



## EDITORS COLUMN

*"What goes around, comes around." - Bob Giacomini*

*"In each generation of life things change. Seventy-five years ago, Marin County was one of the state's largest milk producers. That's before there was any reasonable mode of transportation, since milk is a fresh product and you couldn't be hauling milk half way across the country. Once transportation modes changed, and became more efficient, then you could milk the cows a little bit further away from the people and still get it to them on time. Now, with pasteurization and homogenization, the shelf life for milk is 21 days. Now it's not that important to grow your product here. I can go back even a little bit further. In the 1850's to 1900, before there was really any transportation other than a schooner going in and out of the bay, there were all these dairy stations. They were making butter and cheese on the farm, and were putting it on schooners and taking it into San Francisco and selling it. Why were they just making butter and cheese? Because of the slow mode of transportation. There was no electricity. It was a way of preserving the product, by making it into butter and cheese. Once you've done that, you don't*

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## What goes 'round, comes 'round Farmstead cheese from Point Reyes Station

The Point Reyes Original Blue Cheese phenomenon was born from a noble desire of owner Bob Giacomini: keeping his kids on the farm. When Bob suggested that Karen, Diana, Lynn and Jill take over the milking operation of 500 cows, the answer was an emphatic "No way!" Bob and his wife Dean then tried a different tack. "What is it then that you really enjoy?" The response was a unanimous, "Food!" So the family went on a search to find out what they could do to combine the very successful Giacomini dairy operation with a food operation. Two years' research and careful consideration paid off. No blue cheese was being made in California. In fact, very little specialty blue cheese was being made in the U.S. at that time. So the decision was made. The next step was to find a cheesemaker, and fortune shone on the family again. Through a casual contact at a trade show, Bob ended up hiring his present cheesemaker, Monte McIntyre, possibly the best blue cheese expert in the country. So they were on their way to becoming the premier blue cheese operation in the country, and one of only two true "farmstead" operations.



*Bob Giacomini with wheels of Point Reyes Original Blue cheese.*

The milk is absolutely the freshest possible, pumped from the milk tank to the fermenting tanks the same morning, capturing all the natural flavors and freshness of pure milk. Everything is hand-done, right down to wrapping and packing. The family operation now produces 1,000 wheels a week and plans on an expansion soon. The cheese has had an enthusiastic reception with sales growing daily. Karen, Lynn and Jill handle the sales, marketing and administration. Bob "does a little bit of everything," which is at least two full-time jobs.

On top of the growing success story of the cheese is the environmental impact that the dairy has had from the increased value of the milk. The herd size has been reduced from 500 to 280, easing pressure on the pastures, reducing water quality issues and lightening the load on the whole dairy operation. In addition, the Point Reyes Original Blue brand is a cornerstone of the Northbay artisan cheese renaissance along with Cowgirl Creamery and Straus Family Creamery in Marin.

*"We are going to get more cheese-makers. How many more I don't know. But the main thing now is bringing people together. And if we can work together, not overproducing, with each of us in our own niche categories, then we can preserve this thing for everyone. The farmstead foods' philosophy is spreading throughout the whole country, and we have a unique opportunity." - Bob Giacomini*

## Organic Row Crop Workshop

Fifty or so organic row crop farmers showed up at the Point Reyes Station Dance Palace Community Center, braving the first real winter storm of the season. It seems fitting that the farmers made it through the intense wind and rain that eventually took out power for three days. Many Marin and Sonoma farms were represented, as well as young interns and apprentices who work on the farms seasonally. The panel was



*Star Route Farm's Doug Gallagher manages 30 acres of mixed veggies*

an all-star line-up of organic luminaries. Warren Weber of Star Route Farms led off with a positive and inspiring overview of the state of organic farming in Marin County. Warren is president of Marin Organic, as well as a founding father of the organic movement. Paul Vossen, UC Cooperative Extension Specialty Crop Advisor for Marin and Sonoma Counties, gave a superb presentation on the “nuts and bolts” of organic farming practices. (Paul is available for consultations from our office in Novato, 415 499-4204.) Bob Bugg from UCCE followed with a great slideshow and insights into holistic farm systems. Organic farming includes balancing the whole ecosystem, not just input control. Leonard Diggs finished off the presentations with a unique and challenging presentation that surveyed the broader human dimensions of what it means to farm organically. Leonard's broad background in organic farming and piercing point of view added a deeper dimension to the event.

As important as the informative nature of the event was the warm companionship that flowed throughout the evening. It is hard enough to get everyone off the farm, so this gathering was both productive and fun. Being able to network and share farming experiences is nothing new to the Marin farming community. Granges, farm bureaus and extension programs have historically held this role. Hopefully the organic farming community, as it matures here in Marin, can provide leadership for greater cooperation and communication.

