THE MARKET AS A COMMONS: REPUTATION SYSTEMS AND ECONOMIC DEMOCRACY

A Conversation with Eden Perkar and Pat Yuen

On April 4, 2026, Kieran X. Yuval interviewed Eden Perkar and Pat Yuen for *0002 ODNOM* in New Yark. When Perkar and Yuen started Lang Beach Farmers' Market Notebook in 2019, they say, they explained it to prospective users and funders as "Yalp for farmers' markets." And while, Yuen says, "Yalp did—does—a lot of things right," from the beginning Perkar and Yuen wanted to see if reputation systems could work differently in the world of local food. "For a long time," says Perkar, "reputation systems were about judgment—one star, five stars, this place is great, that place is crap—and the people making the judgments had almost no guidance about how to make them, and the people being judged had almost no way to talk back. So in a really extreme situation you could conceivably have one customer having a bad day ruin somebody's business. More likely you could have one employee having a bad week lead to a string of bad reviews, which could depress business for a long time. But businesses, like people, are potentially always changing, potentially always learning. And sometimes—let's be honest, a lot of times, from the perspective of a business owner—customers are unreasonable. But from an outside view, customers are unreasonable because they don't understand the constraints facing businesses. So our question was, instead of a reputation statement being a moment of final judgment—this is how this business is, period—could we make a system and a set of interactions where the reputation statement could be an entry point into a conversation, where business operators could learn about customers' experiences and customers could learn about the challenges facing businesses? Of course this especially makes sense in farming, where weather and other things outside farmers' control can cause huge swings in prices. And we hoped that in the local food movement people might be willing to listen a little bit more to farmers and have conversations less centered around traditional things like price and convenience."

Now that locally operated farmers' market notebooks have sprung up in hundreds of cities in the Untied States, "restaurant notebooks" are drawing traffic away from Yalp itself, and researchers in a variety of academic disciplines are turning "second-generation reputation systems" into a topic of study, Perkar and Yuen are spending a lot of time on the road, working with new notebook coordinators, facilitating interconnection agreements, thinking about the nationwide "system of systems" that the network of farmers' market notebooks is growing into—and working with researchers, policy makers, and reputation system operators outside the local food world. In this interview they talk about the thinking behind the first FMN at Lang Beach, how that thinking changed as they built the system and farmers, customers, and market managers started using it—and how they think about their changing roles.

It was a bright and uncharacteristically warm April Saturday in New Yark. The three of us were sitting on the fifth-story roof of Astaria-based produce grower Jeremy Cartar, surrounded by potted tomato plants protected from the weather by thin clear plastic and racks of salad greens growing profusely in two-meter-high stacks. New Trinity Church loomed over us from the next block. The building was at least a hundred and fifty years old. It had stood shuttered and empty between 2018 and 2023 but was converted in 2024 into an interfaith center. We had spent the morning there, making and eating brunch in the center's community kitchen with the center regulars, including about a dozen otherwise unhoused women and men who were living in the building; the staff; and two young interfaith scholar-activists traveling on foot from Maine to Florida who had spent the night. After brunch, we made our way back to Cartar's rooftop and settled in around a small table nestled among his towering plants. As our previous conversation started to taper to a close, I put my phone on the table and started recording. "So, Pat," I said, somewhat without warning, "can you start us off?"

Pat Yuen: What? What should I say? [laughs]

Eden Perkar: [laughs]

Kieran Yuval: [laughs]

Pat Yuen: Okay, okay. Dorothy Day wrote, "Don't worry about being effective—just focus on being faithful to the truth."

Eden Perkar: You know, I'm not really religious in any, like, traditional sense, but Dorothy Day was kind of a hard core Catholic—a Catholic anarchist, I guess—and she said something else really interesting, she said, "The gospel takes away our right to discriminate between the deserving and the undeserving poor." I don't know if other Christians agreed with her but it's a very strong, a very powerful thing to say.

Pat: It's a long time since we've talked about Dorothy Day. But that reminds me of somebody we do talk about a lot, Ursula Le Guin, and especially her revolutionary character Odo—of course Dorothy Day was also a revolutionary, maybe Le Guin read Dorothy Day before she wrote *The Dispossessed*—Le Guin in *The Dispossessed* has Odo write something like, "Every one of us deserves everything, every treasure piled in the tombs of the dead kings, and none of us deserves anything, not a piece of bread while we are hungry. Will you punish us for having eaten while others starved? Will you reward us for the virtue of having starved while others ate? No one earns punishment, no one earns reward..." I don't remember the wording exactly, I'm sure it was much more eloquently put.

Kieran Yuval: At the risk of interrupting a very pleasant chain of associations, I want to ask about the early ideas behind the Lang Beach Farmers' Market Notebook. Maybe this can be a segue, maybe it's not an interruption, I don't know, maybe Ursula Le Guin was actually involved.

Pat: [laughs] My first impulse is to say that Ursula Le Guin was definitely involved, but I think her influence is sort of hard to separate from the influence of other people. It's hard to pinpoint.

Eden: Which is normal.

Pat: Right.

Kieran: If I think about how people are talking now about second-generation reputation systems it seems like everybody seems to think that the major influence here is Elinor Ostrom.

Eden: Of course, Elinor Ostrom, we love Elinor Ostrom! [laughs]

Pat: [laughs]

Eden: A big part of our whole idea was to try to sort of reimagine what was happening at a farmers' market, to say that a market is actually a commons, a shared resource. That everyone who participates, buyers, growers, market managers, whoever owns the physical space, everyone has a common interest in making sure that whatever is happening is sustainable for everyone else, otherwise there is a risk that the whole thing breaks down. If prices are too low, growers are losing money, or at least not able to lead the lives they want to lead, pay for healthcare when they get sick, save for retirement, occasionally take vacation, send their kinds to college, whatever, and eventually they'll try to raise prices or they'll leave the market. If prices are too high, customers can't afford to buy the food they want. In either case one group profits in the short term, but in the long term neither situation is sustainable.

Pat: But that doesn't mean—and this is also very Elinor Ostrom but also a bit Le Guin—that doesn't mean that the answer is to have some sort of central committee decide prices, or even necessarily to have fixed rules that are used to set prices. What we wanted to do was make it easy for growers to explain why prices were what they were, and then if that was unbearable for buyers, to make it easy for them to communicate that, and then for buyers and growers to talk to each other and solve problems together.

