



## EDITOR'S COLUMN

Nearly all of Marin agricultural production is in livestock and livestock products, but new innovations have been coming from the organic crop farmers. This trend is trickling up to the broader agricultural community. Straus Dairy was the first organic dairy in the west, bridging organic pioneers with the mainstay of Marin agricultural production, milk. Today, Straus Family Creamery and Clover Stornetta are helping traditional dairies transition to organic production.

Next in line for diversification into higher premium markets is the beef and sheep industry. Producers like Mike Gale, David Evans, the Lunny family, and Liz Cunningham have ventured into the alternative marketing and production arena, and are pioneering higher premium specialty products.

This issue examines new practices (thistle-eating cows), new trends (organic dairy) and the new USDA Grass Fed standards. All these issues reflect the shifting trends that affect our cattle and sheep ranchers. For dessert the Marin Agricultural Land Trust and Marin Community Development Agency have published a new cookbook celebrating these producers! - Steve Quirt, Editor

## New high quality feed discovered: Wooly Distaff Thistle

What if you could get rid of weeds without spraying, transforming them into valuable feed instead of something that costs you time and money? What if the answer to weed control was as simple as turning them into forage for your livestock?

Those are the questions behind the seven steps developed by Kathy Voth to train cows to eat weeds. Taking advantage of 20 years of research describing how animals choose what they eat, she discovered a way to train cows to eat a new weed in as little as an hour a day for five days.

Voth, a research associate from Utah State University, first tested these steps in a pilot project at Grant-Kohrs Ranch National Historic Site in Deer Lodge, Montana. She trained cows to eat



Heifer munching happily on a mature, bolted distaff thistle.

Canada thistle, leafy spurge, and spotted knapweed. Now, working with Peggy Rathmann and John Wick in Nicasio, and with Mike and Sally Gale of Chileno Valley Beef, Voth has successfully used these steps to train cows to eat Distaff and Italian thistle.

On May 9, cows at the Wick Rathmann Ranch first ate Distaff thistle from black tubs, and on June 3, after waiting for the distaff to bolt, the cows ate it in pasture even though there was plenty of grass nearby. Further test pastures are planned at the Gales', where a small herd of heifers has been trained.

So how does this work? According to Voth, research shows that animals learn what to eat, making choices based on feedback from the nutrients and chemicals in forages. "We've found that most 'weeds' are as nutritious as alfalfa," says Voth. "Once a cow tries it, she likes it." Voth coaxes heifers to try new foods that they haven't eaten before like alfalfa molasses meal, rolled corn, milo, etc. "Most people are surprised when a cow won't eat something the first time she sees it, even though we all know it's good for her," says Voth.

Over a four-day period, cows are introduced to four different foods, often with a familiar flavor mixed in. On the fifth day Voth adds weeds mixed with one of the foods and flavors (generally molasses) they are used to. "We didn't think our 30 trainees would eat Distaff thistle the first time we gave it to them," said project participant Peggy Rathmann. "But they ate it like crazy!"

For those wondering if they could simply spray their weeds with molasses without going through the short training process, Rathmann and Voth ran an experiment to see if cows without training would eat as much molasses-coated Distaff as cows with



*Experts on organic certification: Albert Straus, Ray Green, Anita Sauber, Liz Inman, Jeffrey Stiles, and Dan Giacomini.*

## **Organic Dairy Workshop in Tomales**

It was standing room only at the Tomales History Center for “Certifying Your Dairy Organic” on May 24. Twenty Marin and Sonoma dairies were represented, confirming the rumor that transition to organic dairy production is for real. The operations ranged from already certified dairies and those in transition, to conventionals looking seriously at converting their operations. Interested representatives from Clover Stornetta, Sonoma County Ag Commissioner, CCOF, Toby’s Trucking, and the Goldridge RCD showed up.

The panel of experts was of all-star quality: Ray Green from the State Organic Board, Albert Straus from Straus Creamery, Anita Sauber and Jeffrey Stiles from the Marin Agricultural Commissioner’s Organic Certification program, Dan Giacomini from the USDA National Organic Program, and Elizabeth Whitlow from North Coast CCOF. The panelists didn’t flinch at taking on the the more controversial and troublesome aspects of organic certification like herd transition. Even though the Rule is partly contradictory and sometimes confusing, the panelists managed to clarify and explain to potential registrants how to negotiate the gray areas.

