

Biography and memoir

Add to myFT

The Spinach King – the tale of an agricultural dynasty and its dark secrets

John Seabrook wryly details the rise and fall — and Oedipal struggles — of his family's farming empire



The employees of Seabrook Farms gather outside its vast factory in New Jersey in the 1950s © Yale Joel/The LIFE Picture Collection/Shutterstock

John Gapper

Published YESTERDAY

3

In 1955, Life magazine ran a photo spread on Seabrook Farms in New Jersey, calling it the “biggest vegetable factory on earth”. Jack Seabrook, chief executive of a business that grew a third of the frozen vegetables in the US, stood triumphantly in front of 5,000 workers and his father Charlie (CF) Seabrook, known as the Henry Ford of Agriculture.

Four years later, this picture of US enterprise and familial harmony imploded, with Jack Seabrook and his brothers trying to have their alcoholic, drug-addicted father declared insane, and CF responding by selling the family business and cutting them out of his will. So ended the reign of the Spinach King and his anglophile, carriage-riding playboy son.

Most historians of family businesses face the challenge of uncovering the human secrets within them. John Seabrook, a New Yorker writer and author of books on culture and music including *Nobrow* (2000) and *The Song Machine* (2015), had the opposite problem. He knew little of farming but almost too much about his late father Jack and grandfather Charlie.



A mix of peas and carrots is prepared for the Seabrook Farms' freezing plant © Bettmann Archive

The Seabrook males (including the author until he went sober) were dedicated tipplers but, as John quotes a psychologist writing: “In my experience, the business itself is usually [the] family’s primary drug and other dependencies follow.” The industrial-scale farm, dating to the 19th century in the Garden State, was the substance they abused.

So, Seabrook has plenty of material and tells most of it entertainingly, with a wry sense of humour. There are two stories: the one about how Seabrook Farms became one of America’s leading agricultural forces before flaming out, and that of the family and the Oedipal struggles of Seabrook sons to undermine their fathers’ reputations.

There is a tour de force scene of social comedy in which Jack Seabrook affects Wasp bemusement at his son’s girlfriend (later wife) asking for a mere glass of wine, before descending to his wine cellar in search of a vintage bottle to decant by candlelight. At the rear of the cavernous cellar sits a safe whose combination has mysteriously been lost (or has it?).



Seabrook also brings vividly to life the week of glamour when his parents met at the marriage of Grace Kelly and Prince Rainier in Monaco in 1956. He was a mid-century farm boy turned Manhattan socialite, and she was a gossip columnist for a New York newswire, who found a scoop about the theft of jewels while lunching with her future husband.

The family business meanwhile recovered from going bankrupt in 1924 to agricultural hegemony under the capricious, autocratic CF. From his early experiments with crop irrigation, he jumped on the opportunity to freeze lima beans and spinach, helped by Clarence Birdseye. Later, Jack Seabrook developed the family’s own brand.

This is a tremendous tale, but one understands why Seabrook’s mother, when told before her death that he was thinking of writing about it, tried to warn him off. “Maybe she knew what I was going to find out,” he writes. Or maybe she knew the men of her family’s obsession with grinding down their ancestors.



Summer Books 2025

The best titles of the year so far. From politics, economics and history to art, food and, of course, fiction — FT writers choose [their favourite reads of the year so far](#)

CF and Jack’s weapons were trusts and lawsuits; Seabrook’s is the pen. The story darkens as he digs into family files and newspaper cuttings to detail the seamy great fortune of the business. “Behind every great fortune lies a great crime,” Honoré de Balzac wrote, and although Seabrook can’t quite pin a big one on his family, he finds some nasty stuff. In 1934, CF and some henchmen violently broke a strike for higher pay by his farm workers and fired many of the Black employees, with the Ku Klux Klan massing in support nearby, he writes.

Decades later, Jack Seabrook got involved in dubious consulting work, with payments made to a Swiss bank account and the details perhaps locked for ever in that hidden safe. Seabrook judges that his family left “a legacy of cheating”.

The truth is more complex: even CF was, for the times, liberal about whom he employed, including interned Japanese Americans. They remained grateful to him long after his death and, as one local observed: “Just because you are an alcoholic doesn’t mean you can’t run a company.”

The author acknowledges his conflicts: trying to expiate his guilt and take revenge on his grandfather while co-managing the \$15mn family trust fund, for example. Still, he gives too little credit to the agricultural innovations of his forefathers’ doomed enterprise. They did not buy spinach at a Brooklyn farmers’ market; they raised it plentifully from the soil.

The Spinach King: The Rise and Fall of an American Dynasty by John Seabrook WW Norton & Co £25/\$31.99, 368 pages

John Gapper is the FT’s chief UK business columnist

Join our online book group on Facebook at [FT Books Café](#) and follow FT Weekend on [Instagram](#), [Bluesky](#) and [X](#)



Follow the topics in this article

- Life & Arts
- Add to myFT
- Biography and memoir
- Add to myFT
- Non-Fiction
- Add to myFT
- History books
- Add to myFT
- Agriculture
- Add to myFT

