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Jack L. Debenedetti, Jr., Brussels Sprouts and Artichoke Growing on the North Coast

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Authors

Debenedetti, Jack L., Jr.
Jarrell, Randall
Regional History Project, UCSC Library

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INTRODUCTION

The Regional History Project conducted three interviews with Jack L. Debenedetti, Jr., the late vegetable grower/shipper in May, 1977, as part of its agricultural oral history series. This volume, *Jack L. Debenedetti, Jr., Brussels Sprouts and Artichoke Growing on the North Coast*, is published posthumously. Debenedetti died June 12, 1992.

These interviews are a significant contribution to the history of local agriculture because they include so much detailed information from a grower's point of view on two specialty crops predominant in Santa Cruz due to our unique soil and weather conditions. Also important in Debenedetti's recollections are the role of Italian-Americans in the development of these crops and his perspective on the grower/shipper as a businessman, rather than as a working-in-the-field farmer.

Debenedetti was born in 1908 in San Mateo, California, to a well-established Italian-American family, the son of John L. and Rose F. (Cuneo) Debenedetti. He attended school in San Mateo, graduated from UC Berkeley in 1932, and attended a year of law school at Stanford University. He married Jane Hanson in 1933 and joined his father as a partner in the J. L. Debenedetti Company, growers and shippers of vegetables under the brand name "Fog Kist." From the

1930s on, the Debenedetti Company leased and owned ranches totaling about a thousand acres in coastal San Mateo County and Santa Cruz County, additional acreages in other areas in the state, and from their packing houses shipped vegetables all over the country.

His paternal grandparents, Joseph Debenedetti and Teresa (Scarpa) Debenedetti, settled in Half Moon Bay in the late 1870s. Joseph Debenedetti had grocery and mercantile stores in this area and extensive coastal land holdings as well. The interviewee's father, John Debenedetti, was born in Half Moon Bay in 1880, and in the early 1920s gave up his business interests in banking and merchandising to devote himself exclusively to the development of the artichoke industry. He became known as the "Artichoke King," established the Half Moon Bay Artichoke Growers Association, and is credited with being the first to introduce the artichoke to East Coast markets.

Jack Debenedetti, Jr., opens his narration with his family's history and land holdings in Half Moon Bay and Pescadero from his grandfather's day in the 1880s until his own retirement in the late 1970s. He discusses how the company expanded from the depression years on, specializing in artichokes and Brussels sprouts on their coastal lands, and growing asparagus, peas, rhubarb, broccoli, and cauliflower in other areas, so that they were harvesting crops throughout the year. They established packing houses in San Mateo, Hayward, Santa Cruz, and Stockton, and financed growers in Kent, Washington, Hollister, and Santa Maria.

Debenedetti provides a detailed overview of coastal agriculture during a half century, describing the varieties of crops grown, characteristics of coastal soils, weather conditions, pest control, capital costs, field labor and the Bracero Program, and the vicissitudes of growing. He gives the history of the Santa Cruz Artichoke and Sprouts Growers Association, of which he was president, and detailed explanations of all aspects of growing artichokes and Brussels sprouts.

In his discussion of Brussels sprouts, he explains how the small cabbage-like vegetable came to be grown here. Unlike warm weather crops, sprouts thrive in

the foggy, cool, windy weather on the central California coast. The plant is also unusual since it has only a single stem, the main stalk, around which the sprouts grow from the bottom at ground level to the top, around 24 inches tall. Sprouts are grown in only a few other areas in this country—in New York state and on the coast in New England. Other sprouts-growing regions include England, Belgium and Holland, where a variety of hybrids have been developed.

Debenedetti discusses the adoption of the Jade variety of Brussel sprouts by most local growers and although in his opinion it was not as flavorful a sprout, and yielded less sprouts per acre (three to five tons per acre as compared to other varieties yielding six to seven tons per acre), it commanded a very good price, was very hardy, and enabled growers to have a single harvest per year. Brussels sprout cultivation begins annually in February, when the seeds are planted in open hotbeds and transplanted to the field in May and every three weeks until late summer. Harvesting takes place at intervals until around January. Debenedetti discusses irrigation, fertilizing practices, plant diseases and insects specific to sprouts, the application of pesticides and inspection and regulation by the local agricultural commissioner. He also describes harvesting, mechanization, packing and shipping, marketing, local acreages, and the introduction of the Brussels Sprouts Marketing Act.

Debenedetti discusses the history of artichoke cultivation in this area, crop propagation, harvesting practices, production costs, packing and shipping, the work of field labor, and the 1936 strike in Pescadero. His narration also includes chapters on the fate of coastal agricultural land, the decline in family farms, and his thoughts on the changes in local agriculture during his years as a shipper/grower.

Twenty years elapsed between Debenedetti's narration and the publication of this volume, and the Project unfortunately did not have the opportunity to have his own editing or comments included in the transcript. The tape-recordings were transcribed verbatim, the transcript edited for clarity and continuity, and the manuscript organized into chapters.

Copies of this manuscript are on deposit in the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; and in Special Collections, McHenry Library, University of California, Santa Cruz. The Project is supported administratively by Alan Ritch, head, Collection Planning, and University Librarian, Allan J. Dyson.

Randall Jarrell

March 28, 1997

Regional History Project

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Family History

Knaster: I want to go as far back as your grandparents and start with them. Where were your grandparents born?

Debenedetti: Well, on my mother's side, Joseph Cuneo was my grandfather. He was born in Genoa, Italy. I have these books that tell exactly when, I'm not sure . . . it goes back to 1830 . . . As a young man he came to the United States and settled on the East Coast. During the Gold Rush days I think he came to California in the early 50's, and settled eventually in Volcano . . . that's up near Jackson, Amador County. He had many mines and I think he had a store there also where the present site of Volcano is now. As a matter of fact, the family still has a mine or two that they retained over the years. When he came to this country, as I understand it, he met his wife, Mary, and I believe her name was also Cuneo, incidentally.

Knaster: Were they related?

Debenedetti: Not related. They were married in California. Through that marriage they had, I think, nine or ten children. After mining and having a store business in Volcano, then he came to San Francisco, and bought extensive interests in properties. He had many properties at that time . . . around the 1906 earthquake and then settled in San Mateo. As far as my father's side, [John L.] DEbenedetti, he came over as a young man, I think he was fourteen or fifteen or sixteen, with a pack on his back. He used to sell trinkets and various things along the coastside of San Mateo County, and the California coast. From that beginning he married, later was in the store business in the Half Moon Bay and the Pescadero area, and had ranching interests and was quite aggressive. He

later became a supervisor in San Mateo County and married Teresa Scarpa, whose parents had come from Italy, also from around Genoa, Italy. My grandmother was born around 1852 at Mission Dolores in San Francisco.

Knaster: Your grandfather, [John L.] DEbenedetti was also from Genoa?

Debenedetti: He was from Genoa.

Knaster: Do you know why they came to the United States at that time?

Debenedetti: Well, of course this was the promised land at that time and it was a dream of both of them to come over—more opportunities here. They were very ambitious young men, and other than that I've never heard it expressed why they really did come over. I think it was just for opportunity.

Knaster: Did the rest of your family come over afterwards or were they the only ones?

Debenedetti: I think the Cuneo side of the family . . . I think there were other [branches] of the family that did come over at that time, possibly from Italy, because I know they had the Cuneo side brothers and sisters . . . I remember my aunts and grand-aunts, and I remember seeing them as a child.

Knaster: Did you know what they were involved in in Italy? Genoa's not exactly a farming community.

Debenedetti: No, Cuneo on my mother's side was from a small village outside of Genoa, and of course they came over as very young men, so I don't think they were active in anything, other than being with their parents and probably having the dream to come to America. I don't know what their parents did, to be honest with you.

Knaster: Do you know why your grandfather went to Half Moon Bay, in California?

Debenedetti: Well, in Half Moon Bay, at that time as I understand it, there was a great deal of activity along the coast, more than there was in the interior of California. A lot of the agriculture products were shipped directly on the boats off the coast, rather than by rail. I guess there wasn't any rail, really, cross country. San Mateo County was in its infancy, and people just seemed to settle along the coast at the beginning.

Knaster: Did your grandfather ever go into any farming in Santa Cruz county?

Debenedetti: He had interests in farms with others and he bought several ranches along the coast. I know he had a few ranches in the Half Moon Bay area. Cuneo didn't go in to the ranching business. He was in investments in San Francisco, real estate investments in mining. He was with one of the founders of Columbia Savings and Loan in San Francisco, and then went to a large stockholder in San Mateo, the First National Bank of San Mateo, which, incidentally was about the second branch of the Bank of Italy at that time, which later became the Bank of America.

Knaster: The ranches that you mentioned, what crops were grown?

Debenedetti: I think there was grain grown there—barley and wheat, and potatoes were grown on the coast in the early days. Vegetables came later. About 1920 was really when they got their start; that was when they brought in the artichoke, and together with potatoes, beans, dried beans and things of that kind, I think that's what was grown then. Later on they tried Brussels sprouts; there was a very small acreage of Brussels sprouts about 1920. That was more or

less experimental. They found that it was quite profitable, and so then expanded to the present day when there's a good five thousand acres of Brussels sprouts along the coast.

Knaster: Do you know who introduced Brussels sprouts?

Debenedetti: On a ranch my father had an interest in with Mr. Joseph Delmora in Pescadero, I know I've heard of ten or fifteen acres, that must have been prior to 1920. Perhaps that was the start of it. When I came in we were growing approximately nine hundred to a thousand acres at that time, which was quite a few sprouts.

Knaster: That is quite a few sprouts. Where was your father born?

Debenedetti: He was born in San Mateo County on January 14, 1880. Here's his picture. [Debenedetti has a book on his family] Unfortunately I don't look like him. (Laughter) I think he's a very fine looking man.

Knaster: Yes, he is. Was he born on a ranch or was he born in town?

Debenedetti: My father and grandfather never did actually live on a ranch. They had ranches in the area that they farmed together with other people, or acreages that they rented out. He was in the store business; he had two stores, one in Pescadero, and one in Half Moon Bay. So they lived in the house which is on Main Street in Half Moon Bay. The building is still there.

Knaster: Is it presently occupied?

Debenedetti: Yes. I'm not sure where they lived originally, but to my recollection they lived on what is known as the Debenedetti block in Half Moon

Bay. You can see it on Main Street. The home was above the store; it was a very large apartment-type home which was on the second floor.

Knaster: That was common practice in those days, to live above your store. Did he go to school there? Was there a school?

Debenedetti: My father went to local school in Half Moon Bay, and then he went to Santa Clara University, and graduated from Santa Clara; then went to work for *The San Francisco Call-Bulletin*. I think after that he went into the dry goods business. He had a store in South San Francisco and a branch in San Bruno at that time. I was born in South San Francisco.

