

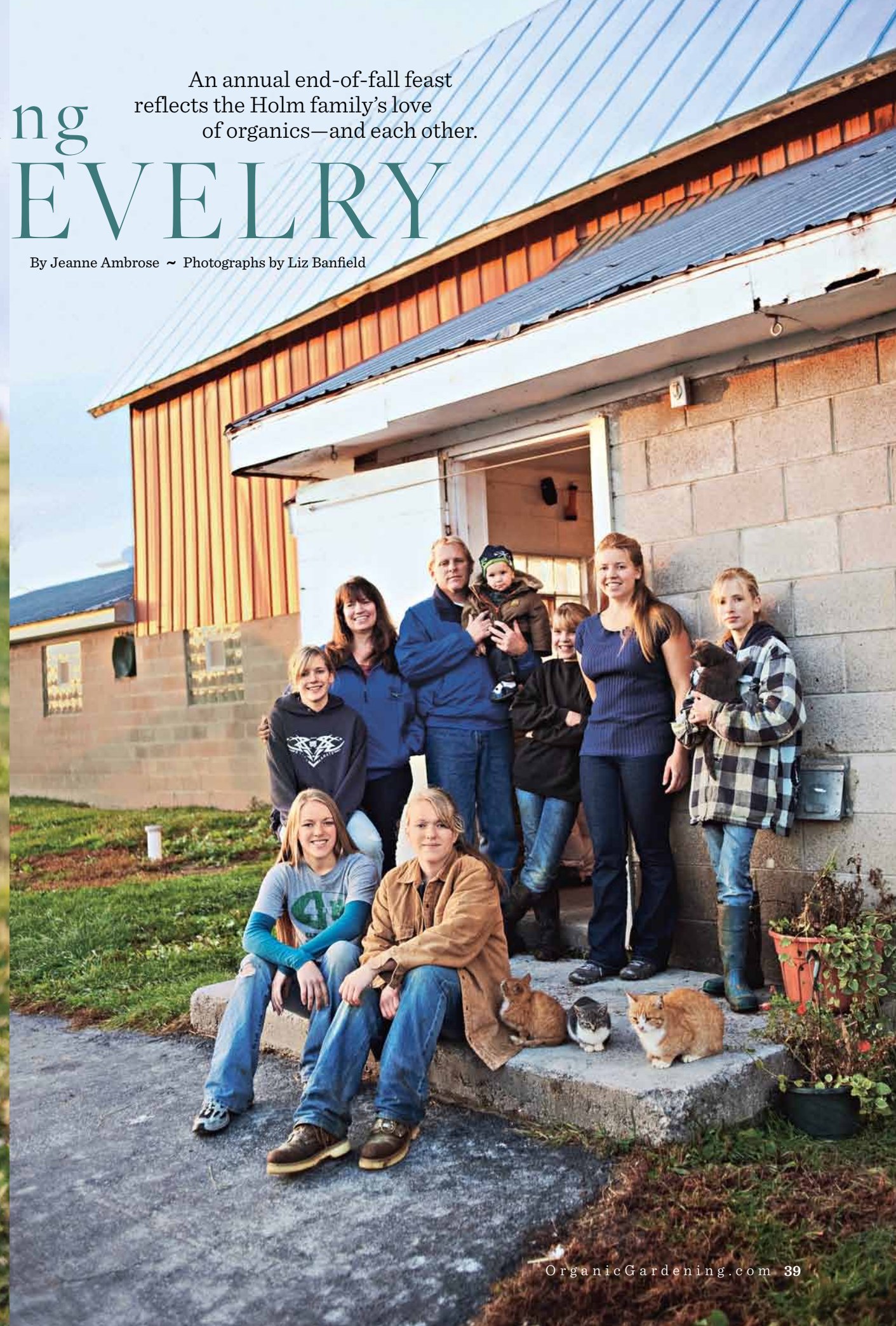
Opposite page: The Holms and four-footed friends pose outside the milking barn. Standing, left to right: Mary, Mariann, Doran (holding Daniel), Rachel, Sarah, and Laura. Seated: Andrea (left) and Erika.



sibling REVELRY

An annual end-of-fall feast reflects the Holm family's love of organics—and each other.

