COURTESY: MARYJANESFARM (2)

Growing Success

The West Coast is a leader in organics, the fastest-growing segment of the food industry

By Eric Lucas

Kneeling down to plunge her hands in the dirt, Emily Rude hoists a handful of dark loam and lets it run through her fingers back to earth. It's a light and airy spring day in the Palouse, and the soil has caught the sun's early season warmth like a sponge. Its texture is not all that spongelike, however. Rude's handful breaks up with the distinctive crumbly characteristic that soil experts call "friable."

Moscow, Idaho–based MaryJanesFarm distributes food throughout North America, operates a bed-and-breakfast and runs the Pay Dirt Farm School.

"That's Palouse silt loam soil," Washington State University professor John Reganold, a soil expert, announces to the group of students gathered around him. "It's classified as 'fine-silty, mixed, mesic Pachic Ultic Haploxerolls.' Not that any of you want to know that."

Rude wants to know that—and much more. She's a pathfinding member of a new generation of agriculturalists who take a keen interest in soils, and part of the student class working toward the first organic farming major ever offered at a U.S. university. Rude, who will be a sophomore this fall, is committed to her field, and its foundation, personally and professionally. That foundation is the dirt sifting through her fingers.

"For me, soil is everything. It's what holds our country together, but I don't think we're taking good enough care of it," she explains. Her family's ancestral farm near Wichita, Kansas, once rested on rich black ground, she says. Now the land is depleted, a pale shadow of its former horticultural health, she says. She'd like to restore it. Today she's learning how to do that by planting sets of bunching onions in the ground on WSU's organic farm, a 3-acre parcel bestride a ridge east of Pullman.

The farm is a key part of preparing students to major in organic agriculture systems, an option that became available fall semester 2006, with students who were already getting bachelor's degrees in agriculture able to switch their major to organics. The first organic-agriculture-systems major, Jewlee Sullivan, graduated this year. She had learned the program was in the works and had taken many of the classes likely to be required. More program majors are expected to graduate in about a year.

"So many consumers want organic food and food grown with environmentally friendly standards," says Reganold, who has been promoting this trend for two decades at WSU. "It's not going to slow down. We've got 10 students pursuing the major now, and I foresee 20 next year. Our first grad [Sullivan] got a job offer before she even graduated. The ag industry needs this."

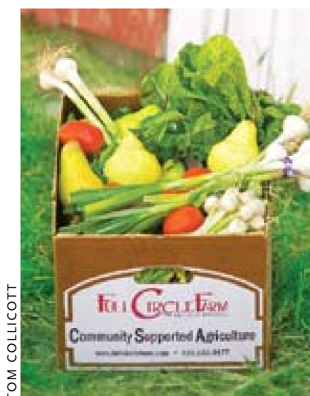
In just the space of a generation, organic agriculture has evolved from a somewhat quirky pursuit

JULIE SHAW

COURTESY: PLATE & PITCHFORK

into an industry characterized by large-scale as well as small-scale commercial enterprise, Reganold notes. Rude's a pioneer, yes, but she's part of a modern-day land rush—this one focused on rapidly changing how crops are grown versus claiming a plot of ground.

The West Coast is the longtime home of this movement. One of the first major U.S. organic food producers, Cascadian Farm, was founded in Washington's Skagit Valley in 1972. The farm began as a back-to-the-land collectivist project based on environmentalist principles, and has evolved to lead the organics industry in its shift toward the mainstream. It is now a subsidiary of General Mills. California leads the nation in organic producing acres (just as it leads the nation in agriculture, period), but organic production is growing in Idaho, Montana, Oregon and Washington, as well.



TOM COLLICOTT

Although organic foods still represent a mere 2 percent of all food production, organics is the fastest-growing segment of the food industry, growing at a rate of 20 percent each year since 1990, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Organic-product sales have more than doubled over the last five years to reach $16.9 billion in 2006, according to the Organic Trade Association.

