



EDITOR'S COLUMN

Changes in agricultural life occur slowly. Growing food involves longer-term cycles of family, nature, land management, and economics than most other enterprises. A rapidly changing economic environment is affecting farm and ranch diversification, adaptation, and family succession plans. Here in Marin we have an overwhelming majority of small family farms (see "What We Grow" on the back page), and many of these farms are either thinking about changing their operations or are actively involved in some sort of diversification or upgrade of farm plans.

This issue is all about changes and new enterprises that reflect movements in our farming community. Ellie Rilla just returned from a sabbatical adventure in the British Isles, where she observed a mobile milk processing operation that could have applications here in Marin to help the dairy community diversify. We also cover two next-generation farmers who are returning to the traditional family operations with new ideas. For landless farmers, we visit Peter Rudnick and see just how cool an operation he has put together through partnerships and leased land.

So we are seeing change in local agriculture: new ideas, a new generation, and new ways to contribute to local livelihoods.

- Steve Quirt



Portable dairy wagon hits the road

What's black and white and green and has four wheels? And what does it have to do with helping dairy operators discover new markets?

I was at Beechenhill Farm with Sue and Terry Prince for several days in England's Peak District National Park this September revisiting farms from my agritourism project in 1997.

As Sue says: "*Beechenhill Farm is a 92-acre hill dairy farm, in the Peak District National Park. We moved here 25 years ago in 1984 just as milk quotas were introduced into the European community. So, immediately, our plan to pay our mortgage with increasing our production of milk was scuppered and we had to look for another way of increasing our income.*" Sue and Terry are local farm and community leaders, milk 40 Friesian Holsteins, run a lovely farm B&B, and are experimenting with value-added products like cheese.

I arranged for Sue to visit with Ellen Straus in 1998. She took home the "organic" milk idea and initiated an organic dairy conversion on their farm. Their story and other farm tidbits can be found at their website <http://www.beechenhill.co.uk/farmingfacts.asp>.

To me, Sue is the "Ellen Straus" of her community and has created many diversification schemes to help protect the farm landscape: cultural and environmental. She describes one project called Food from the Peak District, <http://www.peakdistrictfoods.co.uk/>, which she initiated in 2001. "*And that was all about food and building a local food economy and making links between tourism businesses and local food producers.*"

Her latest project is the Peak District Dairy Wagon, a mobile dairy processing facility, where farmers and their families from the area can relearn dairy processing skills lost in the 1930s when the milk marketing board was created.

Over 30 farmers went back to college - actually Reaseheath College, Centre of Excellence for Dairy Technology at Nantwich, for day-long sessions trying their hands at making cheese, yogurt, and ice cream. It was while Sue and fellow farmer Sarah Helliwell were elbow deep in cheese curds, that they came up with the idea of a mobile dairy teaching unit, driven by a technician, travelling from farm to farm.

Sue worked long and hard to find funds, until HRH Duchy of Cornwall, Prince Charles, stepped in and provided funding to kick off the project.

Twenty farmers participated in the two-year project begun in 2007. So what's next? "*I've got the the trailer in my dairy yard,*" says farmer Angus Dalton, "*as several of us plan to bid on purchasing the wagon so that we can use and share it several times per week to make our small batch cheeses and ice cream.*" Angus quips, "*The college that originally built it is also interested in using it as a training tool around the country so we'll see who ends up with it.*"

You can find out more about this idea if you think it would be useful in Marin and Sonoma counties at <http://www.dairywagon.co.uk/>. - Ellie Rilla



Peter Rudnick has found a successful niche through a partnership that allows him to farm full-time, growing 20 varieties of peppers in West Petaluma.

Peter Rudnick Picks Peppers In Petaluma

Peter has been a traveling grower of peppers and other Solanaceae (potato and tomato family) for the past few years, farming in the East Bay, Bolinas, and Petaluma, on choice pieces of rented farmland. This year, in partnership with Allstar Organics and local farmer George Beltrametti of B & B Farms, Peter has produced three acres of the most incredible sweet and hot peppers around. Three acres of pepper fruits is a lot for one guy to manage from seed to delivery, and Peter has done it all this year, along with help from his wife Wendy Johnson and son Sean Rudnick.

Peter has been at this a while, managing a farm here and there, and has accumulated about as much time in the dirt as anybody else. This current gig is a brilliant combination of collaboration and skill on more than one level.

First, there is a partnership with Marty Jacobsen from Allstar Organics. Peter grows and sells exclusively to Marty. *"We have a good relationship and business agreement,"* says Peter, *"I grow them the best certified organic peppers around, and he pays me well."* Couldn't be much simpler than that.

Marty and Peter lease the acreage from local Petaluma farmer George Beltrametti, also at a fair price. George has been around a long time and has a really tidy vegetable farming operation in West Petaluma. George himself grows squash, onions, pumpkins, and garlic in the light sandy loam. He and Peter are happy with the arrangement, and it works well for both farmers.