By Jeanne Ambrose ~ Photographs by Liz Banfield



Watching the nine-member Holm family prepare dinner in their kitchen is like witnessing a graceful ballet on a crowded subway platform. The dance, fine-tuned by years of practice, takes place in a modestly sized farm kitchen, one made smaller by an

8-foot table squeezed in for the sharing of meals.

Today's performance is the annual late fall harvest feast—a collaborative effort of the six sisters, ages 11 through 19, one underfoot baby brother, and parents Mariann and Doran Holm. The fluid teamwork in the kitchen mimics that of the organic dairy farm run by the girls. Yes, the girls: Holm Girls Dairy, in Elk Mound, Wisconsin, is run by the sisters with occasional input from their parents. (Eighteen-month-old Daniel, the youngest addition to the family, is not yet a member of the human resources team, but when he is 3, he'll be able to hold the bottle used to feed a newborn calf.)

With about 70 head of cattle to manage, including 35 cows to milk, the girls are amazingly organized despite their easygoing, youthful demeanors. It's obvious that they have a higher calling: organic living. "It's become a huge part of our lives," says eldest daughter Sarah, 19, a junior at the University of Wisconsin at Eau Claire. "It isn't the obsession of eating [organic], but more the enjoyment of learning how and what to eat, and why. Our family goes to great lengths to make real chicken soup, starting with raising the chicken." And with that, the raising and eating of food from the farm is deeply fulfilling.

Farm-Fresh Idea

The idea for the Holm farm got its start about 13 years ago in Newport Beach, California. At the time, Doran had a high-profile sales job covering a seven-state region that kept him on the road more often than he liked. On one rare evening at home, he was reading a bedtime story about farm life, *All the Places to Love* by Patricia MacLachlan, when Sarah, then 6 years old, asked, "Daddy, can we have a farm?"

The question was one that her father had often asked himself. Doran, who had worked on a dairy farm while in high school, had dreams of running a family business. A farm seemed to be the ideal option.

Seizing the inspiration, Doran contacted his father in Wisconsin and asked him to be on the lookout for farmland. And when a 100-acre farm became available, 75 miles east of St. Paul, Minnesota, Doran and Mariann bought it. Such an opportunity also seemed like divine providence: Doran's father's family had settled in that very same area after moving to America from Norway, and his company, based in Minnesota, happily transferred him back to the Midwest.

Doran's plan was to milk cows and replace the grueling road trips with family time. Mariann's plan, she says, "was just to get out of L.A." Thus the family business took root. Doran now works for Organic Valley, helping other farmers transition to organics. The family dairy is also a member of the Organic Valley Family of



Clockwise from top left: Doran Holm holds Daniel in the milking barn, which isn't far from the family's warm and welcoming farmhouse. For their annual harvest feast, the Holm sisters (Erika, Andrea, and Laura, right, and Sarah, opposite) add fall flair to the table and prepare a meal of thanks, one reflecting an organic lifestyle.

Farms, the nation's largest farmer-owned organic cooperative.

"We wanted something where we could work together as a family," Mariann says, adding that at the time, "we had six girls under the age of 10." The Holms bought cows and eventually decided to become certified organic. Now, she says, "Our mission is to have a financially and environmentally sustainable family business where all of us can apply our unique talents to the good of the family and the farm."

One of the first lessons that Mariann learned, which spurred the decision to become an organic operation, occurred when a veterinarian advised her about the chemicals necessary to worm the cattle and keep away flies. "It freaked me out," she says. "If it kills everything inside the cow, how can it not affect the milk?" As an alternative to chemicals for fly control in the summer, the girls spray the barn and cows with essential oils, including lavender mixed with mineral oil.

Like their sister Sarah, Andrea and Erika, 18-year-old twins, also attend the University of Wisconsin at Eau Claire. And all of the girls either are being or have been homeschooled. Explains Mariann, "The farm is a living laboratory full of lessons in science, chemistry, and biology." But Sarah would add another subject: politics. "I really have farming to thank for my continued interest in it," says the political science major. "Nothing is more controversial than food, nothing is more important than food, and nothing is more messed up in our political system than our policy toward and our understanding of food." It makes sense, then, that her long-term goal would be to "go to law school, farm, write a book, have a big family, and rewrite the Farm Bill," she says. For Erika, on the other hand, it's to one day open a restaurant on the farm.