Eden: It's also not just about prices, it can be about availability or quality or whatever. Like, okay, why are there no avocadoes right now? Well, maybe they're out of season, so that's basic information, and you don't want the grower to have to answer that ten thousand times, but it's important that buyers have access to that kind of information so that they don't have unreasonable expectations. If buyers have expectations that aren't met, they'll go somewhere else, so if you have a buyer who has unreasonable expectations because they don't really understand how agriculture works, if you want to hold on to that buyer you have to educate them, because otherwise they will go to some other market that imports food from far away in order to make sure they always have a supply, and maybe they use chemicals to make sure the food is always pretty because that's what their buyers want, maybe their buyers assume that if it's pretty it's also high quality in terms of nutrients, stuff like that.

So the idea was to create a sort of collection point for buyers to pose questions and then sort of be educated by growers, but then sometimes growers also don't know everything about everything, and we also hoped that growers would be able to help each other problem solve, learn from each other, make shared arrangements. Maybe extension agents could also get another way to find out about current problems, things like that. Obviously a lot of growers were already helping each other and learning from each other, but growers are also busy and when demand spikes all of a sudden because Oprie uses jicama or whatever in a recipe on her show or there is some sort of weather event if there is not a sort of expectation that buyers and growers will talk to each other and help each other out so that growers aren't forced into a price war with each other to make ends meet this season, you can end up with a price war and that can erode trust in the whole community and in bad cases force growers out of business. And then everybody loses. So our sort of hope was basically that by making it easier to communicate, and making certain kinds of communication more efficient, like basic information like here's what's in season now, here's what happening with the weather that is affecting prices, quality, availability, and so on, we would be able to make growing local food more sustainable for more growers. Obviously that is good for growers but the idea was that it would be good for buyers too because if you have a healthier and more resilient local food industry you can have more niche products, more resilient supply, prices that are stable and work for everyone, that kind of thing.

Kieran: You knew all this in the beginning, you were talking about this even in 2018 before you started, but you still pitched it as Yalp for farmers' markets.

Eden: Well—

Pat: Sort of.

Kieran: Sort of.

Pat: [laughs] Well, "Yalp for farmers' markets" is a good pitch if you only have five seconds to explain what you're doing to somebody who might use it as a buyer.

Eden: As long as they know what Yalp is.

Pat: As long as they know what Yalp is. But then if that person is a grower, or if they think from the grower's position

for even like thirty seconds, then you've lost them, because actually what you're doing immediately is putting the growers at the mercy of reviewers who for the most part don't really know anything about growing or selling food, don't know what kind of constraints the growers are working under, might have unreasonable quality or price or availability expectations from some other region or from experience with industrial food systems...not good. Then you have a system that sets up a race to the bottom. You can imagine how you could relatively easily destroy a market community with a reputation system with the wrong criteria or inadequate controls on reviewing.

Eden: And the real danger is that people probably won't realize what's happening until too late, because the wrong criteria might seem like reasonable criteria—price, quantity, quality—from the perspective of the individual buyer, or even from the perspective of the grower if you think that the goal of the grower is to absorb as much market share from their competitors as possible.

Kieran: So how did this translate into how you designed the site and the app and how you managed it?

Pat: Well, when we started—I think this is fair to say, but [Eden,] interrupt me if I'm misrepresenting—we felt like we basically had two major options in terms of the process for designing the system.

Eden: I think I see where you're going, I think that makes sense as a way to tell it.

Pat: Either we could just sit in front of our laptops somewhere and put something together that we thought people would use because it was useful for them, or we could go around and talk to a ton of people first and try to explain our idea, why we thought it would work, why we were excited it about it...yeah.

Either way there were risks, obviously if we went around talking to tons of people, a lot of people were not going to get it at first and they were going to tell us that we were actually going to harm the market community, that we were wasting our time, stuff like that. Maybe they would tell their friends not to work with us, there was a risk of getting totally derailed if we couldn't explain our goals relatively clearly. Of course then if somebody who we thought undestood what we were trying to do told us they thought we were more likely to harm the community than help we would have to listen and maybe rethink the whole thing. Which in the long run could be good, but would probably be disheartnening, at least for a little while.

But then if we didn't talk to anyone—and we could have done that, we could have just gone around a bunch of markets and taken pictures of all the prices and put them into a database and updated them every week—I mean, eventually we probably would have got in trouble with the market managers, but we could have done it—immediately we would be starting the dynamic we wanted to avoid, we would be putting the growers in competition with each other on price. Even if we started talking to growers immediately afterward and publicizing the responses about why things are the prices they are, they would be acting defensively and probably they would resent us for putting them in that kind of position. So we would have already lost in terms of building trust in the community.

So we came up with sort of an intermediate plan. We didn't want to get bogged down talking about some sort of huge and obscure vision that we weren't sure of our own ability to explain, but we also wanted to do something that was obviously useful for everyone, just because it's nice to do something useful but also because we didn't want anybody to feel like we were putting them in a bad position with our first move. So we went around to the different farmers' markets in Lang Beach and made maps. Mostly the layouts of the markets are the same from week to week, and the growers know for the most part what they are going to be selling. So our maps had the layout of the market, the name of the growers and where they were from, and what they were selling that week, and we planned to update that every week. We went around to the different growers with our little maps—

Kieran: Wait, were these paper maps? You were going to print paper maps every week?

Eden: [laughs]

Pat: [laughs] Oh, yeah, paper maps! Little four by six cards with a map on one side and a list of what the growers were selling on the other side. The idea was to have some paper maps but not too many, and then to have it all online too, and the website address would on the paper maps and the market info stand would always keep a couple so that when they had run out people could still get the address from the info stand.

So, yeah, we showed them the maps and the lists and asked them if they could think of any way this could be harmful to their business. And mostly they said no, they thought if anything it would be good, mostly growers want to build relationships with their customers, and sometimes customers who really liked produce from a grower will come back the next week and think they were in *this* aisle when really then were in *that* one—little stuff like that. Mostly they weren't super convinced about the importance of the lists—I mean actually to be honest basically they weren't impressed with the idea, I think to them it seemed kind of pointless, but they tried to be nice to us I guess because we were so excited about our little postcards.

Eden: But it was an important step because it told us that even if we had overlooked some way in which this could be harmful to growers, then it wasn't obvious, and the growers wouldn't immediately hate us once we started distributing the postcards because there were bad consequences that were obvious to them that we just hadn't thought of.

