



Omaha Fringe Festival includes belly dancers and a Robin Williams tribute. *Midlands*



After more than a decade, Missouri Valley favorite Rhizosphere Farm will close. *Living*

# Omaha World-Herald

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## Mueller warns of more Russian interference

He rejects Trump's claim of 'exoneration,' saying his team didn't consider whether to charge the president

WASHINGTON (AP) — Robert Mueller, the taciturn lawman at the center of a polarizing American drama, bluntly dismissed President Donald Trump's claims of "total exoneration" Wednesday in the federal probe of Russia's 2016 election interference.

In congressional testimony, Mueller warned that Moscow's actions represented — and still represent — a great threat to American democracy.

Mueller's back-to-back Capitol Hill appearances, his first since wrapping his two-year Russia probe, carried the prospect of a historic climax to a rare criminal investigation into a sitting American president. But his testimony was more likely to reinforce rather than reshape hardened public opinions on impeachment and the future of Trump's presidency.

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THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

The former special counsel was questioned for nearly seven hours.

## Reward offered for information on where Gretna girls got alcohol

By ERIN DUFFY

WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

How did the group of 15- and 16-year-old girls involved in a fatal crash last month obtain the alcohol that authorities said they were drinking before their car careened off the road?

Sarpy County law enforcement investigating the crash said they are hitting a critical roadblock when it comes to answering that question: Students, parents and other potential witnesses have

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Watch the video from Wednesday's press conference.

been reluctant to talk to investigators and share what they know.

On Wednesday, the Sarpy County Sheriff's Office again urged the public to come forward with information about who provided the alcohol to the Gretna teens, four of whom were killed last month in the crash. Officials dangled a \$7,500

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### IN MONEY

Facebook will pay \$5 billion fine; it says FTC settlement will lead to improved privacy safeguards.

## Fears over data privacy spawn never-Google movement

THE WASHINGTON POST

SAN FRANCISCO — In the small South Carolina town of Newberry, Bob's Red Mill muesli cereal is hard to come by.

That presents a challenge for resident Gregory Kelly, who can't get enough of the stuff. He'd rather not truck the 40 miles or so to Columbia to stock up on it, but he's also loath to buy it from the company's website, which he says is riddled with tracking software from Google.

Kelly grudgingly chooses to head into Columbia every so often, rather than cede his data to Google or turn over his purchase history to another online retailer. "I'm just not sure why Google needs to know what breakfast cereal I eat," the 51-year-old said.



BY MAGGIE MCGHEE FOR THE WORLD-HERALD



## 'THE REALITIES OF FARMING' SET IN AT RHIZOSPHERE

Fate of the popular farm  
highlights the challenges  
smaller operations face

By SARAH BAKER HANSEN  
WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

MISSOURI VALLEY, Iowa — It's a cool, stormy morning at Rhizosphere Farm, and Terra Hall stands in the drizzle in one of her large fields, pointing out her last heirloom tomato plants.

Her last green beans. Her final potatoes.

After more than a decade of growing, marketing and selling local, organic food, this will be Rhizosphere's final season. Hall and her husband, Matt, announced this spring they'd decided to quit farming.

"If we made money doing this," Hall said, "I don't know that we'd ever stop."

It's a struggle that many, perhaps even most, small farmers understand, even farms as popular as Rhizosphere.

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RYAN SODERLIN/THE WORLD-HERALD

This will be the final season for Rhizosphere Farm, run by Terra and Matt Hall. Though popular at farmers markets and with local restaurateurs, the farm has failed to turn a profit. Matt hasn't been able to help out on the farm as much this season, as he's been working off the farm to help make ends meet.

# LOCAL FARMERS FACE 'FIERCE COMPETITION'

## FARM

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The farm's stand is arguably one of the most eye-catching of any vendor at the farmers market, and unarguably one of its most popular. Its colorful, carefully arranged produce often sells out early in the day. Despite that popularity, plus regular restaurant customers such as Block 16, La Buvette and The Boiler Room, the farm has never made a profit.

Its owners pay their scant staff more than they've ever made themselves, and the couple has always maintained second jobs outside of the farm.

"Farming is really just a series of gambles," Hall said. "You can't do this if you don't like to gamble. It's something you do because you love it. But when you can't pay your bills, you can only run into a wall."

The story of Rhizosphere is more common than one might think, said Ben McShane-Jewell, a University of Nebraska extension educator based in Blair.

As farmers markets have continued to experience incredible growth, they've become saturated, he said. Small farmers now vie for market share not just from their fellow vendors, but also for the fixed base of shoppers.

"It's fierce competition," he said. "It becomes hard for any individual farmer to make a profit."