Reaping the Rewards

To celebrate their commitment to farm life and all things organic, the girls on this day are hastily putting the finishing touches on their harvest feast. An organic spinach and romaine salad is topped with organic feta cheese and dried cranberries. Simply steamed rainbow chard—from their garden—is dabbled with pats of organic butter. Roasted squash and sweet potatoes are drizzled with organic honey. Dessert—a streusel-topped pumpkin pie—contains organic flour, butter, and pumpkin. Even the whipped cream they serve with the pie is organic and flavored with a sprinkling of cinnamon.

"When I was little, I used to pride myself because I was not a picky eater," Sarah says. "Now I find it's the opposite. If the food isn't 'real food' that is organic and unprocessed, I simply don't want to eat it."

As they do on the farm, the girls pitch in at each mealtime. Andrea, Erika, and Mary are the chief pie bakers, while Sarah loves making salads and vegetable dishes. And no one can resist being creative in the kitchen. Leave the girls to their own devices, and the countertops are soon covered with ingredients and open cookbooks as they try out new dishes.

"At one point, Sarah was making pickles in her bedroom and sauerkraut on her desk," Mariann says. "Sometimes you've just got to resist yelling and let them experiment."

Beyond the farm, the sisters experiment with life's offerings in other ways. They often travel the country for 4-H events, participate in community activities, and take voice lessons. The older girls sing at various regional functions and, quite simply, whenever they have the chance. Like just before the harvest dinner begins. It's not surprising that they all sing the blessing—in perfect harmony. •



Opposite: The sisters take turns ushering the cows home for milking. **Above:** The Holm family gathers for a special harvest meal. Each sister had a hand in preparing the food, including a specialty dish made from locally sourced produce and their own dairy.

Cranberry, Feta, and Walnut Salad

2 to 3 cups spinach leaves
1 large head romaine lettuce, torn into bite-size pieces
1 cup dried cranberries
4 ounces feta cheese
2 cups coarsely chopped Crispy Walnuts (recipe at right)
Honey Mustard Dressing (recipe at right)

1. In a large bowl, combine the spinach, lettuce, cranberries, cheese, and Crispy Walnuts.
2. Drizzle with about $\frac{1}{4}$ cup Honey Mustard Dressing. Toss to coat, and serve.

Makes 4 to 6 servings

Crispy Walnuts

4 cups walnut pieces
1 teaspoon sea salt

1. In a large bowl, combine the walnut pieces, sea salt, and just enough water to cover the nuts. Cover and let stand overnight.
2. Preheat the oven to 150°F.
3. Drain the water from the nuts and spread them on a baking pan. Bake for 12 to 24 hours, stirring occasionally, or until dry and crisp. Store in an airtight container.

Makes 4 cups

Honey Mustard Dressing

2 tablespoons balsamic vinegar
1 tablespoon honey
1 teaspoon Dijon mustard
 $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
 $\frac{1}{4}$ cup olive oil

1. In a small bowl, whisk together the vinegar, honey, mustard, and pepper.
2. Slowly add the olive oil, whisking until combined. Keep refrigerated until ready to use.

Makes about $\frac{1}{2}$ cup



Sweet Blessings Squash

2 tablespoons salted butter, melted
1 pound sweet potatoes, cut into 1-inch pieces
1 pound acorn squash, peeled, seeded, and cut into 1-inch pieces
1 large onion, chopped (optional)
½ cup dried cranberries
1 tablespoon honey
1 teaspoon granulated sugar
1 teaspoon ground cinnamon

1. Preheat the oven to 375°F.
2. Pour the melted butter into a 13×9×2-inch pan. Add the sweet potatoes and cover pan with foil. Bake for 15 minutes.
3. Remove the foil and add the squash, onion (if desired), cranberries, honey, sugar, and cinnamon. Stir to combine.
4. Bake, uncovered, for 35 to 40 minutes, or until vegetables are tender.

Makes 6 servings



Piecrust Pointers

The Holm sisters offer a few simple steps to creating an easy-to-handle, flaky piecrust—one of their specialties of the house.