## Is Marin the “Normandy” of Northern California?

Some people think so. Lynne Devereax, a marketing consultant for the California Milk Advisory Board, says that “Marin County, with its green grass and long pasturing season, is poised to become a premier producer of artisan and farmstead cheeses. Northern California is beginning to be looked upon as a ‘blue ribbon’ region for premier and gourmet foods.”

Sue Conley from Cowgirl Creamery agrees. “The quality of the fresh milk produced here is incredible. As a cheese-maker, I couldn't ask for a more superlative fresh ingredient, which translates into cheeses of the highest quality.” She goes on to say, “The reputation that we are building is beginning to attract attention of fine cheese-makers from around the world. They are watching us closely and see a growing opportunity.”



*Sue Conley of Cowgirl Creamery in Point Reyes Station.*

Farmstead cheeses are rare. These cheeses, made on the farm from animals that are pastured on-farm, are the top of the line and are in great demand. There are just a handful in California today. What makes them so special is the “terroir,” the geographically specific qualities and flavors that the milk carries from the soil, water and pastures into the cheese, creating unique and identifiable flavor characteristics. This is enhanced dramatically with the reduced processing techniques that farmstead cheese-makers employ. The Giacomini Family's Point Reyes Blue is a premier example of fine farmstead cheese-making.

In 1937 1,218,153 lbs. of cheese were reported produced in the Marin County Crop report. Marin was famous for butter and cheese for many years before technology and transportation transformed the dairy business. We still have the climactic advantages and the talent to reclaim our place as one of the top dairy-product regions. Here at Cooperative Extension, in 2003, we are beginning to explore these possibilities. Give us a call if you have questions or want to know more about these opportunities. 415 499-4204.

## Healthy Food For Growing People

Marin County is blessed with a bounty of agricultural products, innovative thinkers, and increasingly health-conscious consumers.

Using the strength of combined effort and rich resources available, the Marin Food Systems Project has begun to sow seeds around the county. Our goal, to link schools with farms and healthy fresh food, involves systemic change.

The Environmental Education Council of Marin, MALT, UCCE, Marin County Health and Human Services, Slide Ranch, Marin Organic, and many others have combined to create a network of relationships supporting both schools and farms. In November, we hosted an event bringing together community members to focus on the health and welfare of our children, farms, schools, and families.

Nearly 300 joined in a program called *Healthy Food for Growing Kids*, November 20, at College of Marin in Kentfield. Mollie Katzen, author of famed *Moosewood Cookbook*, inspired participants with her wisdom and experience of connecting young people with food. Panel presentations focused on local challenges and opportunities; models of what can be done to link schools and farms. Warren Weber spoke about the importance of preserving local agriculture and about the ways in which farms could work with schools more closely. Participants at the event included Star Route Farms, Mt Barnabe Farm, the Pasternak family, Straus Family Creamery, Nana Mae's of Sonoma, Nicasio Valley Farms, Paradise Valley Farms, and many others.

A great deal of energy and excitement was created. Tastings of local food, resources, handouts, cookbooks and more were available to attendees. Monthly meetings are held on the 3rd Tuesday of every month, and we encourage the public to join us.

What is emerging from our meetings and work is broad and meaningful. We are seeing change occur at both the institutional level and among individuals. Relationships between consumers and farmers are shifting. Cooking classes using locally grown and school garden food are sprouting up, school food policies are being passed, classes are visiting farms, teachers are attending trainings that introduce food-based and agricultural education materials.

The time is ripe for broad changes in our institutions and in how we view food and sustainable agriculture. This change will require many people being active in small and significant ways at both the grassroots (at schools and farms), and the policy level. The momentum is developing. We look forward to working with you!

- Leah Smith, Marin Food Systems Project

## In Memory of Ellen Straus

My wife and I moved to West Marin in the spring of 1973. Our first home, along with our one year old daughter, was the "Clark Road" red house, on the Straus dairy property in Marshall. In no time I was fixing fences on the Straus pastures and getting to know the family. Bill and Ellen were already active in farmland preservation and the early development of MALT. Although we appreciated their efforts, nobody could foresee the tremendous impact on our agriculture and land use this humble couple would have.



Photo: Suzanne Parker

The most vivid memory I have of Ellen is a classic one that so many others have shared. The sunny Straus kitchen with its cheery red checkered tablecloth, a pail of fresh milk and some sweet treat from the oven waiting to be enjoyed, and Ellen, with her everpresent smile, the universal mother, asking about the family and insisting that we have more cookies. Whether it was a neighbor, her family, the farming community at large, or the state of regional agriculture, she unabashedly embraced us all, and fed us with her strength, compassion and wisdom, thus empowering us to continue working for the goals of a sustainable farming community in West Marin.