Three and a half years ago, UCCE conducted a workshop on organic dairy certification and two dairymen showed up. Today’s contrast in milk prices between conventional (low) and organic (high) is an indication of the explosive growth of the organic industry. The rush to get in the market is on, but producers need to be cautious about financing the transition and following the USDA guidelines that define Certified Organic, the consumer’s seal of confidence in the market. Expect to see more Marin dairies providing fine organic milk to our local market.

## ***This time, “grass fed” really means “grass fed.”***

Have you ever stood at the meat counter wondering what “grass fed” really means? Soon, when you see “grass fed” and the “USDA Process Verified” logo on the same label, you will know that the meat comes from animals with a life-time diet of at least 99% grass or forage.

USDA released the “marketing claim” definition in May for public comment, open until August 10.

### ***What’s a marketing claim?***

By law, all meat labels have to be approved by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). In the 1970s, when a few pioneering ranchers started marketing beef raised without hormone implants and antibiotics, USDA began to allow voluntary “marketing claims” on meat labels - “no hormones administered” and “no antibiotics,” for example.

For years, USDA handled applications to use various marketing claims, including grass fed, on a case-by-case basis. Several years ago, the agency decided to standardize a set of commonly requested claims to bring consistency to product labels and avoid consumer confusion. The small staff that handles these claims was overwhelmed by the number of requests. In 1996, only two came in per week, but by 2004, they fielded 15 per day. And many wanted to make the same or similar claims but had to be handled one by one without a standard definition in place.

Grass fed was one of the first of a new set of marketing claims to be defined. The first attempt fell flat: in 2002, USDA proposed the now infamous “80-20” standard, meaning that up to 20% of a grass fed animal’s lifetime diet could be grain and other concentrates. Public response ran solidly against the idea. Only three comments received by USDA, out of the hundreds that came in, were in favor of 80-20.

USDA started over, this time in close collaboration with a coalition of organizations representing farmers and ranchers, consumers, natural meat companies, natural foods retailers, and public health, environment, and animal welfare groups. Two years and many meetings later, the coalition arrived at consensus and recommended that the USDA adopt a 99% standard. The agency agreed.

### ***What the standard says***

“Grass, forbs, browse, forage, or stockpiled forages, and post-harvest crop residue without separated grain shall be at least 99 percent of the energy source for the lifetime of the ruminant species, with the exception of milk consumed prior to weaning. Routine mineral and vitamin supplementation may also be included in the feeding regimen.” The standard can be applied to cattle, sheep, and other ruminant livestock (not pigs).

*Continued on next page*



### **What the standard does NOT say**

The coalition recommended that the USDA “grass fed” standard include a prohibition on feeding mammalian or poultry proteins, the use of antibiotics except for treatment of disease, and feedlot confinement. The coalition-proposed standard would have included a land stewardship element, requiring stocking rates never to exceed sustainable management standards per NRCS guidelines. However, the USDA decided that the “grass fed” claim should be narrowly focused and the other elements were covered by other standards or agencies. Grass fed producers who do not use hormone implants, for example, can apply to use the “no hormones administered” marketing claim on their labels.

### **How the marketing claim will work**

The grass fed marketing claim will be administered by the USDA’s Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS), as part of the “Process Verified Program.” Here’s how it works: a live-stock producer requests that AMS verify his “grass fed” claim. AMS does an on-site evaluation to make sure the producer’s feed regime meets the standard. Then the producer can label his products as “grass fed” with the “USDA Process Verified” statement and logo.

### **Status**

The USDA grass fed standard is not yet law but is still open for public comment. The USDA wants to hear from the public: producers, consumers, and everyone else, whether or not this proposed standard should be approved.

- Lauren Gwin

Comments on the grass fed standard are due August 10 and should be sent to:

Martin E. O'Connor  
Chief, Standardization Branch,  
Livestock and Seed Program, AMS, USDA  
Room 2607-S, 1400 Independence Avenue, SW.  
Washington, DC 20250-0254.

## **Marin Farm Families- Stories & Recipes**

*A little book about diversity, adversity, tenaciousness, extraordinary devotion & FOOD!*

Marin Agricultural Land Trust (MALT) and the Marin County Community Development Agency launched *Marin Farm Families—Stories & Recipes* at the Marin County Fair and at the Point Reyes Farmers’ Market in July.