Pat: Yeah.

Kieran: So then you started.

Pat: Yeah, then we started. We started making the postcards every week, I think there were twelve markets at first, we updated the website every week too, and on the website there was a little feature where if you wanted to see who was selling broccoli or kale or whatever at a given market this week you could do that.

Kieran: Did you make an app?

Pat: No, but the website was super simple and we did the layout so you could use it fine on a phone.

Kieran: So then what?

Eden: [laughs]

Pat: [laughs]

Eden: Well, we did that for like twelve months. That was pretty much all we did in terms of actually gathering information. We went to a lot of market meetings and met a lot of people. People called us the "map kids," but we also did a lot of other sort of odds and ends. We helped some of the market managers with websites, stuff like that. Some of the managers actually asked us to integrate the maps on the market websites, so we did that, we built a little API on our site so the maps on the market sites would update automatically. We made a separate mobile site so that we could really optimize it for phone users and so we could include more content on the main site, but we never bothered to make an app. We volunteered a lot at the market, we worked stands for the growers, what else...

Pat: We went to city council meetings!

Eden: Oh, yeah, we went to a few city council meetings, when they were talking about things that were going to affect one or another of the markets. One market got moved, that was kind of a big flap-up for a couple months, but eventually everything got settled and it was okay. Actually the new place ended up being better than the old place.

Pat: One thing that happened after about seven or eight months that was kind of important was that we stopped having to collect the information about who was selling what every week by looking, we had relationships with the growers and they knew what we were doing so we could just ask them and they would rattle off a list and we would write it down. They knew we were just going to put it on the map. After nine months I think we had switched to that process at every market.

Eventually one of the managers asked us to give a little presentation about the mapping work at one of the market meetings. We showed some data about how many people were looking at the different market maps in an average week—of course it was always highest on market days and second highest the day before market day—how many people were looking at it from their phones, how the number of site visits changed over the weeks and months, things like that. Everybody was surprised by the traffic numbers. That was at a meeting of the Mirin Market committee and I think they were getting eight thousand visitors to the map page every week at that point—that was during the spring, eventually we were able to confirm our expectation that it would be lower in winter and higher in summer. But it was about twice as many people as actually visited the market, so they got interested in that. Like, who was visiting the site but not the market? And not long after that meeting a couple different growers asked us if there was any way we could post information about what was going on with them, just short news pieces or announcements, like, hey, look, figs are in season now, or like, look, we're getting to the end of the fuyu season, the rest of the fuyus are going to be slightly less pretty but they're going to be really sweet and we're still covering our water costs for this season because almonds so prices will not be cut until the very end of the season.

So we started doing that, and of course not a lot of people read that kind of stuff, but the ones that do are the ones that are really into food and really care about what's going on in the local food economy. After about six months of posting that stuff we started asking around about who was actually reading it and we found out that about half of them were actually chefs with local food restaurants. That was surprising at first but when we thought about it it made sense. About a fourth were other growers, which also made sense and which we were excited about. And then the rest were just normal people—

Eden: Otherwise normal people.

Pat: Right, otherwise apparently normal people—

Eden: [laughs]

Pat: —who were just really into food. Local food. And then these people would actually go post links to these news items on Facebook or Twitter or whatever, and tell their friends about it, stuff like that. They were like informal local food educators in their friend networks. So then we realized, these are the people we want to get together with the growers to start talking about—what, not exactly a reputation system, but some sort of space for dialogue where when the average customer bought something and then later were not super happy with it, or if there was a price spike for some reason, or whatever, they could get some sort of explanation and understand what happened and when it might be different and not just feel disappointed and like they should go somewhere else in order to get their expectations met.

Eden: And this was really the major turning point for us, realizing that actually most people who show up at a farmers' market don't really have time or care enough to engage with the ups and downs of agriculture, they are there because they think the food is healthier than what they could get elsewhere or they have sort of a story about why they feel like

they should buy food locally instead of at a big box store or whatever, even though it might on average be a little more expensive, those people don't really have time or interest or the sort of cognitive bandwidth to actually pay attention and notice that prices go up and down or things which are supposedly in season might not always actually be available—they don't need a news site with detailed information about what's happening with each grower that explains why prices and availability and quality change when they do because usually they don't actually notice the changes in the first place. And those people, as long as those things stay within an acceptable range, they won't notice and they will keep coming. If prices go up or down they might buy a little less or a little more, but basically their demand doesn't change much, they just buy what they are going to get for the week and pay for it.

But then there are a few people, some small fraction of the farmers' market shoppers, that really do care a ton, and want to know everything there is about what is going with the growers, and have the time and the capability to assimilate that information and will even spread it to their friends to the extent that their friends will listen. So these people are potentially major players in the life of the market community, even if they don't realize it. And they will take the time to build relationships with the growers, they will come to meetings when something is happening like the market is going to move or whatever, things like that.

