

# Grown in Marin

FARM & CROP DIVERSIFICATION NEWSLETTER

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## EDITORS COLUMN

Welcome to our first issue of "Grown in Marin". We plan on keeping you up-to-date with the opportunities and successes of agricultural diversification in Marin County. There is a lot happening already, from the Straus Family Creamery success story to Patti Elliott's recently certified organic Meyer Lemons. Most everyone agrees that we are moving into a new era of agriculture here in our beautiful and unique county. The challenges facing all of us, farmers, ranchers, consumers, government and businesses together, are creating an increased awareness of our own agricultural heritage and history along with a renewed sense of our responsibility in keeping this rich resource of farms and ranches economically healthy. There is a steady move towards organic production, supported by the creation of our own county organic certification agency within the Ag Commissioner's office. A workgroup is being formed to explore the possibility of producing certified organic beef. Russ Sartori in Tomales has two acres of sweet, red organic strawberries growing, and a number of ranchers are certifying pasture land for growing organic hay and silage.

With all this growing interest in organic and diversified farming,

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## From Dairy to Berries

When you ask Russ Sartori how his two acres of organic strawberries are coming along, he invariably says without hesitation, "ask me in November". Russ is being cautious about any predictions for the profitability of his two acres of organic strawberries that he put in his lower pasture last September. But any farmer who inspects his carefully manicured patch can't help but predict a big harvest of the sweet red berries starting in May.

The Sartori Ranch has been a solid part of the agricultural community of northwest Marin for four generations. Romeo and Russ operated the 660 acre dairy for the last thirty years on healthy pasture for their herd of about 100 cows. Rome retired and Russ decided that "twenty seven years of milking was enough", and decided to lease out their well-managed pastures. Soon Russ got the itch to farm again. His cousin, Mike McDowell, was growing organic strawberries down the road and talked Russ into trying a few acres.



*Russ Sartori and Farm Manager Raphael Alvarez spreading straw mulch on their two acres of organic strawberries.*

Organic strawberries have a high market value per acre, and with smart direct marketing can net a bundle. Russ surveyed different areas of his ranch and did some soil testing. The higher ground that he preferred was "too rich in Boron. We decided to move it across the highway, even though irrigation would be more difficult." The pH value was a little high so Russ trucked in a few tons of lime and balanced out the slightly acid coastal Blucher soil for his strawberries, and then trucked in 10 loads of composted cow manure for added fertility. After a lot of ripping, disking and rototilling, Russ and his Farm Manager, Raphael Alvarez, were ready to plant. "I didn't think we'd make it," Russ confessed, "It was December and everybody told me it was too late." Long days and nights followed and Russ and Raphael put in two acres of berries, drip lines, black plastic covering and rice straw mulch, along with deer fencing and irrigation. Just in time for the rain.

Spring brought the weeds. Raphael, Russ and crew now have everything under control with hand weeding and mulching and thousands of fat green berries are on the vine and waiting to turn red. Russ still insists on "waiting until November" when all the numbers are in before staking any claims of success. A cautious, and maybe the best strategy. But any farmer who looks at his field would bet on a winner.

As for the marketing of these "Grown in Marin" organic strawberries, it is hard to imagine that they won't be a hit. West Marin has an excellent climate for organic strawberries, much like that of the Pajaro and Salinas valleys. Strawberries like a cool temperate growing season, ripening slowly for size and sweetness, and we certainly have it in Tomales. Russ is rounding up his cases and baskets and making contacts for marketing

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## Medicinal Herb Farming Workshop

April 12th marked the date of the first "Grown in Marin" Crop and Farm Diversification Workshop. Eighty farmers and interested friends attended the talk at the Dance Palace Community Center in Point Reyes Station to learn about emerging market opportunities from expert herb farmers and marketers.

Forty-one percent of Americans use some form of alternative health care and the numbers are growing. Marin and Sonoma Counties have an expanding population of naturopathic medical practitioners, herbalists, Chinese medicine practitioners and ayurvedic healers. Until recently, these medical and health professions had to rely almost exclusively on imported dried herbs of questionable age and quality. Practitioners are beginning to look for high quality, fresh local herbs, thus opening up a new and growing market for the specialty grower or the farmer looking to diversify their farm or ranch.

