



**The alternatives**

## **‘We’re not hippies’: why these Iowa farmers swapped pigs for mushrooms**

**Faaborgs rail against  
oppressive industrial  
agricultural system with  
unexpected evolution into  
indie artisan food firm**

**By Tom Duggins**

**A**s a sixth-generation Iowa farmer, Tanner Faaborg is all too aware that agricultural traditions are hard to shake. So when he set in motion plans to change his family’s farm from a livestock operation housing more than 8,000 pigs each year to one that grows lion’s mane and oyster mushrooms, he knew some of his peers might laugh at him. He just did not necessarily expect his brother to be chief among them.

“My older brother has worked with pigs his entire adult life, managing about 70,000 of them across five counties,” Faaborg says. “But we got to a point where he went from laughing at me to saying: well, I guess maybe I’ll quit my job and help you out.”

“Now he’s the most dedicated,” says Katherine Jernigan, director of the Transformation Project at Mercy for Animals, a non-profit that helped the Faaborgs make the switch and set up their new business, [1100 Farm](#). “He’s the most in tune with which mushrooms are growing well.”

Set up in 2019, the Transformation Project works with farms across the US that want to ditch industrial animal agriculture, which is typically done as contract work on behalf of big meat companies, and move toward a sustainable, fully independent business model.



From left: Tammy, Rand, Tanner and Tyler Faaborg. Photograph: 1100 farm

They provide guidance on how to repurpose existing infrastructure for different

crops, but also business advice on how to find the market, set up a website, establish a brand and sell directly to consumers. They also provide research and innovation grants that can help with the finances of making the transition. The Faaborgs now use their crop of functional mushrooms to create products such as tinctures and salts that are sold directly to consumers online.

The idea is to move beyond a form of intensive farming that has a hugely detrimental impact on the environment, but also to protect the farmers themselves, many of whom find that the concentrated animal-feeding operation (Cafo) model takes a toll on their mental health. In that regard, the Faaborgs' story is quite typical of a sector in which agricultural consolidation has had a negative impact on individuals and communities.

“We used to have all these independent farms,” Faaborg says, “but people with money felt it was important to own every facet of the operation. Own the pigs, own the feed, own the distribution lines, but then contract out the work.



The farm now produces exotic mushroom varieties such as pink oyster. Photograph: 1100 farm

“Our family used to have this homesteading lifestyle with some chickens and a big

orchard, where we would go out and collect eggs in the morning, really living off the land ... every animal had a name, we enjoyed the chores, harvesting, picking weeds.”

That changed for the Faaborgs about 30 years ago when someone from one of the big meat companies knocked on their door. They were offered loans in order to build several large hog barns and adopt the Cafo model. The plan was to pay back the money over a decade and then have a higher household income. However, it came with a different, non-financial cost.

“It became more: we have an employer, we have a job, we have to go out there and do these things to collect this check, to pay the bills and pay back the loan. That takes a toll on your mental health. It changes how you feel. It takes away your sense of pride and self-worth.”





A rack of lion's mane mushrooms. Photograph: 1100 farm

Government figures suggest that about 10 years ago, the population of rural, small-town America first **began to decline**, with young people increasingly moving to urban areas for economic opportunities. Many farmers that the Transformation Project speak to have found themselves struggling with the large amounts of debt taken on in the Cafo model, which can become unmanageable. Much of their work lies in showing that a different model is possible, closer to the autonomy of old.

“The bigger picture is not just to transition individual farms but to show that a different system is possible,” Jernigan says. “We hear from farmers who are in despair: they feel they are bad farmers or have done something wrong. But helping them see they are part of this system where it’s almost impossible for them to succeed ... I can’t state how far that goes in helping them understand there are solutions out there.”

For the Faaborgs, the switch has made them feel excited about their work and its connection to nature. They want others to know that a different future is possible.

“Our family is not a likely candidate for this story and for this success,” Faaborg says. “We’re not like a hippy family, or a rich family who had spare money and said: ‘Yeah, this will be fun.’ My dad was a welder for about 40 years. We had the hog barns for more than 30 years. My parents were not into change. But if our family can do it, any family can do it.”