This kind of cooperation between the three partners is a good model for those of us who don't own land outright. It can be a challenge to find good farmland, access, and water around here, but it can be done. Cooperative ventures like this are helping to get more fresh local food into the local foodstream.



Third and fourth-generation Poncias

Securing Succession on the Farm

Next generation farmers like Loren Poncia and Bobby Foer are finding ways to stay on the ranch. The last generation of ranching families grew up in a strong commodity market, with the dairies selling to local and national creameries, and the livestock folks selling exclusively into the national, vertically arranged meat markets. Stagnant prices and high-risk economic cycles have been a huge challenge to these families, and the next generation has been reluctant to join the family enterprises that show little room for conventional growth. It's much easier to leave the farm with a degree in ag business and find a well-paying job.

But some of the kids are making a go of it. There are certainly more people venturing into a new marketing model than are listed in this article. So far we have featured Dave Evans, Julie Evans-Rossotti, Cindy Pomi, the Giacomini family, and of course, Albert Straus. Loren Poncia and Bobby Foer also need to be singled out as innovators and survivors on the family farm.

Loren & Al Poncia

There is an ancient concrete water trough half-buried in the pasture on the Poncia family property on Gericke Road, just north of Tomales. Carefully inscribed on the edge of the block is the name of Angelo Poncia (senior), who lived to 101, and Al Poncia (the one we know), with an old date. Loren Poncia is next in line in this family tradition, and he is becoming more and more the face of the family farm. I had a discussion with him while hanging out by the old water trough. He said, *"It's hard to make a living at this. But I'm committed to making it profitable and keeping the ranch going. We keep looking at new ways to make it work."*

Continued on next page



Al Poncia and Stemple Creek calf

Loren takes the lead role in diversifying the ranch by creating Stemple Creek Farms to market an ultra-premium, mature, grass-fed beef product in quarters and wholes to families. *"We make a whole lot more profit doing it this way, but so far our market is small. But it's growing."* Loren is part of a vanguard of young ranchers tapping into the local and sustainable consciousness sweeping the Bay Area. *"We know that people want quality. That's what we are aiming for,"* he mentions.

The Poncias have worked closely with the Natural Resources Conservation Service and the Marin Resource Conservation District in Point Reyes fencing off creeks for erosion control and developing a tight rotational grazing system. Nancy Scolari, Executive Director of the Marin RCD says, *"Al and Loren have done an amazing job on their habitat and pasture management. They are great farmers and excellent land stewards."*

Loren is planning to grow Stemple Creek Farms as the demand increases, and is spending more time on the family farm. He sits on the Board of Directors for the Marin Agricultural Land Trust and takes a keen interest in the development of sustainable agriculture in West Marin. By combining the innovation and entrepreneurship of modern niche market agriculture with the traditions of his family, Loren is a good example of where Marin agriculture is headed.

Bobby Foer and Alfred Grossi's Dream

When Bobby Foer was a little kid he would spend his weekends with his grandpa, Alfred Grossi, on the family ranch in Nicasio. Bobby would hang out with Grandpa and learn the art of taking care of Alfred's sprawling flock of hens. The eight-year-old became fascinated with the birds, and developed a life-long passion for poultry, earning a BS degree in Poultry Science from Cal Poly San Louis Obispo. Bobby loved the experience but found the large commercial operations represented there some-

thing he did not care to pursue. *"The huge commercial farms were not what I expected. I believe in taking the best care of my birds that is possible."*

Today, that is exactly what one finds upon visiting Coastal Hill Farms, on the family ranch where Bobby grew up learning about poultry from Grandpa Alfred. The place is absolutely spotless, in part because of Bobby's mother, Alfreida, and father, Bob, who have pitched in to make the farm a paradise for the chickens. Bobby is raising laying pullets for those folks who would rather buy a laying hen rather than spending six months raising the birds from chicks. He is also specializing in premium quality fryers, and has just begun to market to the best restaurants.

Coastal Hill Farm is tucked into a beautiful valley in West Marin, near Nicasio. Bobby is environmentally conscious and his operation shows it. He feeds only California Grown grains and composts litter with cow manure from the ranch to create food for the earth. His care for the welfare of the birds is exceptional.

The ranch also hosts cattle and a large family garden. Bobby's operation has invigorated the Grossi Ranch in a really new way. He has rekindled the vision of his grandfather and is beginning to make a significant contribution to our local food supply. His determination and energy is the same kind of effort that his traditional farm family exhibited when they helped to build a ranching industry here in West Marin. Like Loren Poncia, Bobby is combining the old and new to perpetuate a healthy farming culture.

