life lived through agriculture.