

Honoring Agriculture Diversity in Marin

Dance Palace – Pt. Reyes, California

October 21, 2015

Notes: Breakout Session 1a – “What Products to Market”

Facilitator: Jim Jensen, MALT

Notes: Vicki Jimenez, UCCE Marin

Bonnie Nelson, UCCE Marin

Speakers:

Anthony Bordessa – Washoe Valley Duck Farm

Guido Fronsini - True Grass Farms

Tamara Hicks - Tomales Farmstead Creamery

1. **Introductions**

2. **How did you decide what product you would produce and did customer demand play a role in that?**

AB: Fourth generation farmer. Loves agriculture. Stumbled on the duck egg opportunity with a “google” search. Product is trending. Bakery’s love him. Trying to figure out whether to overshoot on production or aim low and play it safe? Pulled out of Farmer’s Markets. Business is 85-90% retail, 10-15% restaurants. He delivers the product 175 – 180 (eggs or dozen?) per week. Uses mobile cages to house ducks.

TH: Cheese was not a dream. Came for love of the land. First generation farmer. She and husband bought and restored 160 acre farm then had to do something with it. Decided on cheese. Found the more cheesemakers there are, the better for all. Restaurants are competitive. If one sees the other has you cheese, they want it too. Have not done marketing and doing well. Room to scale up, but not ready yet.

GF: Six years ago bought and slaughtered first bull. His beef was listed in Playboy magazine as one of the top 50 things to try before you die. Diversify income streams. Now raising pork and lamb. Been raising pigs for three years, doesn’t know anything about them so he’s learning. If consumers love your first product, they will love your next product.

3. **Are you Organic? Why or why not?**

AB: Not organic. Small and conventional free range. Hope to diversify product line in the future with organic.

TH: 160 acres are organic – land only. Goats are not organic. Goats on west coast have a parasite so they need to be medicated and can’t be organic. On the east coast, the parasite freezes off.

GF: Not certified organic due to cost. He is putting his money elsewhere. Customer know them and what they are doing. He doesn't think he needs a third-party _____ to tell them what they are buying. He believes in educating the community.

4. Have you used value added as a diversity strategy? For example, artisanal cheese, niche, or boutique products.

AB: Niche – restaurants, farm to table, boutique, grocery stores. Got into Safeway when they began to support local producers. People see duck eggs and give them a try, then they become part of their lifestyle.

TH: Only two goat farms in Marin. Trying unique cheese products using cow, sheep and goat milk.

GF: Wagyu beef products. Direct and transparent – this is what we do and why. Paying attention to sequestering water and carbon. Won an award for educating and developing a culture to broaden diversity. Grazing for conservation movement.

Questions:

Ralph Grossi – What premium do you expect over conventional markets? How do you sort it out, organic, etc.?

AB: 30% over premium. Bigger bird, more feed. Hits all marketing points – grass fed, pastured, etc. With egg prices dropping, now about 20%.

TH: 100% over Costco. Artisanal, all hand done – labeling and cutting. Biggest cost is labor. Pays \$15 hour for full time + health benefits.

GF: Local has helped. Consumers following people in news (TV, magazines) makes community want grass fed, etc. Equal to conventional. Investing the land at the moment.

5. Visions for the Future

AB: Sky is the limit. Need to hone in on it. Keep up with demand. Maybe diversify into other niche egg markets – organic, etc.

Questions:

Paulette Swallow, UCCE Marin – You are only 22 years old and started this business at 18! You just graduated from Cal Poly. How did you keep the business going while at school?

AB: The lady in the front row – my mom! Without her he would be starting the business over. With her help, he has been able to keep the business going.

TH: May add a couple of cheeses. Also sell chicken eggs. Customers visit and see their operation, and like GF said, hopefully they will like the next product. They do farm tours and farm stays. Lots of folks visit the farm.

GF: Work on farm worker housing. Combustible toilets. Graze State Parks. Many are mismanaged or left fallow. He would like to not work year-round. Sell beef in summer, down time in winter.

Questions:

Petaluma FFA Girl: GF – what type of beef do you breed?

GF: Charolais, Angus, and full blood Wagyu for breeding

Mike: Lack of water, the drought, is this the new normal?

TH: Milks just once a day. Using whey to irrigate fruit trees. Lucky to have good water on their property.

GF: Has to have water for fire safety. The way they graze saves water. Springs are beginning to show more water as a result. Reduced number of cattle and started pigs.

Paul: Value-added standpoint of being in Marin and specialty items – is there a differentiation in flavor in what you are producing?

AB: Duck eggs are richer than chicken, creamy and good for baking.

TH: We have amazing cheese! Two restaurants are always #1 because of her cheese! ~haha Cheese goes from farm to plate in two days. Attribute the amazingness to taking care of the land.

GF: Idea in people’s minds is that grass fed equals quality.

Kitty: AB – How did you get into Safeway?

AB: Mom went to school with a lady who works there. She said Safeway was trying to bring in local products, so he called the Petaluma store. He went in expecting to interview. He introduced himself and the manager said, let me show you where to set up. ~haha. It took a few months to get the paperwork in place, but now he is in the system it is easy to provide product to other stores.

Kitty: AB – Are you concerned about quantity?

AB: Safeway told him make sure you can supply us! Now, into it a few months and it has been OK, barely have enough eggs sometimes. Once they (Safeway) starts marketing, he will have to get bigger.

Kitty: AB – are the ducks layless in winter?

AB: Yes, supplements with 16 hours of light.

Person: GF – where do you do processing?

GF: Marin Sun and _____

Person: AB – Mobile coops, how do you power them?

AB: Solar

Person: AB – what do you do with spent layers?

AB: Tried to do it himself, took about 20-30 minutes per bird. Cost too much for labor. Currently selling to local caterer, my go with pet products.

Person: GF – grass fed?

GF: Grass finished, not supplemented with hay.

Paulette: AB – where are the eggs in the stores?

AB: On the end-caps

Person: GF – how many pounds per acre – not happy with Wagyu?

GF: 375 – 550 pound Wagyu/Angus – not much, small. They don't sell product by the pound, they sell by the unit. In four to five years, when established, they may go by the pound.

Al Poncia: GF - Better to go angus or ???

GF: Still learning, 30 years old and started business at 24.

FFA Girl: GF – Do you supplement?

GF: No, organic molasses sometimes. All grass.

Mike: GF – Due to price break, are customers dropping?

GF: They have not. Right now they don't have enough animals. Ground beef is \$6.50 to \$8, a little lull, but good. For pigs, people need to be more skilled at cooking! ~haha

GF leaned over table to AB and told him he needs to tell his customer about how weather affects his production. Need to educate them. (great sharing moment)

Added Value of ranching = ecosystem services, educate consumer about your practices and external benefits.

Advertising = take consumer out on your operation, proximity to a foody customer base, presence at events, markets, tours.

Size = trying to figure out sweet spot, diversify both product and outlet.

Markets = restaurants, farmer’s markets, grocery stores, on-farm stores, tours. Explain your story to consumers.

Organic = began conventional, transition, transparency with customers instead, and save money for other uses, education. Love of land greater than operation.

Diversity Strategy = niche markets, flexibility, bigger picture/ ecosystem services, education.

Biggest Cost = labor, and nothing is mechanized. Greater extra cost you can charge at end. Want to change farmworker housing laws in the County.

Drought? More organic matter in soil = more water retained.