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Harvest of Survival

Pick-it-yourself fruit is a fun way to get in touch with the land, and, for small Brentwood farms, a necessary tactic to stay afloat.

By John Birdsall

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The road to East Contra Costa County's summer U-pick orchards cuts through a manmade landscape of the formerly bucolic to end in a very precarious paradise. Between vast clusters of stucco mansionettes, the chain restaurants and big-box retailers keep their distance from one another, bulky presences on swaths of paved cropland. Once you reach the Highway 4 bypass, there's a whiff of farmland to come, and before long you're in a human-scale landscape of windbreaks with shiny leaves, the odd farm stand with its leaning plywood sign advertising corn or nectarines, and everywhere around you the charms of semineglect. Welcome to agrotourism, with the added flavor of keeping farming viable in the midst of an exploding exurb. Welcome to Brentwood U-pick country.



Apricot grower Tony Gliedt and family.

It's the frenzied first Saturday in June, one week after the official U-pick season kickoff. In places, the two-lane roads that crisscross the twenty-square-mile region of pick-'em-yourself summer stone fruits are snarls of SUVs and family minivans, slowed by the occasional open hauler heaped with apple-green ears of local corn. At the popular U-pick farms closest to Highway 4, parking-lot attendants flag traffic through orange cones into dirt lots. It feels more than a little like the vortex of activity swirling around a Saturday afternoon high school football game. And yet, says a woman fighting to preserve what's left of Brentwood's fields and orchards from development, U-pick mania might just be the best way to save the best of the East Bay's remaining farmland.

"People crave a connection with place," says Kathryn Lyddan, executive director of the Brentwood Agricultural Land Trust, a nonprofit that seeks to secure easements of agricultural property in eastern Contra Costa County. "The more people who get that connection, the more likely we'll keep that access to local food."

At Brentwood's Pease Ranch, a widely scattered crowd of several dozen may be seeking connection, but the more immediate task is filling white plastic buckets with mostly Bing cherries. The evenly spaced trees are green and shaggy, with lopped-off tops that concentrate clusters of dark-red fruit on long, spiky branches.

"It's very beautiful," says Ichizo Tsujino of Menlo Park, dropping plump fruit into his bucket as his wife and toddler daughters examine something in a thick tangle of weeds nearby. He gestures to indicate the thirty acres of orchard, with its glimpse of Mount Diablo's cornflower-blue backside just beyond the trees. The Tsujinos are U-pick first-timers — until two years ago they lived in Sapporo, Japan.

In the forty years since it started, the nature of Brentwood's U-pick business has changed with the Bay Area's demographics. Nowadays some farmers reckon that as many as 80 percent of their U-pick customers are of East Asian and South Asian origin, just like the Tsujinos. "We've never seen a big ranch," Ichizo Tsujino says, smiling under his broad-brimmed bucket hat.

But as California farms go, this one is tiny. And for the agriculturally tiny — farms like Pease Ranch that exist

by selling a mix of visitor-picked and farm-picked produce — U-pick tourism is a survival strategy.

"It's definitely an easy way for a niche farmer to sell what he grows on a small piece of property," says Ken Hagan, a farmer and president of Harvest Time, a marketing organization of more than forty Brentwood-area U-picks. The organization publishes a trail map, a glossy foldout with rundowns of member farms, and a numbering system designed to make it easy to find a particular grower in the chaos of cherry kickoff weekend. "It's a model that works because of where we're located," he says. He's referring to the relatively short drive from Berkeley — it's the length of, say, a couple of *Dora the Explorer* episodes playing to the backseat of a Honda Odyssey.

But an influx of casual daytrippers — folks out for scenery, a few pounds of fruit, and the chance to get a little orchard dust on their shoes — has created a dilemma for at least one farmer. Cathy Wolfe thinks the casual agrotourist has made things more challenging. "It would be great if everyone bought volume," says the 29-year-old part-owner of Wolfe Ranch. The Brentwood farm grows apricots for wholesalers; its U-pick crops are primarily peaches, including heirloom varieties such as Fay Elbertas, expected to ripen in late July. "We used to see a lot of the older generation coming to buy cases to can and preserve and put up for the winter," she says. "Nowadays the current customer is looking for entertainment. For me that's frustrating, because I'm trying to sell fruit." If Wolfe sounds peeved, it's only because small farming is such a tenuous proposition.

Some growers fight the chronic tenuousness by diversifying. Tony Gliedt, owner of Gliedt Family Farm a few miles northeast of Brentwood, works as a general contractor and cabinetmaker, but keeps ten acres of U-pick apricot trees that he says are organic, although not certified. The apricots are mostly Pattersons, plus a few trees of small, syrupy Blenheims and a couple of Moorparks, and should be fully ripening right about now. Like other small growers, the farmer turned contractor sees organic certification as a knot of regulations and fees. In the past it's kept him from applying for formal certification, though Gliedt says he's downloaded the application from the USDA Web site and expects official green designation by next season. "I like eatin' something that's not full of chemicals," he says. "I can go to the supermarket for that."

U-pick at Gliedt Family Farm is by appointment only, and Gliedt appreciates 24 hours' notice. But for U-pick junkies, a little advance planning is a small price to pay for a hands-on relationship with their food. "People can come out here and have their minds blown at how special it is when you pick food off a tree," says BALT's Kathryn Lyddan. "You start to build a political base of people who understand you need to have farmland surrounding an urban area."

Farmer Wolfe is more interested in volume than politics. "Buy a lot when you come out," she says with a mock-scolding tone that suggests she's sort of joking, but mostly not. A farm's survival, after all, isn't exactly something to joke about.