



JULY • 2010

Wow. Things are certainly happening in our county in the agricultural world. First, the California Department of Labor Enforcement arrived and visited a few farms, which cost one local crop farmer \$18,000. We partnered with Marin Organic and invited a speaker from the DLE to explain just what is going on and he did. It turns out that *any* work done on a farm counts as labor, and the “worker” must be paid in full, minimum wage, workers’ comp, and State and Federal Deductions. That’s the law and if you break it you are liable to be fined. This policy has rocked the apprenticeship, intern and volunteer programs within the ag community.

Then we had the late, cool, cold, rainy, wet-soil spring, which was a blessing for livestock operators and a curse for tillers. Farmers were getting into their fields three to four weeks late. Greenhouse catastrophes were everywhere, and cool weather disease was all over. One farmer had his whole crop infested with garlic rust.

New farmers markets are coming on board, two in Mill Valley, and a new one in Marinwood. Whole Foods has opened its Mill Valley store that will feature mostly local goods. David Retsky of County Line Farm has created a brand new marketing strategy that looks to be a success. David and his crew pack a \$25 box of “what’s on the farm that week,” and

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## You can almost taste the grass . . . . . . in the cheeses from Nicasio Cheese Company

Randy, Rick and Scott Lafranchi of Nicasio are making and marketing their family dream. Around 1973, Will Lafranchi, their father, started it all. Rick Lafranchi says, “We knew Dad was up to something. But he never mentioned outright that we were going to make cheese.” It was some years later, after the family members found sketches, doodles, and notes on cheese making, that they discovered Will’s secret passion for making the Swiss-Italian-style cheese that he grew up with on the slopes of the Swiss Alps.

Fred Lafranchi, their grandfather, started the dairy farm in 1919, running a very successful operation, and eventually handing it over to the family. The ups and downs of the dairy industry are well known, but what most folks don’t know is how much the “value” of the milk has dropped. For instance, in 1946 milk was selling for \$6.00 per hundred weight, which translates in today’s commercial economy to \$46 per hundred pounds of milk. At this writing, dairy farmers are getting paid \$11 dollars. Looking at those numbers, it is painfully obvious how much the economic value of milk has declined.

The Lafranchi family, like many other families here in Marin, are rooted in the land and its agricultural heritage. Selling out is often not an option for these families, so adding value to the milk makes sense to keep the business going. The dairy certified organic to capture the milk premium, but that was really a first step. Deciding to make cheese was the next.

Around 2004 the family began to research the possibility of making Will’s  
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dream a reality. Rick, Randy, Scott, and the rest of the family returned to their grandfather’s village, Maggia, Switzerland, to see where the family cheese making history began.

In the Alps, several families in the villages will typically pool their cows together and move them to higher mountain pastures, milking on-site, and carrying the milk back to the cheese maker’s house. They make cheese and cellar it in local caves. For generations this has been the tradition, and each village has its own cheese with its distinctive terroir. In the Lafranchi village, cousin Gabrielli introduced the family to the local cheese maker, Maurizio Lorenzetti.

The family stayed three weeks and fell in love with the cheese and the process. Maurizio was making a soft-rind cheese called Formegella, unique to this area of the Alps. They asked Maurizio to visit the home ranch in Nicasio and help them learn how to make his cheese.

Maurizio visited the US in 2008 to help the family get started in the art of making the cheeses of Valley Maggia. Scott Lafranchi, a CPA in his last life, emerged as cheese maker, applying his precise skills in economic management to cheese making. The result is artisan production of the cheeses from the family’s ancestral village: Black Mountain (aged mountain style), Foggy Morning (fresh cow), Formagella (bloomy rind), and Nicasio Square (washed rind). All the cheeses are made from organic whole milk, fresh from the family dairy tank just a mile away.

