



MARCH 2011

This issue is really about just doing what works here in Marin. A new species has arrived: water buffalo. Soon the new cheese will arrive: authentic, Italian style mozzarella cheese (farmstead), adding to the species list of milk animals, right along with goats, sheep, and, of course, cows. Why not? An innovative example of entrepreneurial hard work, Ramini Mozzarella, joins the cheese community and is featured in a new report by Ellie Rilla on the steady and successful development of the Artisan Cheese industry here in Marin and Sonoma counties. There are, at this writing, 22 commercial cheese plants in the two counties with four more on the way. What used to be discussed at the farm or ranch kitchen tables has bloomed, with lots of hard work, into a premium, world-class local industry. We are resuming what left off decades ago, as we return to the processing paths of the past. Add to that the new Cheesemaking program under way at College of Marin, and you get a good match for more to come.

Speaking of bringing back legacies, it is possible to bring back small twigs of the past by saving heirloom fruit tree varieties with grafting. The popular efforts to dig in locally and use local resources are growing. Saving and restoring older

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Water Buffalo? In Tomales?

In 2009, Craig Ramini walked into the Farm Advisor's Office with a neat bundle of plans and a big bundle of focused energy. He told us that he wanted to build a water buffalo herd, milk them, and make traditional, Italian style mozzarella cheese - fresh and local. OK. We are accustomed to innovative and alternative agricultural plans and ambitions here at the Farm Advisor's quarters. Some of this gets cooked up right here in our cloistered conference room - the Barinaga sheep cheese project had its genesis here. So Craig's project, although exotic, seemed like it might grow legs, and we started hanging out with him and watching the enterprise grow.

Craig was in homework mode when he left for the northeast to work with a water buffalo herdsman and learn a little about management, health, and breeding. Then he took off for New Zealand to work for a few weeks at an Australian farmstead buffalo mozzarella operation, returning to the U.S. just in time to pick up a small herd of water buffalo from Los Angeles. At that point, we had no worries that Craig was not serious! All he needed was a place to settle down with his ladies.

Here is where it got interesting. After a few months pasturing his herd in Sonoma County, Craig connected with the Tomales Poncia family: Al, his wife Cathy, and his son Loren, who run Stemple Creek Ranch, Loren's organic grass-fed beef operation. They hit it off, and Craig moved his growing herd to Tomales, where he began to restore the old family dairy barn and added water buffalo and his infectious energy to the Poncia family's Gericke Road operation. Craig looks to have a combined dairy and cheesemaking operation side by side, with a little shop and place for lovers of fresh, authentic mozzarella to enjoy. This could be a spectacular event, with the lush green grass (Al and Loren are exceptional grass farmers), coastal coolness, and authentic ranch ambiance.

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Coming of Age: The Status of North Bay Artisan Cheesemaking

The report, “Coming of Age: The Status of North Bay Artisan Cheesemaking,” provides a current profile of farmstead and artisan cheesemakers in Marin and Sonoma counties. The data in this report were collected in 2010 in interviews with 38 cheesemakers and cheese professionals. It reports on the current status of artisan and farmstead cheese production in the North Bay, identifying the needs and issues facing these farmers and producers. The North Bay is home to the largest concentration of artisan cheesemakers in the state. Of California’s 43 artisan cheese companies, more than half are located in Marin and Sonoma counties. Survey results confirm the many positive aspects of a diverse and thriving artisan and farmstead cheesemaking community—from the variety of cheeses being made here, to the increasing interest in and demand for artisan cheeses by consumers.

Respondent data indicated:

- Almost half (46%) of Marin and Sonoma Counties’ artisan cheese businesses are farmstead, with one to four family members involved in the operation.
- The oldest continuously operating cheese company has been in business since 1876; the newest operations, begun in 2010, are close to production.

- There are 22 commercial cheese plants in the two counties; four more are close to production.
- Over one third (33%) of those interviewed have been making cheese for three years or less.
- Almost 8 million pounds of artisan cheese are produced here annually.
- Production per cheese business ranges from 1,500 pounds to 3 million pounds annually.
- At an average price of \$15 per pound, artisan cheesemaking is a \$119 million dollar industry in the two counties.
- Annual sales range from a high of \$8 million to a low of \$10,000.
- 332 people are employed in the two counties in the production of cheese and fermented milk products.
- 40% had 11 or more full time employees with an average of 35 employees.
- 70% own a dairy and produce milk for cheese.
- Almost three-quarters (73%) of cheesemakers are making cow milk artisan cheese.
- 46% of cheesemakers indicated that they farmed all or part of their operation organically.
- 37% rely on land leased from others for their cheese operation.
- 72% of farmstead cheesemakers sold agricultural conservation easements on land totaling 9,000 acres and used the proceeds to help capitalize their transition.

Recommendations for future growth included:

- Streamlining permits for cheese plant development;
- Expanding education and training programs for new cheesemakers;
- Increasing the number of cheese operations with active food safety and hygiene plans;
- Resolving shipping and distribution problems;
- Building an affnage infrastructure; and
- Promoting area cheeses in connection with culinary and wine tourism efforts. -- *Ellie Rilla, UCCE Marin*

“Coming of Age: The Status of North Bay Artisan Cheesemaking” is online at <http://cemarkin.ucdavis.edu/files/73480.pdf>



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The Poncia Ranch was established in 1902 by Loren’s grandfather, Angelo Poncia, then was passed to Al, and now is being run by Loren. The Poncias are cautious farmers, but also know an opportunity when they see one. Loren’s venture into organically grown and certified grass-fed beef and lamb has proved to be promising. The family’s support of the Ramini mozzarella operation is a bold move, much like the partnership between Kitty and Doug Dolcini and vegetable farmer David Retsky of County Line Harvest. These are old-school ranchers joining with newer entrepreneurs to diversify their operations in order to maximize shared resources.

