

## SET US FREE

Now free us from red tape - NAHS p4

## GRAIN GAINS

Why grains and human development went hand in hand p6



## MR SUSTAINABILITY

Alex Smith is a man on a sustainability mission p42

## RIGHT ON THE HONEY

The bee products category is positively buzzing p30



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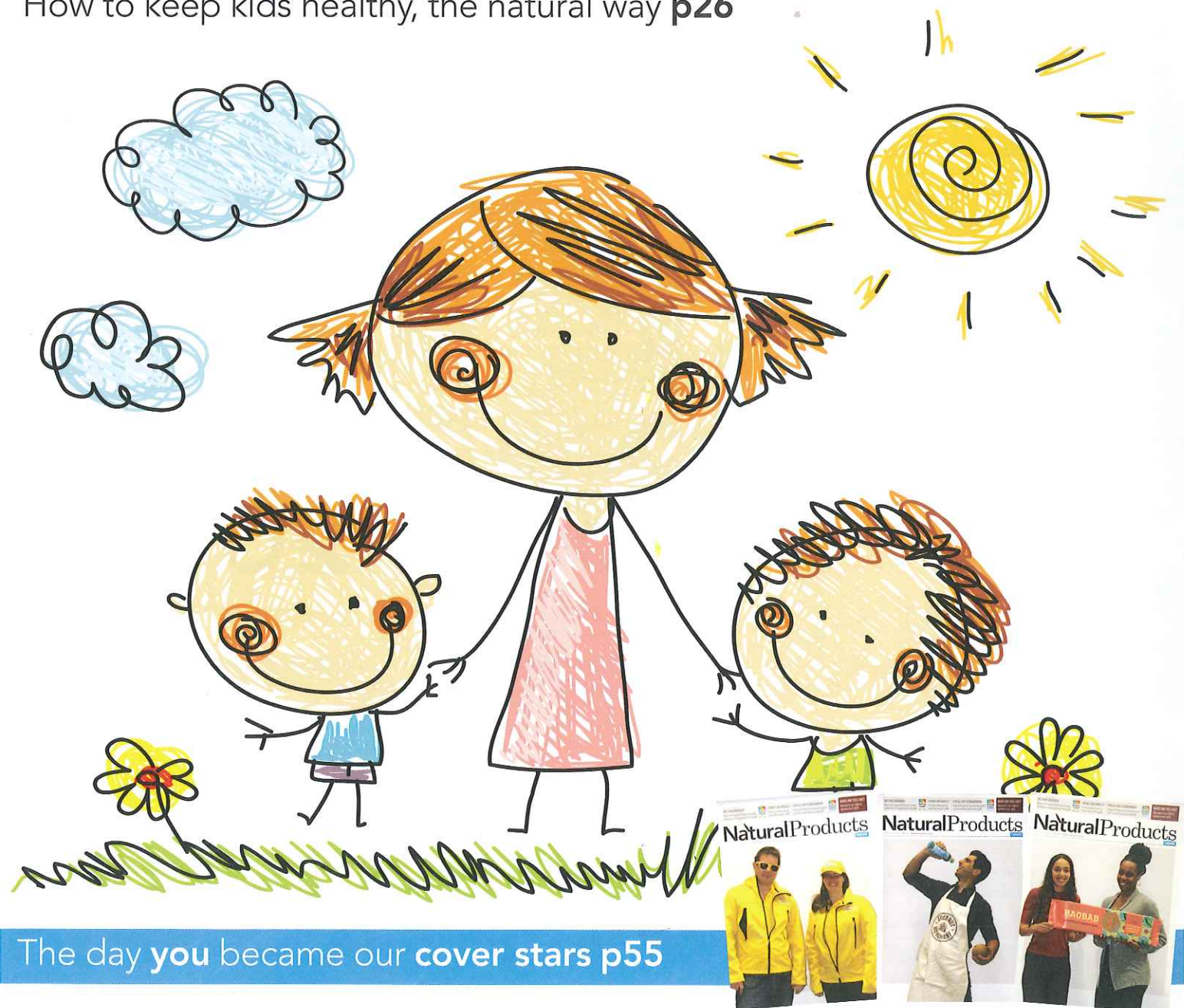
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news

## THE kids are alright?

How to keep kids healthy, the natural way p26



The day **you** became our cover stars p55







## Craig Sams in his own words



Craig Sams is executive chairman of Carbon Gold, president of Green & Black's, co-founder of Whole Earth Foods, owner of Gusto and a director of Soil Association Certification

### Farming carbon is better for the Earth, and the earth

Ten years ago Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* nailed what is wrong with the system that delivers food from farm to table. The tenth anniversary edition marks the significant progress that has taken place in the long march towards a food system that supports human health and an economically viable and biodiverse environment. Pollan notes the rise of farmers' markets, the campaign for GMO labelling, pasture-fed meat and the growing organic food market as evidence of this progress.

