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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



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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

In 1955, Life magazine ran a photo spread on Seabrook Farms in New Jersey,

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.



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



JOHN SEABROOK

has mysteriously been lost (or has it?).

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

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

with crop irrigation, he jumped on the opportunity to freeze lima beans and spinach, helped by Clarence Birdseye. Later, Jack Seabrook developed the

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. CF and Jack's weapons were trusts and

This is a tremendous tale, but one understands why Seabrook's mother, when



writers choose their favourite reads of

the year so far

side 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 in that hidden safe. Seabrook judges that his family left "a legacy of cheating".

lawsuits; Seabrook's is the pen. The story

darkens as he digs into family files and

newspaper cuttings to detail the seamy

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

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

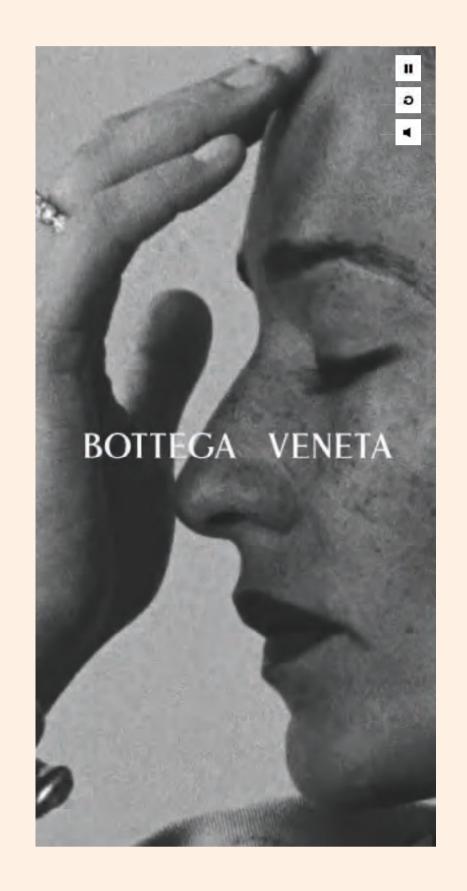
farmers' market; they raised it plentifully from the soil. The Spinach King: The Rise and Fall of an American Dynasty by John

Seabrook *WW Norton & Co £25/\$31.99, 368 pages*

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