

66 ALISSA HESSLER
RUNS HER WEBSITE,
URBANEXODUS
.COM, FROM THIS
FARMHOUSE NEAR
CAMDEN, ME.



features

56 HARNESS THE POWER OF DRAFT HORSES

Tractors may offer an easier way to plow a field, but they won't love you back. Earth-friendly and emotionally rewarding, equine-fueled agriculture is experiencing a renaissance. *by Brian Barth*

66 THE (NOT SO) SIMPLE LIFE

How a successful Seattle PR executive fell hard for an East Coast photographer and traded city sophistication for 18 rugged New England acres, which incubated her addictive, ag-centric website, *urbanexodus.com*. *by Sara Morrow*

76 THE OUTSIZE IMPORTANCE OF THE TINY ORGANIC SEED

A benefit in California Wine Country honors our nation's public plant breeders—by putting their work on the plate. *by Rachel Levin*

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Canadian photographer Richard Johnson sheds light on his country's preferred winter pastime (sorry, hockey!), one funky fish shack at a time. *by Brian Barth*

the (not so) simple life

how a successful
Seattle PR executive



fell hard for a
Brooklyn photographer,



with real estate in
remote Maine,



and traded city sophistication for
18 rugged New England acres
that incubated her addictive, ag-centric
website, *urbanexodus.com*.

BY SARA MORROW

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALISSA AND JACOB HESSLER

THIS PAGE Alissa and
Jacob Hessler
converted this 1877
barn into a photo studio
and office for their
boutique creative agency.
OPPOSITE The couple,
with terrier mix Dottie,
displayed this update
of Grant Wood's *American
Gothic* at their wedding
reception.



THE DAY ALISSA MORRIS met her future husband, Brooklyn-based art photographer Jacob Hessler, in early September of 2012, he had signed the mortgage on a quaint farmhouse near Camden, Maine. "I was in New York on a business trip, and a mutual friend of ours invited me to a party," recalls Alissa, then a public relations project manager in Seattle. "We started talking, and before we knew it, it was 4:30 in the morning." A few weeks later, she flew back east to visit his new old home, a 1905 cottage on 18 acres with stone-bordered vegetable beds and apple and pear orchards. "It felt like the farms I'd seen in storybooks."

Fast-forward five months, and the California native had impulsively quit her job, uprooted her life, and followed her heart to Maine. Coastal Maine. In the dead of winter. With zero career prospects. "I knew I had to be with this person," Alissa explains, "but I had no concept of the hardships." The culture shock was immediate. Panic soon followed. "Coming from a world where you associate your identity with your job title, I was at a loss. I couldn't tell people what I did anymore." She and Jacob both



Alissa fashioned the living room's coffee table, painting a tree-trunk slice silver and setting it atop metal legs. Jacob's photo of California's Death Valley hangs above a hand-me-down console.



Jacob heads upstairs after plowing the driveway. "Last year, we spent Valentine's Day on our roof shoveling off four feet of accumulated snow," Alissa says, referencing country life's less-romantic realities.

ES

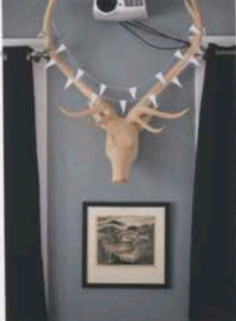
RIGHT A wedding gift, this carved-wood stag head supports a strand of mini felt bunting. Jacob's stepfather unearthed the woodcut of the couple's property, by Maine artist Carroll Thayer Berry, at an estate sale. FAR RIGHT Among the few possessions Alissa brought from Seattle: this midcentury dining set, a \$100 Craigslist bargain.

ES

Alissa updated a cheap 1970s kit clock, scored at the Maine Antiques Festival, with black chalkboard paint. A hidden liquor stash lurks inside.

D

Dottie dons a snappy red scarf to survey the snowfall.