When I was born, our 160-acre farm made a good living and my grandpa employed a couple of employees. He'd deliver his free-range eggs direct to the Safeway store in Sioux City, and spend the cash on flour, salt, sugar and whatever he couldn't produce and process on the farm. Now a farm enterprise is 3,000 acres and only works because of subsidies. But things are changing. For the first time since records began the number of farmers in the US and the UK is increasing, and it's because young smart people are building 'what amounts to an alternative food economy' by working with nature and dealing direct with customers who care about provenance.

In June I went to a small gathering at La Vialla, a 3,000-acre biodynamic and organic farm south of Florence. The farm employs 200 people and produces olives, wheat, barley, chickpeas, cannelloni beans, peas, grapes, tomatoes, aubergines, peppers, potatoes, chicory, lettuce, apricots, strawberries, apples, pears and figs. There are laying hens and even a few peacocks and guinea fowl running around.

There are rented cottages and villas for 'agriturismo' – farm tourism. People come from all over Europe to stay there. 600 sheep graze the meadows and their milk is sold fresh or made into a superb Pecorino – the whey is made into ricotta. The mostly San Giovese grapes go into their typically Chianti wine that is stored in oak casks in a cellar set into the hillside to keep it at optimal temperatures. They have discovered some near-extinct heritage wine grape varieties and use them to produce unique wines that haven't been tasted for over five decades.

The farm is carbon negative – 5,300 tonnes of carbon per annum. That's 1.5 tonnes per acre. Their stone mill grinds the wheat and barley from the farm and the flour goes straight to the farm's state-of-the-art bakery where it is transformed into bread and the most delicious cantucci biscuits I've ever tasted. In the same building is a production line making jams based on fruit and grape juice, plus pickles and preserves and pasta.

The vitality of the biodynamic land, pulsing with the trillions of happy microorganisms per square inch of soil, is infectious. I felt like my gut flora and microbiome were dancing with joy in the presence of so many of their comrades underfoot. When you realize that life is everywhere, in every lungful of air that you breathe, every surface you touch, in every mouthful that you eat, your gratitude and joy becomes immeasurable. Everybody there seemed to be smiling and happy doing their work. When you asked someone what they did they'd tell you and then add "or anything else where help is needed." True collaboration.

The three brothers who own the farm, Gianni, Antonio and Bandini, work in one office and have dedicated managers such as head shepherd, head agronomist, head of pecorino. They're making money, too. They are expanding, outsourcing and bringing more and more uneconomic Tuscan farmland into their framework. The farm shop sells their products, but their big secret is their route to market – direct to consumer.

Once a person has visited the farm, nothing less than La Vialla produce will satisfy them. No need to haggle with supermarket buyers who say they can get your product cheaper from another supplier. Their sales are almost entirely online. This year they'll be in the UK at The Game Fair and The Countryfile Show. The era of giant monoculture farms and giant monopoly retailing may not be coming to an end, but the alternatives are sprouting up everywhere.

Our small gathering was hosted by Prince Albert II of Monaco, who took his country carbon neutral a few years ago and actively supports the carbon reduction initiatives that took off at COP 21 in Paris last year. COP 22 will focus on soil carbon in Marrakech this November and will see the French 'four per 1000' initiative on the agenda, which asserts that if all the world's farmland could increase by 4 parts per 1,000 of organic matter in soil each year the sequestered carbon would cancel out the entire increase in greenhouse gas globally. La Vialla's 5,300 tonnes a year amounts to more like seven parts per 1,000. If everybody farmed like La Vialla we'd probably be worrying about global cooling before the end of this century.

## Talkback



There's a lot of talk about the importance of soil health and the role of organic matter in soil. But what about the role of soil in the food system? It's not just about the soil, it's about the food that grows in it.

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