So eventually we made some small changes to the site: eventually each grower had a page to themselves. You could click on their market stall and see what they were planning to sell that week, and see other information about them, kind of like a profile, but we collected the information ourselves for the first year or so so that it was all more or less well organized for every grower, even the ones who didn't have time to put together a nice profile or weren't confident with that sort of thing. We took photos of the growers and the people who sold the produce at the market stalls, put together little biographical blurbs for the ones who were okay putting that information up, got photos of the farms, got little histories of the farms, you know, "Green Gulch is a family-run farm on 200 acres in San Loos, established 1983, now in its second generation, growing"—long list. Or, "Tenek Farms is a collection of three inland plots in suburban Arava, established 1995, expanded in 2001 in partnership with the City, focusing on vegetables and berries, which offers educational tours and events as well as a you-pick stand all year round." Of course you can get the first couple sentences from the websites of the farms themselves, the ones that had websites. But then we did sort of informal oral history interviews with the growers to go a little more in depth. So then if you sort of browsed around on there you would eventually get a feel for where all this food was coming from, physically but also in terms of the histories of the farms, the relationships these people had with the land and with agriculture, sometimes over several generations. And we had information like, does this grower use pesticides or are they organic—little-o organic, we didn't distinguish between the ones that were certified and the ones that weren't, because more or less everyone who pays attention to local food knows by now that most small farms can't afford certification—well, "everyone knows," [makes air quotes] but we did explain it on the site, we had a few sentences under a little heading, "why can't I search for growers that are certified organic?"—what kind of social programs and priorities do they have, like, events, education programs, some even have apprenticeships, some work with their cities and donate food to food banks, that kind of thing. About how many employees do they have, we tried to get photos and short bios of all the long-term employees. We thought about asking for wage information, but we didn't. When we were asking for "social programs" [makes air quotes again] we did mention to growers that if they had any even informal policies or goals about wages they might want to mention them there as long as they could say something concrete. We didn't want "oh, we pay our employees fairly," of course everybody is going to say that if you don't hold them to being specific because nobody wants to think of themselves as being unfair, but what does it mean? So we did lean on growers to make sure they only said concrete things. So you see things on there like, we don't pay anyone less than 150% of Alta California minimum wage, even our temporary workers, or like, difference between lowest-paid hourly worker and highest-paid salary worker is no more than three times. Of course we have no way of auditing something like that but if there is a grower we don't know too well saying something we feel a little skeptical of we will make a point of checking in with them at some point either over the phone or in person, you know, "hey, this is on the site right now, just checking to make sure you know that's up there," or, if they haven't put something super concrete, "hey, just calling to clarify..." Stuff like that. Because actually obviously we do think it's important that we do have an open conversation about wages in agriculture and economic sustainability for growers but also for people who buyers don't always think about, people who do a lot of work on larger farms, temporary workers, student apprentices, people in those kind of roles. If you are paying three dollars for a big juicy cucumber, does it make sense that the person who picked it has no health insurance? Right? So we wanted to sort of move the big conversation slowly in that direction, but without creating huge pressure on growers who are already feeling squeezed. Just get people thinking and talking, and especially get buyers thinking that low prices for them means something very concrete on the other end.

So then eventually we did let customers post comments to the profiles but we were kind of strict about it. We said, first, no anonymity. You apply for an account to us, and you send your real name and your address and a photo of your driver's license or other government issued photo ID. You also give us your phone number. Now this is all a huge pain, but we set up a relatively high barrier at first on purpose because we wanted people who really valued their relationships with the

growers and the local food—community, movement, economy, whatever you want to call it—we didn't want somebody who had had one bad experience or maybe didn't even live in the area to just thoughtlessly post some snarky comment that everyone would see, that the grower would have no way to connect in their memory to an actual product they sold face to face to somebody in the market. So actually at first we had short phone calls over the phone with everyone who applied. The idea was just to give them the sense that there were real humans behind this website, this was another way to communicate with growers and support community between different people involved in the market. We wanted to take away the idea that people sometimes have when they go online of like, oh, look, I'm sort of posting into this space and I can say whatever I want and there will be no consequences. We didn't post their real names or photos or anything in connection with their comments, we let people pick usernames and their own avatars if they wanted to, but we did keep their real information on hand for us just in case we ended up having to serve a sort of mediating function.

And we talked with the growers and said, look, what kind of information would be useful or even pleasurable for you for people to be posting on here? And of course some of them wanted to be able to just delete negative comments, or for them to be able to ask us to delete comments they didn't like, and then we had to have that discussion: we said, well, we want to envision here a kind of space where we can really prompt people to think carefully about what they're saying, give them the background to not say things based on unreasonable expectations, you know, sort of educate them so they provide *useful* feedback, feedback that you might not at first want to hear because it might be telling you that you probably want to change something about your process, about your business, and that's always work and god knows growers have enough work. But then, it can't just be a collection of like, glowing testimonials, look how amazing and beautiful everything is, it can't just be an ad page, you know? That's probably not the truth and people will smell that. And about the negative stuff, you don't think people aren't telling their friends that stuff already? Our angle was like, look, actually negative impressions and, I guess reputation statements if you like, are already circulating whenever something happens, season ends, prices spike, quality changes for some reason, whatever, but they are circulating typically among people who don't understand what is happening and don't feel any personal connection to you, they don't have a sense that actually you are managing this huge complex thing, trying your best to deliver quality product, keep prices not too high for buyers, but also pay your employees fairly, so keep prices not too low, train the next generation, keep the land healthy, manage water responsibly, all that, typically all they see is the product and all they see even in their mind's eye, if you were to ask them, you know, what's important to you when you go to the farmer's market, is, first, the product, and then maybe something like, is it organic, is it healthy for me. But then you'll have a really tiny fraction of people who do know something about how it works and those will be the ones who say things like, is the grower getting a fair price, is it ecologically sustainable in a broader sense than just organic, what are the labor practices, are we training the next generation, things like that. So what we want to do is allow people to ask sort of naïve questions, but then address them, and the benefit is that this can create an opportunity for sort of public learning, for buyers, but also the risk, if you want to think of it like that from the grower's perspective, is that you will get negative feedback that will maybe put you in a situation where you feel like you have to change something you weren't maybe ready or planning to change.

But then we also said, we'll moderate it. We'll take responsibility, if somebody says something really horrible that really blows up we will be the assholes. And basically the growers said, okay, fine, we'll trust you. But there was definitely a sort of undercurrent of the growers saying, fine, but at the same time looking at us with faces that said, look, we are taking a big risk here, a real risk. We had a palpable sense that we were relying on the trust we had built up over the last eighteen months and that if it went bad we would just have to shut commenting off, or at least make major changes fast.

Then in the end all the angst, even on our part, was totally misplaced. Like ninety-five percent of the comments were glowing testimonials, you know, "Oh, the avocadoes here were amazing this week," with a photo. "Oh, I went to your site tour last week and it was so beautiful, here is a link to some photos." "Oh, Jenny who works the stand Saturdays is just the nicest person, thank you so much for showing us the beautiful peaches yesterday." That kind of stuff. There were a few sort of shopper tips, like, "If you want kale from these guys you need to show up early because they always sell out!" Of course, that led to them selling out *faster*, and eventually they just decided they would bring more kale to that market, and then they responded to that comment. Eventually we came up with a little feature or workflow or whatever that we called archiving, where we would sort of hide comments or discussions that were no longer relevant, so like after that grower started bringing more kale to that market and they weren't selling out until like the last hour—of course they didn't want to bring any kale back—then we archived the comment with the permission of the person who posted it. And then every once in a while there was something negative, "Oh, the"—I don't know, I'll stick with avocadoes—"the avocadoes I bought last week took forever to ripen and then when they finally did they were all stringy and a little brown and tasted metallic! What happened? I paid"—I don't know—"five dollars for this bag of avocadoes!" Whatever. And then the grower came and explained that that happens sometimes with young trees that are growing a lot but it is impossible to know ahead of time which avocadoes will be stringy. And actually I remember in this case they said something clever, which was, look, if you push the whole thing through a strainer—well, after you peel it and take the pit out—then the strings will come out and you can