Craig has been carefully navigating a steep learning curve. Right now, he is working on special hardware for his custom milking barn. These water buffalo have not been milked before; they are not used to it. Plus, they have huge



horns, meaning getting them into the milking stalls presents some engineering challenges. Every day Craig leads them into the barn, calves alongside mother cows, and takes them through the routine, preparing them for eventual milking duties.

Craig is eager to start making mozzarella cheese, and will begin with a cow’s milk version next month, eventually working into the planned traditional buffalo milk.

This whole story speaks of the intent to add value to our products. Already Craig is homogenizing the vertical steps of the value chain into one fresh and local stream. From the breed to the consumer, it’s all about adding value. The location, the originality of the product, and the personality of the proprietor all give an intangible, yet real value. Desmond Jolly, former head of UC Small Farm Center, once said, *“It’s you, the farmer that adds value to your product.”* Amen.



Stalking rare fruit scion in West Marin

West Marin is fertile hunting ground for heirloom fruit tree varieties. Tucked away on old, now structureless homesteads, along tangled waterways, in backyards, empty city lots, roadsides and unused lands, these relics, jewels and odd varieties lie camouflaged and waiting to be reincarnated as grafted rescues from the past. Some of the trees are “daughters” of older mother trees – cherry, peach, and of course the ever-present plum. In February, we can see where all the wild and otherwise plum are, as they are the only color in the woodland. March, you can identify peach, and by April, all the apple and pear are painting our landscapes.

John Valenzuela, president of the Golden Gate Chapter of The California Rare Fruit Growers Society and horticulturist extraordinaire, and I set out in search of wild scion between storms in late February. John is truly unique, with his amazing grafting and propagating skills, as well as having a deep interest in our local fruit tree cultivars. In his leisure time, he grafts edible fruit onto wild trees, in case he needs a bite on one of his rigorous hikes.

In the San Geronimo Valley, we found a legacy cherry, with daughter trees growing up nearby. This may be a variety worth re-introducing in West Marin. The best way to begin the selection process is to first taste the fruit. What is the flavor like? Do you like it?

We found abandoned plum, pear, peach, thornless blackberry, and apricot in hidden pockets from Woodacre to Inverness. It makes sense to look at these old varieties, with current interest in local sustainability trends. Becoming more independent and self-reliant on the local level should include the ongoing cultivation of food plants (in this case fruit trees) that are well adapted to Marin. We want them to like it here!

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varieties that are well adapted to our bioregion is another part of this trend.

-- Steve Quirt, editor



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Marin Farm News:

☞ **Mike and Sally Gale** have been selected by the **Marin Conservation League (MCL)** as its **2011 John McPhail Jr. Business** awardees. This award is given to a business which exemplifies environmental sensitivity and has fostered positive working relationships with environmental groups. MCL wrote of the Gales, "Your stewardship is evident in the great care you have taken to protect and preserve habitat for fish, wildlife, and native plants." The award will be presented at a dinner on April 15.

☞ **Agricultural Institute of Marin (AIM)** has introduced a new look for their market tour education program. "**Diggin' the Farmers Market**" captures the enthusiasm of market tour participants, who come to learn about local agriculture. To learn more about these tours, visit AIM's website, <http://www.agriculturalinstitute.org/>.

Upcoming Events - Save the Dates:

☞ **2011 California Co-op Conference**, April 8 & 9, Berkeley, CA. The conference is dedicating a track of workshops to share how cooperatives stimulate economic development and to present the latest information on food and cooperatives. For more information, go to http://www.cccd.coop/events/cc_2011.

☞ "**Reweaving the Community Cloth: A Celebration for our First Farm Based Cotton & Wool Mill**," May 1, 2011. Benefit Dinner and Fibershed Fashion Show starts at 5 pm. at Toby's Feed Barn on behalf of fiber farmers. Dinner ticket is \$75, and late-night entry is \$25 covers the fashion show and two cocktails. Contact Rebecca Burgess at 415-259-5849 for more information.

Publications:

☞ Explore the **Sonoma Marin Cheese Trail:**

http://marineconomicforum.org/images/Map_for_web_crx.pdf.

☞ **Marin Agricultural Summit 2010: Notes & Memory:** <http://ucanr.org/sites/2010AgSum2/files/74316.pdf>, February 2011.

☞ **Coming of Age: The Status of North Bay Artisan Cheesemaking:** <http://cemar.in.ucdavis.edu/files/73480.pdf>, January 2011.

☞ **Small Farm Handbook, 2nd Ed.:** <http://anrcatalog.ucdavis.edu/Items/3526.aspx>, published March 4, 2011.

☞ "**California Ranching Without the Williamson Act**": <http://reach.ucdavis.edu/downloads/WilliamsonActFactsheetUCDavis.pdf>.

☞ **Dairy Safety Training Program** materials, including the fo-tonovela in English and Spanish can be downloaded at http://agcenter.ucdavis.edu/Announce/dairy_guide.php.

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