Alfred Grossi is smiling down from heaven, watching his grandson as he works in the old milking barn lined with spotless pens that are teeming with glossy, healthy, and happy birds. Bobby's mother, Alfreida said, *"We are proud to see Bobby's dream become reality."*

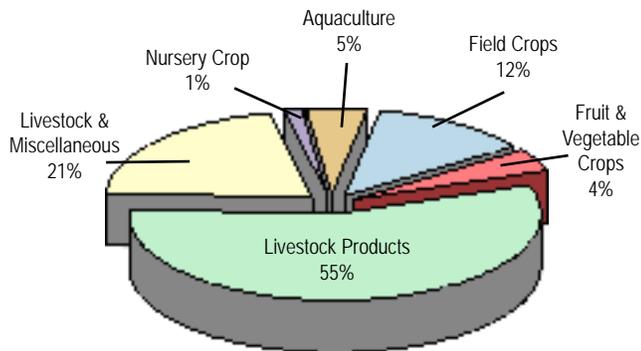
Bob, Alfreida and Bobby Foer at Coastal Hills Farm in Nicasio



What We Grow

2008 Production Summary

Marin County Livestock & Agricultural Crop Report
from the Marin County Agricultural Commissioner



Marin County is home to all sizes and shapes of farms and ranches. Dairies are the largest and most technologically developed. They are first on the Ag Commissioner's Crop Report for production value at 55%. Livestock themselves make up 21% of reported production. Next on the list is hay and silage, which make up 12%, followed by fruits and vegetables at 4%, and nursery crops at 1%. Most of the land in Marin, therefore, except for 400 acres or so, is grazing land, supporting the feeding and lodging of 32,000 cattle (cows, heifers and bulls), 10,000 sheep and lambs, 250,000 chickens and turkeys, and 1,600 goats and rabbits.

The vegetable farms are small, 1-40 acres, and are all Certified Organic, growing some of the best crops in the North Bay. Aquaculture on Tomales Bay and Drakes Estero continues to add to the diversity of our farms. We have olive orchards and 192 acres of wine grapes and about 5 acres of apples.



The University of California prohibits discrimination or harassment of any person on the basis of race, color, national origin, religion, sex, gender identity, pregnancy (including childbirth), and medical conditions related to pregnancy or childbirth, physical or mental disability, medical condition (cancer-related or genetic characteristics), ancestry, marital status, age, sexual orientation, citizenship, or status as a covered veteran (covered veterans are special disabled veterans, recently separated veterans,

Vietnam era veterans, or any other veterans who served on active duty during a war or in a campaign or expedition for which a campaign badge has been authorized) in any of its programs or activities. University policy is intended to be consistent with the provisions of applicable State and Federal laws. Inquiries regarding the University's nondiscrimination policies may be directed to the Affirmative Action/Staff Personnel Services Director, University of California, Agriculture and Natural Resources, 1111 Franklin Street, 6th Floor, Oakland, CA 94607, (510) 987-0096.

Marin Farm News

- ☞ **President Obama** ate and enjoyed **Drakes Bay Oysters** at a special luncheon at the White House on July 21st. The oysters were served in the "California Picnic" starter menu.
- ☞ The new **From the Farm to Your Table: A Consumer's Guide to Fresh Fruits and Vegetables** (ANR publication 21643, ISBN 978-1-60107-610-6), is \$7.00 and can be ordered by calling 1-800-994-8849 or by logging onto www.ucanr.org/farmtotable.
- ☞ **Deborah Walton of Canvas Ranch** (<http://www.canvasranch.com/>) has been invited to present her research into the use of Babydoll Southdown sheep to graze vineyards and orchards at the **Western SARE** (Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education) conference in Visalia **December 1-3**. Deborah received a SARE grant in 2004 and since then, the use of this rare, heritage breed of sheep has gained enormous attention from the agricultural community.
- ☞ This year the cheesemakers at **Cowgirl Creamery**, under the direction of **Eric Patterson**, developed **WAGON WHEEL**, the latest addition to their lineup. The 25-pound wheel is aged for two months and has a mild, nutty flavor. Their holiday catalog has arrived and can be viewed online at www.cowgirlcreamery.com or can be ordered by calling 866-433-7834.
- ☞ The **Marin Economic Commission** awarded **Cowgirl Creamery, Chris Giacomini of Toby's Feed Barn**, and four other local organizations the **2009 Awards of Excellence** for their "contributions to a vibrant and sustainable Marin County economy" at a November 13 luncheon.

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

Editors: Steve Quirt, David Lewis, and Deborah Skaar
Production: Frances Healey
Contributors: Ellie Rilla

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
COOPERATIVE EXTENSION - MARIN COUNTY
1682 NOVATO BLVD., SUITE 150B
NOVATO, CALIFORNIA 94947

FIRST CLASS MAIL
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
COUNTY OF MARIN