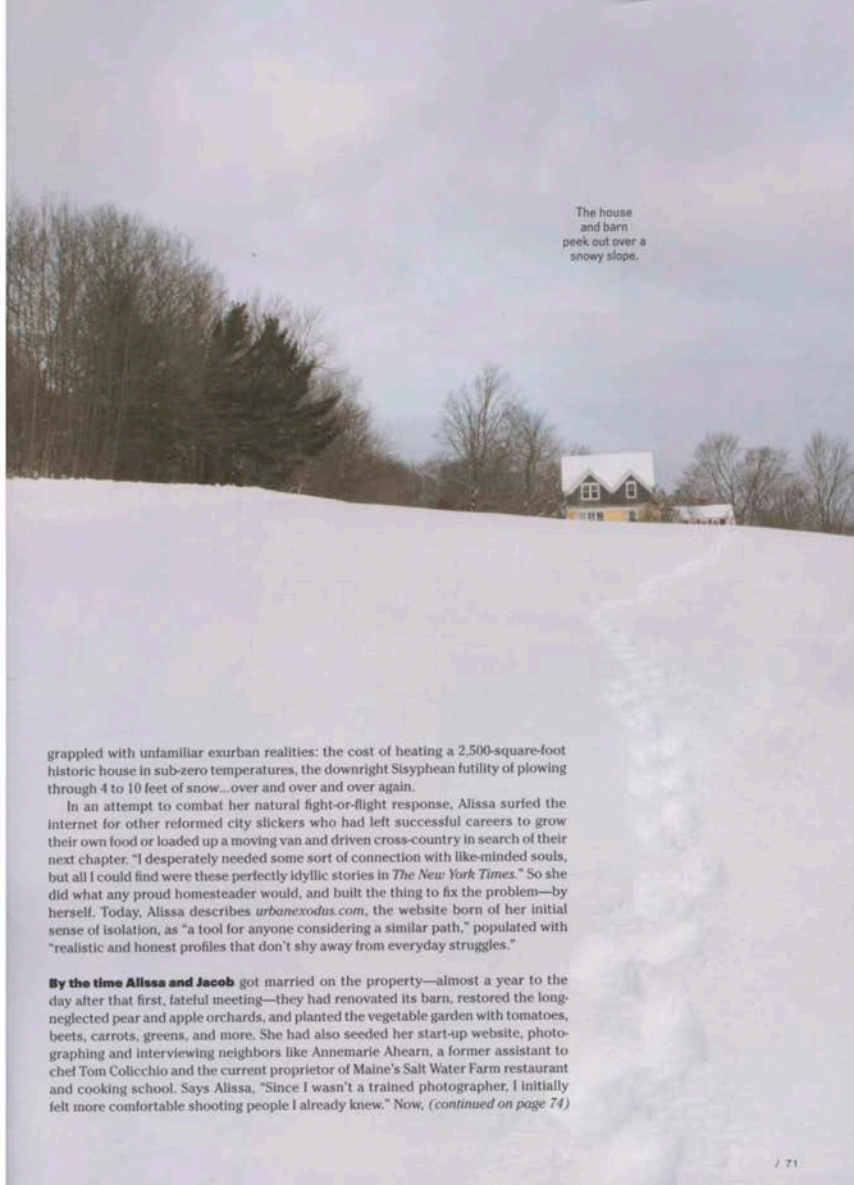


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The farm's former owners, both architects, updated the kitchen, with its huge soapstone sink and latching cabinets.

The barn was in rough shape when Alissa and Jacob arrived. They ripped out the hayloft and cattle stalls, replaced the rotten wood floor with poured concrete, and insulated the whole shebang. Now the couple's office and photo studio, the space also hosted their wedding reception.



The house and barn peek out over a snowy slope.



grappled with unfamiliar exurban realities: the cost of heating a 2,500-square-foot historic house in sub-zero temperatures, the downright Sisyphean futility of plowing through 4 to 10 feet of snow...over and over and over again.