The cheeses have been received with enthusiasm. Leah Smith from the Agricultural Institute of Marin says, “I love the cheese. You can really taste the milk. All the cheeses are pleasantly mild but have lots of taste. My favorite is the fresh, soft cheese, Foggy Morning.”

“We really haven’t started to market the cheese aggressively yet, since we are still learning. We are kind of a work-in-progress, right now,” comments Rick.



## Local Nicasio Valley Cheese goes into local United Markets

One place that picked up on the local cheese company was United Market in San Anselmo. The produce manager Ed Gilardi got the news from Rick Lafranchi at Silver Screen Video, and took it to his boss. “We are building in more and more local food and produce to our line. This was fantastic, to be one of the first to carry Nicasio Valley Cheese,” Ed says.

Getting product from our “conventional farms,” especially our traditional (conventional) dairy and beef farms, into local stores can be a difficult task. Our commodity farmers are used to selling “lots” of calves, and “hundredweights” of milk, on regular schedules to processors, some as far away as the Midwest. This tight national structure doesn’t leave much room for specialty niche marketing. By progressing to cheese from their own cows, the Lafranchis have found a way to add value to the family farm by taking the commodity to specialty, and capturing the premium through vertical marketing. The United Market folks are also proud to carry their neighbor’s product. “We are very happy with the deal,” says Ed Gilardi, “and are looking for more ways to carry local.”

Both retailers and producers are beginning to adapt to the new demand for fresh, local food. They are actively overcoming the obstacles of a steady supply stream, seasonal concerns, and freshness for produce and meats.



## Planning the future of Marin’s agriculture

Beginning in late March, Marin’s farmers, ranchers, food processors, dairy producers, agricultural organizations, agencies, and retailers have been gathering to discuss the past, present, and future of agriculture in Marin. Each of these respective groups has met together in focused discussion on what has worked for their agricultural operation and what difficulties they are facing. Together we are finding



important themes and commonalities which will determine the content of the November 13, 2010, Marin Agricultural Summit, so that the Summit can best meet the needs of Marin's agricultural community.

At the Row Crops Focus Group, a collection of Marin's dedicated farmers acknowledged the benefits of being supported by local organizations, the importance of crop diversification, and the potential to share more resources. Farmers discussed concerns about labor loss and passing farmland on to future generations.

During the Livestock Focus Group, multiple generations of ranchers agreed upon the successes of being customer-driven and fostering public education about local agriculture, as well as the potential of providing ecosystem services such as habitat restoration. Ranchers also discussed the need for economic analysis and a local harvesting/processing facility, concerns about loss of labor and land transfer between generations, and improving rangeland management practices.

Food processors applauded the support they've received from local organizations, other food processors, and the ease of getting started. They echoed each other's challenges with transitioning from a small family business to something more large-scale, a lack of marketing programs, and struggles with local regulations. Our local food processors brought to light the potential of a more skilled labor force, shared facilities, and regular meetings to help each other problem-solve.

It has been inspiring and thought-provoking to gather with our local agricultural community to share successes and concerns. It is already clear that there are many shared experiences among us and we can collaborate to ensure the prosperous future of local agriculture. Stay tuned as we continue to unveil these important issues and plan the Marin Agricultural Summit for November 13, 2010. - Jenna Brager, UCCE Intern

### *Marin Agricultural Focus Group findings on moving forward in profit & sustainability*

**Marketing:** This was one of the most discussed topics. With the increased demand and exposure to county agriculture, all sectors agreed that we could do some work in this area. Do we need a regional identification program? How can the conventional commodity producers begin to cash in on the trends? How can we develop more value-added products? How can consumers become more educated, to encourage a loyalty to Marin products?

**Successful farming and production:** Labor is a big issue for row-crop farmers and others. Cost-of-living here restricts an easy-to-access labor pool. New regulation en-

forcement has handicapped the row-crop farmers, threatening to make production even more expensive. How will we deal with this? In fact, overall for most focus groups, demanding and expensive-to-follow regulations rose to the top of the list. How can we expand our agricultural output under the umbrella of increasingly stringent regulations?