Half Moon Bay Growers Association

Debenedetti: Then he sold his stores and I think he was asked at that time by some vegetable growers in the Half Moon Bay area if he would manage their association, or they wanted to form one. So he formed the Half Moon Bay Growers Association, and managed that for a short time. Then they expanded. They started growing artichokes, or artichokes had been started at that time. It was pretty much centered around the Half Moon Bay area. Then gradually they extended it down the coast into south San Mateo County, into Santa Cruz County and eventually into the Monterey area. Of course that has been the most successful because of the soil conditions. Much of it is river bottom and much heavier ground, which is more adapted to the growing of that crop.

Knaster: Well, it is interesting that your family didn't have a background in agriculture.

Debenedetti: Yes, that's right. As a young man out of Santa Clara University. But I guess he saw possibilities in it. There were many, many immigrants from

Italy coming over to this country at that time and settling. A lot of them settled along the coast. I know he was very helpful in getting them established at that time. Matter of fact, he was given the Cavalier's Cross, which I think is equivalent to knighthood or something, by the King of Italy. That was back in the '20s, for being helpful to the Italians who came to this country.

Debenedetti and Artichoke Growing in the 1930s

Debenedetti: So he was a very dedicated and capable individual. So he helped them and at the same time they helped him along the road. After the Half Moon Bay [Growers] Association expanded, it became the United Artichoke Growers Association and that developed in two counties—Santa Cruz and Monterey. Then about 1930 he gave up those associations and went on his own and started growing quite extensively along the coast. I was with him about 1933, after graduating from the University of California, Berkeley.

Knaster: So up until 1931 he hadn't actually maintained his own acreage?

Debenedetti: No, he had interests in ranches with other growers, but they did the growing. But he was the manager of the associations and distributors and developed markets throughout the East and even changed the containers, which may be interesting. Back in the early days the artichokes were shipped in boxes so large you wouldn't believe it. It took two men to lift them. They were four by two feet. They were shipped to the local markets.

Knaster: Was there any reason for their being so large?

Debenedetti: Well, it was probably the saving on boxes, and they could be re-used, and after they were sold probably loose in San Francisco. Of course then they developed a smaller box which was equivalent to the apple box. I think that

was standardized as the shipping box to the East Coast. My father was responsible for the development of that container and also expanding the markets throughout the East coast.

Knaster: Was there a difference in the packing between those two boxes?

Debenedetti: There was no packing at all. They were put in bulk in this large container, and just lifted on trucks and brought to the local markets.

Knaster: Were they individually wrapped in that case or in layers?

Debenedetti: They were just layered in a dozen count, through 48, which indicates the number of artichokes in the box. The larger the size, the lower the count. They shipped in that box and the thing that always puzzled me was the fact that they had a ballish pack at that time, which because of the high iron content, I guess the artichoke would bruise a great deal. But still, that box was standardized and people went with it until the sixties, when the corrugated fiber box was introduced. Now you don't have the bruising perhaps. So that's an advancement of the packaging aspect of it.

Knaster: Are they still put in layers now?

Debenedetti: Yes. Only now instead of making what we knew as the full box I think all you have now is just that one box which is the equivalent of a half a box in the early days.

Debenedetti Family History (continued)

Knaster: I see. Well, I'd like to hear a little about your own life. You said you were born in 1908.

Debenedetti: I was a child of the Depression. I was born in 1908. Father was successful. We moved to San Mateo on Elm Street. I went to San Mateo High School, graduated in 1927. I went to grammar school in San Mateo. Then I went to the University of California at Berkeley. I met my lovely wife there, and she was living at Pasadena at the time. After I graduated, I went to Stanford Law School for a year. My father was taking care of all my expenses, fortunately.

Knaster: Was this during the Depression?

Debenedetti: Yes. I remember we became very serious, Mrs. Debenedetti and I. I went to the dean of men and I told him that I thought I would leave school and that I'd decided to get married. He said, "Well, it's a tough world out there, and if you think it's best." My father said, "Well, if that's the case, of course, you'll have to get to work." So that's when I started working, and we were married in 1933.

Jack Debenedetti Joins His Father in Business

Debenedetti: Then I went into business with my father. He had many real estate interests. The Depression didn't hit us until a little bit later. I guess people started moving back to the farms and maybe there was more produce grown, but people had moved into the urban area and perhaps there were less people on farms. We didn't suffer until a little bit later. Of course all these demands of property taxes and things of that kind made it a little difficult. So that's pretty much it. When I went with my father, we expanded the business and were growing, as I say, close to nine hundred or a thousand acres on the coast . . .

Knaster: Was that all in San Mateo County?

Debenedetti: Yes.

Knaster: That was in Brussels sprouts or artichokes?

Debenedetti: That was in artichokes and Brussels sprouts. It was more lucrative to grow Brussels sprouts. Artichokes was a good bread-and-butter crop; but we went into Brussels sprouts and established our own outlets and then expanded into other vegetables. We had packing sheds in San Mateo; Hayward; Santa Cruz; Kent, Washington; Stockton, California—we used to go to various crops, everything from asparagus to Brussels sprouts. We used to finance growers in various areas, in Santa Maria, Hollister . . . So we were pretty busy there for a number of years. Then when World War II came along, I was about 32 at the time, and had two children. We were growing extensively.

Knaster: Did you not have to go into the army?

Debenedetti: I didn't go into the service, no. I think my classification was 3A or something.

I was thinking primarily of the labor supply.

Bracero Program During World War II

Debenedetti: The Bracero Program was introduced and we were one of the first to recruit from Mexico, and had as high as two hundred men come in. That kept on for a good many years, although we did have quite a few Filipinos at that time, and they were excellent workers. After the Philippines got their independence, why they didn't seem to come over as much. The quota, I guess they weren't allowed to come over as . . .

Knaster: I think they were limited to 50 a year.

Debenedetti: That's right. So, unfortunately we had to find a new source of labor, and we were very short during the war. We had school children out trying to harvest Brussels sprouts and other things.

Knaster: Did you have women working for you too?

Debenedetti: We had everyone. It was a real, real hassle. We were about ready to give up, but then the Bracero Program came in and saved us, really.

Knaster: Do you think you were instrumental in getting that program initiated?

Debenedetti: Well, in a way we could have, because we were a fairly large user at that time, and it was necessary. We were quite active and I know we voiced our concern.

Current Labor Problems

Knaster: Did you work with any governmental agency?

Debenedetti: Of course we worked with the federal government, the Department of Labor. Of course I don't want to bring this up, but there is a problem now with labor. It's very controversial, whether or not it should be brought in again.

Knaster: What is your feeling on that?

Debenedetti: My feeling is, very honestly, that if there's labor in this country that's available, it should certainly be used. I've found in the last few years that you can't blame the people that don't want to work. I know this has been argued, and as long as we see unemployment figures we think they're available, but they're really not in numbers that were adequate to take care of the demand.

Perhaps a program where they could bring in a limited number at certain times of the year to this country if they're really necessary legally. I think you'd have a lot less illegal citizens in this country that's probably going to drain your economy. So I really think that there should be something worked out. Because they're coming over anyway.

Knaster: Do you think there's an insufficient number of field laborers right now?

Thoughts on Unions and Farm Labor

Debenedetti: As I say, there's an awful lot of people, and I'd tried certain ethnic groups. We tried them even when they were required, when we had the Bracero Program. There are a certain number of people that you or I may think are available in the labor supply but they won't work. They won't work on the ranch, and they won't do this menial labor. The Chicano people deserve lots of credit, and they're out there working and harvesting our crops. Other than that it seems to me that the American people don't want that . . . but I don't want to get into deeply, because it involves my thinking . . .

Knaster: Well, that's fine. I'm interested in hearing your opinions about it, because as a grower you were very concerned with the labor supply.

Debenedetti: If it wasn't such a political thing and all sides really faced up to the situation . . . I know there're certain labor unions that don't want them to come in because it would destroy their whole power and their pressure. And I can understand that.

Knaster: Do you mean the U.F.W. [United Farm Workers]?

Debenedetti: I'm talking about Chavez's union or the Teamsters or anyone else that's involved in agriculture. It's a power struggle and I think the farmers' position should be acknowledged. It shouldn't be a matter of political feeling. There's a need . . . There's times when the farmer makes lots of money; there's many times when he loses lots of money. He's dealing with the elements. If he doesn't have the adequate labor at a price he can afford to pay, why we're not going to eat very cheaply in this country. You're going to destroy the agriculture set-up.

You know the bottleneck, it seems to me, in the wage structure with the farm people, or the farm workers . . . the bottleneck in this whole thing is the people between the farmer and the consumer. There's so many people that get an extra bite out of the consumer's dollar. When you go down, the farmer's the low man on the totem pole, and inasmuch in most cases you're dealing with a perishable—he gets what's left. He can't store; he can't build up; he can't do anything else. He has to depend on the daily market, outside of maybe the frozen industry.

If he could get more, for his price he'd be happy to pass it on to his workers. But when you're dealing with a perishable crop, like we have for many years, and you don't know what you're going to get for it, increases come, and everything else. We have no protection against the market or against, maybe processing. It's a very hazardous business.

Knaster: Do you see any other way of dealing with these products other than through a middleman? Do you recommend any other system for marketing?

Debenedetti: There're ways that have been tried. Why, we've dealt directly with the chain stores. You eliminate some of those in-between, but gradually you get

so dependent upon them and you grow for one or two sources, and those sources dry up or they change, go to someone else. Why then what happens? Then you've lost all your connections and it's not good.

Knaster: Have you considered yourself a farmer?

Debenedetti: I don't think you necessarily have to be out there everyday on a tractor to be a farmer. I have worked on a tractor. I have helped harvest my product. As I've gotten older, why I've been less active. I think anyone who is the entrepreneur in the business and puts his money up and owns the ranches and hires the men and does everything but the actual physical labor, I think he's a farmer.

Knaster: I want to backtrack a little bit. I was curious whether when you went to the University of California you studied the agricultural sciences?

Debenedetti: No, very honestly, I never intended to go into the farming business. I wanted to become, or my father wanted me, to become an attorney, and I was for that. As a matter of fact I took political science and then went on to Stanford Law School. That was the intent, but the Depression came along and we decided to get married. I had to go out and work for a living. Support my family.

Knaster: Yes. I can understand that.

Debenedetti: But I've enjoyed it, although possibly other things I would have enjoyed more, and I'm frank in saying that.

Knaster: What other things do you think you would have enjoyed more?