The expert speakers panel addressed the history and current state of the medicinal herb industry both nationally and locally, the farming and post-processing of medicinal herbs, market specialization and nuts and bolts farming techniques. Consensus from the speakers was that lucrative possibilities from medicinal herb farming is a reality, but careful market surveys and studies preclude investments of cash and labor. As an emerging market, the industry is very unsettled with fluctuating pricing and demand. New farmers need to understand this and plan accordingly. Peg Schafer, who farms Chinese medicinal herbs, suggested that farmers choose a variety of herbs to grow when getting started, to insulate against crop failure and market changes.

Herbs require a more varied growing culture than vegetables. They are closer to wild plants and much more sensitive to soil variations, water, temperature and fertility. Our vegetable crops are more predictable due to breeding and hybridization.

Market openings exist here in the Bay Area with our large and dedicated community of practitioners, who are thrilled to receive fresh, local organic plant materials for their patients.

The Herb Farming event will be followed up with a workshop on Thursday, May 30 at the Dance Palace at 4:30 -7:30 pm on "Planning Smart for Farm Diversification", which will focus on how to make sound choices for diversifying your farm. July 18 will feature an "Organic Strawberry Production" workshop which will cover what is required to get into growing this potentially profitable specialty crop. Watch for talks on organic livestock and direct marketing coming up. As always, fresh, local organic snacks will be served!

## Marin Organic News

Marin Organic is a non-profit organization established to educate the public about products grown and made in Marin, with a mission to create a sustainable farming system by increasing the consumption of local agricultural products.

Because we know that many consumers want to make purchases that support growers and processors from their communities, Marin Organic has developed a recognizable identity for locally-grown, organic food. This new regional identification label will be supported by a public education campaign that promotes the consumption of Marin Organic products. Here are just a few of the services they are already providing Marin County's organic farmers:

- ☛ Organizing and participating in community-based food and nutrition events such as Taste of Marin, Harvest Day, and conferences, events and gatherings.
- ☛ Orchestrating the debut of the Marin Organic label on point of purchase signage, stall signs and banners at the San Rafael Farmers' Market.
- ☛ Supplying the Lagunitas School district with fresh produce, dairy and meat products in a groundbreaking school lunch program that they plan to expand and duplicate in other Marin County schools.
- ☛ Spreading the Marin Organic name and message about the benefits of buying locally-grown and produced food through the local media.
- ☛ Creating demand among restaurants, grocery stores and farmers markets.

They organize events and farm tours to educate consumers about Marin farms and stimulate customer preference for locally produced food, provide educational opportunities for school children through farm field visits, and help develop organic school lunch programs in Marin schools.

So start to look for the Marin Organic label at your grocery store and local farmers' market and ask for Marin Organic products by name.

### MARIN ORGANIC MEMBERSHIP

Grower Membership offers public relations and advertising, sales leads, strategic alliances, use of the Marin Organic logo and farm sign, along with networking and business education opportunities.

They also have memberships for the general public titled Friends of Marin Organic (Free-range Friend membership) for \$35. Let's help them to spread the good word about thinking globally and eating locally.

Call **Wendy McLaughlin** at the Marin Organic office at 415/663-9667 to find out about grower membership rates and signing up!



### News from MOCA

The Marin County Agricultural Commissioner's office is one of the first counties in California to offer an organic certification program to qualified agricultural producers and handlers. Marin Organic Certified Agriculture or MOCA was created and inspired by the community it serves: local growers, processors and consumers. This certification program dovetails with the new USDA National Organic Program which requires all organic producers and handlers to be certified by October 21, 2002.

#### MOCA's program objectives include:

- ☞ Providing a service that verifies through certification the authenticity of agricultural products marketed as organically grown.
- ☞ Enhancing the credibility of organic agriculture as a sustainable system.
- ☞ Helping to preserve our environment to optimize the health of microorganisms, plants, animals, and people.
- ☞ Assuring consumers that organically produced products adhere to the National Organic Program laws.
- ☞ Facilitating commerce in fresh and processed food that is organically produced.
- ☞ Encouraging and promoting organic agriculture in the County of Marin.

April 2002 will mark the one-year anniversary of MOCA's existence. The first year has been diverse and rich. They have organically certified local vegetables, fruit, chicken eggs, herbs, cut flowers, veggie starts, silage and cheese, and have received interest from producers of oat hay, pasture, medicinal herbs, wool, and livestock. Please feel free to call **Anita Sauber** if you have any questions regarding organic production, handling and certification at (415) 499-6700.



