

# REINVENTION OF THE FARM

## The Next Generation

STORY AND PHOTOS BY TEMRA COSTA

According to the Census Bureau, the USDA no longer considers farming an occupation, since less than 2% of the population is actively engaged in the fields.

Depressed food prices and the super-sizing of both farms and retail markets have reduced farm profits, and it is not difficult to understand why young people are opting to look off-farm for career opportunities instead of staying on the land. The majority of farmers I meet report this phenomenon. Fortunately, in the Sacramento Valley, a new crop of family farmers is growing. They choose to stay on—or return to—the family farm, aided by efforts of family, local institutions, and other resources.

Mandy Johnston is finding that her return to the family farm is more beautiful and interesting than she had imagined. Now 24 years old, she has recently come into partnership with her mom and stepfather in Pedrozo Dairy and Cheese (written about in Winter 2005 issue of *Edible Sacramento*). She did not realize that she wanted to go into the business until the moment it was about to go up for sale. Her parents had let her spread her wings off the farm when she majored in public relations at California State University, Chico, and, after graduation, worked for a public relations firm in Chico. Recently, rather than see the farm sold, Mandy quit that job to market Pedrozo cheese, while her stepfather remains in charge of the dairy. Her off-farm education and experience have exposed her to new ideas and concepts that can create a more robust family business.

Having parents as business partners presents challenges. Different generations have different marketing perspectives. While Mandy has been seeking to beef up their web sales, her parents want their focus to be closer to home by bolstering sales at farmers' markets. "It's a compromise," she said, "I agreed to do one market a week."

Continuing the tradition of making farmstead cheeses from



Mandy Johnston

their grass-fed cows and keeping the business in the family excite Mandy. The day I met with her, she had samples of a Pedrozo cheese called Blondie's Best, named after a pet cow that she has had since she was 11 years old. The small size of their herd and their natural approach to grazing have instilled a sense of environmental responsibility as part of her business ethic. You don't get the same kind of craftsmanship from the large dairies with large feedlots, nor do you get the same sense of accountability that Mandy has expressed to Pedrozo's customers. As cornerstones of our communities, family farms are our land stewards. It is up to the public to continue to support and make such operations viable so that second generation farmers like Mandy have incentives to continue their farming tra-

dition. You can find Blondie's Best at Sacramento Natural Foods or by getting in touch with the farm at 530.865.9548.

Another great example of a second-generation farmer is Michael Bosworth. Last year he completed his Master of Science in Agricultural Economics from UC Davis, and he has since become intimately involved in the operations of Rue and Forsman Ranch. Rue and Forsman Ranch produces organic and conventional rice, organic vetch, oats and hay, as well as beef cattle.

Michael describes the rich history of his family's farm when he recounts how he came into farming. "I was lucky enough to be born into farming," he says. "Both my mother's and father's families have been ranching in northern California (mainly in Shasta County) since the 1870's. They primarily raised beef cattle. My mother re-married Michael Rue of Marysville in 1990, whose family has been involved raising beef cattle in Yuba County since the 1940's."

As a second-generation farmer, Michael feels the effects of a nation that no longer recognizes farming as an occupation. He is concerned about the rampant sprawl in the Sacramento Val-

ley and the long-term challenges that it poses to their farmland. One of the other challenges he identified as we spoke was the disconnect most consumers have with their food. Despite all of this, he finds “farming to be an extremely rewarding way to earn a living. Knowing that you played an instrumental role in the production of high quality, nutritious food for thousands of people leaves a person with a feeling of satisfaction. I love the way the rice fields look and smell right before harvest, and I love watching the grain pour into the harvester as it rolls across the field. I also enjoy knowing that by carrying on the family tradition of farming, I will be able to provide my children with some of the same childhood experiences that I was afforded.”

(In addition to second-generation farmers, there is another source of new farmers in the Sacramento Valley, and it presents the largest potential for growth. These farmers are the new im-

migrants to the area, who are finding that their previous farming experience can provide them with a good livelihood in their new home. These immigrants, among them Hmong, Mexican, Russian and others, will be the subject of a future article.)

It is certainly encouraging to find such vibrant and enthusiastic people as Mandy and Michael continuing their families’ traditions with family support. Fortunately, there is also additional support for such efforts. The UC Davis Student Farm provides resources for those who want to learn about more sustainable means of farming. The farm’s director, Mark Van Horn, describes its mission this way: “The Student Farm started in 1977, and its goals are to promote student learning of sustainable agricultural principles and practices through programs which emphasize in-field, experiential learning, and, most importantly, to encourage student initiative, creativity and exploration.”

Van Horn feels that the challenges facing new farmers are similar to those facing anyone starting up a new business. Farming requires a great deal of infrastructure and the start-up costs can be immense. That is why organizations such as Farm Link are working to create mentoring relationships between aspiring farmers and those who are active or retiring [www.californiafarmlink.org](http://www.californiafarmlink.org).

These new generations of farmers bring a new perspective to farming, a perspective that has largely been lost in the modern industrial approach to farming. These new farmers see the benefits of smaller sized agriculture, which keeps a focus on direct marketing, on knowing the consumer, and on providing products that are environmentally sustainable.



*Michael Bosworth and his mentor, stepfather Michael Rue, in one of their fields in Marysville.*

COMMUNITY ALLIANCE WITH FAMILY FARMERS

**BUY FRESH**

**BUY LOCAL**

**WWW.CAFF.ORG**



In addition, consumers are tipping the balance in favor of these new perspectives and creating incentives for this new crop of family farmers. Due to an increasing demand for quality food and for ecologically and socially sound farming practices, second and third, even fourth generation farmers are encouraged to build upon the infrastructure put into place by their families. Whether by farming or consuming consciously, we are all playing our part to increase the connectedness of our local food systems, binding together the land, those who grow upon it, and those who eat the fruits of their labor.

For more information, feel free to contact me at 530.756.8518 x 18 or by email at [temra@caff.org](mailto:temra@caff.org). Until next season, enjoy the local fruits and vegetables of this bountiful region and continue to look for and ask for local food wherever you shop and eat. It is really making a difference!

#### SOME SEASONAL SENSATIONS

Apples (Gravenstein, Gala), pomegranates, green beans, broccoli, cabbage, carrots, cauliflower, celery, chicory, eggplant, chard, kale, mustard greens, leeks, lettuces, peppers, potatoes (Yellow Finn, Fingerling, Purple, etc), winter squash (Turbin, Red Kuri, etc.)



*Meet me at the*

## DAVIS FARMERS MARKET



*California*



**Special Wednesday Pre-Thanksgiving market**  
12pm - 6pm on November 22

#### Market Hours:

Saturdays 8am - 1pm (Year Round)

Wednesdays 2pm - 6pm (Nov. - Mar)

Wednesdays 4:30 - 8:30 pm (Apr - Oct)

#### Holiday Season at the Davis Farmers Market

Holiday craft faires and music each Saturday, 8am-1pm

Special pre-Christmas market 12/23,  
and pre-New Year's market 12/30.

(530) 756-1695 [www.davisfarmersmarket.org](http://www.davisfarmersmarket.org)  
Central Park 4th & C Streets Davis, CA 95616