The Vicissitudes of Farming

Debenedetti: Well, perhaps the investment world, banking, or something like that. Because farming is not an easy life whether you're out on a tractor or not. To me that's the best part of it. When you're sitting out in the fields and you see it rain. I was thinking how hazardous it is. Back three or four years ago during certain rain storms, we would have two or three inches. You could lose your crop, because this soil along the coast is very shallow. It has a clay base and saturates the soil and if it stays there for a number of days in that condition, why you can very well lose your crop. So farming is very hazardous. You don't just put in a crop and know you're going to harvest it. Many things can happen to it—insect damages—so it's very difficult. Of course every package that goes out, especially if it's processed and frozen, has got to be free from insects, insect damage, and that puts an additional burden on the farmer, where he's got to spray every fifteen days, and then we catch the devil from people who say that we shouldn't put spray on it; but if it does have insects you can't sell it, so we're caught in between, and it's a difficult situation.

Knaster: I was curious. You said, when it rains a lot and the soil gets saturated, that destroys the crop. Is that because the water remains in the soil and it rots the roots?

Debenedetti: If you have excessive moisture for any length of time, it sours the root and kills the plant. It's like overwatering a house plant. The same thing will happen.

Coastal Soil Conditions

Knaster: When the soil has a clay base there's no run-off?

Debenedetti: Yes, and many of the heavier soils are found in San Mateo County, Santa Cruz County, and in Monterey County. But in Monterey County, where Brussels sprouts are grown, they're pretty much on the sandy hills; they have better drainage, so the loss from rain is not as great down there. However the crops are not quite as heavy and they're not quite as large as they would be in heavier soils. There's quite a variation in the soils along this coast. There's some excellent soils in Half Moon Bay. There's some poor soils in San Mateo. Most of it is over a shallow layer of good soil. The under-soil is pretty much clay and water doesn't penetrate well. But that is pretty much the same all the way up and down the coast.

The thing that disturbs me is that on this land every year the same crops are grown; you have to keep it up otherwise you can't survive economically. These crops have to be grown, and usually that's the only crop that's adaptable to this area, so they grow Brussels sprouts year after year after year. Well, in earlier times, before the sprinkler was really brought in, much of that soil was eroded in the ocean and the feeling is now all of this ground along the coast is irreplaceable, and maybe it is. But there's really a feeling that there's no soil like it, that it's prime soil—it really isn't. It's not the best soil in the country.

BRUSSELS SPROUTS

Plant Diseases and the Development of Hybrid Brussels Sprouts

Debenedetti: Most of this soil, especially in San Mateo County has a virus embedded in it. It's a club root that attacks Brussels sprouts plants, usually all cruciferas; it's a root disease. It kills your plants. In order to combat that, the University of California and others have come up with the treatment to combat it. Whereas before you didn't have to spend any money in preparation of your

ground, now they have to spend close to a hundred dollars an acre just to be able to grow a crop.

Knaster: How long has that been?

Debenedetti: Well, it started in the Colma area of San Mateo County and through using the plants from that area to others, and equipment from one ranch to another it has spread this club root pretty much to the coast. Now you have ranches as far south as Watsonville . . . Here and there you'll notice the problem. It's been gradually increasing since 1950. It's a very costly thing. You have that and you've got the nematode now, and you've got shallow conditions and that's the reason, perhaps, that the industry has gone to hybrid plants. There were developed hybrid Brussels sprouts, seed that was developed in Japan. So that you have a one-harvest operation, also to cope with our labor shortage. This is a one-harvest plant that can be harvested mechanically. Instead of picking the sprout eight or nine times by hand, now of course these hybrid varieties are being developed where we can control the development of the sprouts on the plants so that they all mature at the same time and can be mechanically harvested. Of course, that's what happened in the last ten or fifteen years, certain strippers have been developed and harvesting machines have been developed to cut down on labor and to strip the Brussels sprouts off the stalk. By doing that we've been able not only to save labor but to shorten the harvest period. Usually varieties mature in ninety to a hundred and twenty days. Most of the Brussels sprouts grown now are harvested prior to November and the heavy rains. So, the industry's somewhat adapted to the condition.

Knaster: How many different varieties of Brussels sprouts are there?

Debenedetti: Well, there's many different varieties of sprouts. But the old hand varieties are out. They're not being used any more, and every year they develop new varieties, but the old stand-by and the one-harvest is the Jade varieties.

Knaster: What are the advantages or disadvantages of the various varieties?

Debenedetti: The advantage is that it grows in a shorter number of days. So your cost involved in growing is not as great. If the other varieties take maybe a hundred and fifty days, why you have spraying, more fertilizer and everything else.

Knaster: Do you see a difference in the quality between a sprout that's grown in ninety days and one that's grown in a hundred and twenty days.

Debenedetti: Well, I think we taste a difference in the sprouts today, as against the sprouts we used to grow several years ago—the hand-picked varieties were a lot tastier and more tender. These newer ones have a tendency to be more bitter and fibrous. But there's nothing on the market any better. I guess it doesn't make any difference, does it? Of course that's the only taste we know.

Knaster: Well, I personally notice the difference in taste. Maybe not in Brussels sprouts but in tomatoes. Tomatoes just don't taste good unless I pick them off the vine myself.

Debenedetti: Yes. And the old beefsteak tomatoes—they're delicious. Now you have the Pierce and the machine-harvest varieties, they're not near . . .

Knaster: You said there were four varieties of Jade?

Debenedetti: There are three or four different strains of Jade, of the hybrid. There are also the acceptable varieties that've been developed around

Amsterdam and they seem to be very good. I think they're a little higher in yields and a little larger in sprouts, and perhaps a little better in taste. But they take a little longer to grow. But they're coming up with new varieties all the time, but that doesn't mean they're any better. The old standbys are the Jade variety of the Japanese and maybe the Linnets, and that's pretty much the standby of the other varieties.

Knaster: Do you remember when the change-over was made from the original variety to new kinds?

The Economics of Growing Brussels Sprouts

Debenedetti: Well, I don't know the exact year, but the when the Japanese came out with the new hybrid, of course that changed the whole picture. And the one-harvest was uppermost. That was in the early '60s. Of course that was what they were all looking for, to get the crops to be one harvest where you could adapt it to mechanical harvesting. Also to have a shorter growing period and that revolutionized the whole Brussels sprouts industry.

Knaster: If you have a shorter growing period and you harvest all your Brussels sprouts at one time, what happens to the Brussels sprouts for the market? How are they maintained fresh? Or are most put into frozen packages?

Debenedetti: Well, that's right. I would say that eighty to eighty-five percent of the Brussels sprouts grown in California are processed, frozen foods. I don't believe there's any more canning of Brussels sprouts, but I know there's frozen.

Knaster: Was the percentage always that high?

Debenedetti: No, they had built up the fresh market, always had the fresh market. Gradually it's been going downhill. Because in order to get the same price—we need a certain price to make it economically sound to grow Brussels sprouts. That is set pretty much by the price the freezers give us. We can see, maybe a small profit, or basically some profit, when we contract with the freezers for the Brussels sprouts. That pretty much establishes a market. Now if the market is sixteen cents a pound, and to get the equivalent in money you have to put down into a package and you have to package it, and you have to ice it, and you have to ship it to the eastern cities and you have to pay all the expenses involved in that and all the commissions involved and everything else. The cost of a fresh product back there is probably a lot more than they could go to a store for and get the frozen product. Because we can't get any more money than we can for a frozen product, why we go into the frozen package. One exception may be locally where the fresh competes pretty well with the frozen. I think there's more grown in cups and small container packages to the public in California on the west coast.

Knaster: I personally noticed that Brussels sprouts were around for a very short time this last year. I used to think they would be here much longer and I remember having them for dinner only a few times.

Debenedetti: Yes. Well, you can remember they're always on the frozen shelves. The yield was short last year. It was down last year. Perhaps that's one reason why you didn't see as many.

Knaster: Is that because of the drought?

Debenedetti: I don't know whether it was because of the drought. I would say it's the way the weather was. It was conducive to a faster growing plant, for

some reason we had problems with our growings and the bolting of the plants, so it all reflected in a lower yield.

Knaster: What are the optimum weather conditions for growing the sprouts?

Debenedetti: Well, it's known as a cold crop. They do better in a milder, not a hot climate. You have adequate water, adequate fertilizer, not excessive rains, cooler weather is better too, probably less insect damage and less costs. Pretty much the climate we have around here, or around the coastside. I suppose the best growing area of sprouts, considering everything, would be from Santa Cruz, possibly to Davenport.

Knaster: Are there any other parts of California where sprouts are grown beside these three counties?

Debenedetti: Brussels sprouts have been tried all up and down the coast. They've been tried north of San Francisco, but the rains were excessive then. It wasn't too successful. I know we went up and looked into that country. It's pretty much stayed from Monterey County north to San Francisco. I know sprouts have been tried in the Salinas Valley. Close to a half section of land that I grew out of Chualar, experimented with. It was a very interesting experiment. Very hazardous. (Laughter) Grew great plants but unfortunately I wasn't a native of that area and it gets pretty hot, you need lots of water, but we grew a good quality sprout. But they're not going to grow sprouts in that area when they can grow lettuce and other things a lot more profitable. Brussels sprouts are a very expensive crop to grow. There was in excess of fifteen hundred dollars an acre to put in an acre of Brussels sprouts, believe it or not.

Knaster: What accounts for that high cost?

Debenedetti: Well, besides rents, you have insecticide expense, which is very high, and you've got to keep the insects out.

Knaster: What are the insects associated with Brussels sprouts?

Debenedetti: You get a cabbage worm, serphid fly worm; aphid, of course, is the most important. So that has to be taken care of. Then you've got fertilizer, and you have to put in close to a ton of fertilizer. It depends on what ground you grow it in. Then you have labor. Labor is very high. There's an awful lot of labor involved. Your crop is usually planted in April, May. You don't harvest until August, September. You've got to irrigate anywhere from a week apart to the sandy soils and maybe two or three weeks to the heavier grounds. So you've got a constant outflow of money. Your equipment costs are getting higher every day. There are [studies] made by the University of California which would indicate that they're well over fifteen hundred dollars an acre to grow and harvest.

Knaster: That's quite a bit. Well, how many tons of Brussels sprouts would you get out of that acre?

Debenedetti: That varies also on the year, on the variety, on the soil that you're growing it on. Anywhere from last year, there's been some disastrous yields, went down to three or four ton to the acre, which is under your cost, and sometimes you've had some excellent yields would go up to seven ton or better. Jade varieties hang pretty much around an average of five tons to the acre, four and a half, five and half tons to the acre.

Knaster: How many tons would the acre have to yield in order to make it profitable?

Debenedetti: Well, of course it depends on your price now. The price has been raised a little bit this year, but I don't know if it's going to take care of added costs. There are studies made by the University of California that figure you've got to come out pretty close to five and a half tons just to break even.

Knaster: Just to break even?

Debenedetti: Just to break even. Unless you have a secret way of keeping costs down. But around five tons to the acre is pretty much the breaking point. And I say, these Jade varieties last year were poor. But some years maybe they'll average five to six tons, and you may have other varieties that get a little bit higher and make up the difference. But the margin is very, very close.

