

June 1, 2008

Explorer | Sonoma County, Calif.

## On the Trail of a Sustainable Feast in Sonoma



Heidi Schumann for The New York Times  
Golden Nectar Farm in Windsor, Calif., uses a mobile chicken coop to bolster the sustainability of the small suburban operation.

By [TAYLOR HOLLIDAY](#)

Correction Appended

THE psychedelic, hand-painted, Mushroom Man pickup truck parked at the New Carpati Farm in Sonoma County, Calif., just outside the town of Sebastopol, was the first sign that this vacation was going to be a little out of the ordinary.

After a short tour of the grassy property and a stop to pet the baby chicks in their coop with a view of the verdant valley in the distance, my husband, Craig Havighurst, and I entered a little plastic hut. Inside, a few rows of shelving each held several oak-sawdust “logs.” As our eyes adjusted to the relative dark, bunches of meaty shiitake and gorgeous canary-yellow oyster mushrooms popped out of the logs in invitation, almost like gold in a mine. “See those white hairs on top?” said Steve Schwartz, owner of the New Carpati Farm and our guide on this culinary pilgrimage. “It means it’s super fresh. You would never see that in a grocery.”

A visit to Mr. Schwartz's low-tech little mushroom hut on his three-acre farm is a revelation in many ways. But it's one that most Sonoma County visitors never have, since most are only headed for the area's excellent [wineries](#). "If you just do the wineries," said Mr. Schwartz, "you're missing out."

After a four-day tour of farms — with a few wineries thrown in — I had to agree. We had come to Sonoma County specifically for the food. Inspired by the "locavore" movement, in which Earth-aware consumers go to great lengths to eat only locally grown, sustainable food from within a 100-mile radius of their home, we decided to take a locavore holiday, creating an entire meal from farms we had personally visited and farmers we had personally met.

This was possible because of Sonoma County Farm Trails, an agrotourism and farm-marketing group that supports sustainable agricultural diversity. It has 165 farm members in Sonoma County that invite interaction with the public in some way — from farm stands to farm tours. Having had its 35th anniversary in 2007, it is one of the oldest, largest and most diverse agrotourism organizations in the [United States](#).

The farms of the Sonoma County Farm Trails are dotted throughout the county anywhere wine grapes and creeping development have spared a patch of land. They are mostly working family farms, making time for visitors generally by appointment.

Wanting the full farm experience — and a kitchen to cook in — we were glad to find Full House Farm, also outside Sebastopol, which offers one of the few farm stays in the county. With our oenophile friends, Kelli Back and Gary Pemberton, we settled into the guesthouse, giddy over the view of the horses in the valley below, which we could see from the picture windows or from the Adirondack chairs perched on the hill. Amenities included our own kitchen [garden](#) and a bowl of freshly laid eggs. From Full House Farm, our food-sourcing radius would be a mere 20 miles: north to [Healdsburg](#), west to Bodega, south to Petaluma and points between.

"People are divorced from where their food comes from," said Ana Stayton at our first stop, Golden Nectar Farm on the southwest outskirts of Windsor. A nutrition educator and lay herbalist, Ms. Stayton, along with her husband, John, co-founder and director of the country's first green M.B.A. program, at Dominican University of California, runs Golden Nectar with the goal of "helping people imagine the possibilities in their own lives of having a connection to the natural world and living more sustainably."

A tour of their 2.5-acre farm — past a studio made with straw bales, an outdoor cob kitchen, a car that runs on vegetable oil and a hen-mobile that ferries a handsome assortment of chickens to fresh pecking grounds — feels like a stroll through someone's giant backyard, albeit someone with the audacity to grow 150 varieties of fruit, from kiwis to blackberries, figs to pluicots.

"This farm was designed as an experiment in biodiversity," said Ms. Stayton, reaching under a blueberry bush to yank a stray asparagus stem out of the ground for us to taste. As an organic farm that uses only natural fertilizers and pesticides, the diversity and rotation of plants helps keep the soil healthy and pests at bay, Ms. Stayton explained while an intern began transplanting some onions near the blueberries to see if they would ward off pesky gophers.

Although it's on a slightly bigger scale — 17 acres right off U.S. 101 near Santa Rosa — Tierra Vegetables is run with a similar philosophy. “We want people to know where their food comes from,” said Wayne James, who happened to be there, chatting with a repeat customer who was buying up all the strawberries, when we dropped by the bountiful farm stand that fronts his neatly tractored, though wildly diverse cropland. His sister and the farm's co-owner, Lee James, was running their stall at the Ferry Plaza Farmers Market, where [San Francisco](#) epicures seek out Tierra particularly for its vast array of chilies and chili products.

