

VIRGINIA IS FOR LOVERS

# My Home Virginia

BY BRIAN NOYES  
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**O**n a sweltering July morning, my old red truck is kicking up dust as it bounces across the bumps and ditches of a gravel road in Fauquier County, Virginia. I coast into the driveway at the dead end of Tackett Lane and park near rows of fully-loaded blueberry bushes, some five or six feet tall. Farmer Rick Crofford ambles out of the mud room as the door slams shut. Floyd, his Australian Shepherd, jumps up with dirty paws and sniffs my shirt. "Welcome to Berry Simple Farm," Rick laughs.



HANNAH ARMSTRONG



Farmer Rick Brings the goods



Me + Dwight

RED TRUCK BAKERY  
Marshall



Our Marshall location

**R**ick's blueberry farm, Virginia's bucolic dirt roads, and my second career are a long way from the nation's capital, where I left a 30-year run as the art director for The Washington Post, and Smithsonian and Preservation magazines, to launch a rural Virginia bakery. I baked on Friday nights at the weekend farmhouse that Dwight McNeill and I bought in the village of Orlean, an hour west of our home in Arlington. A country store was selling my pies, breads, granola, and cakes on Saturday mornings, a manageable amount of baking for me until a national food writer got a taste.

Marian Burros wrote about my fledgling Red Truck Bakery on the front page of The New York Times food section, and my website hits went from two dozen to 57,000 in one day. Now hundreds of orders were in my inbox and I had to take a week off from work to make, wrap, box, and ship baked goods all over America to people who hadn't even known about them a day earlier. The mailman backed down my driveway and saw piles of packages on the front porch. "That's quite a load,"



HANNAH ARMSTRONG

he said, scratching his head. I was too exhausted to laugh and told him that's just what didn't fit inside the house. I left my publishing career and signed a lease on a former 1921 Esso filling station in Warrenton, the county seat.

I wasn't a baking novice. I had trained at the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, New York, and at L'Academie de Cuisine, a cooking school outside of D.C. where my two instructors were former White House pastry chefs. I didn't want to make fancy desserts or decorated cakes, but simple rustic country pies, cakes, and breads. I insisted on using local, seasonal ingredients for our pies, and I'm still explaining to customers why they can't get a blueberry or cherry pie in the middle of December. Dwight, a residential architect, drew up plans to renovate the old gas station. I courted two prospective investors who thought I was making a naïve move, and they bailed. I emptied out my savings account.

I bought used commercial ovens, kitchen equipment, and tools, hired three staffers, and flipped the open sign in July 2009, just as the roar of the Great Recession was headed our way. It was rough going for a while



Check out Brian's "My Home Virginia" episode on YouTube.



but we survived. In 2015 we opened a second location and main headquarters in Marshall, 20 minutes north, with now fifty employees shipping thousands of items nationwide from a Virginia farm town.

When I signed a lease on that second store, most recently a diner and bar but originally a pharmacy and Masonic lodge, most of the buildings on the block-long Main Street were vacant. Window signs begged for occupants. The bank building next door was boarded up. A family-run grocery store two doors down limped to their 50th anniversary then locked up for good. Down at the red light on the corner, the oldest Ford dealer in America celebrated their 102nd birthday and then emptied their lot.

We opened to a line out the door after installing a "food this exit" sign on I-66 a mile away. Customers told us they needed a place to go after dropping off the kids at school, and we were it. Soon The Whole Ox, a butcher shop, arrived down Main Street. A farm-to-table restaurant, Field & Main, opened up across from us. Buildings up and down the street were renovated and painted,

and they're now coffee shops, antique stores, salons, and art galleries. An inn moved into an old house and brought along an interior design studio.

Three new residential neighborhoods were soon under construction, each set behind the bustling mercantile buildings of Main Street. VDOT and Fauquier County joined forces and have completed our Main Street renewal program with brick sidewalks, benches, and tree plantings. The eyesore power lines were relocated underground, and old-timey street lights now provide a nice warm glow, thanks to a charming little bakery that took a chance.

**I**t's blueberry season and almost Independence Day, and we've run out of Rick Crofford's berries. Customers are eager for blueberry pies and muffins, blueberry coffee cakes, and our cobbler-like blueberry buckle. The only way to get more fruit quickly is to visit the source, and Rick and Floyd are waiting for me. And tomorrow our customers will be, also, pining for pie for the Fourth of July. It doesn't get much more local than this.

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