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sustainable elements

OLD REBUILDING AN OLD BUILDING

Reggie Young remembers the time he and five workers were rebuilding a chimney high atop the four-story, 200-year-old Howard Hall farmhouse when a forceful gust of wind nearly swept them off the scaffolding. Straddling the two-by-fours and holding on for dear life, Young eyed the wide swath of the glittering Hudson River and thought it was the very last thing he'd see. Luckily, a momentary lull in the wind allowed everyone to descend safely.

Young, who heads up the **Howard Hall Restoration Group**, has been working to restore the 1812 Federal mansion in Athens (Greene County) for the last six years. He has caught the restoration trend sweeping both this country and overseas—a groundswell of people who want to know how to rebuild structures with materials that will last—materials that were used centuries ago before the “throw-away” culture took hold.

The stately white house sits on a hill overlooking a stretch of farmland, most of which is overgrown with young trees. The outside of the house brandishes ladders and scaffolding, evidence of the ongoing work. Howard Hall Farm has become what Young calls a “learning laboratory for restoration arts”—a Mecca for teaching people how to use sustainable building materials. “There is a movement out there of people who are fascinated with the

techniques of how historic buildings were built,” Young says. “Our classes have attracted people from as far away as Ohio, and many folks living in Brooklyn brownstones. They all seem to be gravitating toward building for sustainability.”

The main ingredient in the restoration recipe is lime in its many incarnations: lime mortar, lime washes, lime plaster. Walk inside the grand farmhouse and the seeming incandescence of the lime-plastered walls is striking. The subtle, multi-dimensionality breathes a solid essence of ‘place’ and speaks to the labor-intensive process that is being retrieved from a millennia of building history. In its day, lime



Date: Mar 1, 2011; Section: Sustainable Elements; Page: 18

mortar was used because it lasted centuries—think Parthenon, Great Wall of China and medieval European castles.

Even though the lime is expensive, Young orders his in 55-gallon drums from places like Virginia Lime Works, and he likens the process of creating plaster to an alchemist's brew. The lime is cooked or baked in lime kilns and ends up as hot putty known as slag or slurry. "In the old days, they would cover the pits of lime slurry and come back in a year," Young explains. "The impurities went to the bottom; the purest layers would rise to the top and would be saved for the final coat of plaster because it's thin, light and pure."

Because lime needs water and oxygen to cure, Young says people restoring 12-inch walls in European castles find that 1,000 years later, the innermost walls are still wet. "It's very sticky and holds everything together. It allows the building to move and breath," Young says.

Understanding the long, arduous process of curing lime and its different applications is contrary to the twentieth century's shift away from sustainable building. The advent of cement ushered in the age of modular construction, complete with readymade homes and offices answering the demand for "new and better." The tried-and-true materials and old techniques fell by the wayside.

In the long run, Young says, it doesn't pay to use materials that will soon deteriorate and have to be replaced. "Cement can't drain or breathe. It's very brittle and it literally crushes the brick," he emphasizes. "It's now crushing the fabric of our cities."

To date, intensive work at Howard Hall Farm has seen several tons of sand and lime putty go into pointing and rebuilding exterior walls. Almost all interior walls have been



replastered. Some 40 coats of lead paint have been stripped off of original window sashes that frame the old, textured cylinder-glass windowpanes. All the lead paint has been removed and the trim restored. A Federal staircase has been torn out and replaced by a Victorian version. Artist Nora Johnson, a partner at the Howard Hall project, has just completed an entryway mural of gracefully arching trees. Professional plasterer Robert Dickson is working on restoring and rebuilding ceiling molding—a laborious process of slathering on different consistencies of lime mortar. When completed, a lofty, multi-tiered border will frame the rooms.

In the planning stages, and shadowing the use of sustainable materials, are green solutions such as co-generation heating and soy-foam insulation. All the work inspires Young to intone the famous eighteenth-century English essayist and critic John Ruskin on how to build forever:

When we build, let us think that we build forever. Let it be such work as our descendants will thank us for; and let us think, as we lay stone on stone, that a time is to come when those stones will be held sacred because our hands touched them, and that men will say, as they look upon the labor and wrought substance of them, 'See! This our fathers did for us.'

"Restoration work is almost the same as cooking, especially when you work on paint and pigments and how they are suspended in the medium," Young says. "It's fascinating to watch."



Date: Mar 1, 2011; Section: Sustainable Elements; Page: 19

To that end, Howard Hall Farm is gearing up for a new spring and summer season of classes that may include open-hearth cooking and cooking in the beehive oven, heirloom gardening, seed saving, organic beekeeping, historic paints and decorative faux-finish techniques (graining, lime washing, stenciling), traditional sheep shearing, re-pointing and rebuilding stone, historic lime mortar training.

The cooking component is motivated by Young's early professional experience in New York City's high-profile eateries. Now that his business of restoring homes and mansions up and down the Hudson River is thriving, his dream is to put Old World culinary traditions under the roof of a beautifully restored building. For Young, the ultimate class at Howard Hall would be learning to make chocolate paint (followed by creating a dish of chocolate chicken molé).

