



A NEW LEAF

From left: Azalea with her manure bucket; varieties of baby lettuce in the greenhouse.



DOWN ON THE FARM

WHAT'S A FAMILY TO DO ON A SPRING DAY? PLANT POTATOES, NATURALLY. BETHANY SALTMAN DIGS IN

TThe night before our trip to Sisters Hill Farm, where we were heading to help plant onions, I laid out our outfits and checked the weather obsessively: 50s and windy. Could be worse. My husband, Thayer, tidied up loose ends from his psychotherapy practice so he could enjoy his day in the dirt, and Azalea, our 7-year-old daughter, set some Barbies aside, thinking they would like the trip. As for me, I was so focused on getting us all out the door in the morning, I didn't even stop to consider what the day actually might be like. But during our morning drive through the gentle hills of Dutchess County, N.Y. — the beautifully restored farmhouses, legions of horses, and family homes with estate-like names such as “Blue Fence” — I relaxed and got the feeling we were in for a treat.

I was right. When we turned onto Sisters Hill Road, we spotted the white farmhouse and the wide, empty fields. Not far off, a very tall guy rode an orange tractor against the pale sky. As we drove farther, I saw the tractor rider's face and wondered who he was. He looked frankly too happy to be a guy who

works in the dirt all day. And that pretty much defined our experience of planting at Sisters Hill Farm: sweet, welcoming — and not at all what we expected.

A stunning piece of property bequeathed to the Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul of New York by one Mrs. Mary Halloran in 1917, the nonprofit Sisters Hill Farm is supported by community members who, in return, share its weekly harvest. This is what is known as a CSA, or Community Supported Agriculture. And it means that lots of people help out at the farm — including participants from the Community Footprints program at The Ritz-Carlton New York, Central Park (see sidebar), among them the hotel's executive chef, Mark Arnao, who will use part of the bounty he's planting here in his Auden Bistro & Bar.

Passing the farmhouse, we drove closer to a little white outbuilding with big doors and pulled into the parking lot. As we got out of the car, Thayer, Azalea and I pulled up our hoods, bracing against what was, indeed, a windy day. The other farmers-for-a-day drove up, as did that happy tractor guy, whose name is David Hambleton, a farmer hired by the sisters in 1999 to cultivate their land. Smiling, he walked toward us and the others who had begun gathering and said, “The onions aren't here yet!” The three of us looked at each other,

FAMILY TRAVEL



I thought about farming and the way fresh food is returning to its rightful place in our lives.

GOOD EARTH

Clockwise from top left: The white building where the volunteers first gathered; Thayer, Azalea and Bethany make sure their potatoes are evenly spaced; one of the farm's tractors.

confused. We knew the day was supposed to be devoted to onion planting, but we hadn't considered the onions themselves. I'd had the vague assumption that the onions would be in seed form, but apparently I was wrong about that, too.

As we drank coffee and munched on pastries in the breezeway of the outbuilding, David explained that, while most of the vegetables grown on the farm are from seeds germinated in the greenhouse, others are planted as bulbs. That was the case with the onions, which had been shipped from Texas but had not made it into the early shipment — they were coming later. He told us that we would plant potatoes instead, holding up a long flat stick with evenly spaced marks on it. We would lay this stick alongside the tilled soil, and it would indicate where to place the fully

mature potatoes. Thayer loved listening to the nuts and bolts direction, and Azalea — like the rest of us — was ready to get started.

Our first stop? The flatbed-truck manure station. A few lucky ones got to stand on top of the pile, shoveling it into our buckets, which we carried into the field. Azalea lugged her bucket, Thayer and I helping as we grabbed our own. The three of us settled into a little plot, scattered the fertilizer, and planted purple potatoes, which eventually would sprout into potato plants. Lay the yardstick down, place the tater in the ground. Slide the stick. Remove hood. Look at sky. Listen to the quiet chatter of your fellow farmers. Repeat.

Kids love nothing more than doing something fun and getting attention while doing it. Azalea is not the earthiest kid in the world, but how could she not enjoy crouching in the dirt, tossing one of her favorite foods into the ground, both of her parents at her side, and surrounded by friendly folks? Even so, in an hour or two, she started singing random songs, talking to herself, rambling off into her play realm, asking to get her Barbies out of the car. We were losing her.

Looking around for ideas, I asked one of the farm's apprentices, Audrey Berman, if we could get a tour of the property. She got David's permission and away we went. Barbies stuffed in Azalea's pockets, we walked to the greenhouse, where we saw baby lettuces

FAMILY TRAVEL



BUCKET LIST

Clockwise from top left: Azalea and Thayer clearing the mice-friendly pile of brambles; young plants in the greenhouse; the potatoes ready to be planted.



COMMUNITY FOOTPRINTS

Community Footprints is a Ritz-Carlton social and environmental responsibility program that includes Give Back Getaways, experiences offered to guests who want to join employees in contributing to local communities. Options depend on the destination but include everything from working with an organization devoted to feeding the hungry and helping young people get ready for the workforce to working to save blue iguanas in Grand Cayman. For more information, visit givebackgetaways.com.

galore. Then we visited my first real-life root cellar (I mean, fairy house) before exploring the fields on the 5-acre property. Our last stop was the house where Audrey lives with the apprentices. She led us to a room that held the grand finale: a cardboard box of chicks. Warmed by a red light over their box, the wee things were adorableness incarnate. Azalea even got to pet a baby Rhode Island Red and other heritage, blue-egg-laying chicks. She was back.

And what do you know? When our tour was finished it was lunchtime. The three of us meandered over to the farmhouse, where the sisters live, and sat around their giant dining-room table enjoying our wraps and fruit and outrageously good M&M cookies.

After lunch, the work continued. David led us to a pile of brambles in the middle of the field — “a great home for mice,” he said. Which is why half of us loaded the branches into the back of a truck to be disposed of. Simultaneously, the other half crawled beneath some craggy bushes, hooking them

to a harness to be pulled out of the ground with a tractor. With no hesitation, everyone put their gloves on and dived in. I watched Azalea circle the pile, looking for a way in. And then I watched her find it.

On the way home late that afternoon, winding back the way we came, I thought about farming, and the way fresh food is returning to its rightful place in our lives. I entertained a passing fancy that maybe I could learn how to farm, but then I thought about our little home garden, and the zinnias Azalea loves, and the basil and the tomatoes. On bread. With salt. And then I thought that it is probably enough to just take better care of all that — the veggies, the meals, my little family — the way we all took care of Sisters Hill Farm that day.