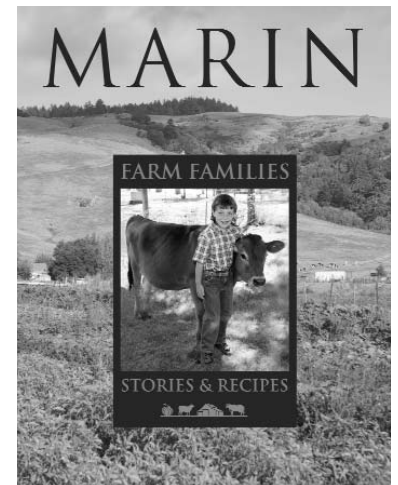
The book includes profiles of 22 people whose lives revolve around the rhythms and tempos of Marin agriculture. Some are ranchers with thousands of acres of land and a legacy spanning three or four generations; some are first generation growers leasing land and making their own history, one day at a time.

Recipes include those created by food professionals like Gerald Gass of McEvoy Ranch and Amy Nathan Weber of Star Route Farms, as well as plain and fancy treasures from the kitchens of Marin’s farming families. The ingredients sometimes come straight from the field, like David Little’s “Pouch Potatoes,” or from the pantry, like “Mamma Grossi’s Bread Soup.”

Marin Farm Families was conceived as a creative footnote to the Marin Countywide Plan, to showcase the importance of agriculture to the County, and to support the efforts of Marin agricultural organizations, including Marin Agricultural Land Trust and others who work in partnership with farming families on issues of conservation, marketing, education, and natural resource restoration.

*“The Marin Countywide Plan builds on a long legacy of creative collaboration between agricultural and environmental interests,”* notes Alex Hinds, who is the Director of the Marin County Community Development Agency. *“This book carries that tradition one step farther by celebrating the farm families themselves.”*

The book can be purchased at: Pt. Reyes Books, Cowgirl Creamery, and Toby’s Feed Barn in Pt. Reyes Station; Bellwether and Drakes Bay Oysters in Inverness; Point Reyes National Seashore Visitor Center in Olema; United Markets, Whole Foods, and Border’s Books in San Rafael; Comforts Restaurant in San Anselmo; and Woodland Market in Kentfield. - Elizabeth Ptak



*"Thistle" continued from page 1*

training. The results showed that training is really the key. Untrained animals ate only two ounces of the weed the first time they saw it, while trained animals ate 81 ounces.

What's next for this multi-year project? *"We've learned a lot this summer about how easy and fast it can be to teach a cow to eat a new weed, but there are still questions to be answered,"* says Voth. *"Folks want to be sure that weight gains are good for animals who eat these plants, so we'll be monitoring that."* Voth notes that in 2004, heifers eating Canada thistle, leafy spurge and spotted knapweed gained an average of 4.5 pounds per day, so she anticipates similar results here. She'll also be monitoring changes in vegetation over time and working with animals to see what size pastures and times of year work best to maximize their consumption of target weeds. - *Kathy Voth*

Visit Kathy's website for more information and current news. <http://www.livestockforlandscapes.com/marin.htm>. Kathy will also be presenting a rough cut of a video describing this first year's progress at Taste of Marin and will be presenting workshops in the fall. The workshops will be organized by UC Cooperative Extension. Stay tuned for the schedule posting at [www.growninmarin.org](http://www.growninmarin.org)

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## News from Marin County Farms, Ranches and Producers

- ☞ MALT's Farm Field Studies program put 500 students on farms and ranches this spring despite the difficult weather. MALT is now looking for farmers and ranchers for summer and fall tours, to continue educating school kids about the bountiful agriculture in West Marin. Call Sandy Dierks at 415 868-0205
- ☞ David Evans from Marin Sun Farms reopened The Eatery and Butchery in Point Reyes Station on July 1, in combination with Kim Labao from Indian Peach Company serving cooked food.
- ☞ The Marin Resource Conservation District (MRCD) and the Marin Agricultural Land Trust (MALT) announce that their no-till drill and soil aerator is available to Marin County landowners for a daily rental fee. For further information or to schedule usage, please contact Jeff Creque at (707) 765-1059.
- ☞ Anita Sauber, Marin County Agricultural Commissioner's Office, Lisa Bush, Consultant for UC Cooperative Extension, Steve Quirt, UC Cooperative Extension, and members of the Marin County Community Development and Public Works departments received the award for "Outstanding Employee Team of the Quarter" for their work supporting and fostering agriculture in Marin.



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