Knaster: Has the yield changed over the years? Since when you first got into business until now, has there been a greater yield per acre, or a lower yield?

Debenedetti: No, I think that we've been having poorer yields generally, because before we used to hand pick them. It was less loss. We would pick the bottom of the plant and then as they developed up, then we wouldn't have the decay, we wouldn't have the sprouts sitting there for a longer time clustered together. So you didn't have the insect problem. You would pick off the problem spouts. Gradually there was less loss. Now with the one harvest varieties, there's more chance to lose, to have spouts that are not usable by the freezer.

Knaster: Well then why would you have the one-harvest variety? I understand that it brings down field costs, but if you would be getting more of a profit from having the other variety, then wouldn't that balance out somehow?

Debenedetti: No, you asked me about yields, and yields were up on those, but it also entailed a great deal more labor. I think I mentioned a while back where we

had up to two hundred men harvesting. Well, to do the same job even on that I could use seventy-five men. The labor's the big factor . . . When you were growing those varieties, most of the money spent on labor was for harvesting. You need large crews to do handpicking every plant. Now you go down with a machine, and you can take three or four rows at a time. Of course when you look back there's no more plant. But everything on those plants've been harvested. With maybe six men on a harvester. So when you add up the labor and the time spent in the field—and those varieties probably took five months to grow—and you were fighting them, the elements and everything else for seven months on that same plant, six or seven months. Why, you can see why the cost build-up is much greater.

Knaster: You started the Brussels sprouts growing up on the south San Mateo coast?

Debenedetti: Right.

Knaster: Why did you move to Santa Cruz County?

Debenedetti: Well, we still own a ranch in San Mateo County on Purisma creek and it's a lovely ranch but . . . That's a good question, I moved to Santa Cruz, I'm not as young as I used to be, and I don't want to travel 150 miles a day, like I used to do every day to take care of my farm and ranch interests. Just got tired. Then I bought a ranch near Watsonville, close to 1950.

Knaster: Up until then you were only in San Mateo?

Debenedetti: Oh, I mean as far as *owning* a ranch. We leased and farmed almost every ranch farmable in San Mateo County. Then I moved down to Santa Cruz. Of course we're operating a packing shed in Santa Cruz. That was from the '30s

to 1975. So it's been a long stretch. The soils in the Pescadero area where we did a lot of farming were very shallow and very hazardous, and we had rental problems and labor is more difficult to get up in the remote areas of Pescadero or Half Moon Bay, where there's more a nucleus of labor down here and perhaps that was the reason.

Knaster: Have you felt good about the change from San Mateo to Santa Cruz? Personally and businesswise?

Debenedetti: Well, it makes sense, because you're closer to the market. You are closer to the activities. I think it's a little more pleasant place to live than on the coast side.

Knaster: Has your acreage changed over the years? You mentioned that your father had started with something like nine hundred to a thousand acres . . .

Debenedetti: He was the manager of the associations until about 1931 so we pretty much started together. I was with him in '32 or '33. When I wasn't at school, I was interested. At one time both he and I together had nine hundred to a thousand acres of Brussels sprouts and that began in the thirties. That's after he gave up managing other people's . . . or investing in ranches which he handled himself in the association.

Knaster: Did you expand after that?

Debenedetti: Well, we expanded in the sense that we went to other areas. We had peas that we were financing or growing with other growers in the Hollister area, a good thousand, fifteen hundred acres in the San Jose area. We had a packing shed there. We financed growers near Kent, Washington. We purchased from asparagus growers around the Stockton, Union Island, Steward Tract and

that country and packed there. We brought broccoli from the coast, we brought peas. There were acreages of peas grown in San Mateo County on the hills in springtime. We used to send hundred of carloads of peas out into our San Mateo and San Leandro packing sheds. We had a packing shed in San Leandro where we had managers and had everything from rhubarb to cauliflower. So we had a pretty varied business, and we had many packing sheds going. But specifically our growing was restricted to Brussels sprouts on this coast and peas around the San Jose and Hollister area. So we were busy every month of the year.

Knaster: Well, did you maintain those interests or did you drop them along the way?

Debenedetti: I maintained them. Even after my father passed away I maintained them and went into two or three other deals.

Growing Sprouts in Texas

Debenedetti: Even in Texas in 1950 we grew Brussels sprouts. It was an experiment. Of course at that time 65% of every dollar we spent went to labor. Of course, the labor was dirt cheap in Texas in the '50s. Mexicans would go across the border and work all day and go back at night, great savings in labor, that was the place to be. I had heard from a receiver that we had commissioned, a man in Philadelphia, that there was a carload of Brussels sprouts that'd come from the state of Texas. We knew approximately where the area was, but if you've ever been in Texas you know there's millions of acres. Oh there's land for the taking. Thousands and thousands of acres to be developed. Anyway, we went down there and it was between LePrier, Texas and Uvaldie, Texas, it was Uvaldie, Texas and San Antonio. We figured it was in there someplace. Well, as I

say, with millions of acres between Uvalildie and San Antonio we looked over the side road, here was eight acres of Brussels sprouts. Eight acres . . .

Knaster: Eight acres.

Debenedetti: In the whole state of Texas!

Knaster: (Laughter)

Debenedetti: And we spotted it. How fortunate can you be?

Knaster: Oh. (Laughter)

Debenedetti: Well, they looked great, only they had let the plants sit there for a month or so. They waited until all the sprouts were matured, then they'd pick it. And it's funny, they didn't go to seed, those sprouts. So we were enchanted with it. Of course they were filled with bugs. They hadn't sprayed them or anything else, but it looked like they could be grown there. So, we investigated and tried to get something where it was a little cooler and closer to the border. We weren't able at the last minute to get land so we went and bought this acreage in LePrier, Texas where the sprouts, because we knew they would grow there. We had that ranch and then we rented another ranch in Uvalidie, where old John Nance Gardner, the former vice-president under Roosevelt, was living and owned half the town practically. So we farmed there and then also made an arrangement with Dr. Weeks in Eagle Pass, Texas, who was in the frozen food business. So we had a pretty good set-up.

Well the crops were grown, they were all coming fine, only we had to plant in September instead of May, because it was pretty hot down there. So we grew and everything was going along fine, and a norther came in. We had the only

Brussels sprouts in the United States, believe it or not. In 1950, California had drowned out. We were in business in California, but we were drowned out here, and everybody else was. We had the only Brussels sprouts in the United States and we would have made a killing. Well, after about a week of harvesting, a norther came. And if you know anything about a norther coming into Texas . . . I didn't know anything about it. The next day went down to five above zero. It stayed there for seventy-two hours. So there we were, practically out of business. But we could have had a fortune on our hands. We had about eight hundred acres of sprouts, and the only sprouts in the United States, and we were dictating our own prices and . . . anyway, that was my experience in Texas. So we decided to pull out.

Knaster: When I hear stories like that . . . It reminds me what someone once told me, how he likened farming to gambling. He said, "It's worse than going to Las Vegas."

Debenedetti: Oh, there's no doubt about it. I gamble every day. I've always gambled all my life and still I wouldn't go to Las Vegas and put twenty dollars on a crap table . . . It's a funny way of gambling. Oh, it's just a terrible gamble.

Knaster: What are some of the risks that you've taken? How do you try to protect yourself against those risks?

Debenedetti: Well, I guess we look back in weather patterns over the years and things like that. We take our chances knowingly. Of course, the pattern isn't the same every year, but it's pretty much the same. As far as the market's concerned, we try to become aware of the amount of acreage that's going in by other growers and things of that kind, and we've always done that. We've tried

to improve our marketing connections, so that we can be competitive. We've been very fortunate in the past. So that's pretty much what you look for.

Santa Cruz Artichoke and Sprouts Growers Association

Knaster: Do you think that growers getting together minimize the kind of risks that you take?

Debenedetti: No, I have belonged now, since I stopped running my own company; six or seven years ago I joined the Santa Cruz Artichoke and Sprout Growers Association. I have been a member there. The only reason I did that is a matter of convenience. I didn't want to have my own organization. But it doesn't help as far as your growing risk. Or anything else. It's just that you're together in a non-profit situation and you have your manager and everything else, and it's a lot less demanding of you. So now you just grow instead of doing everything. There's no way that it helps you, other than maybe it minimizes your costs. Maybe there is a little saving in your marketing, when you don't have to go out and market through someone else.

Knaster: Does the association function as a marketing agent?

Debenedetti: Yes, that's right. It's a non-profit co-op. It has its merits. I think that was probably the most stabilizing influence in the Brussels sprouts business. We have very little control. You're dealing in a perishable. And unfortunately, when eighty-five percent of your sprouts are processed, before you can make any arrangements, say marketing of those sprouts, or committed price from the processors, you've already got your seed in the ground, you've already got your land, in any area where you are committed to grow one crop, so you put it in

and then you take what comes. And unfortunately we're at a disadvantage there. There's a great amount of risk.

Brussels Sprouts Marketing Act

Debenedetti: Because of that situation and because when you have surpluses you don't get a price, we did have a Brussels Sprouts Marketing Act through the state of California, and it's allowed us to determine what amount of sprouts should be processed. It was supervised and overseen, and we had state personnel, from their department of enforcement that sat in every meeting. So we weren't able to establish any monopoly or any curtailing of the needs of the country. Of course we had the processors looking over our shoulder all the time to make sure that they got enough supplies. So the supplies were kept in balance. Whatever the country needed, or whatever the Brussels sprouts industry or processors needed, they got, and we consulted with them, and we had quotas. By doing that, naturally, we in essence, had a very tight control, when you're only dealing with five or six thousand acres in the United States. You have ninety-five percent of all the sprouts, why you control pretty much the industry. But it was a small organization with good judgment that made the supplies liberal enough—we didn't demand big prices or anything else, we just wanted to curtail the supplies so at least we could get something to survive on. That went on for many years.

Knaster: This act that you mentioned. When was that put into effect?

Debenedetti: I should know because I was probably the prime instigator of it.

Knaster: Did you have someone lobby for it?

Debenedetti: Well, I discussed it with Dr. Braun, the head of that department in the state of California.

Knaster: The department of agriculture?

Debenedetti: Yes. We promoted it and brought it to a head. Then we had to have a vote of all of the growers along the coast. They were very skeptical of us at first, but I felt it was the only salvation, in all honesty. We had a hearing down here, and it was accepted, and we did it. It was our salvation.

Knaster: Was this in the fifties or the sixties?

Debenedetti: No, this was up until about six years ago. The processors were not necessarily for it and I can understand it, because they wanted to be independent, they didn't want anybody to distribute what they should get. You know we curtailed free enterprise to a certain extent in that case. So they prevailed upon some of the growers that they didn't need it, and it was abandoned. They voted it out. Fortunately since then the costs have been so great and I think the acreage is down instead of up and some of us are getting disenchanted with it, or getting tired of the whole thing, and possibly getting out of it. I know I don't grow over a hundred acres now, or a hundred and twenty-five acres, when I used to grow nine hundred. Land is getting scarce to grow the crop and cost is great and the potential is not as great. Anyway, it's going to keep pretty much in balance, I would think. Because there're not too many people interested in growing it any more.

