



EDITOR'S COLUMN

"Whether autumn will bring wind or rain I cannot know, but today I will be working in the fields."

- Masanobu Fukuoka

Peter Worsley is an organic row crop farmer from Inverness. He is a meticulous and serious grower of the kind of produce that we all like to have on our tables. If you survey one of Peter's four farm locations, you will notice immaculately tilled beds, groomed cover crops, and perfect produce. The plots are small by conventional standards, the largest being two acres. But the attention to quality and sustainable farming practices that Peter applies to his operation outshine any "size" considerations that arise. I asked him what he enjoys most about farming. I think the question took him off-guard for a moment. "Well, I guess I just like doing it," was Peter's abbreviated reply.

The current bloom of new small "micro-farms" that are springing up around the county are an indicator of a passionate renewed interest in agriculture coming from a diverse mix of new, old, and "emerging" growers. Some of the local conventional livestock operators lease acreage to these new farmers who certify the land

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Three Summer Stories *Small Row Crop Farms in Marin*



Janet Brown and Marty Jacobson of Allstar Organics, Peter Worsley (grower), Deborah Walton, Tim Schaible, and Courtney Delello of Canvas Ranch all provide premium crop produce to farmers' markets, farmstands, and CSA's in Marin and Sonoma counties.

September in Marin is a great month to showcase your farm. Harvest is peaking and brilliantly fresh food is everywhere. The three small family farms featured here are typical of the kind of operation emerging in Marin County: family owned, premium quality production, and attention to sustainable practices.

Peter Worsley farms in four different locations in West Marin. Peter's Tomales location reveals much about his careful attention to detail and quality. Two acres of potatoes, dried black beans, and perfect delicata squash stretch out in the rich, loamy Tomales soil. The long rows of delicata squash are thick and green, and rows of mature black beans for drying extend across the gently sloping ground. Peter has been growing his dry bean crop for a few years now, and the pails of shiny black beans he has on hand look like they would make a great soup. His operation is a model small vegetable farm. He chooses his crops carefully, selects only the best product for market, and displays and distributes it with a modest smile. Peter's main outlets are the Point Reyes farmers' market on Saturdays. But you need to get there early. By noon he is completely sold out.

Janet Brown and Marty Jacobson always have had great heirloom tomatoes, but this year they outdid themselves. Along with the Brandywines and Green Zebras, the farmers have added to their successes with a new portfolio of hot-weather veggies like tasty and rare heirloom peppers and truckloads of sweet juicy melons. The melons are what really get you. The crane variety, developed in Santa Rosa, is outstanding and has turned into a signature for the farm. The choice of hot-weather varieties is smart, as most of our row crop farms are coastal and grown for the cool weather climate. What we need to round out crop mix in Marin has been filled in a sweet and tasty fashion!

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Miguel Altieri Tours Marin Farms

August 10 was a day of information exchange. Stacy Carlsen, Agricultural Commissioner, hosted UC Berkeley Professor Miguel Altieri, a leading researcher and activist in the field of sustainable farming, and three researchers from Brazil and Italy on a Marin farm tour. Sustainable agriculture was the theme.

The Tomales Sartori Farm was the first stop where delicious organic strawberries go directly from field to market. The group spent time talking with Russell Sartori about mulch management and insectary pest control. Dry farming, a method used historically in Marin, is being revived at Little Organic Farm in Tomales. The researchers were impressed with David's huge, red dry-farmed heirloom tomatoes. There was a lively tour of Straus Family Creamery in which the crew gobbled up Albert's fantastic ice cream. Grass-fed beef is the main product at Marin Sun Farms in Point Reyes. Miguel and his colleagues were treated to a spirited presentation by David Evans on the sustainability of local animal livestock systems. Last stop was Star Route Farms in Bolinas where the discussion turned to weed control. Miguel, Warren Weber, owner/operator of Star Route Farms, Doug Gallagher, Star Route's farm manager, and the researchers launched into the dynamics of weed growth on organic farms. Unlike areas where large farms border each



Warren Weber, Doug Gallagher, Steve Quirt of UCCE, Dr. Mohamed Habib, a researcher from Brazil, and Dr. Miguel Altieri.

other and pests spread easily, Marin's small farms are surrounded by diverse native ecosystems and have few pest problems. However, weeds are the one problem with which farmers continue to struggle. Warren and Doug heartily concurred!