Tierra encourages visitors — especially children — to roam its fields. “Organic is part of our sustainable practice,” Mr. James said, “but not all. The work we do here is environmentally, socially and economically sustainable. It has to be all three.”

The good news, he continued, is that “a lot more people understand what we're doing nowadays.”

Proof of that is in the growing numbers of people who frequent farmers' markets and join community-supported-agriculture programs, like Tierra's, in which families become subscribers and pay the farmer in advance for a weekly delivery of fresh produce. Shaken into a new awareness by contaminated foods (E. coli spinach, anyone?) that have traveled an average 1,500 fuel-guzzling miles from a farm who-knows-where to your table, more Americans are eager to know their farmers and understand how their food is grown.

Even after visiting Love Farms, however, you may not fully understand the progressive methods of Ron Love. A city farm smack in the middle of Healdsburg (and a favorite of local chefs), its six acres boast 200 different organic crops throughout the year. A talk with Mr. Love quickly veers from his explanation of why his rows of tomatoes are growing up out of plastic-covered ground (the Israeli-desert-style irrigation conserves water and controls weeds and enables him to get his tomatoes on the market before anyone else's) to a discussion of the heady biodynamics of Rudolf Steiner and his prescriptions for organic farming with a spiritual bent, or what Mr. Love calls “the next level of consciousness.”

“We don't understand the geometry of the living world,” Mr. Love said. “The '60s generation are the last people who can farm. We need a framework of valuing becoming a farmer.”

That's also a concern for the mushroom man Steve Schwartz, who learned to grow mushrooms while teaching women to do so in [Thailand](#) in his [Peace Corps](#) days and who now works with California FarmLink, which helps preserve family farms by matching up retiring farmers with the next generation of aspiring back-to-the-landers.

There's no better way to cultivate that next generation than by getting kids out on the farm, which is exactly why many of these farmers take time out of their 80-hour-plus work weeks to give tours. There was a particularly happy assortment of human kids playing with exuberantly friendly goat kids at Redwood Hill Farm, a certified humane farm where all 350 goats have names.

Though it has a small-scale industrial creamery, Sebastopol-based Redwood Hill is still family-run and still makes award-winning goat [cheese](#) by hand in small batches, said the understated, gray-haired woman who led our tour of the creamery (it is open to the public a few weekends each year). It was only after we had followed the trail of the various cheeses to the aging racks — seeing how some varieties grow a little moldier and hairier by the week as they age to perfection — and swooned over the taste of creamy-tart crottin and Camembert-like Camellia, that we realized our guide was the owner, Jennifer Bice, a goat-cheese maker since 1978.

If there is one thing you learn from visiting farms, it's that sustainable farming is an endless challenge. But on a drive toward the Sonoma coast, the environmental payoff is abundantly clear: rolling green hills, freely grazing cows, diversity of terrain.

Head for bohemian Bodega (population 500), and you'll wind up at Bodega Artisan Cheese. After 22 years as a goat rancher, Patty Karlin is still pushing the envelope at her 60-goat farm and dairy, where she makes cheeses for farmers' markets and local restaurants. In her 90-minute eco-tour, she shows how she's moving off the power and water grid — with solar panels and a pond-fed, tiered irrigation system — in an attempt to zero out the ranch's bills. "Everything I do has to be a model for the third world," said Ms. Karlin, who is also a consultant to African farmers.

In the creamery, we saw the experimental Gouda she had made that morning with her young apprentice. And before a cheese tasting, we sampled the exotic microgreens that her apprentice-tenants sell to high-end restaurants under the name Earthworker Farm.

At McEvoy Ranch in Petaluma, the view may be richer and grander, with 18,000 olive trees planted over 80 acres of a 550-acre ranch, but it is still strictly sustainable and organic. Nan McEvoy, a former chairwoman of The San Francisco Chronicle, was among the first to plant olive varietals from Tuscany in Northern California. Her olive ranch and country home on the hills of the border of Sonoma and Marin Counties are as luxurious as her oils. On the frequent and thorough two-hour tour, you'll visit the olive orchards (each tree will produce roughly a gallon of oil each year) and the milling room (a giant granite stone crushes the olives, pits and all) before tasting the green and grassy extra virgin oil.