The Fate of Coastal Agricultural Land

Knaster: Well, if you're down to a hundred and twenty acres, and you had nine hundred . . .

Debenedetti: I leased two ranches out that I formerly grew on, and now I am doing it pretty much as an expensive hobby.

Knaster: Well, what did that land go to, then? Did someone else take over with Brussels sprouts, or did it become another crop?

Debenedetti: No, it is the same crop, Brussels sprouts. I leased my ranch in Half Moon Bay. I just had two at Purisima Creek and we leased that to a group of farmers. And then I leased this to a Brussels sprout grower in the one I had near Watsonville . . .

Knaster: I was curious because if acreage goes down, I wonder what are those acres going into? Are they being developed for housing or are they being developed for another crop? Are less Brussels sprouts being produced?

Debenedetti: Well, no. Obviously they are going into other crops. Of course there's a great amount of acreage in the Pescadero area and in San Mateo County; several thousand acres were formerly in Brussels sprouts that are not farmed now. It's not farmed now because it's not the best ground. Water is a factor, there's no question about it. It's, as I say, remote. It's a little more difficult to get labor, the camp facilities are not perhaps adequate, and nobody wants to go down and pioneer again, the soil is shallow . . . well, that's pretty much it. So, what're they going to do with that land? I wonder. The fields are too small to be really economically feasible to grow lettuce, since they grow hundreds of acres and they do everything mechanically, you know, it's a concern.

Knaster: Do you think it will go into real estate?

Debenedetti: Well, of course there we get into another pretty tough area . . . I'm biased, naturally, because I have two ranches right on the ocean. I have one a

mile frontage and San Mateo county is four miles from Half Moon Bay, only a mile away from the present development of Westinghouse, and I bought this investment, and now I can't develop it. I can't develop it, I've been down-zoned, and, as a matter of fact, because of local resistance they can't even sell it for parks. So what do you do with ground? Just pay your taxes and let people look at it. Get what little revenue I can off of it, which isn't enough to sustain the properties. So, these are the problems that I have, naturally, and then it would probably prejudice my thinking. But I think many people along the coast have the same problem. I think it should possibly be retained for the public. But I don't think it should be retained by private capital to sustain it for the public. I think they should be publicly owned. You know, if they don't want it developed, what's a man to do with it? I think the public's obligation is to take it away from him and give him a reasonable value for his property. 'Cause that's why we bought it, is to develop it. When you look ahead, there's only so much ocean frontage. And it has great potential. Anyway, that's been a very sore point in my mind. Maybe it's because I've been so close to it. But this is getting away from the . . .

Knaster: Not really, because we're interested in learning what the trends are in the area in terms of what's happening to agricultural land. Is it going into housing? You've been here for a long time.

Debenedetti: Yes.

Knaster: Have you seen a decrease in agriculture acreage toward other uses?

Debenedetti: Go up the coast to San Francisco. There's a small acreage that was sacrificed, there's no question, in the San Pedro Valley, and there's Pacifica that's there now. Before there was nothing. Maybe there's developed a hundred and

fifty, two hundred acres. Then you go into the Princeton area, and there has been some encroachment, but some of that farming was right in the urban area anyway. Then it was destined to go out. When you go along the coast toward Half Moon Bay from Princeton—I don't know if you're familiar with this coast. But naturally, there's some people that get together and there's a certain amount of more development. There has been a tract or two in there. South of Half Moon Bay, there's a development now, I think a very beautiful development, Westinghouse, or Half Moon Bay's properties. It's changed hands two or three times, but Westinghouse is the primary developer. He has a beautiful development down there . . . a golf course, and condominiums. I don't know if you've ever seen it coming along there. Just south of Half Moon Bay. Beautiful area.

Knaster: Yes, I'm sure. I've been through there many times. I must have passed it.

Debenedetti: That's really enhanced the area, I think, aesthetically. That land was very marginal ground, and probably grew some dry crops in there. When you get further south, there's no development at all from there . . . my ranch and on the Purisima Creek is in farming. It's nothing from there until you get into the San Gregorio Valley and you have back in there . . . naturally, as people become urbanized more they don't sustain themselves on a small farm anymore. You know how it is. I think it's a matter of development, not necessarily the fact that development has gone in, but the thinking of people is different. They want to get away from the farm, and they want to get jobs that are perhaps easier, in urban areas. So then you get into the Pescadero area—outside of a few homes on the beach, there's no development. Nothing until you get to Santa Cruz. It's all been pretty much the same. So I can't see where there's

been any destroying of the coast. Most of that ground is not the top ground. It'll probably be declared prime because they want to retain it. But it's not prime, prime ground. I think I know ground well in my experience over forty years.

Early Growers

Debenedetti: The Tambellini brothers were around the Davenport area a little bit later. The Mungai are also quite prominent around here. There's several Mungais. That was around 1925, I think. One of the Mungai's, one of the nephews, is a city councilman here in Santa Cruz. I know one of the sons of the old Tambellini was Albert Mungai, who was manager of our artichoke and sprout growers association.

Knaster: You think Rovei was the first artichoke grower?

Debenedetti: Well, he was one of the first. Louis Poletti, who was Swiss-Italian, I think he was the manager of the artichoke growers when my father was general manager in San Francisco. Mr. Poletti was manager and Fred Pfyffer at that time had come over probably from Switzerland and was bookkeeper at the time. Then my father became inactive, or when we went on our own, did our own farming, I think that Mr. Poletti took over some growers and handled their accounts in Davenport. Then Fred Pfyffer branched out on his own and was quite successful, and is still operating in Santa Cruz, as a matter of fact, mostly in Brussels sprouts. So I got some of that information from Mr. Pfyffer who was bookkeeper years ago with the United Artichoke Growers.

Knaster: It's interesting that many of the names are Italian. Do you think there's any reason for that? Were Italians growing Brussels sprouts and artichokes in

Italy? Why is it that a whole group of Italians got involved in this particular crop?

Debenedetti: Well, of course they immigrated to this country from Italy. A lot of them ended up on the coastside. Some of their relatives were in the area. As I think I indicated before, most of them settled in the Half Moon Bay area . . . Of course, some of these names like Pfyffer, or maybe Rovei, may have been Swiss-Italians who came here originally and started the dairy industry along the coast . . . and were very active, like the Swiss dairies in Davenport still have vast holdings there. So some of them actually are Swiss-Italians, not straight Italians. But a lot of the Italians started most of the artichoke industry, from the north part of San Mateo County and sort of migrated into Monterey County.

Knaster: I was really curious about that, how it seems that certain ethnic groups sometimes get involved with a particular crop?

Debenedetti: Well artichokes are grown in France and Italy. Many Italians here came from the central part of Italy, from Tuscany, probably, and I guess they had been farming and came over and with acquaintances started here.

Capital Costs

Knaster: Well, I have a bunch of questions. Starting with, going into this kind of business in the twenties and thirties, what kind of capital requirements were necessary in order to get a business going, in terms of a figure today in order to start a farming business? It's agribusiness, and you really need a lot of capital . . .

Debenedetti: That's right.

Knaster: . . . heavy equipment. Could you talk a little bit about the differences between starting in the business then and now?

Debenedetti: Well, I think I mentioned that at one time in the thirties when I became somewhat active, I don't think we spent—we were nine hundred acres of sprouts and some artichokes and other things—I don't think we spent more than fifty, sixty thousand dollars to raise that kind of crop. Today it costs in excess of maybe fifteen hundred dollars an acre. We're talking almost a million dollar crop. So, I'm sure financing would be much greater. We used to buy a D-4 tractor for twenty-seven, twenty-eight hundred, and now they're about twenty-five or thirty thousand. The costs have multiplied. Labor in those days was maybe forty-five cents an hour, thirty-five, forty cents an hour. Today we're paying, I suppose with the insurance and everything else, in excess of three dollars an hour. That in itself, when you think that labor makes up quite a bit of the costs of this crop, why perhaps that's an explanation.

Knaster: Was it easier to get credit in those years than it is now?

Debenedetti: No, it was much more difficult in those days. I think it was a lot more difficult. 'Course in the thirties we were still in the depression years and real estate wasn't particularly of any great value in financing, because it wasn't liquid and the banks were very difficult to borrow from in those days, actually. Certain people had lines of credit and had been successful. And, of course interest rates were down, it was all relative. They would pay five or six percent increase in those days. And now it would be, nine, ten?

Knaster: Well, at least. Yes. Was the market fairly wide open in those days, or was it pretty competitive?

Debenedetti: That's a hard question, really. It was wide open, there's no question about it. It was open to anyone, and I think artichokes and sprouts were comparatively new crops. It was a question of providing markets and expanding the market for them, and I think that's what my father did. Going into the eastern markets with new packages, new ideas and more forceful salesmanship. For instance, I'll bet there isn't sixty percent of the people in the United States who know what an artichoke is. I've sent artichokes into Terre Haute, Indiana, not over fifteen years ago, someone asked me to do it for them. I got a letter thanking me for the beautiful table decoration. There are a lot of people that don't know what artichokes are. So, there's still a potential market for artichokes, I think.

Decline in Family Farms

Knaster: Was there a lot of competition in terms of the number of growers, as compared to today?

Debenedetti: Well, actually, there may be less.

Knaster: Less competition then or now?

Debenedetti: I mean less growers, numbers. I think that the agricultural industry is stretched out into the Salinas Valley and the east, and Arizona and other areas. Before it was more restricted to California, I'd say. We even grow in Texas and Florida. You have produce every day of the year. I think then we were trying to hit certain seasons. It was common in those days for farms of twenty-five, thirty, forty, fifty acres to sustain a family. Today of course you could never survive with that kind of acreage.

Knaster: So you've actually seen the acreage per farm increase . . . and the number of farms decrease. Farming in the past, used to be a fairly viable way of earning your living for just a family and it no longer is?

Debenedetti: Well, think of it this way, it's hard work. A small acreage cannot sustain a family. It means more involvement of financing, more equipment and everything else. So you may be right, it may not be easy to sustain yourself. On the other hand, I think that young people don't want that kind of life anymore. They don't want to get up at six in the morning; they don't want to have the worries. They've seen what their parents are probably going through, and the same people migrated more to the urban areas.

Knaster: I think in general that's true. There is a small percentage of young people who go back to the land, not necessarily as a total way of living, a total way of earning a living, but as a life style.

Debenedetti: Well, I think it's very appealing when you think of growing your own crops and everything else. But it may be a dream, a fantasy for a lot of them. They don't really end up there. Don't you think so? I think they outgrow it.