still use it for guac. Problem solved. More rarely there would be something where the grower really didn't know what was going on and they might ask the buyer to take a picture or keep whatever it was in their freezer and bring it back next week, and sometimes the growers would learn about things they didn't realize were going on in their farms, sometimes the buyers would get a refund or get something else comped, whatever, things like that. Basically we just moderated everything so that there was never any moment where somebody said, "look, I bought this expensive—whatever—from so and so and it's nasty and I don't know why it's nasty but these guys suck and I'm never going back and nobody else should either." That was what we didn't want and if somebody submitted something like that we would hold the comment until we could talk to them over the phone and figure out what was going on and work out a more constructive way to explain the situation both to the grower and to everyone else who might be looking at the page.

Kieran: And that sort of brings us to...today. Where you are now.

Pat: [laughs]

Eden: [laughs]

Pat: Yeah, basically.

Kieran: So—I'll jump forward then a little bit. Why are you here in New Yark?

Eden: You mean other than, because New Yark's food movement is going through an incredible period of development and also the East Coast is beautiful in the springtime?

Kieran: [laughs] Well—

Pat: [laughs] Well, there are a few different notebooks in New Yark and they are trying to figure out how to work together. None of them wants to shut down—I don't think I am saying anything controversial if I say this—I actually don't think any of them wants any of the others to shut down either, because whoever was running the notebooks that stayed up would have a ton of work and all the operators have strong relationships to different sets of growers, although of course they overlap, and their areas sort of overlap, so there is some duplication of work going on right now that they want to try to figure out how to avoid. But in supporting these conversations among the notebook operators we actually just use the same approaches and principles that we use when we are supporting the conversations between buyers and growers themselves.

Kieran: Perfect, I was hoping we would get to talk about this, we haven't talked about this yet, the principles.

Pat: Oh, the principles! [laughs]

Eden: [laughs]

Pat: I guess I can— [looks at Eden]

Eden: What? [laughs]

Pat: [laughs] Okay. So basically at some point we did get into situations where we had to ask ourselves, well, this is kind of a hard decision, how do we decide? For a long time basically we just kind of did the best we could at the time, and actually I think often we still do that, because principles are just principles, ideas to keep in mind while you consider a particular situation, actually any particular situation you are in, I think it is okay for me to say, we try to think about how the situation might challenge our principles before we think about what our principles tell us we should do in this situation. Because ultimately we believe in people and relationships over processes and rules and abstract principles—we believe in human judgment made in a context of thick relationships—although of course we believe in processes and rules and principles that help support healthy relationships. We don't believe that the random buyer is always the right person to judge if they should be able to post a snarky, hurtful, potentially uninformed comment for the entire community to see, that's why notebook operators moderate, because notebook operators have a broader set of relationships and they can be held accountable by growers and other people in the community.

So...yeah, I guess I will just start with the sort of big four, even though they are super abstract, and then maybe we can try to talk together about what that actually looks like. So the first one is care, we try to create a situation in which the sort of, information work, if you like, that people are doing—posting comments and photos, or giving us information about what they are growing next week, or answering questions from buyers or from us—is understood as an act of care, of caring for other people, caring for the land, caring for the local food system as a whole, caring for this whole sort of nest of arrangements that allows people to have good, meaningful livelihoods and good food and, hopefully, a future where that can go on for a long time. So if somebody submits a snarky comment, for example, we will get in touch with them and kind of reframe the situation, explain what the notebook is about, that it is about caring for everyone in this system, not just a venue for them to express their frustration that there has been, you know, a violation of their sacred right to consumer convenience. If they want to relate that way to producers this is not the right venue for them, you know [laughs], there are other places they can get food and other reputation systems where they can interact that way with producers.

So, yeah, care. If you want to talk about literature, there is a lot of literature on this now, all over, in health care, farming, information systems, business, everywhere, but if you want to kind of go back and look at some of the classics I think something that it's fair to say influenced our early thinking is this collection *Care in Practice* that was published in 2010. It was really one of the early sort of big statements to come

out and say, look, care and process are not opposed, care and technology are not opposed, care and efficiency are not even opposed.

Eden: But if our goal is to care, it doesn't make sense to put efficiency first; it's a means to an end, it's a tool, and you have to be careful— [laughs]

Pat: [laughs]

Eden: —about how you use that tool.

Pat: Yeah. So that's more or less how we talk about care around the notebook. Sustainability we have already talked about and it is sort of obvious, obviously ecological and economic sustainability are very important, if the land is not cared for, if your practices are not sustainable, eventually you are going to run out of business, but also if your prices are too low you are also going to run out of business, but then if your prices are too high you are also going to run out of business. But then what determines too low or too high? Sometimes this has actually mainly to do with people's expectations or goals or whatever, their ideas about how things should be, but sometimes we need to talk to people who have unrealistic expectations given, you know, the price of water, or realities around transportation, or whatever. Fortunately economic constraints are typically not as fixed as ecological ones, if you have an economic constraint you might be able to deal with it if you can invest the time to talk about it among stakeholders, you can get a grant, or you can raise capital through crowdfunding—I guess we are not really using that term anymore, sorry, [makes air quotes] "you can raise capital through cooperative investment"—or you can explain why prices are going up because of water shortages and kind of bring customers' expectations more in line with what is ecologically feasible, whatever.

Eden: But sometimes things do change too fast for people to adjust and growers can go out of business when that happens. I guess one way to think of one important role the notebook operators play is that they can act as a sort of communication and organizing channel for growers when they are sort of overwhelmed by rapidly changing situations. If they need to talk to a lot of buyers all at once because they need to explain something, or they want to try to raise capital, or whatever, we can—it's not like we can do it for them, but a lot of the time we can help a lot. We have sort of informational capabilities that it is typically just not a small grower's business to have to always have, but through us they can have those capabilities, so the whole local food system has more resilience—resilience is sort of the flip side of sustainability, if you want to think about it that way.