The story of the increasing popularity of organic farming can be clearly told by the numbers: In the United States as a whole, there are now more than 4 million acres of USDA-certified-organic farmland—including cropland, pasture and rangeland. Although that is just 0.5 percent of total U.S farmland, the amount of certified-organic farmland has more than doubled since 2002.

In fact, in 2005, for the first time all 50 states had some certified-organic farmland, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. USDA 2005 statistics, the most current available, show that the country had about 8,500 certified-organic operations that year. More than 1,900 of those were in California, working more than 360,000 acres of certified-organic farmland.

In Idaho, 198 certified-organic operations were working nearly 101,000 acres of certified-organic farmland. In Montana—the country's No. 1 producer of organic wheat—145 certified operations were working nearly 230,000 acres of certified farmland in 2005. In Oregon, there were 317 certified operations working 46,550 acres of certified farmland. In Washington, organic farmland grew from 41,102 acres in 2005 to more than 57,000 acres in 2006, and the state's 550-plus certified producers now generate total annual sales of $101 million.

But statistics are just the skin of the apple in organic-food production. Not only is there a rich core of dedicated people pursuing and promoting organic food in general, but organic food products are branching out in numerous directions. (Please see the sidebar on pages 19 and 20 for just a few examples.)

Many food producers now use

Above: **Chef Scott Dolich, foreground, from the Park Kitchen restaurant, and chef Leather Storrs, from Rocket, prepare a Plate & Pitchfork dinner at an organic farm in the Portland area. Erika Polmar and Emily Berreth (right) are celebrating the fifth season of Plate & Pitchfork.** *Below:* **Andrew Stout, co-owner of the Seattle area's Full Circle Farm, delivers organic produce to grocery stores, restaurants and consumers.**

RITZY RYCIAK

organic methods but do not seek formal certification because they feel it isn't worth the hassle or cost, since the conversion to a certified-organic farm takes a minimum of three years, including the application, inspection, and transition of production processes, with inspections required thereafter in order to get recertified annually. The main reason for the three-year period for initial certification is to ensure that no prohibited substances have recently been used on the land.

Others avidly seek certification because it opens vast new markets. With major grocery chains embracing organics, and customers paying price premiums sometimes as much as double the cost of an equivalent nonorganic product, what used to be considered quaint is now seen as common sense.

Certification is booming, says Margaret Scoles, executive director of the Independent Organic Inspectors Association in Broadus, Montana. The association comprises inspectors that work for organic certifiers in the United States and abroad, including agencies the USDA has approved to provide "USDA Organic" certification.

Scoles says it was a different story when she started in her profession 20 years ago. "I took a half-day workshop and was in business. Back then, the issue for inspectors was finding enough work. Now, the issue is finding time for all the work."

IOIA now has more than 300 members and conducts training workshops in locales as diverse as Ecuador and Ohio. "We can hardly keep up with the demand," Scoles says.

Although Oregon vintner Susan Sokol Blosser recognizes the tedious and expensive aspects of becoming USDA Organic–certified, she believes it is worth it. She's president of Sokol Blosser Winery, founded in 1971 near Portland, which raised grapes using traditional agricultural methods until about a decade ago. Now the winery's 80-acre estate vineyard is organic, and Sokol Blosser says the process has brought a new understanding of the art of growing.

"We've always thought of ourselves as good to the earth, but how we define that has changed over the years," she says. "The old way was, 'Feed the plant, not the soil.' The organic approach is to feed the soil, which is part of a larger system that includes the plant. So, where I used to send our soil out for chemical analysis, now we test for microbial activity."

Sokol Blosser Winery produces about 60,000 cases of wine a year, with its signature grape the

The Organic West

Here are just a few examples of the diversity and growing popularity of organics in the western United States and Canada.

In January, Santa Barbara–based **Fifibear's Brasserie** was launched by Roxanna Bina, a new mother who'd been looking for organic, nutritious meals for her son, Felix, nicknamed "Fifi." When she didn't find anything that suited her, she began making her own baby food from organic ingredients purchased at the Santa Barbara farmers market. She cleans, steams and purées them, adding no preservatives or artificial ingredients, and freezes them immediately to preserve nutrients. She delivers the 4.5-ounce tubs—in varieties suitable for 6- to 18-month-olds—all over the country, including to hotel rooms for parents taking their babies on trips. Her baby food was also a hit in the Golden Globe Awards gift lounge in January.