Encouraged by the farmer/researcher exchange, the participants hope to secure research grants for farmers to experiment with different trials. These experiments will help keep Marin on the cutting edge of sustainability research.

- Devi Rao, Marin Agricultural Commissioners Office

Taste of Marin

Three hundred guests attended the Taste of Marin event on September 23 at the Marin Art & Garden Center in Ross, organized by Marin Organic and the Marin Agricultural Land Trust.

Taste of Marin 2004 illustrated most deliciously what a local food system can offer to the community: food safety, integrity, identity, and most of all, relationships between the consumer and the attractive, fresh, ripe, and healthy products that our producers grow just miles away from our homes. While food in the United States travels an average of 1,300 miles before it reaches the plate,



Gary Thornton of the Thornton Ranch, Russell Sartori and his daughter Alex Sartori from the Sartori Ranch in Tomales, hosted a table at Taste of Marin.

the food at the Taste of Marin traveled less than 50 miles - and the farmer producing it was sitting right next to one of the nearly 300 guests. The event was sold out, which verifies that the awareness of the importance and value of local food production has become a part of the character of this county.

In response to the loss of family farms in Marin County, in 1999 a group of visionary farmers and ranchers formed Marin Organic. The organization's mission is to promote the ethical, creative, and patient enterprise of sustainable agriculture and encourage a preference for locally produced food. Marin Organic is part of the alliance of over 30 governmental and non-governmental organizations and departments in Marin County that are working on the vision that we all share: creating a safe and interconnected place to live that is founded on a strong, local food production system for ourselves and generations to come.

An essential link in this vision is created by acknowledging and celebrating our local producers here in Marin County whenever we can, at food-based events such as the Taste of Marin, or when we vote with our dollars in the retail store or at our local farmers' market.

- Helge Hellberg, Executive Director, Marin Organic

Grown in Marin ☉ *September 2004*



Kate Baron, Helge Hellberg, and Wendy McLaughlin of Marin Organic with the new delivery truck. Alan Mart, with hat, joins them.

New Marin Organic Delivery Truck

As Executive Director of Marin Organic, Helge Hellberg (that's pronounced, "Hel-ga") has turned his energetic personality into a practical fundraising machine. Recently, an anonymous donor asked Helge what Marin Organic needed to carry on its work of building up organic and sustainable farming in Marin. Helge didn't even hesitate, stating, "We need to work on getting nutritious, organic local food into schools. We could use a delivery truck." Right there the donor wrote Helge a generous check for the truck and six months' pay for a driver. As the great Sherlock Holmes would say to Dr. Watson, "Watson, the game is afoot!"

Marin Organic was suddenly the owner of a new, freshly painted refrigerated delivery truck with a hydraulic lift on the back. Now they had to figure out what to do with it, which didn't take Helge and his hard-working staff, Wendy McLaughlin and Kate Baron, long. With help from the Marin Food Systems Project and Miguel Villareal from the Novato School District, the Marin Organic staff set out to glean potatoes from one of David Little's sites out in Tomales. A full day's work later, the MO crew had a truckload of David's spuds loaded up and ready for delivery. "That was a lot of work," commented Helge.

The acquisition of the truck is a first and very important step in the development of a Marin-based distribution system for the organic and sustainable farmers in our region. Marin Organic now has the resource to activate a much needed service: getting local food to the locals. It seems ironic that we have such pristine and delicious farm products here, yet many consumers have difficulty in finding them. This effort by Marin Organic to "get something going" for distribution of product to schools, retail outlets, and farmstands is as important as it is bold. Good work, Helge and staff.

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Canvas Ranch straddles Marin and Sonoma counties in the Two Rock area. Its twenty-six acres are owned and run by Deborah Walton and Tim Schaible with the able help of Courtney Delello, farm manager. The farm is a mix of specialty livestock, vegetable row crops and dog breeding. Canvas Ranch runs a fifty-four member CSA that has been very successful and well managed, with drops in Sonoma and Marin counties. The boxes include fresh produce, eggs, and edibles from Canvas Ranch and neighboring farms.