Knaster: Probably for many it's true, because it's a hard way. I don't know if I could do it. I would *try*, but I don't know. I don't know the first thing about it.

Debenedetti: Well, you'd have to learn like anyone else.

Knaster: Yeah.

Debenedetti: Like I've always wanted a cattle ranch, all my life. I wanted wide open spaces, and horses and everything else. But I never came around to it, it

was just a fantasy of mine. We have had horses, but usually on maybe fifty acres and . . . I don't know. It sounds great, but in practice it's pretty hard.

Knaster: Yes, I'm sure. Well, we talked about how few acreages there were in Brussels sprouts around 1920, and how that increased by about 1930. Why do think Brussels sprouts had such a slow start?

Debenedetti: Well, I think it was a new vegetable, new to the public. In a way it's always been a luxury vegetable, because per pound it costs quite a bit. Even though we don't get a great deal of money for the Brussels sprouts. I've even forgotten this year, but it's around seventeen cents a pound or something like that, and that's after deductions and things like that, and still if you go to a store, you're talking about eighteen cents a pound, or something in a frozen package . . . the same product. I was listening to the *Today Show* this morning and was shown the relative prices, the prices the farmers get in relation to what the consumer pays . . . and you'd be amazed at how small a percentage of it goes to the farmer . . . That's probably the bottleneck. I think that's why farming has got to be so big, you talk about agribusiness. They're probably going to survive in the end because they're so well financed, they could take a bad year, they go very good when their volume is so terrific. It doesn't take much percentage or profit to sustain them while the little farmer's going to have it difficult; he can't always survive a really bad year.

Knaster: Do you see the possibility of agriculture reversing itself? From agribusiness back to smaller farms?

Debenedetti: I can't conceive of it . . . But again I say that they can operate a lot more . . . not necessarily efficient or knowledgeable, but they're so much better financed to take care of the bad years, against the others. I think that's the whole

concept of America's business. You've got to be big to survive today. I think small in anything is pretty tough to be unless it's specialty crops.

Knaster: So it's easier, actually, to run a large operation and more likely to get credit from a bank, and to survive than someone who's in a smaller operation?

Debenedetti: Well, I would think so, because usually . . . you talk about agribusiness, I think they're usually part of conglomerates and seem to have unlimited finances . . . But if a small farmer has a couple of bad years it usually takes all of his cash and his chance of getting credit is limited, I think.

Knaster: You mentioned before some of the people who were also in Brussels sprouts at the time . . . some of the other growers. Are those people still in Brussels sprouts, or has the number of growers decreased, and have they gone to other crops, or just dropped out of the business?

Debenedetti: Well, a lot of them have gone out, the old farmers that I've mentioned. Some of the new generation has taken over from the older generations . . . and gone. There's several farmers in this area where their fathers before them have been. The families have been around for quite a number of years. I don't know, you get in a rut, I guess, you farm Brussels sprouts and some of the families . . . that's all they know and they keep on doing it. So there're a lot of the offspring of the old growers that are still growing. But their number has decreased. I remember when we had our marketing program there was no more than thirty-five growers in the total Brussels sprouts California growing industry.

Knaster: When was this?

Debenedetti: I think I mentioned in the last interview the Brussels sprout marketing act . . . program we had . . . It was a grower organization, sponsored and policed by the state and developed by all of the growers in California. What we did, of course, was to determine the amount of Brussels sprouts that would be frozen. Until about three years ago we had the Brussels sprout marketing program . . . and then we voted it out. The growers did. But at that time I think that there were no more than thirty-five growing units for the entire state of California. At that time the state of California grew possibly ninety percent of the Brussels sprouts in the United States. Developed about fifty-five hundred acres is all.

Knaster: That's not very much.

Debenedetti: But it's enough to supply the United States. Course, that's about all they consume.

Brussels Sprouts Acreage

Knaster: Is there any international exportation of Brussels sprouts?

Debenedetti: Exportation? There's probably very, very little. I don't think there's any exportation. I think there was a few drabs of imported Brussels sprouts that came from other areas.

There's some grown in the state of New York, and possibly still are. There were some grown in the Northwest . . . Oregon and Washington. Canada grows quite a few Brussels sprouts. There's so many Brussels sprouts where they originated, in Belgium and in the British Isles. When I was there I was told it was something like fifty-five hundred acres of Brussels sprouts in the British Isles alone. So just

imagine the consumption per capita that they have there. They even imported into Europe, on top of the fifty-five thousand acres that they grow.

Knaster: You said that there weren't that many acres in the United States.

Debenedetti: Fifty-five *hundred* in Great Britain. And we have two hundred and twenty million people and they have . . .

Knaster: A lot less.

Debenedetti: So, if we could only have . . . if they would only consume as many Brussels sprouts in the United States as they do in the British Isles, why . . . we'd be all right. We'd have a terrific market.

Knaster: Has there ever been a campaign on the part of the growers to interest the public in eating more Brussels sprouts?

Debenedetti: The Brussels sprouts industry has no advertising program. But when we did have our marketing program, we did advertise the product. When we abandoned the marketing program we abandoned our advertising also. We didn't spend very much and I don't know how effective it was, but we did try to get out to the public. The artichoke industry is still sustaining their advertising program. I can remember that artichokes were advertised by my father in New York City where they used to have fry kitchens. They used to set up a store back there and fry artichokes and give them to the public and hand out literature and everything else. That was back in the '20s.

Knaster: French-fried artichokes.

Debenedetti: French-fried artichokes, right.

Knaster: What were your markets back in those days?

Packing and Shipping

Debenedetti: Where were the markets?

Knaster: Yes.

Debenedetti: The primary markets were the terminal markets, the large, large markets like New York, Chicago . . . all of the larger cities, Philadelphia, of course Baltimore, and later we extended to Detroit and Kansas City where you could take carload vegetables.

Knaster: Were they refrigerated cars in those days?

Debenedetti: Yes. So then, from the terminal markets they were probably trucked to surrounding areas, but because they were only the terminal, the big cities were the only ones who could take a carload of, say, artichokes or Brussels sprouts or a mixed car.

Knaster: How long could they travel without perishing?

Debenedetti: There were two methods of refrigeration; one was called standard refrigeration where it was the railroad's responsibility to re-ice them during transit. Then there was a cheaper method where we would load the cars and just top them with crushed ice . . . the farther they had to go, the longer you thought it was going to be in transit, why the more ice you'd put on it. Occasionally, maybe you'd re-ice them in transit at certain icing stations. They kept an average of ten days by the time they were back to those markets, and were unloaded.

Knaster: Are they still shipped by rail?

Debenedetti: Oh, yes. Some trucks, but I think primarily rail.

Knaster: Are the trucks more for local use, for places in California, or for other states as well?

Debenedetti: Well, I think there's some out of state trucking done. I know there's probably more of it out of the Middle West and the Southwest. I think it's used primarily to get to hit the outer markets, where the rails don't seem to center, or it would take longer to get there by rail and more direct by truck. Of course there's no cartage from the train to the stores, and you go directly to the stores, and the chain stores, I think, have changed the method of distribution pretty much.

Knaster: Have the methods changed at all in terms of transporting them by rail? Is it taking less time; are the cars different?

Debenedetti: I think they're somewhat improved, although it seems to me the refrigerated cars haven't been changed very much. They'd be a little more efficient, but the time element has been cut.

Knaster: I find it interesting that they're still shipped by rail, because I was under the impression that there was a really big changeover, maybe in the '30s or '40s, that a lot of things began to be shipped by truck rather than by rail.

Debenedetti: Oh yes. There's a great amount of shipping by truck, because you can hit smaller and smaller markets in smaller cities. So a great deal of it *is* going by truck. But the carloads going to the terminals are still with train travel.

Knaster: How different are your markets today?

Debenedetti: Al McCary was saying one process plant here in Salinas or Castroville is handling eighteen thousand boxes a day now. It's just a glut on the market, artichokes here.

Knaster: Eighteen thousand boxes a day!

Debenedetti: And that's just one handler of artichokes. So, there's a lot of artichokes . . . want to buy them, this is the time to do it.

Knaster: When the Brussels sprouts were shipped, just before the shipping were they kept in any kind of cold storage, or were they harvested and immediately put on a train?

Debenedetti: Immediately, as soon as possible. That was a big concern. We were farming in Pescadero, for instance, and it was around 1950, the year of some heavy rains. We harvested in Pescadero, of course it was hand harvest in those days. Harvest them and brought them to a packing shed in Pescadero, immediately. They were cleaned there by about fifty or sixty people, went on a conveyer and were iced there. Brought the ice in to Pescadero. Some of those sprouts within twenty minutes after being picked were in the container. They were trucked to San Mateo and Santa Cruz and shipped directly in the refrigerated cars. We found that it was so much better handling them that way. The faster you get them on ice, the better they keep.

Knaster: I am curious because I know they have vacuum storage for apples. I was wondering whether they were doing that also with Brussels sprouts and artichokes?

Debenedetti: Well today it's a little more complicated because eighty-five to ninety percent of the sprouts go into the freezer. After harvesting, in most cases

we deliver them as soon as we have the load for the truck to come into the central marketing place, like Santa Cruz Artichoke Growers or the Pfyffer brothers. Now the processors realize that the faster they get them processed the better. Of course prior to that time when they're brought to the packing house they are run through a compound that keeps them from oxidizing and discoloring. So they go through that process and then go to the processor plants and then as soon as possible they are blanched and frozen. Everyone is aware of the fact, the sooner you put them under refrigeration . . .

Knaster: What is that compound they go through?

Debenedetti: It's some chemical compound, a wash. Sprouts are brought in thousand pound bins and they're run through this pre-cooling conveyor and washer. As I say, the chemicals are added to the wash. It's a preservative that keeps them from oxidizing. Then the water cools off the sprouts since they generate heat pretty fast. It's so small a product, all clustered together, one solid mass, that they build up heat pretty fast. So if you can pre-cool them, it helps.

For Brussels sprouts that are shipped fresh there is a similar process. It goes into the bulk carton for shipment. There's a corrugated box that is about twenty-five pounds or more. They go into the cars and are immediately top-iced and refrigerated there. You're familiar with the quart cups that are hand-filled? They're hand-filled into those containers, usually twelve containers to the package, and it's a ten or twelve ounce package. They are usually put into the ice box or holding room until they're shipped to local markets. So by the next morning they're on the shelf of the Safeway or chain stores. They go into their refrigerated units in the chain stores.

Knaster: When was this process begun?

Debenedetti: Well, we've always followed that pattern somewhat. It's just the idea that the processors realized that they have to get them faster to their processing line. Before we did pretty much the same thing. Back in the late fifties we used to have a pre-cooler arrangement that would pre-cool our sprouts.

Knaster: Did you use the compound then too?