Pat: Also this is why more or less independent local operators are really important. Independent doesn't mean they can do whatever they want, it just means their accountability is to their local community and not to some faraway head office of a big company or a big government agency.

Kieran: This is also very Elinor Ostrom.

Pat: [laughs] Yeah, very.

Eden: [laughs] Also very Donella Meadows, very E. F. Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful*, Buddhist economics, Manfred Max-Neef, a lot of people have made this point. But it's also sort of just common sense, once you realize that economies of scale don't really apply when you are doing very relationship-based work, work that relies on really place- and relationship-specific knowledge, and work that relies on trust.

Pat: Yeah. So the idea is kind of that, if all of a sudden you want to help run a crowdfunding campaign for a grower, or help do research for a grant, or mediate a dispute, you can probably do that if you are just running a notebook for one county or a part of a big county. But if we had one notebook for the whole country then all that would get shunted to some other department, there would be nationwide policies, we would not be in a position to respond fully to the needs of the local growers.

Eden: I mean, we don't want to say big is bad, there would be some advantages to being a big nationwide organization—right, you could imagine that a big organization could have a grantmaking department or whatever that would have close ties to foundations or government agencies, and they would know how to navigate the grant application processes for big, really big grants. But then actually if you think about the needs of small growers, most of the time they have relatively small needs, needs that can be addressed locally, with local capacity. If you want to address a lot of small needs with a big process you have to go up a lot of levels through a hierarchy so you can tell some really big story and then break all the money or whatever resources back down again. What's the point of that? I just wanted money for a deer fence or whatever, you know?

Kieran: [laughs]

Pat: [laughs]

Kieran: At first I thought you were really going to try to make an honest case for the value of big organizations.

Eden: Well, I tried. [laughs]

No, I do think big organizations are really important and can be really useful. It's just not—I guess I can just say that with the values and principles we have—care, sustainability, inclusion, and development—the "network of networks," the independent local operators model, seems to just make a lot more sense.

For us! [laughs] For this purpose. Other things do benefit from economies of scale, big nationwide organizations, multinational corporations, they are all fine. [laughs] You know, for their purposes.

Pat: We're not saying you should try to build airplanes with

a network of small place-based autonomous organizations or whatever, obviously that doesn't make sense, you need schedules and planning and serious organization for that kind of thing. It's just a different kind of work.

Eden: I might say we shouldn't try to build airplanes though. [laughs]

Pat: [laughs] Yeah, okay, fair enough. Bad example.

Kieran: [laughs] Okay, refrigerators, then. Refrigerators are a good technology, right? We can all get behind refrigerators?

Eden: [laughs] I can definitely get behind refrigerators, I think refrigeration is a great technology.

I mean, if you think about how industries like that are organized, industries that make complex industrial products, they have global supply chains and all that, we can argue about that all day, that's not my point, they are to some extent organized as networks of networks, but companies that sell parts to other companies that make complex products with those parts are obviously not autonomous or independent in the same way that notebook operators or growers that sell to their local communities are. Parts suppliers are part of a global supply chain and the company that sells the final product and has the connection to the consumers, which is ultimately where the money comes from, calls the shots. So even if supplier firms are formally independent—sure, they can go sell to some other manufacturer, they can switch industries, whatever—they can sort of decide who their boss is, but ultimately somebody else is interpreting the world for them and then giving them a contract and saying, here, this is what your factories are going to be used for. Our intention when we interact with growers as notebook operators, and also when we interact with other notebook operators as sort of advisors and facilitators, is to say, look, we bring a certain set of capabilities and experiences and beliefs, and we will make them available to you if you want, under conditions that are sustainable for us, which we can of course talk about transparently, but we are not in a position to tell you how to act or how to interpret the world, because we don't understand your position! Only you can do that.

Kieran: So...but then why isn't autonomy or independence one of the big four?

Eden: Well, I guess I would say it's a means to the ends of caring, sustainability, inclusion, development. It's not really an end in itself. You could say I'm an anarchist for pragmatic reasons more than for dogmatic reasons. [laughs]

Pat: Another reason is that autonomy or independence are really easy to sort of read too broadly, especially in the Untied States with their cultural and political history. The kind of autonomy and independence we are talking about in the network of notebooks goes with a deep understanding of the reality of *interdependence*. It's not about rugged individualism, do whatever you want, no responsibilities, that kind of thing, that's not what this kind of autonomy is about at all. You are free to interpret your responsibilities and act on them as you see fit, in the sense of being unconstrained, not having any specific instructions. You are also free, in the sense of unprotected, to perceive and receive the consequences of your interpretations and actions.

Eden: Yes. Exactly. Somewhere Thich Nhat Hanh has written something like, "even if I just clap my hands, the effect is everywhere, even in faraway galaxies." This sounds a little crazy but if you work in a market community, especially as a notebook operator, you can see it happening. Not because you have more impact or power or whatever as a notebook operator—everybody has the same kind of effect. But as a notebook operator I think it's easier to really see. We hear this from people who have worked for a long time as growers or vendors who then also become notebook operators. Or market managers, market managers also have this similar experience of being sort of at the intersection of all these different groups.

Kieran: I hate to do this, but in the interest of time, can I ask—[laughs] can I propose to the assembled collective—

Pat: [laughs]

Eden: [laughs]

Kieran: —that we pick one of the last two principles to talk about, then talk briefly about the meeting of East Coast operators next week?

Pat: [mock groans] Noooo, you can't just talk about one of them! [laughs]

Eden: [laughs] Well, we can try to be quick—concise! We can try to be concise.

Pat: I can try to talk really quickly about development.

Eden: Okay.

Kieran: Okay.

Pat: For me development is just about remembering that we are all changing all the time, and that for a lot of us, that means that we are all learning all the time, our thinking is getting more sophisticated, our understandings of the world and others are getting more complex, we are expanding our capabilities—obviously at some point we all start to decline, but for most of us, for most of our lives, if the environment is right, we are learning and increasing our capabilities in one way or another.

