

News Publications

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Local Farms: Local farms for local food

Oakland Tribune, Apr 24, 2009 by Tom Powers

For the next several months, we'll be running a monthly column from the Brentwood Agricultural Land Trust about our farming and ranching families and businesses in the East Bay.

THE LOCAL FOOD and farming movement is gaining momentum. Every day we become more aware of how important local farms are to our health and our community.

When we eat locally, our food tastes better and is more nutritious. By shortening the distance our food travels from the farmers' fields to our plates, we reduce the carbon footprint of our food and increase the knowledge about the safety of the fruits and vegetables that we feed our families.

Purchasing locally grown food keeps our food dollars in our own community and supports local farmers. People are looking for local food that is healthy, safe and delicious.

Here in Contra Costa County, we are fortunate to live where we can still enjoy fresh, healthy fruits and vegetables grown close to home. While most people in Contra Costa live in cities, we all live within 40 miles of the farms east of Mount Diablo.

The rich delta soils, ample water and year-round growing season make Brentwood one of the most productive food producing regions in the world. Contra Costa farmers have grown food for the Bay Area since the Gold Rush -- from wheat in the 1850s to the famous Brentwood sweet corn, peaches and cherries that we enjoy today.

For generations, Bay Area families have traveled to Brentwood each summer to pick fruit at the u-pick farms.

While Brentwood has welcomed many new residents in the past decade, East Contra Costa County still boasts 12,000 acres of prime agricultural core lands with beautiful orchards, vineyards and fields.

As the weather warms and the days lengthen, Brentwood farmers are gearing up for the busy summer season. By mid-May, the cherries will begin ripening and the "Harvest Time" u-pick farms will be ready for families from all around to visit and pick cherries, apricots and peaches.

The famous Brentwood sweet corn is knee high now and will be coming out of the fields by early June.

All summer and fall, we'll enjoy a cornucopia of fresh, delicious fruits and vegetables from local farms.

In addition to the agricultural core around Brentwood, Contra Costa County has much more farm and ranch lands from the east to west parts of the county and up and down the center from north to south.

Grazing land for cattle, sheep and goats extends from Mount Diablo in all directions. While we often don't think of it, the hills behind Richmond, Pinole, Hercules, Rodeo, Crockett, Martinez, Lafayette, Orinda and Moraga contain a vast amount of open space and range lands set aside by the Board of Supervisors and seven cities in the Briones Agricultural Preserve Agreement.

These lands contain some of the largest cattle, sheep and grazing areas in the Bay Area. They are home to some excellent grass-fed animals, primarily beef.

Contra Costa County also has a growing wine grape and olive oil industry.

Several small vineyards and olive groves dot the Alhambra Valley and the foothills of Mount Diablo, near Walnut Creek. There are some medium-size grape and olive farms around Brentwood, Oakley and Byron as well.

Since the Board of Supervisors established standards for wineries and olive mills, winery permits have been issued for Brentwood, Byron and Alhambra Valley and several more winery permits are in the process.

In 2008, many Contra Costa wines won significant recognition in a Bay Area wine competition with Napa and Sonoma wines.

In 2007 several growers formed the Contra Costa Wine Grape and Olive Growers Association, now going strong with more than 45 members. You never know. Perhaps in a few years, Contra Costa will be the wine powerhouse it was before the Volstead Act (Prohibition 1919-1933), when Martinez alone had more than 20 wineries.

Join us each month at the "Local Farms" column to follow the farm seasons, meet local farmers, find out what's coming out of the fields and learn about farming today on the urban edge of Contra Costa County.

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