Debenedetti: Well, we used some form of a compound, but this is a new development they have. We use others that are probably similar to a chlorine wash, that inhibited bacterial growth.

Knaster: Was this true in the '20 and '30s and '40s?

Debenedetti: In the 30's we used to wash them occasionally. We were probably the only one that did. Or the first one. We got a couple of pre-coolers that washed the sprouts. It cleaned them up somewhat, and it cooled them and then we put this preservative—I forget its name. There were two or three on the market, and we found out that a mild, good chlorine wash was almost as good as anything else.

Profit Margins

Knaster: What did Brussels sprouts draw financially? I mean the price when they were being shipped to these distant markets.

Debenedetti: Well, proportionally, when you think of the value of the dollar, I think we were getting a lot more money for Brussels sprouts then than we are now.

Knaster: Were you paid by the pound?

Debenedetti: We were paid by the pound, or by the drum when we went east . . . or we were paid by the twelve quart containers that we have.

Knaster: Do you remember how much that was? How much were you getting in those days?

Debenedetti: Well, as I say, relative to or compared to our expense at that time, we were doing better—our margins were better. There's no question about it. In the 1940s we were getting as high as eleven and a half cents a pound for Brussels sprouts, when our labor at that time was seventy-five cents an hour as against three dollars an hour now. Our expenses were less. We were hand picking, and getting larger yields. But then through the evolution of the growing process and the harvesting process, new varieties were established. Because of the mechanical harvesting primarily, in one harvest we were able to go in and harvest mechanically and eliminate an awful lot of hand labor, and for that reason, if I'm not mistaken, in the late '60s, and even the early '70s that we were growing . . . we got not much more than the eleven cents a pound in those days. So actually we've upgraded our growing processes, and mechanical harvesting. We've been more efficient. We've certainly been able to keep our price down. That pressure is always on you. They're not getting what they should be getting today, the Brussels sprout growers. Compared to their investment, certainly.

Knaster: Do you think that's going to mean that Brussels sprouts are not going to be grown?

Debenedetti: Well, it could very well be. It's a funny thing, isn't it? Sometimes when they put a price up on a product it moves, and sometimes when they keep it down it doesn't. Haven't you noticed that?

Knaster: Yes.

Debenedetti: Let's put it this way. Our prices have moved very slowly on the bottom. We've gotten very little increases and our costs have gone up tremendously. Our margin is down. I'm talking about all Brussels sprouts growers. So, unless you're really efficient, and you have the weather with you and everything else, you're not going to make a profit. When you think of the investment of fifteen, sixteen, seventeen hundred dollars an acre and the time involved with that one crop, insect problems and all these things, it could very well be that unless the processors want to pay more and take less margin in the middle-man area, and they try to keep the price down too much for the grower, he's going to give up. Because if he had one or two bad years, at sixteen hundred dollars an acre, he's not going to last long. There's no chance to build up big profits over the years. You take lettuce, for instance. Lettuce you can get three or four thousand dollars an acre profit out of if you haven't hit it right. And there they can get out in something like ninety days. Everything is pretty mechanically done. Sprouts is a very specialized crop. They say it could very well be phased out.

Knaster: Have you seen any other crops that disappeared in the course of your involvement in agriculture?

Debenedetti: Well, not really. Perhaps some crops have been used less. I don't think there's as much asparagus being consumed today. Maybe there is but a lot is processed. The price has gone up and up and up. Maybe the demand is relatively stationary. I think that Brussels sprouts are pretty much in the same category. If you like cabbage, maybe you'll just be content with a head of cabbage instead of Brussels sprouts. You know, it's in the cabbage family.

Knaster: Yes. But did you notice the price of cabbage this year?

Debenedetti: Well, that's gone up too. I don't know what the answer is. Of course the population is growing so much, and when you think about the . . . agriculture has to expand to take care of these needs. But, as I say, instead of being centralized in California or maybe Florida, now you grow in Texas, in Arizona, and of course Arizona didn't come into its own as a growing area until around the '50s. The Phoenix area and Yuma. That was developed in the '50s.

Pesticides

Knaster: When you were growing sprouts in the '20s and '30s, were there certain quality standards that you had to meet? And who was in charge of enforcing that?

Debenedetti: I don't think there were any standard quality standards established. But I think the quality of the sprout, generally was better in those days. We had different varieties and that were hand-picked, so we harvested them when they were ready to pick. We had less decay, less insect damage. We would use Black Leaf 40 and spray our plants. We didn't kill the predator insects, so consequently when the weather is more inclement, the aphid, together with the help of the predator insects and the weather, why they disappeared until the next year. So we had much less expense.

Knaster: In other words, you weren't spraying as much in those days?

Debenedetti: We weren't spraying near as much, and with a different type of spray, like Black Leaf 40.

Knaster: How is that different than what you have to do today?

Debenedetti: Well, of course today, especially because ninety percent goes into a processor . . . and the processor has the regulators right on his neck all the time. They're inspected; the packages go through his plant. If there're any worms in there, why you throw a large investment out. You'd probably have to dump so many packages if they didn't fulfill certain tolerances. You had aphid count that you're restricted to. Well, in those days, I suppose they ate a lot more insects or there were a lot less insects there . . . As a consequence of all of these restrictions placed by the public through the Pure Food and Drug and everything else . . . I mean they don't want us to spray but on the other hand they don't want the insects. So they can't have both. Due to these restrictions, naturally, the processors who buy the produce are very strict on the deliveries that we give them. In order for us to have a clean Brussels sprout, we have to go in there and spray like mad.

Knaster: How much do you actually spray?

Debenedetti: It's getting to be a schedule sort of thing. You have to go in every ten or fifteen days. You have to use insecticides at certain tolerances, day tolerances or hour tolerances. You got to be very careful. Every time you spray you have to go to the county commissioner's office and get permits. They regulate it very thoroughly and they should. But we have to do it regularly, whether we need it or not, to keep the insects out; maybe we'll spray a crop fifteen times in the year. Ten to fifteen times. You multiply that by the cost of your materials and the six dollars an acre, or five or six dollars an acre for application, and you're talking an awful lot of money.

Knaster: How are they sprayed?

Debenedetti: Well, now it's done pretty much by tractors with the spray rigs in back and the dust rigs, and of course the dry product, powder, is pretty much curtailed in some areas because of people around now, you can't do that. So you have to use sprays and when you can't get into your fields because of wet ground or something, then they go to airplanes or helicopters.

Knaster: Oh, they do. Before it was banned, did you ever use DDT?

Debenedetti: Oh yes, but to a lesser degree. Because the only thing we're concerned about is a fly, maybe the cabbage maggot, or something like that, and it was probably helpful. We used less DDT than many crops. But we used phosphate fertilizer, we still use some. But they are being phased out somewhat too. DDT was effective, of course, for certain things. Then when we couldn't use that, why I imagine they'd come up with something else, maybe not quite as effective, and maybe a little more expensive.

Knaster: Did you use insecticides in the '20s and '30s as well?

Debenedetti: Well, I wasn't too active in the '20s, but from what I knew about it, in the '30s when I was younger, they used Black Leaf 40, I guess a derivative of the tobacco plant. It's nicotine. They used it prepared and also in many cases mixed their own. They just got the straight nicotine and mixed it with lime and sprayed.

Knaster: Was that sprayed by hand then?

Debenedetti: It was sprayed by hand, originally. Then of course there were the dusters, we call them. They're mounted on the back of the tractor and came off the power of take-off, and were blown out. That was used in the late '30s and from then on.

Knaster: How did you decide when to spray?

Debenedetti: Well, usually, when you'd see some insects. Of course the restrictions and the standards weren't as difficult then. It's tough. When you saw an infestation that the predators couldn't take care of it, why you'd go in there and spray.

Crop Inspection and Regulation

Knaster: In those days were there inspectors from the agricultural commissioner's office that would come in and check out the crop that you were sending off?

Debenedetti: Yes. Of course they've tightened up now that the county's got into the act in inspections. Then there was standardization set up by the state and your markets, and . . . protection of the public. But before we had the higher standards, we would call in the state and federal inspectors in order to inspect shipments that we would ship out of state, because we usually sold on grade and we had to have a certificate showing what grade had left here, so that we were delivering a certain type of merchandise to the buyer, and for that reason we'd call them in . . . But as to someone that came in and inspected your crops all the time, there were a few around then, of course.

Knaster: Was there a regular system whereby people would come and check your crops and tell you whether or not you could ship this or not?

Debenedetti: No. You didn't ship any that was bad unless it was a strong market. But there was less regulation. Anything sold was F.O.B. We were graded U.S. one or two, or eighty-five percent. We knew what we were doing with our

crop. We put a lot of money into the shipping. Or we sold it F.O.B., so we had a guarantee. So we could collect, for instance.

Knaster: Do you feel that the way the regulations are set up by the state department of agriculture and overseen at the county level, works to your benefit or hinders you in growing crops?

Debenedetti: No, I think generally it helps, because it keeps a lot of inferior produce off the market. But I feel that there's a conflict here when we think about how much insecticide should be used and everyone talking about how we shouldn't use so much. But how can you get away from it, when the standards set up by the Food and Drug seem to be much stricter, of course on the processor's side than they are on the fresh, because the assumption is that you can wash it off and prepare your own food. On the fresh. But if we have to conform to the strict standards that the public seem to want in the open market, we're going to have to spray and then apply insecticides whether we want to or not. So the public better make up their mind whether they want to lower the standards, the insect count and things of that kind. Until they do that, why we can't cut down on insecticides.

Knaster: Are you aware of any direct danger from ingesting dead insects? I mean, they'd have to be dead by the time they're processed . . . and put into packages. Wouldn't that be true?

Debenedetti: You'd be amazed at the amount of insects you eat . . . every day. But when a housewife goes into a store and there's a worm in one package, and she's a pretty fussy shopper, the whole industry's going to hear about it. Unfortunately it's poor public relations. It might be much better, probably,

generally speaking, to use less insecticides and lower the standards somewhat on the insects.

Knaster: Yes. Have you ever had any help from or availed yourself of the services provided by the U.C. Agricultural Extension Service?

Debenedetti: Yes. I think the agricultural extension service has done an excellent job in attempting to evaluate varieties that are good in our areas. They help in certain soil treatments and in the ratio of the applications against the benefits and the rate of application. There're many things that they've done and evaluated. I think they've been very helpful to the grower. We've tried to do some help that the growers try to give to the University of California to develop resistant plants and things like that. So they've done good work.

Knaster: Is there any service that is not provided that you feel would be very beneficial, if you had the *choice* of some kind of service?

Debenedetti: No, I think the growers really should be out helping themselves and doing their own experimentation. I think generally speaking they do a lot more than a lot of services. I think a lot of services may be extra services they don't need. They're certain things they do, I don't want to be critical of them because they do some very excellent things. But I think the less bureaucracy we have around telling us what to do and how to do it, as long as it's done rationally and legally . . . I think the farmers do pretty well on their own with what help we're getting now. I wouldn't want any more.