- Use very cold butter to cut into the flour. Use ice-cold water, too.
- Before rolling out the pastry, pat it into a disc shape, cover it in plastic wrap, and refrigerate it for 20 minutes or more. It will be easier to roll out after chilling. (If leaving the dough in the refrigerator more than 20 minutes, let stand at room temperature for 10 minutes.)
- To transfer pastry dough to the pie plate, loosely wrap it around the rolling pin, then unroll it over the plate, easing the pastry dough into the plate. Avoid stretching or tugging the dough in place, since that may cause it to shrink as it bakes.
- Leave an extra ½-to-1-inch pastry overhang to fold into a thick edge that can be fluted with your fingers or the tines of a fork.
- If the crust edge browns too quickly, cover it with a curled strip of foil.

Left: Sweet Blessings Squash shows off roasted acorn squash and sweet potatoes. **Above:** Erika eases Ginger Pastry into the pie plate before Andrea (opposite) pours the pumpkin filling into the partially baked crust. Then comes the streusel-topped finale: Knock-Your-Socks-Off Pumpkin Pie.

Knock-Your-Socks-Off Pumpkin Pie

Ginger Pastry (recipe at right)
1 (15-ounce) can pumpkin
1½ cups heavy whipping cream
½ cup sugar
3 large eggs
3 tablespoons honey
1½ teaspoons ground cinnamon
¼ teaspoon ground cloves
¼ teaspoon ground allspice
¼ teaspoon nutmeg
¼ teaspoon salt
Streusel Topping (recipe at right)
Whipped cream (optional)

1. Preheat the oven to 350°F.
2. On a floured surface, roll the Ginger Pastry into a 12-inch circle. Transfer to a 9-inch pie plate. Trim the pastry to 1 inch beyond the pie plate. Fold the edges under the crust. Crimp decoratively, forming a high-standing crust (about ½ inch above the rim of the dish). Freeze for 15 minutes.
3. Line the crust with foil and then fill with pie weights (dried beans work well). Bake 10 minutes. Remove the foil and beans and bake another 10 minutes, or until the crust is set and light golden brown. Cool on a wire rack.
4. In a large bowl, whisk together the pumpkin, 1½ cups heavy whipping cream, sugar, eggs, honey, cinnamon, cloves, allspice, nutmeg, and salt until thoroughly combined. Pour into the prebaked piecrust.
5. Bake for about 50 minutes or until the filling begins to set. Remove from the oven and let stand for 10 minutes to set slightly. Meanwhile, make the Streusel Topping. Sprinkle the topping over the pie. Return the pie to the hot oven. Bake for 10 to 20 minutes more or until the pie is set and the streusel is golden brown. Serve with whipped cream, if desired.

Makes 1 (9-inch) pie



Ginger Pastry

1½ cups all-purpose flour
2 tablespoons sugar
2 tablespoons fresh gingerroot, peeled and minced
¼ teaspoon ground allspice
¼ teaspoon salt
½ cup cold unsalted butter
1 egg yolk
2 tablespoons ice-cold water, plus more as needed

1. In a large bowl, stir together the flour, sugar, gingerroot, allspice, and salt.
2. Using a pastry blender, cut in the butter until the mixture resembles coarse meal.
3. In a small bowl, combine the egg yolk with 2 tablespoons water.
4. Add the yolk mixture to the flour mixture and toss with a fork until the mixture forms moist clumps. (Add additional cold water, 1 teaspoon at a time, if the dough is too dry.)
5. Form the dough into a ball and flatten into a disk. Wrap in plastic wrap and chill for 20 minutes or up to 24 hours. Allow the dough to sit at room temperature about 10 minutes before rolling into a piecrust.

Makes 1 (9-inch) piecrust

Streusel Topping

1 cup all-purpose flour
⅓ cup brown sugar
1 teaspoon ground ginger
½ cup cold, unsalted butter
¾ cup pecans, chopped
⅓ cup crystallized ginger, finely chopped

1. In a medium bowl, combine the flour, brown sugar, and ground ginger.
2. Using a pastry blender, cut in the butter until the mixture resembles coarse crumbs. Stir in the chopped pecans and crystallized ginger. Sprinkle the topping over the pie as directed in the pie recipe.

Makes about 2½ cups