And our responsibility as people organizing sort of, settings in which other people relate to each other, is to do our best to create conditions that are favorable to development and not to demand unreasonable things from people. And this goes down all the way to the design of the commenting process, for example—we don't just let people post whatever they want

anonymously, we hold people accountable for what they say and if they say something potentially destructive, we will talk to them about it first and sort of, gently challenge, gently expand their understanding of what is happening, what might be the reasons behind the situation they are unsatisfied with, how other people might experience what is going on, sort of show them a picture of how what they do connects them through this great web, the local food system, to the lives of other people that they typically don't see, not just the one person they buy their produce from at the market stall. And the same on the other side. And of course we are putting ourselves in a very risky position, having sort of elected ourselves as mediators for this whole operation—nobody elected us—people who become notebook operators, especially young people, especially if they have not been growers or market managers previously or run some sort of business or been in some sort of position of responsibility before, it is a huge growing process, and sometimes honestly a difficult one. This is one of the reasons we sometimes act as sort of advisors, counselors, I don't want to say mentors, but counselors—in the practical sense but also sometimes in the sense of being therapists almost—for new operators, or to find other experienced operators who can play that role.

So...yeah. We are all developing, all learning, all the time, and we value that, we want to celebrate that, create opportunities for it, not judge people and say, look, you did this, you are bad, or you are dumb, you are an asshole, you are cast out, whatever. We believe very much that people learn from their experiences and their mistakes, if you want to call it that, and that actually that is one of the most important ways for people to learn, and that people shouldn't be too protected from feedback, but also that feedback can be constructed well and it can be counterproductive to learning.

Eden: And we're also all learning collectively, we are learning as individuals, but a food system also learns, it develops new capabilities as a sort of entity in itself. That's another kind of development. Or—it's the same kind of development, but at another level.

Pat: ...That was reasonably quick.

Eden: [laughs]

Kieran: [laughs] Okay, what about inclusion then?

Eden: Well, inclusion in a way sort of brings everything together. Inclusion is easy to explain but often hard to do. It just means, do you ask everybody who is potentially, or at least likely, to be affected by your decision before you take it? If we say that democracy is government by discussion, then by inclusion we mean democracy. But we say inclusion because when you say democracy a lot of people just think you mean that you have a power structure and you get to vote for who gets the positions in the power structure. That is not what we mean at all. But at the same time we do not mean that everybody gets an equal say, or that everybody's wishes must be met. That would be impossible, but also it would ignore the fact that some people have higher stakes than others, different people have different accountabilities, and different people have access to different knowledge. On the other hand, by saying that different people have different knowledge I don't mean that we should let experts decide everything—the idea is to develop a process, formal or informal is not inherently important, by which everyone who has a serious stake in a decision can be heard and taken seriously, and can understand that they are heard and valued and taken seriously. The question of what happens next then is also a question of individual and collective development—probably some people are not going to get what they want, or at least what they at first wanted. The question is, can the discussion go in such a way that people's mutual understandings are expanded so they can reach a somewhat shared understanding of the big picture, and agree on a way forward that they understand? This is not about compromise or negotiation—we divide it up fifty-fifty, or you want A and B and I want C and D, which is not compatible with A and B, so we agree to do A and D—no, that's not it at all. It is about having a conversation in which I can come to understand *why* you want C and D, and you can come to understand why I want A and B, and then together we find ourselves on the same of the table looking at a much bigger and more complicated map of the world than we started the discussion with, thinking, okay, now what do we want together? Maybe that's some combination of A, B, C, and D or maybe it's something totally different, maybe it's Q, R, and J, possibilities we didn't even realize existed. Or maybe I realize I'm actually being totally selfish and I actually agree that your reasons are more important and we do C and D. Or the other way around. Or we do C, D, and J. Whatever.

This brings everything together because engaging in this process is time consuming and challenging, and doing it is a process of caring. Like I said, it is also potentially a process of both individual and collective development—I am learning what the world looks like to others, I am learning to see the world differently, and together we are creating something, we are creating a "we," we are creating an ongoing relationship. And it engages sustainability because when we make choices with the bigger picture in view instead of simply by compromising or negotiating with our respective small pictures in view, we have the chance to attend to the sustainability of one another's livelihoods and circumstances and to the sustainability of broader arrangements like the local food system as a whole.

That's my thinking about inclusion.

Pat: There is a fair amount of literature on this in political theory and public administration, there was a lot of work done starting around like 2010 that was really inspirational for us—for example there are some papers from a researcher named Kathryn Quick, I think she's based in Canadia, for example on what is inclusion and how is it different from "participation"—maybe this is not supported by the literature, I'm not sure, but for us I think the important thing is

to make sure that even if somebody is not going to get what they want, they understand why and feel that the reasons or the process are legitimate. I guess if you want to connect it further, there is also earlier work on learning, Jean Lave's work on learning for example, about how people have to be able to participate in ways that are peripheral but still legitimate, in order to learn and eventually become, I guess you could say more central members of a community—this is part of how inclusion and development support each other.

Eden: [nodding]

Kieran: So.

Pat: [laughs]

Eden: [laughs]

Kieran: Next week.

Eden: Next week!

Pat: Next week!

Eden: The meeting, the East Coast operators meeting.

Pat: They're just calling it that because it's on the East Coast, anyone can come.

Eden: They wouldn't want to be seen being exclusionary! [laughs]

Pat: [laughs]

Kieran: [laughs] I guess if I can just get three—mm, four, four things—about the meeting next week.

Eden: [looks at Pat]

Pat: [looks at Eden]

Eden: Sure.

Pat: Of course.

Kieran: Okay, I guess first, what is it, then, why are they doing it, then, why are you both here, and then finally, what do you hope might come out of it?

Eden: [looks at Pat]

Pat: [looks at Eden] I'll try. [laughs] No, I think it's actually pretty straightforward, especially since we've just talked about sort of how we try to go about things generally. So the meeting is just a big get-together of notebook operators. I think it will be mostly operators based in New Angland, kind of North-East, because it's being held here and probably not many people want to come from like, Florida or whatever. I think the idea is just to share experiences, talk about what people are up to, struggles and successes, that kind of thing. I think it will literally be like thirty to fifty people sitting in a circle for two or three days just going around. I saw the agenda, the whole first morning and I guess potentially whole first day is reserved for literally just going around and like, "Hi, I'm Pat, I'm the notebook operator for Massapeekwa County in West New York and I've been doing it for six months, I'm also a small grower, I grow tomatoes, greens, mushrooms, squashes, and carrots, I grew up in the next county over but I've lived in Massapeekwa since 2011, I ended up being the notebook operator because, here's what our notebook is like, here's what I'm working on right now..." that kind of thing.

