

AGRITOURISM

# FARM FORWARD

## Planting the Seeds for the Future of Family Farms

BY PEG CHAMPION



Not far from the gridlock traffic on Capital Expressway in South San Jose lies the verdant expanse of Santa Clara County's newest urban asset, Martial Cottle Park. A gift for future generations, Martial Cottle Park offers a public space for walkers, bikers, equestrians and dog walkers to connect with nature and agriculture.

Founded in 1864, Martial Cottle Family Ranch was continuously run by Edward Cottle and his descendants for 150 years. During that time, the family watched as the valley's agricultural economy gradually changed and four-lane highways and strip malls crept closer. But, according to Eric Goodrich, program manager of Martial Cottle Park, the family withstood the pressure of urban sprawl and stubbornly said "no" to the fortunes offered by developers.

True to family form and just as he'd promised his mother, in 2003 Walter Cottle Lester, the last living heir to farm on the family ranch, donated the 287-acre farm to the Santa Clara County Parks and Recreation Department and the California State Parks Department. According to the property deed, the land has to be used solely for a "historical park that informs and educates the public about the agricultural heritage of the Santa Clara Valley." He passed away in 2014.

"The Cottle Ranch could have turned into just another housing subdivision or a high-tech business park," says Goodrich. But thankfully it didn't. Today, the park is home to the working farm and a crop of educational organizations and community groups.

Goodrich says that the park's comprehensive master plan calls for

an educational farm that is integrated into its urban neighborhood. Renovation is under way for the farm's 18 historic buildings, and innovative techniques, such as dry farming, are being introduced. "Currently we provide programs for grammar and middle school students," says Goodrich. "We want to work with local high schools and universities to establish an ongoing internship program, educate people about where their food comes from and inspire future farmers."

### Organic Growth

When the park opened in May 2015, visitors saw a new group of farmers working the land.

"In 2015 we planted our first crop of tomatoes, melons, squash, Sugar Snap peas and pumpkins on 180 acres," says Brendan Miele, director of domestic farming at Jacobs Farm/Del Cabo. A certified organic family farm founded in Pescadero in 1980 by Larry Jacobs and Sandra Belin, Jacobs Farm was awarded the contract to farm the parkland and to educate the public about their work.

"We recently opened a public farm stand, just in time for our fall



Opposite: Martial Cottle Park. Above left: Brendan Miele from Jacobs Farm (left) with Eric Goodrich, program manager for Martial Cottle Park. (Photos by Ron Horii) Above right: Epicurean Group café. (Photo by Chris Chowaniec)

harvest.” Miele says their educational programs this year included school field tours, a seasonal pumpkin patch and internships with the Farmer Veteran Coalition and local universities.

“We farm 100% organically,” says Miele. “We know that healthy plants require less fertilizer and fewer pesticides.” The park is also their first direct-to-consumer experience, “We love getting the feedback. Most farms are isolated, in rural areas, but here at Martial Cottle we have a real opportunity to interact with folks and educate the public about the risks and rewards of farming.” Miele says that they plan to host public lectures discussing the drought, dry farming and rainwater harvesting.

## A Taste of Santa Clara Valley

On October 17, 2015, 150 local food advocates enjoyed such an ‘opportunity to interact’ when they joined Epicurean Group and Martial Cottle Park at the co-sponsored farm-to-fork dinner, “A Taste of Santa Clara Valley,” benefitting the Community Alliance with Family Farmers (CAFF) and their Farm-to-School and Farm-to-Market programs.

A 35-year-old California policy and advocacy nonprofit, CAFF, is working to build a better food system, through programs that connect farmers, businesses and consumers.

“CAFF’s mission is to advocate for family farmers and sustainable agriculture,” says Sheila Golden, CAFF regional manager for the Central Coast and Santa Clara County. “It’s a win-win—we help family farmers increase their income and sustainability, and we enable community members and businesses to find and choose local food.”

Along with policy work, CAFF runs programs that encourage environmentally sound farm management practices and support food safety and consumer education. The Farm to Market and Farm to School/Hospital Programs “help growers coordinate their product with buyers, which ensures that supply and demand grow together,” Golden says.

Golden says innovative tracking and distribution software systems are coming online to help small and mid-size farms gain a competitive edge. “Small farms will flourish here in Santa Clara Valley using the same innovative techniques that have fueled the success of

Silicon Valley,” says Golden. “Ultimately, our goal is to strengthen family farms, which are the cornerstone of healthy and economically viable communities.”

How businesses source their food can also make a big difference. When they demand local, family farms benefit. According to Golden, one such business is Epicurean Group, which “has a great sourcing program in place and is a good example of how a demand for fresh, local food can change the food system.”

## Putting Local Crops on High-Tech Tables

Managing more than 50 corporate and campus cafés and restaurants across Northern California, the Epicurean Group team prepares food from scratch—without using canned sauces, soups, dressings or processed foods.

“We’re glad to see Martial Cottle adding organic food to the Bay Area food supply,” says Mary Clark Bartlett, CEO and founder of the food-service management company. “From the beginning, our company’s mission has been to provide our customers with seasonal, nutritious food, sourced locally.”

“We make a pledge to our clients to provide socially responsible, sustainable food,” says Clark Bartlett, which includes organic fruit and vegetables as available, grass-fed beef, cage-free eggs and antibiotic-free chicken.

Just as buying local food in season when it is plentiful is good for family farmers, it makes good business sense, says Clark Bartlett. “Instead of trucking food from miles away or flying it up from South America, buying local saves our clients money and reduces our carbon footprint. It’s also more nutritious.”

For family farms, businesses and communities in Silicon Valley, the future looks delicious. ✕

---

Peg Champion is passionate about sustainability and environmental issues, specifically those related to the food industry. She lives in Sonoma County and, when not cooking or tasting Pinots, she often writes about food and wine.