*Anita Sauber and Susan Ventura from the County Agricultural Commissioner's office and organic farmer Don Murch look over Don's freshly tilled fields.*



*Brangus livestock transitioning their way to organic at the Gale Ranch in Chilen Valley.*

### Organic Livestock Workgroup

The first meeting of the Marin County Organic Livestock Workgroup was held April 10 at the UC Cooperative Extension office in Novato, Marin County. The group discussions were led by Anita Sauber from the Agricultural Commissioner's office and Extension Range and Livestock Advisor Stephanie Larson, with the participation of about a dozen ranchers, marketing specialists and a local large animal veterinarian.

The informal discussion was wide-ranging and touched on: the definition of "natural" beef, the difficulties of becoming truly "organic", the upcoming National Organic Standards, how to develop a certified organic finishing facility and the big issue of parasites and the use of the parasiticides. Marketing topics were of course on the table. Tony Arend from Niman Ranch noted that "Natural" and "Organic" both command up to 20% more in the market. With the increased expenses of more fencing for rotations, organic feeding, specialized finishing and more intense management practices, is this 20% enough to justify a transition? And how much more will the market bear? These questions were all posed and left open for further study and discussion.

The biggest issue for actually growing rests on the pesticide use issue which is the last big hurdle for transitioning from "natural" to organic. For certified organic, use of the popular de-wormers is forbidden. In our temperate marine grasslands, the parasites are active year-round whereas in more severe climates the bugs are killed by the winter freezes. Here in Marin ranchers are currently experimenting with herd size and well managed rotations to discourage parasite infestation.

The workgroup will meet again in the middle of May to further explore how we can develop a viable organic livestock program for Marin County.

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we are excited to present to you our program, "Grown in Marin", which includes this newsletter, a speakers program and a Marin County growers profile and directory.

The speakers' series began with a hugely successful "Medicinal Herb Farming" workshop. We plan to follow this with "Planning Smart for Farm Diversification" on May 30 which will cover topics needed to know about integrating a new crop enterprise into the existing farm plan. Look for "Organic Strawberry Production" on July 18 and then:

- Organic Livestock Opportunities
- Direct Marketing your Farm
- Farmstead and Artisan Cheesemaking
- Specialty Crop Production
- Organic Growing: From Transition to Certification

The dates of these events will all be listed in this newsletter.

Through the summer and early next year we will be putting together a "Grown in Marin" agricultural producers directory which will list the current farmers and ranchers with a product and availability section that will help link up consumers and business interests with Marin farmers and ranchers.

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and distribution. He is receiving cautious yet enthusiastic interest from specialty stores and markets, and his fruit is a natural for the farmers' markets.

The Sartori Ranch organic strawberry experiment is a very visible example of an ingenious farm diversification enterprise, which fits nicely with a pasture and replacement heifer program. Russ has taken three acres of pasture out of production, which, after improvements and operating costs should net him a good profit. Pasture leases in West Marin average about \$55 per acre. When you mention those numbers to Russ, all he says is "talk to me in November."

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## Marin County Producers Net Awards from Around the State

Marin producers have pocketed a number of prestigious awards from around the state.

☞ **Marin French Cheeses** won 1st place for *La Petite Cream* and several other cheeses at the **American Cheese Society - 18th Annual Conference, 2001.**

**Cowgirl Creamery** won 1st place for its Cottage Cheese.

☞ **Cowgirl Creamery** won 1st place for its *Pierce Point Cheese* at the **Los Angeles County Fair - 2001.**

☞ **Point Reyes Blue** scored 2nd place out of 27 entries at the **US Cheese Championship Competition, 2001**. This is outstanding since they went into production in February, and the competition was in March. They are entering the World Cheese Competition to be held in London in November.

☞ **Sam Dolcini** won 1st place in the young farmers and ranchers category at the **Farm Bureau National Convention, 2002.**

☞ **Straus Family Creamery** won Gold Medals for its Whole Milk, Salted Butter, Reduced Fat Milk and Nonfat Milk at the **Los Angeles County Fair, 2001.**

☞ **McEvoy Olive Oil** won a Silver Medal in the "New World Blends" olive oil category at the **Los Angeles County Fair, summer 2001**, for their 2000 harvest.

☞ **Corda Winery** received a Bronze Medal for its Red Meritage at the Northcoast Wine Competition, and a Silver Medal for their Meritage Red and a Bronze for their Chardonnay.

## Planning Smart for Farm Diversification

May 30, 2002 ☞ 4:30 - 7:30 PM

Dance Palace Community Center

Point Reyes Station, California

A workshop for anyone who is planning a new crop enterprise on their farm. The topics covered will include smart market choices that fit your farm, growing and long-term business planning.