



Farming on the edge

by Jacoba Charles

West Marin is perhaps best known for its rich history of food production. After the Gold Rush, coastal dairies became an integral part of the regional economy; later, the organic farming movement infused local practices with respect for the coast's deeper roots in native food cultivation. Journalist Jacoba Charles, writing from her Inverness studio and Sonoma County family ranch, explores the current landscape of agriculture on the edge.

A tapestry of farms and pastures covers the folded hills of West Marin, stitched together like scenes from a bygone era. In many ways, the agricultural community rooted here is a relic. Forty years ago, environmentalists, farmers and politicians joined together as family farms were dying out across the nation. Today, their battle has

paid off. Marin County is a leader in the local food movement, and high-end Bay Area menus feature its organic produce, grass-fed beef, seafood and dairy products. Men and women work in fields their grandfathers plowed, and the number of organic farms has reached 60.

Yet troubles are far from over for small farms. Hurdles range from federal regulations to personal finances, and include the ramifications of a food safety bill designed for industrial-sized farms, proposed changes to slaughterhouse processing, and hefty fines for employing volunteers. Farmers and ranchers face the daily challenge of managing invasive weeds, marketing their products and meeting the demands of organic certification.

“One of our greatest challenges is educating the consumer and somehow making them understand the real value of food,” said Adrienne Baumann, director of the nonprofit Marin Organic. “It’s not easy. Most people think it’s about what’s on their plate, and it’s not. It’s about so much more. There are benefits to the environment, and to the dollar staying in the local economy. It’s

all in the price of the zucchini you just bought.”

Agriculture first took root in Marin during the Gold Rush. As people flooded into San Francisco and then north to seek their fortunes, some looked at the lush coastal hills and decided to settle. “Imagine coming through here back then, as your little steamer or whatever goes right past the Tiburon peninsula,” said historian Dewey Livingston. “Marin was immediately attractive because of all its gorgeous grassland, and I mean gorgeous in the way they would have looked at it: as pasture, as potential.”

Settlers experimented with crops—from potatoes to artichokes—but dairying quickly dominated. Marin had a winning combination of rich soils and numerous harbors, and soon became known as the “butter capital” of California.

Agriculture thrived throughout the county for over

Continued on page 4



a century. Then in the 1950s, development exploded. Along the Highway 101 corridor, suburban homes replaced pastures. A new county plan, drawn up in the 1960s, called for similar development along coastal Marin. Highway One was slated to become a four-lane freeway, and a community of 125,000 people was planned for the shores of Tomales Bay.

But the tide of public sentiment began to turn. The Point Reyes National Seashore was formed in 1962 to preserve the peninsula's natural environment and historic ranches. In 1973, a county plan with zoning that protected coastal and agricultural lands from subdivision and development was finalized. And agriculture was given a financial break during this period. Passed in 1965, the Williamson Act gave tax reductions to landowners for temporarily restricting development. The innovative Marin Agricultural Land Trust, or MALT, was formed in 1980 to compensate landowners for conservation easements that eliminated the development potential of their farmland.

While agriculture was being protected, the face of farming was changing. Artists and back-to-the-landers moved into the traditional farming communities of West Marin. In 1974, Warren Weber started Star Route Farms in Bolinas—one of the first certified organic farms in the country, and now the oldest in California. Others soon followed suit.

Today, a map of the county shows huge tracts of undeveloped land. Over half of Marin consists of publicly-owned parks and open space; more than half of the remainder is still in agriculture. And more than a third of that farmland is protected by MALT easements.

In addition to having more than two-thirds of its land either publicly owned or under conservation easements, Marin has some of the highest property values in the na-

tion. This means that taxes are high and unoccupied land is hard to come by. The cost of rural land is six times what it was in the 1980s. "What was possible—the light that shone in our eyes 30 years ago—is really shaded by the incredible increase in the price of agricultural lands," said Phyllis Faber, a founding member of MALT.

Real estate values also make inheritance tax a significant problem for small farmers, whose land has often been in the family for generations. Inheritance taxes are up to 55 percent of property's appraised value—a figure that can cost a family millions of dollars if it wants to keep its business running after a parent passes away.

