



## EDITORS COLUMN

*"Do you know what I would like to see before I croak? I'd like to see this whole county farmed entirely organic!" – Warren Weber*

When Warren first uttered these hopefully prophetic words, I was struck by both the audacity and the optimism in such an outrageous statement. A completely organic Marin? I will have to admit, it got me thinking, not only about what a completely organic Marin would look like, but the road to get there. It's worth a think or two.

I heard a similar statement issued at the Fourteenth World Organic Congress, held this September in Victoria B.C., by a sharp young guy from New Zealand, where they are calling for an all organic New Zealand by 2020, and they are dead serious. Today, 20% of all food produced there is organic. The annual growth rate in the organic sector is at 30-40%. Organic is the fastest growing agricultural market segment in many countries, defining a future trend worldwide.

Here in Marin we have traveled ahead of that curve and are already charting new ground with MOCA, our county organic certification program, and the state's first UC Cooperative Extension

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## Organic & Sustainable in Marin

On October 21, 2002, the National Organic Standards went into effect. Just what does that mean to our growing organic and sustainable farming movement here in Marin?

The National Organic Standards, drafted by the USDA, does indeed set the standard for organic food grown and produced in the US. All of the various state organic regulatory programs are superceded by this cohesive national program. There is general organic industry agreement that the program promotes healthy food, a less toxic approach to farm management systems and new market opportunities for the organic farming industry, which is growing by 20% per year according to industry statistics. Albert Straus of Straus Family Creamery says, "This is an important event and could really affect us here in Marin. Organic farming could offer the kind of economic advantage that saves family farms."

Some feel that the more recent entry into organic food production by corporate farming has changed the original impulse that gave birth to the organic farming movement in the first place. Stacy Carlsen, Agricultural Commissioner for Marin says, "We need to keep in mind that the *process* of organic farming is more inclusive than people think. It involves environmental responsibility and stewardship." The organic farming community here in Marin certainly embodies what Stacy articulated, and the Bolinas organic farmers have pioneered the way.

Warren Weber, Don Murch, and Dennis and Sandy Dierks all started farming organically in the early to mid 70's. In different ways they helped to shape the kind of ecologically sound, socially responsible and economically viable organic farming models that are still the backbone of the small farm organic industry today. This is not factory farm organic, but a healthy, environmentally excellent and artistic farmlife that feeds us tasty and healthy food.

Warren Weber has been called the "Grandfather of Organic," and truly deserves the title not only for his enduring efforts to foster the organic movement, but also for his thirty years of farming in a sustainable and environmentally responsible way.

A walk through Dennis and Sandy Dierks' Paradise Valley Farm will bring you to one or more of the five young apprentices harvesting for the farm box subscription program or planting for winter. Each year Dennis works with the California Certified Organic Farmers apprenticeship program and takes on five or so young farmers who want to learn organic farming. "Not all the kids end up farming, but some do. We have

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*Peter Martinelli of Paradise Valley Ranch harvesting Rainbow Chard.*

## Direct Marketing Workshop

The Direct Marketing of Farm Products workshop was a big hit. The panel of regional direct marketing experts was made up of a marketing strategist, a partner from the Apple Farm in Philo, a row crop farmer and a rancher! Each had a unique and entertaining story to tell about how they found ways to beat the commodity market and boost the value of their farm products by direct marketing to their customers.

Debra Walton of Genus Group Marketing led off with an overview of strategic marketing principles. Research and careful analysis of your own resources and what is selling were strongly recommended.

Scott Mathiesson of Laguna Farms told his story of how he found his Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) subscription farm niche. He built up long-term, loyal relationships with his customers, and has expanded his operation to include other farmers in his weekly box distribution.

Karen Bates and her partners bought a run-down apple farm in Philo about fifteen years ago with visions of farming and living the good country life. Reality set in quickly when they realized that selling their apples commodity style didn't even pay the mortgage. Karen, her husband, and her parents began to cast about for more reliable income streams and developed an on-farm culinary program where customers spend the weekend on the farm experiencing farm life and learning to cook gourmet farm-style food. They began selling heirloom apples direct at farmers markets for 100% premiums, made cider, jams, apple sauce and apple butter. Today the farm is thriving.

Travis Potter works for Prather Organic Beef in Shasta County and can be found at farmers markets sporting his signature white cowboy hat. Travis sells high quality certified organic beef solely at farmers markets. He has a relentlessly positive attitude about his product which is infectious. His consistent service to his customers has won him a loyal following for his product, which is a 50% premium over other high quality beef products.

