

Jerry Hagstrom



The freshman farm caucus

WHILE CONGRESSIONAL LEADERS are getting closer to passing a farm bill this year, wise eyes are already looking at who might serve on the House Agriculture Committee next year when the Democrats take over the chamber.

House Agriculture ranking member Collin Peterson of Minnesota, who is expected to become chairman, has already said he wants to organize the committee quickly. If the current ratio of 26 Republicans to 19 Democrats is reversed, Peterson will face the challenge of finding new members with an interest in and knowledge of food and agriculture.

The Democratic victories were so heavily suburban that it would seem Peterson will have a hard time finding new members, but a surprising number of newly elected Democrats have a food, agriculture, or restaurant background.

The most obvious is Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez from New York's 14th District, who ran her campaign out of a paper grocery bag from behind the bar at a Manhattan taqueria where she was slinging tequila-based cocktails and living off tips.

Ocasio-Cortez, a 29-year-old Democratic Socialist of Puerto Rican descent, recently told *Bon Appétit*, "The food industry is the nexus of almost all of the major forces in our politics today. It's super closely linked with climate change and ethics. It's the nexus of minimum-wage fights, of immigration law, of criminal-justice reform, of health care debates, of education. You'd be hard-pressed to find a political issue that doesn't have food implications."

Ocasio-Cortez does not seem like the kind of Democrat whom Peterson, a leader of the Blue Dog Coalition, would prefer for his committee. But he and Democratic leaders have many others to choose from. Peterson has already said that Angie Craig, from Minnesota's 2nd District, came to his farm festival well prepared on ag policy.

Here are others Peterson might want:

- Josh Harder, from California's 10th District, whose family started growing peaches in Manteca in 1850; and fellow Democrat T.J. Cox—the owner of a nut-processing company—who is ahead of Rep. David Valadao in the uncalled race in California's 21st District.

- Donna Shalala, from Florida's 27th District, who served as Health and Human Services secretary in the Clinton administration and has been a leader of the Bipartisan Policy Center's efforts on reducing obesity. Shalala has also been chancellor of the University of Wisconsin-Madison and president of the University of Miami, where she made it easier for students to get healthy food. As a Peace Corps volunteer in

Iran, she helped construct an agricultural college.

- Abby Finkenauer, from Iowa's 1st District, and Cindy Axne, from Iowa's 3rd District, who defeated ag-oriented Republicans and will undoubtedly need to demonstrate an interest in agriculture to get reelected.

- David Trone, from Maryland's 6th District, who grew up on a farm on the Maryland-Pennsylvania border and is the co-owner of Total Wine & Beverage, the country's largest private wine retailer.

- Elissa Slotkin, from Michigan's 8th District, whose family ran Hygrade Foods, the Michigan meat company that invented Ball Park Franks.

- Dean Phillips, from Minnesota's 3rd District, who is an

heir to the Phillips Distilling Company liquor fortune, was chair of Talenti Gelato, and ran two coffee shops that pledged to offer a \$15 minimum wage to employees.

- Ilhan Omar, from Minnesota's 5th District, who worked as a community nutrition educator.

- Steven Horsford, from Nevada's 4th District, who led the Culinary Academy, which placed graduates in hospitality, health care, and technology companies.

- Chris Pappas, from New Hampshire's 1st District, who is the fourth-generation owner of Puritan Backroom, a restaurant in



Rep.-elect Cindy Axne of Iowa

Manchester.

- Kochitl Torres Small, from New Mexico's 2nd District, who worked on broadband and other communications issues as an aide for Sen. Tom Udall.

- Veronica Escobar, from Texas's 16th District, who grew up on her family's dairy farm.

Which of these Democrats want to sit on the House Agriculture Committee is another question. Many of them may wish to challenge the committee's support for conventional agriculture. Ocasio-Cortez has asked her Twitter followers to send her Instant Pot recipes, but it hard to imagine a member from a district as urban as hers asking for a seat.

Some of conventional agriculture's strongest Democratic critics, such as Reps. Tim Ryan of Ohio, Ron Kind of Wisconsin, and Earl Blumenauer of Oregon, choose to make their cases for different farm policy without sitting on the panel.

Whether inside or outside the Agriculture committee, a Democratic House will mean a fresh debate on farm and food policies with new voices ascendant. □

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