**Consumer Education:** Although a fraction of consumers are educated about the challenges and difficulties that Marin farmers face, many more are uninformed about what it takes to bring food to the table. What can we do to present a true picture of what farmers do to produce food for us, and how can consumers become advocates for farmers on tough issues?

For more detail, look at the Focus Group Summary and Notes Report on the Ag Summit website.



### *2010 Agricultural Summit Resource Program & Site*

Keep up on what is happening with the 2010 Marin Agricultural Summit by visiting our home website, <http://www.growninmarin.org/> and clicking on **2010 Marin Agricultural Summit** - <http://ucanr.org/marinagsummit/>



At this site we will have a series of educational posts to prepare Summit attendees for the topics that we will be covering in November. This "Advance Education Series" will help prepare farmers, ranchers and ag support people to be fully charged by the time we sit down in our workshops and breakout sessions. The site is also a way for people to keep up with this endeavor, even if they are not planning to attend the Summit.

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use social networking strategies to set up prearranged drops, where customers can come within a two-hour period and get their farm box. This super-efficient plan allows the farm to sell more

value in the box, in volume and quality.

As the current marketing channels continue to mature, look for more producers reaching outside of current models, using new technologies to reach a wider public circle of interested consumers.

Cheese is definitely happening. Marcia Barinaga, of Barinaga Ranch, is now producing Basque-style raw sheep milk cheese. Karen Moreda, of Valley Ford Cheese Company, is producing Estero Gold, their premier product, an Italian farmstead cheese. A new farmer in many ways, Craig Ramini has been building a water buffalo herd to begin producing true water buffalo mozzarella, hopefully soon! And of course, our feature article tells the story of the Lafranchi family's new enterprise of producing Nicasio Valley Cheese.

All of this activity points to the 2010 Marin Agricultural Summit, to be held at Walker Creek Ranch on November 13, 2010. After gathering more than 20 hours of needs assessment, we have a strong understanding of our agricultural community concerns, and will host a practical, results-orientated workshop that will be a real plan for success for our readers and farmers in the new decade. Surely we have accomplished much since Supervisor Kinsey put on the first Marin Ag Summit in 1997. Some say we are at a kind of plateau, a jumping-off place for the next level of development. We are trying mightily to line up the challenges, opportunities and possibilities for us to move forward.

- Steve Quirt, editor

∞ Make it an artisan cheese afternoon! **Cowgirl Creamery** offers three tour options for the cheese lover. Learn how cheese is made and sample Cowgirl cheeses. See the production process and participate in a hands-on demonstration of making curd. Hear about the company, how and why it started, its connection to the local dairies and its aim to protect agriculture while making delicious cheese. Reservations are required. For more information: [www.cowgirlcreamery.com](http://www.cowgirlcreamery.com) or call 866.433.7834. For group tours, email [vivien@cowgirlcreamery.com](mailto:vivien@cowgirlcreamery.com)

∞ **Toluma Farms**, a family owned goat dairy in Tomales, received a USDA Value-Added Producer Grant. These grants were authorized in the 2008 Farm Bill. This funding, along with monies from a Marin Agriculture Land Trust easement (April 2010), will assist Toluma Farms in getting their creamery (goat cheese) off the ground

∞ View the UC Agricultural Personnel Management Program website, an information center on farm employment, management, and policy issues at <http://apmp.berkeley.edu/APMP/>.

∞ Check out the newly revised Citrus Entomology website at <http://ucanr.org/sites/KACCitrusEntomology/>

The Grown in Marin newsletter is published quarterly by the University of California Cooperative Extension, 1682 Novato Blvd., Ste. 150B, Novato, CA 94947. Telephone 415/499-4204, <http://cemar.ucdavis.edu>. Production of this newsletter was made possible with funding from the Marin Community Foundation and the County of Marin.

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