On the animal side, they raise cashmere goats, Southdown, "Babydoll" sheep, Maremma livestock guardian dogs, and Arucana layers. The Southdown sheep enterprise reflects Deborah's savvy marketing knowledge. Southdown is a small, short-legged breed that is ideal for weed control in vineyards and orchards. Deborah leases the "Babydolls" out to vineyards and orchards, and also breeds livestock for sale. The cashmere goats provide cashmere that will become added-value products, and the guard dogs are handy to have around in coyote country.

The Canvas Ranch operation is diversified and will become more so. They are adding lavender and plan on distilling for essential oils. The operation is a great example of mixing of plant and animal agriculture for added value.

What's special about these farms? They represent a growing and key segment of our local food system. The larger conventional farms and ranches do the heavy lifting, but these "micro-farms" provide us with specialty local foods and fresh products. Because they are not bound by commodity pricing structures and world competition, these farmers are free to experiment with emerging niche markets. Sure, it's risky and some enterprises don't pencil out. But the scale of these farms allow for creative marketing and consumer sampling opportunities that may eventually make it up the food chain to influence the industries.

That's all important, but equally important to economics and marketing issues is the simple truth that these small farmers love what they do, and their efforts appear on our tables and add to the quality of our lives.

Grown in Marin Workshops for 2005

The following workshops are planned for next year. We will keep you informed as the dates become fixed.

- **Tractor Tillage Practices & Implements**
- **Weed Control on Organic Farms**
- **Irrigation: Methods & Technology**
- **Dry Farming in the North Bay**
- **Making Your Small Farm Profitable**

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as organic. Urban refugees are joining the ranks of market growers with an acre or even less of high-quality production. The emergence of small vineyards, plots of lavender and herbs, and specialty livestock operations all indicate that a renewed interest in agriculture is happening. It is not just the "hobby farm" crowd that is experimenting with diversified agriculture, but the larger conventional population as well. The county's Marin Organic Certified Agriculture program has 3,000 acres of organically certified pasture. Organic range-fed hens are producing eggs on four ranches. The mixing of alternative and conventional agriculture is under way, a good sign that we are heading toward *one* agriculture feeding us all. The hobby farmer, the seasoned organic grower, and the generational conventional farmers are all contributing to our emerging local food system. Each set has its own strengths and its own contributions. I would bet that if you asked a producer from any of these groups why they farm, the question may take them off-guard for a moment. "Well, I guess I just like doing it," may be the reply.

The Grown in Marin newsletter is published bi-monthly by the University of California Cooperative Extension, 1682 Novato Blvd., Suite 150B, Novato, CA 94947. Telephone 415/499-4204, <http://cemar.mar.ucdavis.edu> and www.growninmarin.org. Production of this newsletter was made possible with funding from the University of California Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program, the Clarence E. Heller Foundation, the Marin Community Foundation, and the County of Marin.

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News from Marin County Farms, Ranches, and Producers

- ☞ **Taking Charge of the Future: Today's Challenges & Opportunities for Tomorrow's Agricultural Leaders**, was held on October 9 at Walker Creek Ranch. A hundred or so young and some not-so-young participants attended the session, which was deemed a fun successful event.
- ☞ **Straus Family Creamery** proudly announces that its **Organic European Style Butters** have earned the official **Authentic Food Artisans (AFA)** designation from **Whole Foods Market**. **Straus Family Creamery Organic Butters** will be featured with other top artisanal products as part of the AFA collection in every **Whole Foods Market** store around the country.
- ☞ **Cowgirl Creamery** won awards in several categories, including 1st place for its **Mt. Tam**, and 2nd place for its **Pierce Point** soft cheeses at the **American Cheese Society Show**.
- ☞ **Marin Sun Farms** was featured in **Chez Panisse, Zuni Café, Acme Chophouse, Jardiniere, Eccolo, Quince, and The Olema Inn Restaurants** over the past few months, with exceptional feedback on quality of product.
- ☞ **The Point Reyes Seashore Ranchers Association** is the recipient of the **Marin Economic Commission's 2004 "Excellence in Agricultural Viability"** award for its work in building ag viability in the National Seashore.
- ☞ **The Marin County Agricultural Commissioner's Office** will miss **Organic Inspector Juan Hidalgo**, who has accepted a permanent position as **Agricultural Inspector** with the **Santa Cruz County Agriculture Department**. **Good Luck, Juan!**

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