High land prices also raise the general cost of living, from gasoline to building permits. "The biggest challenges and assets are the same thing here—and that is farming on the urban edge," said Steve Kinsey, West Marin's county supervisor. "That brings us very close to a market of 7 million people who want access to fresh, healthy food, but it also puts us in the sphere of urban real-estate prices."

Higher costs mean higher prices, and that makes marketing trickier in a nation in which consumers have been trained to hunt for bargains, said Peter Martinelli of Fresh Run Farms in Bolinas. "In a localized market like this one, all the costs are up front, and sometimes they are beyond what people want to spend," Martinelli said. "One of the answers comes down to growing a quality product. If something is unusually good, people end up paying for it."

An ongoing federal crackdown on unpaid labor is also impacting local farms. Last year, County Line Harvest near Petaluma was fined \$18,000 for having aspiring farmers work as unpaid interns. And the owner of Draper Farms, a one-acre farm on the outskirts of San Anselmo, was fined \$1,050 for having his sister occasionally work in exchange for produce. Though his fine was later over-

turned through a loophole, the message was clear: Follow the letter of the law, or pay the price.

"The organic farming community is coming out of a long and well-known tradition of people volunteering because they want to learn," said Janet Brown of Allstar Organics, a Nicasio farm focusing on heirloom vegetables. "No one ever thought there was anything wrong with that, including the people who were volunteering. At what point does joyous, exuberant participation cross over into them being exploited?"

In any line of work, from farming to banking, interns are the only type of legal unpaid labor. In order to qualify, interns must meet six specific criteria, including that their employer can't benefit from their work. Otherwise farmers must pay minimum wage to anyone who wants to spend time—even a short period of time—learning how to harvest kale or turn soil.

For now, farmers are looking for ways to work within the existing law. Draper Farms has a "pay to pick" CSA, or community supported agriculture program, through which paying members can come harvest their own produce. And the College of Marin is working with the state to develop an organic farming apprenticeship program with local producers. But farming aficionados who want to trade labor for lodging and experience—such as members of the international World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms, or WWOOF, program—are out of luck.

Another regulatory hurdle facing small farms may have recently been averted. In January, President Obama signed into law the Food Safety Modernization Act, complete with a controversial exemption for small-scale operations. The FDA is now interpreting the new rules, which will go into effect over the next few years.

Conceived in the wake of the E. coli outbreaks of 2006, the act originally applied the same requirements to all food producers, regardless of whether they were a multi-million-dollar industrial farm or a one-acre strawberry patch. Organic and small family farmers said that the regulations necessary for large operations would cripple or kill their businesses. Their worries were met with the Tester Amendment, which provides exemptions to certain requirements for businesses that make less than \$500,000 and sell their products directly to customers within a limited radius.

But some have raised questions as to how much the amendment will actually protect small farms. In order to qualify for the exemption, food producers will have to provide a variety of documentation that could be nearly as burdensome as that required by the new law itself. And regardless of size, anyone who doesn't sell directly to consumers—such as Marin's McEvoy Ranch and Cowgirl Creamery—will have to take additional steps, such as writing extensive food safety plans, electronically tracking all products, and paying an annual fee.

Still, Adrienne Baumann of Marin Organic believes the amendment will offer protection for most of the area's small farmers.

Despite the challenges farmers face, local and sustainably-grown food is more popular than ever. As Janet Brown of Allstar Organics put it, "Beautiful things are happening." Between 1997 and 2009, the number of organic farms in Marin expanded from 29 to 56, and the annual revenue they brought in more than quadrupled—from \$3.1 million to \$13.9 million.

Culture is changing along with this growth. The local government is working to understand the needs of farmers and help provide solutions; Marin Organic runs an organic school lunch program; and customers are flocking to farmers' markets. Restaurant menus increasingly include the names of producers. From beef to cheese to greens to oysters, businesses and consumers alike are acting as though food's source matters.

"What I see, in one word, is transformation," Baumann said. "What has happened locally in the organic food movement is astounding."