

The Soil Sisters experts include, from left, Lisa Kivirist, Cara Carper, Kriss Marion, Peg Sheaffer, and Jen Riemer. They teach other women about raising livestock and setting up farm stays.



# Soil Sisters

A group of female farmers in Wisconsin gathers each summer to host others for a weekend of farm tours, tastings, and inspiration.

Written by Maggie Ginsberg, Ann Hinga Klein, and Lisa Kivirist | Photography by Bob Stefko



LEFT: In Wisconsin, known as America's Dairyland, cows outnumber people 2 to 1. ABOVE: Soil Sisters weekend participants can meet free-range chickens and other farm animals. BELOW: Soil Sisters culinary events showcase the bounty of summer vegetables. Visitors can shop at on-site farm stands.



### A blue sky spills clouds over the Wisconsin farm, casting shadows over rows of vegetables.

Nearby, 50 women seated in lawn chairs and at picnic tables scribble notes as Lisa Kivistik speaks outside her farmhouse near Browntown. Some students are small-towners with big gardens and dreams of selling homemade pickles and preserves. Others are rural neighbors seeking organic certification or looking to learn the business of farm stays—one of the ways Lisa and her husband, John Ivanko, make their living at Inn Serendipity Farm and Bed-and-Breakfast. Still others have made the drive from Milwaukee or Chicago, each about two hours east, with a question that they might not even ask out loud yet: Could they leave their day jobs behind and make a living in the country?

If anyone knows the answer, it would be one of the Soil Sisters—more than 150 women who raise livestock

and crops in the hilly land of south central Wisconsin. And this workshop, aptly titled *In Her Boots*, opens an annual three-day showcase of what they do best.

For most of the 1,000 visitors to Soil Sisters weekend (August 3–5 this year), the event is a hands-on extravaganza. You can collect eggs with a family that raises free-range chickens near Browntown or pull into the drive just after the goats have been fed at Scotch Hill Farm near Brodhead, where you'll bake up savory biscuits using organic flours and Wisconsin cheese. Three towns over, you can meet the docile heritage pigs that Soil Sister April Prusia raises on a pastured prairie near Blanchardville.

Lisa found herself in a unique place in agricultural history when she and John gave up advertising careers



ABOVE: Even the music celebrates local talent; Bob and Peg Cullen team up with farmers Kriss Marion and Cara Carper in the MooGrass band. LEFT: Over 25 workshops, including how to make cheese or fizzy fermented beverages, are offered during the Soil Sisters weekend. BELOW: Kids are welcome, too; they love bonding with the farm animals.



in Chicago to move to rural Wisconsin in 1997. As Lisa outlines in her book, *Soil Sisters: A Toolkit for Women Farmers*, farms across the country were consolidating then. But a separate movement was growing in which women were taking up farming in record numbers. The rolling terrain of Wisconsin's Driftless Area—unsuitable for large-scale agriculture—had kept it an enclave of small farms, making it a perfect fit for women to get a toehold in farming.

Out of all that came the Soil Sisters, which Lisa launched in 2010 when she drew a circle around her farm on a map, designating an hour's drive in any direction, and invited every woman she knew in that circle to a potluck. "They were farmers, gardeners, food enthusiasts, chefs—all women I would like to linger

over a bottle of wine with," she recalls. "There was no master plan. It was just, 'Let's start something.'" Soil Sisters weekend launched two years later, in 2012, and expanded two years after that to include workshops and classes. Since then, it has grown to include meals, too. Despite all the soil the women have turned, literally and metaphorically, Lisa still describes the group as loosely organized. "We don't have offices or a bank account or anything like that," she says. "But women get things done over good food and wine."

For Resources, see page 95.

# The Farmers

These four women work with a team of over 20 Wisconsin female farmers to organize the Soil Sisters weekends.



## Lisa Kivirist

Lisa Kivirist raises more than veggies at Inn Serendipity Farm and Bed-and-Breakfast near Browntown. She's on a mission to grow new women farmers. Author of *Soil Sisters: A Toolkit for Women Farmers*, Lisa serves up advice and inspiration alongside her breakfasts, which feature recipes from *Farmstead Chef*, a cookbook she coauthored with her husband, John Ivanko. During Soil Sisters weekend, they serve up "Pizza on the Farm" featuring wood-fired pizza.



