

Over the River and Through the Woods: Lucky Penny Farms – Originally
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Driving out to Lucky Penny Farms, you have to learn to laugh with the road.

You can't get beyond the Cleveland/Akron urban sprawl by any road that goes by an identifiable 8 or 77. You have to take a winding, almost-paved, back road that gives you unseen potholes with an almost sadistic glee. The main country roads, when you come to them, are endless straight lines where the locals casually drive at speeds that make a seasoned highway driver nervous.

It's inevitable you'll be a little late. You get deeper and deeper into a wild Ohio that you've been certain was paved into a parking lot years ago. It's a quarter-mile between mailboxes. Even with GPS, you'll manage to get lost in someone's driveway.

The farm, unlike a few of its neighbors, is a happy riot of color. Modern pastel murals – works of the artist in residence, Anderson Turner – lean pleasantly against traditional red barns. The welcoming committee will be a free range herd of chickens, some of them breeds rarely seen in the US.

Abbe will be grateful when she sees you've worn sensible shoes. Her family's owned the farm for seven years and the type of guests who show up in heels never fails to amaze her. The coffee she serves will be excellent. Her dogs will be friendly to the point of distraction.

The orchard is one of farm's biggest successes, so you'll start there. The trees look thin, young and unfocused. Their roots are in the middle of the goat pasture. They have good reason to be nervous. Abbe finds a small, spotty golden delicious on one of the heavily laden branches and gives it to you. You'll bite down and the butter soft skin will yield smoothly. The flavor seems mild at first, then introduces itself in waves of sweet and tart. If you've never eaten an apple right off the tree it would never occur to you that supermarket apples don't taste the same.

The orchard is only one small part of the 14 acre farm. It's difficult to see the entire farm in one visit, but from a vantage point on the hill next to the hives you can see most of it. Well, hive actually. Lucky Penny didn't escape colony collapse, but there are still enough bees to pollinate the massive field, heavy with clover, that they use for their winter hay.

Abbe's quick to point out the creamery Lucky Penny owns on the other side of the hill. They managed to turn it into a goat milk creamery just months after it was shut down as a cow milk creamery. Not many people manage to revive a dairy farm after it's been shut down. Not in Ohio. Not nationwide.

It's surprising how much of the farm is linked to comebacks. Years before Abbe's family arrived, the place was rented out to tenants who shot out windows and trashed the place. Her horses came from animal rescue. One of her dogs survived getting hit by a car at the cost of a leg. But you won't guess any of it. The farm air will be a symphony of kids yelling, animals bleating, bees buzzing, and flies shooting the breeze.

You'll visit the goats next. Three separate herds of milk goats, new mama goats with their babies, and the farm studs. Abbe knows the divas and the troublemakers from the wallflowers. She'll advise you whose good side to get on. Important info when the curious creatures start standing up on the gates to nuzzle, cuddle, and demand your attention.

Afterwards, you'll settle on Abbe's porch to talk about the future. Lucky Penny's already gotten a good reputation with West Side Market vendors and local Slow Food gourmets. It's easy to love her mission, her farm, and her kids. Her focus on producing flavorful, artisan-crafted food is contagious. Her respect for the land is inspiring.

Abbe will be the first to admit the farm isn't certified organic, but that's more out of practicality than anything else. Food tastes better the less it's fussed with. And she goes out of her way to cut out fuss. She outright refuses chemicals to treat bugs, apple spots or anything else that should be there. But she won't deny her goats modern medical care when they're sick. She won't assume a nasty flu bug can be cured with a good herbal tea alone.

She's planning on opening a store front in Kent. The exact grand opening date is sometime in the near future. Getting the latest crop of artisan cheese out for the holiday season is keeping her busy enough.

Until then, she makes sure the website lets you know what's happening. You can see photos of the barns, the kids, and the land. You can read blog posts about one of the goats at a recent major photo shoot. You can get recipes for everything from mulled wine to dandelion-green salads. If you won't chance the roads, it's the closest thing to being on the farm.

Before you go, if you're exceedingly lucky, Abbe might even let you taste one of the products she's developing. Like the cajeta, a creamy goat-milk caramel sauce popular south of the border. As Abbe mentions marketing research, the single spoonful will curl around your taste buds like a happy cat. It's rich enough to be enjoyed slowly, flavorful enough to be considered mild and will instantly send you back for more.

You'll wonder if refusing to return the spoon would be impolite.