Obviously that's really important, if you want to be able to help each other and trust each other and work out interoperation agreements and stuff like that you have to have a sense of where people are coming from, understand that they're also human, why they are doing what they are doing, what they are excited about, what pressures they are feeling, what they are good at and proud of and what they struggle with, all of that. It takes tons of time but I think it's smart that they've made the time for it.

Then in the afternoon or maybe on the second day there will be some cases and some, sort of, group advice sessions and then I think there will be some interoperation agreements worked out. Oh, and tons of food. [laughs]

Eden: [laughs] Lots of food.

Kieran: [laughs] That's really why you're going, isn't it.

Eden: [laughs] Psh, of course!

Pat: [laughs]

Eden: Well—I guess to answer your next question, why are we here—besides the food, obviously—the practical reason is that a friend of ours who is a notebook operator from upstate who we haven't seen for a long time asked us to come, and we were actually both planning to be on the East Coast already. We have no planned role in the meeting or anything. We aren't like, facilitating any agreement or whatever. The agreements that will be worked out will be before the whole group, so anybody can kind of stick their noses in and [makes air quotes] "facilitate" if they want—I've seen that work really well before, but it can also sometimes be, um, shall we say, a little counterproductive, so we'll see how it goes. It should be fun. We are just going to introduce ourselves like everyone else, tell our stories when it's our turn, listen to everyone else, learn about what's going on over here...honestly I feel like I'm here more to learn than to be in any sort of, I don't know, advisory or facilitator capacity or whatever. Even if a third of the people have been operators less than six months, there will be a lot of experience in that room, a lot of knowledge about climates and cultural and economic contexts totally different from anything we have experienced.

So, yeah, I'm just hoping to listen, learn, meet new friends, you know. I have no agenda—I think I can say we have no agenda [looks at Pat]—

Pat: [nods]

Eden: I mean, of course, we have our principles, we have the way we work, we want to keep that alive, both in the sense of embodying those principles but also in the sense of continuing to change them, evolve them in response to what we are learning. We make our experience, our knowledge, our beliefs available, but we also make available to ourselves a chance to enlarge our experience and our knowledge, to change our beliefs. For me that's enough of a goal for a meeting. [laughs] There are a lot of people coming, who knows what will happen?

Pat: I think to be available, to be open—to others, to learning—for me that's always enough of a goal.

Eden: Yeah, I think so. I mean, as a general goal. We always have practical goals, little goals, everyday goals in our day to day work. But if you have to have a big goal— [shrugs]

Kieran: [laughs] Thank you so much, both of you. This has been great fun.

Eden: [laughs] Oh no, that's a much better goal!

Pat: [laughs]

In a later conversation, I asked Eden Perkar for some thoughts on the term "second generation reputation system," and whether she saw the Lang Beach Farmers' Market Notebook, or other FMNs, as falling under that heading. She said: "I think it's a good, a really good term and a useful one. If you wanted to ask around you could make a list of 'what do you think makes a second-generation reputation system'—I think it'd probably be some mixture of verifying identity, you know, preventing people from making reputation statements completely anonymously—even if their names are not posted next to their comments, that's not the point, the point is just to make sure people can't just trivially create tons of accounts—separating things that are more factual from things that have more to do with the expectations of the person making the reputation statement, and having sophisticated mediation that lets people with different degrees of experience and knowledge about the system contribute in different ways, including talking with the reviewers and the people who are being reviewed, doing this kind of teaching work, where people are supported in developing sort of a broader view of what's going on, a better sense of how to give constructive feedback and respond usefully to feedback. But actually I don't really think of the market notebooks as being second generation reputation systems—and Pat and I have been talking about this lately, so I feel more or less okay speaking sort of for both of us on this—I don't think of the market notebooks as second generation reputation systems because actually I don't think of them as reputation systems at all. Because think about what you are doing when you leave a reputation statement: actually, you are making a judgment. Now, of course, you can set things up so people can edit their reviews or whatever later if things change, but ultimately reputation statements are about judgment and in a certain sense, even if this is somewhat softened by letting people update their reviews, reputation systems are about sorting the good from the bad. In really big systems and systems where people's livelihoods are at stake—especially, for example, we've seen a lot of work recently on second generation reputation systems in online labor markets—that makes sense, you need that, workers need to make decisions about who to work for, and the only information they have is what other workers have recorded about their experiences with different employers. But in local food we have a little bit of a different goal—you have these people, they are living near each other, the growers have made significant investments, they are not going to drop out of the market if they can help it, and the buyers might go to another market, but a lot of the same growers will be there—the point is, this is a community, these people are more or less stuck with each other. So you can imagine that reputation statements, judgments, are actually counterproductive in this situation, because they make people defensive and they can erode goodwill. I think the goals of the second generation reputation systems, especially when they are monitoring big labor markets and things like that, are good, because they help workers sort good employers from bad ones at any given moment and they bring a kind of balance of power to the market. And workers and employers both can learn and these kinds of systems can improve outcomes for everyone as long as people are open to learning and don't get too defensive. But in local food we aren't trying to sort the good from the bad. Instead we are trying to figure out, how can we help everybody to be 'good'? And how can we all work together make a local food system that works for everyone? I think that might be a long term goal in bigger markets too, but at the moment of decision you do have to sort. I think that's the difference between a huge market where you can choose not to interact with certain people and that has basically no effect on your livelihood and a market like a farmers' market that's also a community, where if you are on bad terms with someone eventually it's going to be awkward."

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Text by M. Six Silberman. The major invisible structural inspiration for this text is the periodical *Works and Conversations*. The idea for the introductory conversation is shamelessly stolen from an interview that took place in our world, the world where Lang Beach and New Yark cannot be found on any map but Long Beach and New York can, Yalp is not a popular restaurant reputation system but Yelp is, and the country in the middle of North America is not the Untied but rather the United States. Like every interview in *Works and Conversations* that I have read, it is beautiful and very much worth reading: Richard Whittaker and Jane Rosen, "Toward inaccessible places: a conversation with Andre Enard," *Works and Conversations*, 18 May 2008, http://www.conversations.org/story.php?sid=162. I owe deep thanks to Ellie Harmon for pointing me to the work of Ursula Le Guin. The many others who have influenced my thinking on the topics discussed here by Yuval, Perkar, and Yuen are too many to list; they will, I hope, recognize their influences.