The consensus was that for small farmers starting out today, direct marketing of certified organic products will help to make the enterprise successful. It provides an element of control and some freedom from the uncertainty of commodity pricing that fits well with the organic farming philosophy.

### Upcoming Farm Diversification Workshops

Winter-Spring, 2003 ♡ 4:30 - 7:30 PM

Dance Palace Community Center, Point Reyes Station

January 30, 2003 - Artisan Cheese Making

February 27, 2003 - Value Added Processing of Farm Products

March 27, 2003 - Organic Certification Workshop

## Row Crop Farming in Marin

It's hilly and there are water problems. There are no large tracts of flat farmland. It's only suited for animal agriculture. Those are observations that we hear over and over in ag. The other day Warren Weber and I were driving through the county, and both of us being into row crops, kept pointing out this piece of land and that, until we came to the realization that there is quite a bit of row-croppable farmland around. Five acres here, ten there, twenty over there. These small acreages are well suited for high-value specialty crops. With the surge in organic markets, these operations could be profitable if managed correctly.



*Dry hills and holding ponds. These typical Marin landscapes may be suitable for smaller scale high-value row crops.*

Adding in five to ten acres of high-value row crops to existing ranch operations could be just the thing needed to put ranches back in the black. "You know, we used to grow all types of vegetables here in Marin - Peas, artichokes, tree crops and berries," Warren says. "and dry farming was once a regular practice."

Water is certainly an issue. But there could be enough for smaller, more focused enterprises. Stock ponds can be fed with side-hill wells or whatever else is available. The Sartori Ranch organic strawberry experiment took only four acres of fenced pasture and drew water from existing wells which was stored in a small holding pond.

Large-scale conversion from pasture to row crop farming is not practical or even possible here, but small organic operations could supplement ranch incomes and supply the expanding organic markets in the bay area. We are close to a consumer base of eight million educated and affluent buyers.

UC Cooperative Extension is a resource base for helping farmers and ranchers with farm conversion plans, crop selections, field trials and consultation. We can be reached at 415 499-4204.

## One-stop Organic Certification

The Marin Organic Certification Agency (MOCA) is your one-stop organic certification store. Housed in the County Agricultural Commissioner's office, our very own certification program fits in nicely with the farmers market registration program. Information on labeling regulations, and weights and measures issues are also readily available. Next door is the UC Cooperative Extension office where the Organic and Sustainable Agriculture program can help out farmers with growing tips, diversification planning and marketing information. Here also you can find out what's eating your plants from the horticulture advisor, or contact the range and livestock advisor or the specialty crop expert.

Anita Sauber from the Agricultural Commissioner's office has done a masterful job of interpreting the new National Organic Standards and has shortened the learning curve by creating an "organic farming systems plan" questionnaire. This questionnaire enables the certifier to evaluate the farmers adherence to the National Organic Standard, and help them to comply. Ready-made forms on everything from compost logs to input lists are part of the package.

In addition to the helpful farm systems plan and the clearly designed documentation that Anita has developed, the farmer gets the added value of Anita herself and her staff. "We like to go the extra mile for our growers," she says, "and we spend as much time as the farmer needs to become really comfortable with certification." She is available by phone, email and in the office to respond quickly to grower concerns. "We like to save the farmers time by adding extra effort to the beginning of the the process. This up-front understanding of the certification can eliminate confusion on record keeping and paperwork."

Anita and the Agricultural Commissioner's office plan to fine-tune their MOCA program in the coming year. They will begin development of a livestock organic certification to assist traditional growers thinking about transitioning to organic practices.

Anita likes to work with the smaller scale producers that we have in Marin. "We really relate to the small guy," she notes, "Our personal one-on-one style fits in well here. We already know most of the farmers, and that makes our job a lot easier, and fun too."



## The Straus Family Creamery and Agriculture in Marin

It is not really possible to talk about organic agriculture in Marin without acknowledging the contributions of the Straus family. Bill and Ellen pioneered environmental and ecological land use practices long before the buzzwords arrived. Today, the family organic dairy and creamery are cornerstones of the organic farming community in Marin.

Albert Straus has demonstrated that it still possible to escape from the risks and flatline profits of commodity markets by venturing into new fields and setting his own pricing structure. The organic market can command higher premiums and when commodity milk prices drop, the organic milk market is unaffected.

