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# Life on the Farm Draws Some French Tired of Urban Rat Race

By BENOÎT MORENNE JAN. 17, 2017

SAULX-LES-CHARTREUX, France — Two years ago, Elisabeth Lavarde decided to quit her office job in Paris and start a new life in Saulx-les-Chartreux, a small town with two butchers and one baker just south of the capital.

Ms. Lavarde, 39, is now an apprentice farmer at a 24-acre farm that grows organic vegetables, sold directly to local consumers. New farmers like Ms. Lavarde usually make what they see as a decent salary of about 1,500 euros, or about \$1,600, a month, slightly above the French minimum wage.

“I wanted a job with more meaning,” she said. “I felt like I was tilting at windmills.”

Alongside the experienced farmer she has been paired with as part of a training program set up by an association that nurtures small-scale farmers, Ms. Lavarde grows around 40 kinds of organic produce, including tomatoes, potatoes, cauliflowers and carrots.

As the sun was about to set behind rows of cauliflower plants on a recent afternoon, Ms. Lavarde gazed over the land she cultivates. A few yards away, a large shelter of tarpaulins rippled in the wind. Ms. Lavarde and her farming tutor, Guilain Vergé, 31, use the shelter to do their bookkeeping and to keep track of their crops on a whiteboard as they wait for authorization from the local government to build a decent barn.

It’s all hard work, she acknowledges. But, she says, “Seeing the sky every day, be it blue or gray, it’s amazing.”

More younger people like Ms. Lavarde are making lives as small-scale farmers in France, drawn in some cases by idealistic notions of tilling the land and of getting away from the rat race of the cities. They often leave behind well-paid jobs, as well as relatively comfortable lives that they nonetheless find unfulfilling.

Powering this small-scale farming drive is a thriving market for organic food that amounted to nearly €7 billion in France in 2016, according to Agence Bio, which tracks the trade in the country. The drive has also been bolstered by an increased awareness of the environmental and health benefits of consuming local products.

Before they can set up shop, however, new entrants have to overcome a range of obstacles, including navigating their way through a labyrinthine bureaucracy that oversees building permits and the distribution of land.

The Duke of Sully, a minister of King Henri IV of France in the early 17th century, once described “plow and pasture” as the lifeblood of the French economy, and farming has long been romanticized in a country that values gastronomic treasures like Camembert cheeses and Bordeaux wines.

But the reality is much bleaker for most farmers, who say they feel constrained by European Union regulations and who have been hit by global competition, shrinking margins and poor harvests in recent years. Generous agricultural subsidies mostly benefit large farms.

In France, a farmer commits suicide almost every other day, a rate 20 percent higher than the national average, according to a 2016 report by the national public health agency.

That dire outlook, however, has not deterred people like Ms. Lavarde from taking up farming, even if established farmers view their efforts with skepticism.

Standing near a frozen wheat field near Ms. Lavarde’s farm, Bruno Gilles, 47, a third-generation farmer who grows cauliflowers, tomatoes and other vegetables, was skeptical about Ms. Lavarde’s chances of success, citing narrow margins and competition from farms that produce vegetables year-round.

“It’s going to be very hard,” Mr. Gilles said, his arms folded over a military sweater.

The first test for new entrants might be their hardest: finding land.

“I find myself to be extremely lucky,” Ms. Lavarde said. “When I see other people around me, access to land truly has been an obstacle for them.”

Since the 1960s, that access has been tightly regulated through regional agencies that act as intermediaries between land-seekers and those either selling or renting.

The agencies have traditionally favored established farmers over new entrants, many of whom grow alternative products based on small-scale organic farming and have modest farming experience.

Ms. Lavarde said that when a young farmer she worked with set out to find agrarian land in the area of Saulx-les-Chartreux, she discovered that a tract had been allocated to a conventional farmer without anyone informing her that it was available.

Ms. Lavarde found a plot to farm through Les Champs des Possibles, which translates roughly as Realm of the Possible, a nonprofit that pairs new farmers with experienced farmers on test farms for two or three years.

“We provide them with land if needed, with a status, with means of production, with professional support,” said Jean-Baptiste Cavalier, an agronomist at Reneta, a national network of 70 testing grounds, of which Les Champs des Possibles is a member.

At the end of their training period, aspiring farmers have agrarian experience, some money in the bank and mentors to vouch for them when they fill out papers to apply for land.

Part of the problem with land allocations is the lack of farms on the market, said François Purseigle, a sociologist at INP-Ensai, an agronomy engineering faculty in Toulouse, in southern France.

“We have guys in the fields that think: ‘I’m keeping my farm. My children are teachers or doctors, so they’re not going to take over. I have a crummy pension. I’ll still keep that property because, you never know, it could gain in value,’” Mr. Purseigle said in a telephone interview.

Vincent Martin shielded his eyes from the sun on a recent morning at a farm near the village of St.-Augustin, about a two-hour drive east of Saulx-les-

Chartreux. He said much of his future as a farmer relied on finding agrarian land.

“Land is key,” said Mr. Martin 36, a single farmer who made a living selling health club memberships in Paris until he left his job about five years ago, eventually to take up farming.

To find agricultural land in the area, he was counting on word of mouth rather than on the regional agencies, despite having filled out piles of application forms.

His tutor, Philippe Caron, 58, who took up farming a few years ago, said he and his wife, Anna, would do all they could to help Mr. Martin get started.

The other challenge facing new producers is distribution, which for larger, established farms usually involves dealing with middlemen selling products to supermarkets and stores around the country. For small producers, the system cuts deeply into meager profits. The solution has been to find ways of selling directly to consumers, mostly through nationwide networks like the Association for the Defense of Small-Scale Agriculture, known by its French acronym, AMAP.

Under one AMAP plan, consumers sign up for a year and get a basket of vegetables, meat, cheese or fruits each week, delivered by a local producer. Prices for a basket range from €12 to €24, and customers, by paying in advance, agree to take their share of the risks that come with climatic contingencies.

Hélène Rouet, 43, a former logistics manager volunteering in one Paris-based AMAP office, quit her job to live in the country with a local producer. She said customers who took the produce baskets had a unique link to the food. “The farmer tells us about the difficulties he’s faced; it’s like he’s bringing us his babies,” she said.

Even when they’ve found land and distribution, some neo-farmers still find themselves having to commute to their land, whereas older farmers often live on the edge of their fields. New entrants often can’t afford to buy the buildings on their farms, if there are any.

Some buy shabby trailers to stay in near their farms or sleep in their cars.

Mr. Martin said it sometimes took him over two hours to commute to the farm. He started work at dawn to plow, sow or harvest, depending on the season.

“It’s worth it,” Mr. Martin said, “for now.”

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