

By Charles Johnson

Take over, take charge

Young farmers anticipate a bright, well-managed future

Plenty of life options tempted Jonathan Andrews when he graduated from Fresno State University. With good grades, a pleasant demeanor, and a resume stacked with honors, businesses would have jumped at the chance to employ him. Still, he chose to return to the family farm.

"It comes down to this: You've got to love what you're doing, and this is what I love," says the 28-year-old.

"There are a lot of exciting things going on in farming now. I'm real interested in technology and there's a technological revolution going on out here. We're using GPS on everything. We have the newest varieties. There's a lot going on that gets me pumped up about farming right now."

Jonathan joined his father, Johnny Andrews, on a 2,300-acre farm at Dos Palos, Calif. They concentrate on cotton and he has his own small, but high-quality, registered Angus cattle operation. His father says Jonathan's energy and expertise benefit the farm.

"He's willing to try new things. It's a better operation if somebody is willing to get out and try things," he says.

Serious moves. U.S. farmers grow grayer by the year, with average age in the mid-50s. Still, some young people, like Jonathan Andrews, buck the trend and take on the risks and responsibilities of farming.

They must remember, however, that they're entering a serious business. "It's not a matter of loving to sit on

that tractor seat. There's got to be more appeal than that. They have to understand that this is an opportunity to own and manage a business," says Alan Miller, Purdue University farm business management specialist.

"Most young people today have options. They have to know their own expectations, what they hope to get out of farming as opposed to any alternatives they might have."

Challenges galore. In addition to all that, farmers run greater risks than many other business people do. Weather, marketing, and dealing with lenders can all be nail-biters.

"Farming is not the easiest thing to do. You can't just walk in there and start borrowing money to get into business. You've got to get established first, somehow," Miller says.

Many young farmers partner with an established farmer, as Jonathan Andrews did with his father. Some choose to enter the business with outsiders rather than family members. That has its own set of challenges.

"Choose partners carefully. That's an important person. If they own all the assets, that makes them very important. Make sure it's a desirable arrangement for everybody involved. Make certain it's an arrangement that will work for you and provide the things you need, and that you're not at a disadvantage. Always pick your opportunities with care," Miller says.

Young people with an urge to farm but no land base can still find oppor-

tunities. USDA helped fund the National Farm Transition Network to give them a chance to do just that. It links prospective young farmers together with retiring farmers who have no heirs but still have a desire to keep their land in agriculture.

About 20 states from Maine to California participate in the program, in one form or another. Some states give beginning farmers a boost with tax credits and incentives, as well.

Nebraska, for one, has a beginning farmer tax credit program. It provides tax credits to landowners who rent land, livestock, storage bins and buildings, irrigation equipment, and livestock equipment and facilities to beginning farmers and ranchers for three years or more.



To qualify for the Nebraska program, beginning farmers and ranchers must have a net worth less than \$200,000, must have farmed or ranched for less than 10 of the last 15 years, and must provide the day-to-day physical labor and management.

In addition, they must be state residents and participate in a financial management educational program. They can't be related to the owner.

When 28-year-old Ryan Gourley's father and uncle exited the farm business in 1999, it appeared he'd never be able to farm full-time. He was patient, though, and always kept his long-term goal firmly in mind.

He went to work as a cotton scout, then took a job working for another farmer, making contacts and learn-

ing the business. Three years ago, he began farming 150 acres. Now he's worked his way to 700 acres on land near Friendship, Tenn.

A good mentor helps, Gourley says. "My father-in-law, Jim Jerman, had the equipment, and I'm working his 150 acres for use of his module builder and a tractor. If it wasn't for him, I wouldn't have a chance to do this."

The years he spent working on Bubba Fincher's farm helped, too. "That got me freshened back up through



►Above: Jonathan Andrews brings energy and innovation to their California cotton farm, says his father, Johnny. ►Right: West Tennessean Ryan Gourley started farming full-time after several years of working for another farmer and as a cotton scout. "It was all valuable," he says.



►**Above:** Childhood friends Chip Flowers and Matt Tays partner with Chip's brother, Beau, on a diversified Georgia vegetable and cotton farm.

learning from him. It was all valuable time. Working as a cotton scout helped, too. I was still in contact with farmers and I was in the field all the time. I knew what was changing in the business and got a good feel for how different farmers managed crops in different ways," Gourley says.

In south Georgia, near Ty Ty, brothers Chip and Beau Flowers and their long-time friend, Matt Tays, farm better than 2,000 acres of cotton, snap beans, cabbage, eggplants, squash, cantaloupes, bell pepper, and other crops. In addition, the Flowers brothers

own three large packing sheds. It's amazing diversity and investment for young men still in their 20s.

The Flowers brothers' father, Buck, big in vegetable plant production, was killed in a plane crash while they were still in college. After graduation, they began farming together. Tays soon joined them. His immediate family did not farm, but he worked on farms as a youngster and had a burning desire to start on his own.

All three have college degrees, in business administration, history, and computer science. Never mind that. They couldn't push farming aside.

"We truly enjoy it. We're not scared of growth. We want to grow at a manageable, controllable rate," Chip says.

They own some land and rent still more. "You can still farm a small amount of land and make as much profit as you can on 10,000 acres, depending on what your yield and expense looks like," Chip says.

"We operate year-round. If we don't the cash flow stops," Tays adds.

You have to find your niche. There's a certain amount of risk with everything. You have to mitigate it. Know your costs going in, and know where you need to be," Beau says.

In the Mississippi Delta, at Belzoni, Pepper Roberts and Preston Aust grow cotton, corn, and soybeans, partnering with Pepper's dad, Paul. It's a big commitment of time and money.



►**Above:** Paul Roberts, left, helped his son, Pepper, center, and friend Preston Aust get started farming cotton, corn, and soybeans in the Mississippi Delta. ►**Right:** Nate Braun plans to join the hog and row-crop farm his father and two uncles operate near Le Sueur, Minn.

"I leave the house at 5:45 in the morning," Pepper Roberts says. "In the fall, I'm back home at 8:30 at night. My wife brings my 5-year-old twins to the field because that's the only time I would get the chance to see them."

Once that desire to farm hits hard, it's tough to turn away. Nate Braun, a college student, plans to join the family farm near Le Sueur, Minn. "It's in my blood," he says. "Since I could walk, it's the only thing I wanted." ■