Lots of market customers also carry a "romantic notion" about farming, McShane-Jewell said, which simply isn't reality. Small farmers face challenges in weather, weeds, pests and the difficulty of the physical work itself.

"It never stops," he said. "The help is almost none. A lot of it has to be done by hand. It's back-breaking work."

The Halls met in 2005 at a farm outside of Eugene, Oregon, where Terra was working. She decided to move back to the Midwest (she's from Council Bluffs), and in 2008 ended up in Fairfield, Iowa, farming at the town's transcendental meditation center. Her husband, an Omaha native, stayed in Oregon to work, and both saved money toward the dream of their own farm.

Rhizosphere officially started in 2009 on a rented one-acre lot in Waterloo, Nebraska, with a manufactured home where the couple lived. They started a community-supported agriculture program, and soon expanded to a second piece of land down the road.

In 2011, most of the crop

got decimated by a hailstorm. The next season, Rhizosphere had one of its most successful years, and the Halls decided it was time to buy their own place. They took a year off in 2013 to look for land.

They ended up in the Loess Hills on a flat 5½-acre piece of land where the previous owner had been growing alfalfa without chemicals.

The Halls planted a "food forest" — it includes grapes, quince, Asian pears and blackberries, among other fruits — and a medicinal herb garden full of pollinators. They grew a variety of crops: rhubarb, asparagus, strawberries, tomatoes, many types of leafy greens, onions, sweet potatoes, green beans, beets, leeks and carrots.

"When we started, I wanted to grow whatever I could," Hall said. "But we were doing too many things and not making enough money."

They started to focus the farm on what restaurants might want, growing more unusual crops like fava beans and salsify, a plant with an edible root that resembles a parsnip.

That focus made them a favorite of chefs, said Paul Urban, who has worked with the farm for years at Block 16. He specifically remembers the farm's colorful greens, carrots and asparagus, and he loved the farm's crop diversity.

"They always have something really different," Urban said.

He cites one example from this season: crosnes, a Chinese artichoke that tastes and crunches like a water chestnut. He served the root as part of a spring vegetable hash with fresh halibut, a lemon beurre fondue and local nettles.

Urban said Rhizosphere has

always been one of the most consistent and most organized farms he's worked with.

"We are just really bummed that Rhizosphere is going away," he said.

The farm continually raised its prices, Terra Hall said, in an effort to stay competitive, and though none of its market shoppers or restaurant customers balked, it wasn't enough.

She said the responsibility she feels, particularly to restaurant customers, is one thing that's kept her going. But she said she reached a point where she couldn't continue selling for less at the farmers market.

"Growing clean, good food locally costs way more than we can charge at the market," she said.

McShane-Jewell said small Nebraska farmers are often hampered by pricing. Nebraska is still catching up with the rest of the country.

"By and large, most customers are not going to pay six or seven dollars for a dozen locally produced eggs, even though that's what it costs, or even more, to produce them," he said.

Farmers market vendors are competing with large farms, too, many of which sell their products for just a couple of dollars at large supermarkets.

"It becomes very challenging for a small farmer to make the argument that eggs produced down the road using sustainable practices are worth the six-plus dollars."

Hall said she isn't sure how much the farm is losing; they've struggled to keep good records. Of all the crops they've grown, she said tomatoes are the only ones that regularly turn a profit.

Erin Schoenberg, the sales



RYAN SODERLIN/THE WORLD-HERALD

Terra Hall arranges the vegetables for the Rhizosphere Farm tent during the downtown Omaha farmers market. The stall is popular, often selling out early. At top, Matt Hall works at dawn to load vegetables into a van to take them to the farmers market.

manager for Lone Tree Foods, an organization that connects small local farmers to wholesale buyers and chefs, said the small farms she works with share that struggle.

"Consumers think that local food is 'special food that I spend more money on during the weekends,'" she said. "It's not their daily food."

And while Lone Tree doesn't work with Rhizosphere, she said she understood the farm's challenge.

"There's a fine line between putting on a happy face at the market while also dealing with the realities of farming," she said.

Hall is still figuring out what she'll do next. Matt will continue his work year-round as a contractor. They plan to stay on their farm, and she said she's looking forward to spending more time in her herb garden.

Maybe she will help people plant their own gardens. Maybe she'll run a small CSA. She hopes to continue some relationships with restaurants. Either way, she knows farming is part of her identity.

"It sucks to work so hard to be so good at something," she said. "Part of what kept us going is that we were good at it, and getting better."

The other part of what she feels? Relief.

"(The decision to stop) has been four years in the making," she said. "It's a long time sitting with the reality of it. But life is much bigger. Maybe I can help other people understand that, too."

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