## Straus Family Creamery Approved

The Marin County planning commissioners unanimously approved the Straus Family Creamery's plan to build its new creamery in Marshall, on the Straus Dairy property. The architects have used green building techniques and have worked hard to minimize environmental side effects. The new creamery facility will expand on the current operation on the Marshall-Petaluma Road.

"The on-farm processing will help keep the operation in the county, which is important," said Albert Straus at the hearing. The new Straus Family Creamery will have the capacity to process organic milk from nearby dairies, thus offering profitable alternatives to mainstream commodity pricing. As dairies around our Northbay "milkshed" look at new models of production, selling organic milk to the new Straus operation will remain a viable option.

Also, as stated by planning commissioner Hank Barner, "You don't get freshness if you get products from hundreds of miles away. People want the benefits of freshness without having freshness nearby." It looks like we will continue to have fresh, organic Marin milk.

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have to keep it at a real cold temperature and it'll keep for months where whole milk won't. And so, where are we one hundred years later? Back to making butter and cheese on the farm." - Bob Giacomini

Bob and his wife Dean, together with their four daughters, Karen, Diana, Lynn and Jill, have gone back to cheese production from a commodity milk operation. Although the reasons for going to a value-added cheese operation are not the same as in 1897, the adaptation to new markets and a changing technological landscape resulted in the same kind of an agricultural innovation. The family has more or less escaped from the trap of commodity pricing and is charting its own future.

But cheese is not the only historical profit center for Marin farmers and ranchers. In 1939, 875 acres of dry-farmed artichoke fields produced 81,000 crates. "Our climate is especially adapted to this crop and it could and should be expanded as we have plenty of acres along our coast in Marin County that could be used for artichoke production." -Thomas N. Peryam, Agricultural Commissioner, 1940 crop report. At one time Marin County had 2,000 acres of peas planted. In 1868 there were 4,000 acres of potatoes, 11,000 acres of grass hay, 750 acres of beets and 4,360 apple trees. There was, at one time, a flourishing cut flower industry and also many nurseries.

The last new dairy in Marin was built 27 years ago. In the last few years in the Marin-Sonoma "milkshed," we have seen the creation of half a dozen new cheese operations from cows, goats and sheep, three certified organic dairies, a new organic creamery in the works, and dozens of diversified niche crops.

Thinking "out of the box," plenty of research and an ability to take advantage of local market opportunities are tactics that can help transition our agricultural operations. Marin County cheeses, butter, cut flowers, natural beef, artichokes and apples could all have a place at our tables. Look for next issue to cover the long history of agriculture in Marin to see how farmers of the past changed with the times.

### Upcoming Farm Diversification Workshops

Spring, 2003 ~ 4:30 - 7:30 PM

Dance Palace Community Center, Point Reyes Station

February 27, 2003 - Value Added Processing of Farm Products

March 27, 2003 - Organic Certification Workshop

## News from Marin County Farms, Ranches and Producers

~ A forum is being held to explain **USDA Farm Bill** conservation programs to interested farmers, agencies, and organizations. The forum will be held on **Thursday, January 30 from 3-5 p.m. at the Lucchesi Community Center** on 320 N. McDowell Blvd. in Petaluma. Interested individuals from Sonoma, Napa and Marin Counties are invited to attend. A social precedes the meeting at 2:30 pm.

~ A seminar titled **Practical Applications of Compost Tea and the Benefits of Vermicompost** will be held in Sonoma on February 21 from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. at the Vintage House. Call **Jeffrey Hilty** at 888 600-9558 for more details.

~ **Sharon Doughty** of the Doughty Dairy, **Bob Giacomini** of the Robert Giacomini Dairy, **Albert Straus** of Straus-Blakes Landing Farm, the **Spaletta Ranch** in Chileno Valley and the **Giacomini & Sons Ranch** in Point Reyes Station received awards from the **San Francisco Regional Water Quality Control Board** for water quality improvements to their dairy ranches. **National Resource Conservation Service** is now accepting applications for this year's **EQIP** grants. Deadline for applications is **February 28**. For more info, call 707 794-1242.

~ **Marin Organic's** producer membership increased from 4 to 18 over the past year. The organization has been awarded a \$30,000 development grant from the **Marin Community Foundation**.

~ **Cowgirl Creamery** is opening its third store in the **Ferry Building** at the top of Market Street in San Francisco, March 21. The company also has been declared the **Grand Reserve Champion** for Artisan Cheese-makers at the **Royal Agriculture Winter Fair** in Toronto Canada.

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