After our McEvoy visit, we had done it: We had sourced an entire meal of ingredients fresh from the farms that grew them. So what did we make from our bounty? Our friend Kelli substituted Bodega Artisan ricotta for the cow's-milk version she normally uses for her ricotta gnocchi — to startlingly light and luscious effect. We made a sauce of New Carpati shiitake and oyster mushrooms; Tierra Vegetables adolescent garlic and fresh fava beans (absolutely worth the double-shucking); Love Farms basil and oregano; and McEvoy Ranch olive oil.

The microgreens salad from Earthworker Farm was a vision with its edible orange nasturtium and blue borage flowers, topped with crumbled Redwood Hill Farm feta and dressed with an olive-oil-lemon vinaigrette from the Meyer lemon tree outside our door.

It was one of the freshest, most satisfying meals we'd ever made, made even better by good friends and local sauvignon blanc.

## FROM THE MUSHROOM MAN TO GOATS THAT HAVE NAMES

Sonoma County Farm Trails publishes a free map and guide (707-571-8288; [www.farmtrails.org](http://www.farmtrails.org)). You can read about [California](#) FarmLink's programs at [www.californiafarmlink.org](http://www.californiafarmlink.org). The following farms welcome visitors for tours by appointment only.

New Carpati Farm, 4241 Bartleson Road, Sebastopol; (707) 829-2978; free tour with purchase of produce or \$5 for adults and \$1 for children over 12.

Golden Nectar Farm, 6364 Starr Road, Windsor; (707) 838-8189; [www.goldennectar.com](http://www.goldennectar.com); \$15 per person (minimum two adults), children free.

Tierra Vegetables, 651 Airport Boulevard, Santa Rosa; (707) 837-8366; [www.tierravegetables.com](http://www.tierravegetables.com); \$5.

Love Farms, 15069 Grove Street, [Healdsburg](#); (707) 433-1230; [www.lovefarms.com](http://www.lovefarms.com); tour free with purchase.

Redwood Hill Farm, 2064 U.S. 116 north, Sebastopol; (707) 823-8250; [www.redwoodhill.com](http://www.redwoodhill.com); free farm and creamery tours on selected dates.

Bodega Artisan Cheese, (707) 876-3483; [www.bodegaartisancheese.com](http://www.bodegaartisancheese.com); \$75 for five people or fewer and \$15 for each additional person.

McEvoy Ranch, 5935 Red Hill Road, Petaluma; (707) 778-2307; [www.mcevoyranch.com](http://www.mcevoyranch.com); orchard tours on selected dates, \$25.

Full House Farm, 1000 Sexton Road, Sebastopol; (707) 829-1561; [www.fhfarm.com](http://www.fhfarm.com); rates start at \$215 a night plus a \$125 cleaning fee for a three-bedroom guesthouse.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: June 22, 2008

The Explorer column on June 1, about a tour of sustainable-agriculture farms in Sonoma County, Calif., overstated one grower's contribution to the region's production of olive oil. The McEvoy Ranch was among the first to plant olive varietals from Tuscany in Northern California; it did not introduce Tuscan methods of olive oil production to the region.



## Fresh and Local in Sonoma County



Only using natural fertilizers and pesticides, Golden Nectar grows 150 varieties of fruit, from kiwis to blackberries, figs to pluicots.

Photo: Heidi Schumann for The New York Times

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Ana Stayton, who runs Golden Nectar with her husband, wants consumers to forge "a connection to the natural world."

Photo: Heidi Schumann for The New York Times



## Fresh and Local in Sonoma County



The family-run Redwood Hill Farm is a certified humane farm where all 350 goats have names. One of its specialties is goat cheese made by hand in small batches.

Photo: Heidi Schumann for The New York Times



## **Fresh and Local in Sonoma County**



A favorite of local chefs, Love Farms produces 200 different organic crops throughout the year.

Photo: Heidi Schumann for The New York Times

## **Fresh and Local in Sonoma County**



Organic zucchini and strawberries are among the produce available at the Love Farms stand.

Photo: Heidi Schumann for The New York Times



## Fresh and Local in Sonoma County



At New Carpati Farm, Steve Schwartz checks his mushrooms with his daughters, Noa, center, and Talia. He learned to grow mushrooms while teaching women to do so in Thailand during his Peace Corps days.

Photo: Heidi Schumann for The New York Times



## Fresh and Local in Sonoma County



The McEvoy Ranch in Petaluma was the first to bring Tuscan-style olive oil production to Northern California.

Photo: Heidi Schumann for The New York Times

## Fresh and Local in Sonoma County



The olive orchards at the McEvoy Ranch are made up of 18,000 olive trees that each produce roughly a gallon of oil each year.

Photo: Heidi Schumann for The New York Times