In an attempt to combat her natural fight-or-flight response, Alissa surfed the internet for other reformed city slickers who had left successful careers to grow their own food or loaded up a moving van and driven cross-country in search of their next chapter. "I desperately needed some sort of connection with like-minded souls, but all I could find were these perfectly idyllic stories in *The New York Times*." So she did what any proud homesteader would, and built the thing to fix the problem—by herself. Today, Alissa describes *urbanexodus.com*, the website born of her initial sense of isolation, as "a tool for anyone considering a similar path," populated with "realistic and honest profiles that don't shy away from everyday struggles."

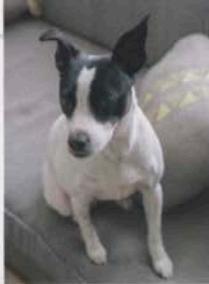
By the time Alissa and Jacob got married on the property—almost a year to the day after that first, fateful meeting—they had renovated its barn, restored the long-neglected pear and apple orchards, and planted the vegetable garden with tomatoes, beets, carrots, greens, and more. She had also seeded her start-up website, photographing and interviewing neighbors like Annemarie Ahearn, a former assistant to chef Tom Colicchio and the current proprietor of Maine's Salt Water Farm restaurant and cooking school. Says Alissa, "Since I wasn't a trained photographer, I initially felt more comfortable shooting people I already knew." Now, (continued on page 74)

A black and white photograph of a winter landscape. In the foreground, a large, gnarled, leafless tree stands prominently, its branches heavily laden with snow. The ground is covered in a thick layer of snow. In the background, other bare trees are visible, their forms softened by a light mist or fog. The overall atmosphere is quiet and serene.

Of the orchard's
century-old pear trees,
Alissa says: "Jake
remembers seeing them
from the road
as a boy growing up here,
thinking they were
creepy, in a
Tim Burton way, but
beautiful."

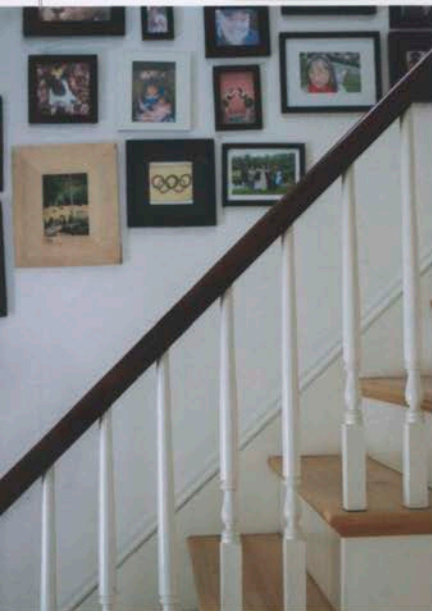
Alissa nabbed this master bedroom lamp at T.J. Maxx in Rockland, ME.

A gallery of family photos adorns the stairwell.



"Dottie only sits on the nicest things we own," says Alissa.

The candelabrum was a gift from the home's previous owners; the porcelain glove mold, part of Jacob's hand collection.



(continued from page 71) she travels around the country collecting tales of other professionals who've headed for the hills, detailing the inevitable low points (tomato blight, porcine eye infections) and highlights (weekday-afternoon hikes, control over your quality of life) on urbanexodus.com. Often, Jacob and the couple's rescue dog, Dottie, come along for the ride. In remote areas, the Hesslers, who also host photography workshops and run a boutique creative agency, will often bunk with subjects.

"We drink whiskey together at night, have coffee in the morning, and help with chores," Alissa says. While everyone's experience is different, one thread finds its way into each interview: "I always ask if they'd ever go back to their old city life." Across the board, the answer is a resounding no. "People are starting to realize that they're detached from their food, priced out of real estate, and can't obtain any sort of American dream unless they make a major move." 🍷



"I'm like a cat in here all winter long," says Alissa of the living room and its abundant natural light. She and Jacob got the sofa from Ikea; the glass-topped coffee table came from his parents.