Portland-based **Harry's Fresh Foods**, which has been in business for 29 years, last year expanded its product line to include organic and natural products, which are sold through stores such as Fred Meyer, Albertsons and Costco. All of the company's products start with fresh Northwest ingredients, which are cooked and hand-stirred in small kettles, then sealed at high temperatures and cooled to lock in freshness, and refrigerated for transport. Harry's Fresh Foods produces organic soups, sauces, stews, entrees, sides and desserts, including organic versions of favorites such as Cheddar-broccoli soup.

Chuck Eggert, founder of Tualatin, Oregon's **Pacific Natural Foods**, which was founded 20 years ago as a soy-milk producer, has became so devoted to the concept of organic food that in addition to the raw ingredients he purchases from local farmers to make the company's soups, broths and gravies; packed tomatoes; and almond, hazelnut, oat and rice dairy-alternative beverages, he wants to grow his ingredients. Over the last seven years he has purchased 700 acres of organic farmland on which he has been producing his own organic vegetables and raising animals in an organic way, without hormones or antibiotics or feed made with animal byproducts. This year Pacific Natural introduced certified-organic packed tomatoes, and also several ready-to-drink certified-organic and Fair Trade Certified iced teas.

Beaverton, Oregon–based **Cooper Mountain Vineyards**, a leader in organic production since 1992, this summer began using some of its organic and biodynamic wine grapes to produce a balsamic vinegar, Apicio, made in the tradition of the vinegar makers in the Modena region of Italy. Biodynamics is an approach to agriculture that strives for the health of the entire farm—and world—ecosystem, according to the Junction City, Oregon–based Biodynamic Farming and Gardening Association. So, for instance, great emphasis is placed on creating healthy soil in which to grow healthy plants, and on having just the right number of animals that can be fed via farm production, to provide just the right amount of manure for the farm's needs.

In February, Hood River, Oregon–based brewer **Henry Weinhard's** introduced its first organic product, Organic Amber Premium Ale, made with certified-organic barley and hops from the Northwest. Combining organic production methods with local and regional ingredients that keep jobs in Oregon, this new ale has met with rave reviews.

Seattle's **Sweet Beauty** uses chocolate from Theo Chocolate to make organic, Fair Trade Certified chocolate spa products such as scrubs and milkbaths, and also offers chocolate face and body treatments.

Seattle-based **Organic To Go**—the country's first USDA-certified-organic fast casual cafe—has grown tremendously since being founded just two years ago. It grew 61 percent in gross sales last year,

and now has 50-plus grab-and-go outlets and 14 retail cafes in Washington and California, including a grab-and-go kiosk at the Los Angeles Airport. It is also making hundreds of lunchbox and catered-meal deliveries a day. Organic To Go went public in February and at the end of June announced that institutional investors had committed $6.7 million in equity. Its products, developed under the leadership of renowned Seattle chef and company Culinary Director Greg Atkinson, include organic preparations of classics such as meatloaf sandwich and Caesar salad, along with seasonal-ingredient salads and microwaveable soups.

Far and Away Adventures in Ketchum-Sun Valley, Idaho, offers all-organic, gourmet food on its luxury river-rafting trips.

The **Island Chefs Collaborative** on Vancouver Island has created a new farm market in downtown Victoria, B.C., to showcase primarily organic fruits and vegetables from local growers. Each week, chefs will attend to provide recipes and cooking tips, and explain some of the more-exotic items.

Oakland-based **Numi Organic Tea**, founded in 1999 by brother and sister Ahmed and Reem Rahim, this year became the No. 1 organic tea in the grocery category, based on sales, according to ACNielsen. And *Inc.* magazine ranked the company No. 24 in the nation for fastest-growing inner-city companies. Numi makes 22 certified-organic teas and teasans (herbal beverage without tea leaves), including four certified-organic iced teas added this year. Seventeen of the teas are also Fair Trade Certified.