Aside from enjoying all the organic smoothies, and now organic ice cream that comes fresh to us from Marshall, there are broader benefits that are spinning off the Straus operation. The Tresch Dairy transitioned to organic and is now supplying certified organic milk to Straus Family Creamery. Two more



*Albert Straus at the Straus Family Organic Dairy in Marshall California*

traditional dairies are seriously considering going organic. The need to feed all the Straus cows has resulted in more local silage and grass hay growers certifying their fields and producing organically. This year MOCA certified two hay growers and a silage operation. Albert is in the R&D stages of developing a certified organic beef program for his bull calves. "This extra income from organically grown beef can add another profit stream to dairies," Albert notes.

The benefits to the Marin agricultural community keep coming from this solidly run family farm enterprise. Employment opportunities have been created not only from the expanding dairy operation but from the creation of the creamery. When was the last time you heard of a new creamery going in?

In 1990 Albert and his family started thinking about going organic, and produced their first milk in 1994. Careful planning, smart business practices and the willingness to take risks has paid off, and today the Straus brand is nationally recognized for its excellence. The operation continues to grow steadily and brings other producers into the enterprise, as well as jobs and business to the county.

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Organic program. Both groups support organic and sustainable farming. Workgroups are being formed to look at how farms and ranches can remain profitable, and here at UC Extension we have just completed a producers survey to help us determine what steps need to be implemented to revitalize and diversify our agriculture. A group of ranchers and Extension specialists have been meeting regularly to explore how to grow our fledgling natural grass-fed beef industry. Ranchers have expressed real interest in finding new ways to grow and market their cattle to remain viable. With most of our farmland in animal agriculture, these trials in natural grass-fed practices seem to be perfectly suited for Marin with its cool weather and extended grass season. More and more traditional ranchers are experimenting with diversified farm plans: the LaFranchi Dairy and their organic farmstand, the Giacomini Dairy and Farmstead Cheese, and the Sartori organic strawberry operation. They point the way to value added farm diversification.

So maybe an “all organic Marin” is not so far-fetched. We have a growing network of support organizations such as Marin Organic. Here at UC Extension we are developing field trial programs, planning new workgroups, and helping farmers to plan new organic enterprises. New organic market opportunities emerge daily.

Albert Straus sums it up when he says, “The whole idea of diversification and organic farming is keep farmers on their farms. It is much more than a simple practice, it is what makes us sustainable.”

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helped six young couples get going, and as far as I know, they are all farming today,” Dennis noted.

Peter Martinelli took over his family farm a few years back. Peter farmed with Warren Weber for a number of years and then took off on his own. He may be the ultimate land steward. His ground is rich and fertile (in the best sense,) and his greens radiate vitality. Watching Peter at work in the field is inspiring. He exemplifies care and artistry, along with universal appreciation of the role of farmers in the community. Asked about his organic practices Peter replied, “Sure I am an organic farmer, and optimizing the natural resources for healthy land and vegetables works well for me. But I don’t separate myself from my conventional farmer friends. We are all in this together; we are all farmers.”

## News from Marin County Farms, Ranches and Producers

☞ **The Marin Food Systems Project** is putting on its second annual “**Healthy Food for Growing Kids**” event at the College of Marin on November 20. Call 415 663-1338 for more information.

☞ **The San Geronimo Valley Farmers Market** has been awarded a Neighborhood Achievements Award of \$5,000 from the **Marin Community Foundation**.

☞ **The Marin French Cheese Company** received eight awards for its soft ripened cheeses, including first place for its **Jalapeno Brie**.

☞ **Straus Communications**, re-launched the “Beyond Organic Show” - a weekly one-hour radio program focusing on organic products, sustainable agriculture and related environmental issues. For details, contact Michael at 415-663-8343, or visit [www.BeyondOrganic.com](http://www.BeyondOrganic.com).

☞ **California FarmLink** launched its **Individual Development Account Program**, which encourages qualified entry level farmers to build assets by matching the farmer’s monthly savings by a 3 to 1 ratio with outside funds contributed by FarmLink. Call 707 829-1691 for more information.

☞ **Barbara Verenis** has been hired as program consultant for **Marin Organic**. Barbara’s strong marketing and organic industry background will be used to boost membership and help with outreach.

☞ **Ellie Rilla**, Director of **UC Cooperative Extension**, spoke at the **Bioneers Conference** on sustainable agriculture and the organic program in Marin.

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