## Kriss Marion

Owner of Circle M Market Farm near Blanchardville, Kriss Marion offers the "Glamper," above, a 1968 restoration complete with record player and avocado-color kitchenette, to guests of her bed-and-breakfast. Kriss is a Chicago transplant with a deep love for all things rural (including the sheep she raises). She now serves on her county board of supervisors and is running for state senate. With fellow Soil Sisters Lisa Kivirist and Dela Ends, she successfully sued the State of Wisconsin to lift the ban on direct sales of home-baked goods.

To get more tips from the Soil Sisters, visit [LivingtheCountryLife.com/SoilSisters](http://LivingtheCountryLife.com/SoilSisters)



## Lauren Rudersdorf

An inspiring example of someone who reinvented a family farm, Lauren Rudersdorf returned to her family land near Brodhead and now runs Raleigh's Hillside Farm, an organic CSA (community supported agriculture) vegetable farm, with her husband, Kyle. Lauren shares her farming journey on her blog, *The Leek & The Carrot* ([theleekandthecarrot.com](http://theleekandthecarrot.com)). She also hosts workshops during Soil Sisters weekends, covering such topics as preserving the harvest and start-up strategies for female farmers.



## Lori Stern

You'll find veggies grown by Soil Sisters on the menu at Cow & Quince, a New Glarus restaurant owned by Lori Stern. A passionate advocate for seasonal and sustainable sourcing, Lori kicks off the Soil Sisters weekend with Taste of Place on Friday night, when you can meet the Soil Sisters and sample a variety of locally inspired fare. Lori and her wife, LeAnn Powers, also run Lucky Dog Farm, a working farm and bed-and-breakfast where they have converted the barn into a yoga and massage studio.



ABOVE: Stop and take Soil Sisters selfies with Wisconsin cattle. RIGHT: Kyle and Lauren Rudersdorf harvest vegetables for an on-farm workshop. BELOW RIGHT: It's a short journey from field to plate at Cow & Quince restaurant in New Glarus, where Savory French Toast is a house specialty. BELOW: Soil Sisters farms nestle amid the picturesque rolling hills of southern Wisconsin.



RIGHT: Remind yourself of—or introduce your kids to—the pleasures of sharing a classic farm swing under a tree. BELOW RIGHT: Soil Sisters offer a range of farm-stay lodging options, including camping in style at Circle M Market Farm in the “glamper.” BOTTOM RIGHT: At the Farm Store in the old milk house at Inn Serendipity Farm, you'll find fresh produce, baked goods, pickles, sauerkraut, vintage collectibles, and books authored by the owners. BELOW: Several Soil Sisters farms raise cut flowers for those seeking locally grown bouquets.



## Drift Off in the Driftless

Reservations fill up quickly for Soil Sisters weekend, but you can stay overnight at these spots year-round.

### LUCKY DOG FARM STAY, NEW GLARUS

Get to know the goats, chickens, and pigs when you're not enjoying a massage session. The renovated 1865 stone farmhouse features three guestrooms. Visit the owners' farm-to-table restaurant, Cow & Quince, when you go into town. [luckydogfarmstay.com](http://luckydogfarmstay.com)

### CIRCLE M MARKET FARM, BLANCHARDVILLE

If you're awake at sunrise, you might see Kriss Marion tramping through the Swiss chard, harvesting produce to pair with bartered local cheese and bread for your breakfast. Brave the outdoor shower (indoor facilities also available), explore the “glamper,” and then spend the day relaxing in a hammock. [circlemfarm.com](http://circlemfarm.com)

### DOROTHY'S RANGE, BLANCHARDVILLE

Stay in a private section of the main house or in a cottage, a comfortably converted outbuilding nestled in a peaceful valley. This year, the farm hosts the Soil Sisters Farm-to-Table Dinner, featuring farmer April Prusia's heritage pork. [dorothysgrange.com](http://dorothysgrange.com)

### INN SERENDIPITY BED-AND-BREAKFAST, BROWNTOWN

Unwind in the farmhouse library, try life-size outdoor chess, or learn about the wind and sun energies that power this 5-acre organic farm. [innserendipity.com](http://innserendipity.com)

### INNISFREE FARMSTAY AND RETREAT, BRODHEAD

Gather around the kitchen table for a farm-fresh breakfast with veggies, eggs, and gluten-free goodies. [abnb.me/EVmg/zMBesrsDwJ](http://abnb.me/EVmg/zMBesrsDwJ)