Outstanding in the Field, the nine-year-old Santa Cruz, California, organization that stages al fresco feasts on organic farms and orchards, with local ingredients prepared by local chefs, is celebrating its fourth national tour this year, including an August 19 dinner at Vancouver, B.C.'s UBC Farm prepared by David Hawksworth, chef at Vancouver's West restaurant. Other dinners will take place this fall in Sonoma County, Los Angeles and Santa Cruz.

On Thyme Gourmet in Bridger, Montana, sells certified-organic herbs.

Nature's Path Foods, based in Richmond, B.C., with a large cereal plant in Blaine, Washington, was one of the early proponents of natural, organic foods. They've been the foundation of the company's products since Arran Stephens founded Nature's Path in 1985. Sales have particularly taken off in the last five to 10 years, and today the company believes it is the largest organic whole-grain-foods processor in North America and perhaps the world—exporting to about 46 countries.

"We believe food, organically grown, is better for you and better for the environment," says Stephens. "Chemicals used in synthetic pesticides, herbicides and fungicides can find their way into the soil, water and eventually our bodies. Organic farming practices enrich the soil and improve a farm's biodiversity, resulting in less soil erosion and more drought-resistant farmland."

Pinot Noir, a vine that Sokol Blosser explains needs a lot of hand work under any circumstances.

"We handle the plants 10 times a year, so it's very labor-intensive."

Growing the grapes organically also means ensuring that all "inputs"—such as fertilizers and pesticides—are organic.

Most farmers will readily tell you their choice of profession is based on lifestyle rather than livelihood. Even so, it's been challenging for organic farmers to have their work sometimes disparaged as a hobbyist endeavor insufficient for a substantial enterprise. Andrew Stout and his partner Wendy Munroe are changing that perception, in a big way.

"I've always wanted to feed people—lots of people," Stout says, standing beside a row of radishes in a huge field in the Snoqualmie Valley, east of Seattle. Cottonwoods border hundreds of acres of bottomland loam; a distant tractor working one corner looks toylike.

This is Full Circle Farm—rather, it is one part of Full Circle, as Stout also has more than 100 acres down the road a few miles. The size of his cropland—260 acres all told—impels the size of his business, which is a horizontally and vertically integrated operation with thousands of customers in three states. Full Circle supplies weekly produce boxes—boasting "Don't Panic—It's Organic!"—to about 2,500 subscribers in Washington and Alaska, and more than 50 restaurants call on Stout for vegetables. Big natural grocers such as PCC (Puget Consumer Cooperative) and Whole Foods also buy from him, and several school districts have signed up as customers. Full Circle employs 70 workers and maintains warehouses in Anchorage and Juneau as well as Seattle.

Stout grows 75 varieties of crops, and buys 25 different types from other producers in Washington. He's building a compost facility to use manure from nearby dairies and horse stables. During the farm's summertime production peak, he estimates his operation feeds 15,000 people.

"That's a lot of food," marvels Stout, a former landscaper who began his farm with 3 acres in the mid-1990s.

Just as pleasantly surprised by the burgeoning popularity of organics is MaryJane Butters, a Moscow, Idaho, visionary who started her operation two decades ago. Back then she was considered startlingly unorthodox, not only because she grew organic produce, but also because she set out to create a diverse enterprise. Butters now publishes a magazine; has written two books (one of which has sold 85,000 copies); distributes prepackaged organic foods throughout North America; welcomes guests to her 50-acre farm; and purveys linens and canning supplies as well as carrots and corn. With 70 products all told, and revenues past $1 million annually, she still finds time to sell at the local produce stand in Moscow.

"I spent 20 years on my knees in my farm, begging people to support quality organic products at slightly higher prices," Butters says. "Now I've got Costco and REI coming to me, and their customers don't blink an eye at the organic price premium."

Instead of having food-box subscribers, Butters has signed up 20 local families to pay a membership fee to visit the farm, tucked within rolling foothills, whenever they want, and pick whatever's available.