"We're planning a whole series of weekend events where people can come and learn, have a lecture and a meal that's all part of a package. It's so amazing to look out over the Hudson and experience the house in that way." —AL

Howard Hall Farm
84 Howard Hall Rd., Athens
(518) 945-1253; howardhallfarm.com

BABY STEPS TO NEW BABY FOOD

It's the flourishing age of the "green" baby. Increasingly, parents are recoiling at the prospect of feeding their babies food tainted with questionable ingredients. Instead, they are opting for organic baby food—sans additives or preservatives—making it one of the fastest growing food trends in the country. Not surprisingly, this popularity has attracted the attention of major natural food companies. To appeal to a mass market, the large companies have created lines of baby food using established stocks of organically grown vegetables and fruits from certified farms across the country. Missing, though, was the magic word: *local*.

Enter **Megan Fells**, chef and co-owner of the **The Artist's Palate** in Poughkeepsie. Fells had her first baby, Olivia, last spring. During her pregnancy, she indulged in the usual rash of baby showers where healthy baby food headlined the conversations.

"We all talked about the new French food processor—a steamer and blender all in one. It costs about \$2,000 and we all were eager to get it," Fells recalls. But the equipment was encumbered with too many parts, including numerous strainers and containers. "Where are you supposed to put all this stuff in your kitchen?" she wondered.

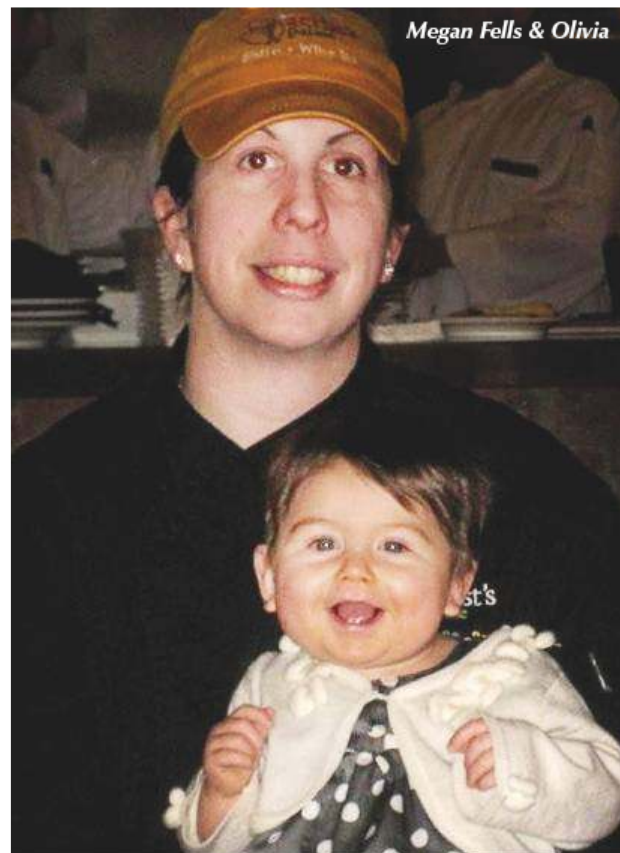
Fells and many of her expectant friends were working professionals and, although they had the money to spend on a food-making machine, there was an important commodity they didn't have: time. Fells works a 12- to 14-hour day, six days a week at the restaurant, and she realized that even if she owned the best equipment in the world to make organic baby food, it would be useless if

she didn't have the time to use it. "There's really very few options out there for moms who work—single moms or professional persons who are head of the household," Fells says. "There has to be a way to make food for the whole week, freeze it, thaw it, serve it. Unless you're a stay-at-home mom, there's no way you would have the time to do all of this."

Fells scoured the supermarket baby food aisles but wasn't impressed with what she found. "The options are pretty grim," she says. "Vegetables are cooked at such high temperatures to maintain shelf life, the goodness is cooked right out of them. Then vitamins and minerals are added. Others are just sugar and water."

Fells researched organic baby foods sold by large and small natural food companies. On a small scale, she found that organic baby food marketing could be risky business: Startups, especially those headed by working moms like Fells, were on the web one day and gone the next.

When Olivia started eating solids, Fells began puréeing various foods and food combinations—offering her home-kitchen creations to her daughter only if they tasted good to her first.



Fells came up with a modest business plan: **Baby Palate**, aimed at the greater Poughkeepsie community and initially marketed through the restaurant. "The restaurant is a good place to start because the majority of our customers have kids," she explains. "I'm thinking about offering home delivery in certain areas, or folks can pick up the baby food at the restaurant."

Date: Mar 1, 2011; Section: Sustainable Elements; Page: 20

Fells plans to reach out to local retailers selling baby items like clothes and toys, as well as to area pediatricians. "I want to start a following with customers based in this area and see how the demand goes," she says. "From the get-go, it will be real *local*, not a huge, mass-produced product. Then we can move toward selling the baby food online and shipping it. I'm exploring many options."

So far, prospects look good. Fells is working on a weekly menu for her baby food and expects to come up with a list of assorted, packaged baby food as a test. Combinations include organic quinoa and rice (a complete protein); apples and butternut squash; and similar variations of all-in-one vegetables and fruit. —AL

Chef Megan Fells
Artist's Palate / Baby Palate
307 Main St., Poughkeepsie
(845) 483-8074; theartistspalate.biz