"Before or after they do the picking, they can lie in the hammock or play in the pond," Butters says. "Everybody has farm fantasies, you know."

Erika Polmar and Emily Berreth's Portland-based enterprise, Plate & Pitchfork, calls on those same pastoral impulses for its busi-

ness. Each summer, approximately 1,200 guests—about 100 per night—attend dinners at nearby farms. Twenty-four chefs—a team of two per meal—cook the dozen or so dinners, which sell out within days of their announcement online. The dinners are based on foods grown at the farm and nearby. This is P&P's fifth season.

"It's become one of the hallmarks of summer here," says Polmar. "We call it 'edutainment'—it's fun, but our mission is to reconnect people with their food source. Our diners get a tour of the farm, hear the grower explain how the food is grown, and then sit down to dinner. They may be eating a fresh tomato 20 feet from the plant from which it was picked."

Some, but not all, of P&P's growers are certified organic, but virtually all grow organically, illustrating the pragmatic divide that has appeared in the industry.

Mike Paine of Gaining Ground Farm in Yamhill, Oregon, who hosts a P&P dinner every year, cultivates 211 varieties of 42 different crops (his favorite is heirloom tomatoes) on 10 acres of his 76-acre farm. Much of the rest of his land is forested or returning to forest land, or is used for raising livestock. Though he grows organically, he's not certified because he doesn't believe it is a worthwhile investment of time or money.

"I sell directly to all my customers, either at the market or to my subscribers," he says. "They know my growing methods. Being certified wouldn't gain us anything."

In addition to hosting the dinner, he has 70 food-box subscribers, sells at Portland's Saturday Farmers Market, and supplies three restaurants. His wife works off the farm to bring in outside income, largely because of the cost to buy their land in 2003, but Paine envisions a day when the farm will support the family entirely.

There are 25 Portland-area farms that provide food boxes to subscribers, an enterprise known as CSA ("community-supported agriculture"). Paine says demand far outstrips supply. "If all of us were at top production, we'd only meet 10 percent of the potential market. We all have to turn people away at the end of the season."

That sort of demand spurs growers such as Paine to bring interns onto their farms. One of Paine's colleagues, Shari Raider—owner of 10-acre Sauvie Island Organics, which she founded in 1993—conducts a formal apprenticeship program in which three students spend 17 months learning the business. The program starts in May, with their first summer devoted to the nitty-gritty of farming: weeding, irrigation, trellising. Winters bring classes in horticulture. The next summer they move up to assistant-manager positions such as running the greenhouse.

Raider's farm was certified organic from 1993 to 1999, but she dropped the certification for reasons similar to Paine's.

"Customer-grower relationships are what count now. We all do this because we're passionate about growing sustainable, good food," says Raider. That passion generates more demand than she can satisfy for apprenticeships: about 25 applicants a year for the three new positions.

Like Paine, Raider not only participates in a CSA enterprise but also supplies area restaurants. Local chefs are often among the earliest and most avid supporters of local farmers who are growing organically.

"Every spring I start buying from local farmers once the salad greens are harvestable," says Christopher Israel at Portland's hot new 23Hoyt. "There's no question an organically grown raw vegetable is better than a conventional one. It's purer. The flavor is better."

Maria Hines—named one of *Food & Wine*'s top 10 "Best New Chefs" in the country in 2005—serves 95 percent certified-organic food at her Seattle restaurant, Tilth, which she opened in 2006. The restaurant focuses on local, organic produce, meats, eggs and cheeses, creating dishes ranging from heirloom-tomato salad with tarragon cream and balsamic vinegar to seared Alaskan halibut with fennel and nicoise olives.

Other restaurants that are not USDA Organic–certified often still use organic, natural, local ingredients. When Seattle's Kerry Sear opened his Cascadia restaurant in 1999, he endeavored to serve only sustainably grown local foods, and he still does so—within reason.

"I used to be more adamant about things. We aimed for 99 percent local—should we serve lemons?" Sear recalls. Now he heads over to Pike Place Market for many of his ingredients, still aiming to buy from local growers, but not devoutly. His original certified-organic-beef supplier recently hiked prices to $48 a pound for cuts of steak. By not restricting himself to only organic products, Sears can procure for more reasonable prices foods such as grass- and grain-fed beef that has been raised with an emphasis on sustainability.

Today he likes to buy from local producers 90 percent of the time, and still acquires organically grown foodstuffs as

What the Labels Mean

Below are "organic" definitions, courtesy of Oregon Tilth, an organic-certification organization.

100% Organic: All organic ingredients. Any processing aids used must be organic. No nonorganic ingredients are used. Must list certification by one of the nearly 100 USDA-licensed "certifying agents," such as Oregon Tilth. These certifying agents generally contract work out to inspectors with the Independent Organic Inspectors Association. Can use the "USDA Organic" seal.

Organic: At least 95 percent organic ingredients. Remaining 5 percent can be nonorganic allowed ingredients. All agricultural ingredients must be organic unless not available. Must list certifying agent. Can use the "USDA Organic" seal.

Editor's note: The USDA is taking comments until August 27 on an "interim final rule" allowing 38 nonorganic ingredients—from food coloring and "bulking agents" to hot-dog casings and fish oil—to be used in certified-organic-labeled foods. Although producers can use nonorganic ingredients only if organic ingredients aren't commercially available, what "commercially available" means may be subject to interpretation.

Made with Organic Ingredients: At least 70 percent organic ingredients. Not allowed to use the "USDA Organic" seal.

Products with less than 70 percent organic ingredients: Can mention "organic" only in ingredients listings. Cannot use the "USDA Organic" seal.

"**Sustainable**" does not mean the same thing as "organic," although the two practices may go hand-in-hand.

According to a 1990 U.S. law, the term "sustainable agriculture" means "an integrated system of plant- and animal-production practices having a site-specific application that will, over the long term: satisfy human food and fiber needs; enhance environmental quality and the natural resource base upon which the agricultural economy depends; make the most efficient use of nonrenewable resources and on-farm resources and integrate, where appropriate, natural biological cycles and controls; sustain the economic viability of farm operations; and enhance the quality of life for farmers and society as a whole."

much as possible. But not unfailingly. "Business sense had to prevail," says Sear, who grew up on an English dairy farm now occupied by a soft-drink bottling plant.

The famous Sooke Harbour House on Vancouver Island, B.C., straddles a similar line. Co-owner Frederique Philip, who grew up in France, was stunned to find there were no local-growers markets when she and her husband, Sinclair, arrived on the island in 1979. So they began their own organic garden, and the grounds at the inn are certified organic.

However, several of Philip's local produce suppliers are not certified. "I'm more interested that it be local. I don't like my food to travel," says Philip, summarizing the philosophy of a movement that is a first cousin to organics: local food. Thus, Sooke Harbour House relies on about 15 local suppliers, some certified, others not.

One Northwest supplier dedicated to all-certified-organic produce is Ronny Bell, who began his direct-to-consumer organic-food-delivery service, Pioneer Organics, in Seattle by working from the back of his Subaru wagon in 1996.

"My focus is quality, locality, availability, variety," Bell says.

Today, he has 60 employees and a new warehouse in south Seattle, and serves 6,500 customers in Seattle and Portland. Pioneer Organics' food boxes, delivered weekly or biweekly, range from $26 to $52; customers place orders online.

Some of Bell's produce comes from Full Circle Farm, and both he and Andrew Stout express amazement at the success they've found. The cloud of mainstream disdain that once dimmed the organic industry's prospects has dissipated like an overnight mist.

Now the sun shines equally on Andrew Stout's Snoqualmie Valley farm and on organic agriculture as a whole. In the distance, Mount Si buttresses the Cascades; Mount Rainier peeks through a tall brace of cottonwoods to the south.

"This is my office," says Stout, grinning. "This is my day, and thanks to the growing popularity of organics, it's a pretty good day." ■

Eric Lucas is a Seattle writer.

For more information about the growth of the organics industry as well as a comprehensive look at where our food comes from, a popular resource is The Omnivore's Dilemma *by Michael Pollan.*