Cultivation of Brussels Sprouts

Knaster: I wonder if you could describe for me the process of actually cultivating Brussels sprouts and starting from . . . you get a package of seeds, up until harvesting.

Debenedetti: I should refer you to a book that's been put out by the University of California Agricultural Extension Service. Briefly, the seed is purchased, pretty much the hybrid varieties we're using now are purchased and put into the ground in late March, April, May . . . depending upon the weather and conditions. The seed beds are usually treated with methyl bromide and chlorophytrin, to get rid of verticellum and weed control and everything else, so that when the plants are in you have very little maintenance. Then you fertilize. The plants are grown in a matter of forty-five to fifty days. By that time, you should have your land prepared, either plowed, chiseled or whatever you do to your land to prepare it for planting. Usually before plants are taken from the seedbed they are treated for verticellum with Tellone. Anyway, we treat the land. Within ten days or so after the land is treated we plant our sprouts and we transplant from the seed beds using planters that we have mounted on our tractors. Usually two, three or four row planters. They're planted in spacings anywhere from thirty-four inches, the rows thirty-six or thirty-eight inches or whatever the farmer wants in varying spaces between the plants. They're planted by the people on these row planters. Of course they're irrigated immediately after that. Then they take it from there. Shortly after we spray for flies and cabbage maggot control, and of course that process from there on up to practically the harvest fifteen days before harvest we're spraying to control one insect or the other. You irrigate in some lands up to close as every week, to heavier ground where they go maybe even twenty-one days. That's about it. It

usually takes from ninety up to maybe a hundred and fifty days, depending on the variety.

Knaster: So the crop that's harvested, let's see, you said you'd plant in March, April. So you'd harvest around July?

Debenedetti: Well we usually have forty-five or fifty, sixty days in the seed bed. And that's two months. Then we have ninety to a hundred and fifty days in, after transplanting. So you're talking to August depending on the varieties you use, August through September, latter part of September or in there when you harvest these different varieties. It goes into October, November. If you plant later it can go into January, February. It all depends, because it depends on when you plant your seed, depends upon when you put it in your ground. Some varieties are better early, like most of the Jade varieties because they're closer couple, you have more, probably problems. Bed down more when the rains come. You have other varieties that are better for late varieties and hold up on their inclement condition, rain conditions.

Knaster: How do you determine when to plant?

Debenedetti: I have a little radio that gives me the weather. And half the time that's wrong. (laughter) Sometimes when it's obviously going to be a storm, there's probably not much that you can do. When your crops are in or about ready to harvest you're going to go ahead and harvest anyway.

Knaster: Has that happened to you, that you'd planted your crop and then suddenly a storm would come up?

Debenedetti: It has many times in the past, where we've lost because of excessive rains. But usually that was on the other varieties where we carried our

crop into the winter rains. Now most of the sprouts are harvested before the heavy rains. It's not as hazardous as it was. But sprouts are very easy to kill with plant growth, if you have excessive rains and they stay there too long.

Knaster: Could you describe how harvesting used to be done and how it's now?

Debenedetti: Well, before, as I mentioned with the other hand-picked varieties, your plant was never topped, never inhibited as growth, and it kept on growing. You would harvest the sprouts when they were mature on the bottom. And you just take off the sprouts that were of size and maturity. It was all done by hand.

As you picked the sprouts, which of course are encrusted on the stalk, as you picked them, then the plant continued its vigor. Imagine if you left them there, you couldn't do that because they would probably break down, because they're over matured on the bottom. Then they'd decay. But the fact that you picked them all the time—anyway you picked some varieties as much as eight or nine times in the season.

Now later on when they developed the hybrids then you had a one-harvest arrangement. When you notice your sprout size maturing and say a quarter of an inch or something on the bottom of your stalk . . . you figure it's about time for you to top your sprouts. What you do is break out the eye. Take it, you know, the eye of the plant, right in the top.

Knaster: Is that done mechanically?

Debenedetti: Oh, the topping's done by hand. It stops the growth; it seems to inhibit the growth at the bottom, and the growth is more general up the stalk. So your whole stalk matures more or less at the same time. So your sprouts are all relatively the same size. Now, if you didn't do that you'd have more of a cone-

shaped development and they wouldn't develop as much on the top, but they would grow more on the bottom. By pinching the eye or removing the eye, then you even the growth along the stalk. Then they all come out the same size. Then you have your harvesters in, thirty to fifty days, depending on the weather.

Knaster: What does the harvester actually do, cut the stalk?

Debenedetti: There are two or three harvesters that were manufactured individually by growers. I think Pfyffer brothers had one, Bonodoli brothers and myself. It would go along and automatically cut the stalk. They would fall into a little belt area, and were conveyed along to the top. Then, as it came over the belt in the top, you had the stripping machines, where you would put the stalk into the knives' orifice in the front, and put it in, and the turning motion of the knives would strip the sprouts from the stalk. The stalk would go out into the field as waste and the leaves and the outside of the sprouts would go onto a conveying belt. And then it would be conveyed back into a trailer. In some cases they're graded on the harvester. In the trailer they're taken to be cleaned.

Knaster: Is that turned back into the soil?

Debenedetti: Well, the only thing that's turned back are the waste, I mean the waste and the stalk goes back into the ground. It's just waste and falls on the ground. So that helps the humus, of course. On the other hand, if there are any insects or worms, or anything else, you bring that back into the ground.

Knaster: When you did hand-picking how many little heads would you get from one stalk?

Debenedetti: Well, to be honest with you, I'm not exactly certain. The taller the stalk you get the more spacing you have, the better, easier it is to prepare, to

take care of your crop. It's more concentrated on a smaller stalk. But of course, the taller the stalk you get, the more spacing you have, the easier it is to take care of your crop. I really don't remember . . . thirty, forty sprouts . . . Maybe I'm way off.

Well, you can pick a stalk up like that and all the sprouts go around them . . . they go kind of in rings when you take them off. I'm trying to think of how many sprouts to a pound. Of course again that depends on the variety. If I could determine that I could tell you, 'cause usually they'd go up to eight or ten pounds to the stalk. Oh, I'd say it's close to four dozen. I should know and I'm sorry I don't.

Changing Labor Needs

Knaster: Oh, that's all right. I'd like to know about your labor needs in growing Brussels sprouts and how that changed. You mentioned for a harvest you would need as many as two hundred workers back in the thirties . . .

Debenedetti: That's right.

Knaster: And now you would use maybe seventy-five.

Debenedetti: Well, now for that same amount of acreage, I would say in a hundred-acre piece of ground, or a hundred acres of Brussels sprouts, you would use probably one fifth of the labor that you did before.

Knaster: One fifth!

Debenedetti: One fifth, yes! Well, I don't know how to explain it. We used to have at least 250 employees and we had eight or nine hundred acres of Brussels sprouts. But I'm not growing that much now. So you have two men cutting a

head, cutting the stalks down and winnowing them. Depending on your machine, you have anywhere from four to six strippers. So you're talking about eight people there, and with a tractor driver nine. Well, that's about it on an operation. Now, you cut an average of three acres a day. That's a one harvest operation, so you're harvesting all your crop . . . in the matter of hours. To do the same thing by hand you wouldn't pick all the sprouts on the plant; and you'd just pick some. I don't know how to explain it really, but I would say if I used nine men to do the harvesting in the field . . . it would have to stretch on for months instead of days. So I would say we used no more than thirty percent of the labor we did before.

Knaster: Okay. That's just for the harvest, what about in terms of maintenance, fertilizing, insecticides and irrigation. How many workers do you need for that? And how has that number changed over the years?

Debenedetti: Well, I'd say per hundred acres, you'd probably need two irrigators. When you're planting you have to have people pulling your plants, and then you have to have them in the fields, you have either two or three or four row planters, and you plant perhaps three acres a day. After the pulling of the plants and transporting in the field, then of course you don't have a great deal of labor outside of your irrigating, cultivating, one to cultivate is ample for a hundred acres, two irrigators, . . . insecticide man, we'd hired out pretty much to commercial operators now. We find it's the most effective. If we had our own we would probably have to hit the same area every twelve, fifteen days, so you're talking about four or five days of the month for a spray man. The growing hasn't changed a great deal, outside of the irrigating. Of course, when we went to sprinkler irrigating you use two men. A hundred-acre piece, if you did everything with gravity flow and flood irrigation with men out in the fields like

we used to and we flood all the sprouts just by directing the water to the plants, why we'd use more irrigating than irrigators.

Knaster: How did you get your workers back in the thirties? Did you go through labor contractors, or did you advertise for workers yourself?

Debenedetti: Well, back in the thirties there were a lot of people looking for work. There was quite a population of Filipinos in the state of California. They were excellent workers and they'd come back to the same place every year. So we had the same workers year in and year out. They'd go for asparagus in the spring and then they'd come back with Brussels sprouts when we'd planted and harvested. So we didn't have any problems, really until there was a problem in industry during the Second World War, when labor was harder to get. That's when they had the Mexican Bracero Program, which saved the day for agriculture.

Knaster: When these Filipinos worked for you did they come individually, or did they come through a labor contractor?

Debenedetti: No, they came on their own in those days. There were a lot of them around. I don't know how they got here, but they were around.

Knaster: Did you have to provide anything for them? Housing?

Debenedetti: We provided housing.

Knaster: On the property?

Debenedetti: On the property. In camps and they did their own cooking and they used to love the coast because there was fishing off the ocean.

Knaster: Are you talking about San Mateo County in the thirties?

Debenedetti: Yes. In Pescadero they loved it because there was fishing off the coast.

Knaster: Were you also responsible for supplying them with tools and various things like that, or did they bring their own equipment?

Debenedetti: No, they'd come back to us every year. The wages they had were, it wasn't too much although I guess relatively speaking's almost the same. Although I think labor's getting a bigger piece of it now. We supplied everything they needed then. We supplied their rain gear when they were harvesting all through the winter time. They'd probably wear it out in one season, so it was our responsibility. The shovels, everything else was supplied by us. They didn't have to come with anything.

Knaster: Were they usually paid by the hour or by weight?

Debenedetti: By hours. We didn't do any piecework.

Knaster: How much were they paid back in the thirties?

Debenedetti: Well, as I remember it got as low as 37 1/2 cents an hour to forty-five, seventy-five, and it jumped to a dollar, a dollar ten, dollar thirty, and it's been jumping ever since. I guess it depends on what crop you're in. Today on piece rate, the worker can make an awful lot of money in strawberries; he can make as much as sixty, seventy dollars a day without any problem at all. Apples . . . they make more than that. The hourly rate in the United States, I think today is what, \$2.00, \$2.30? We're paying anywhere from two and a half to, artichokes

as high as three, three and a quarter, three forty. But nothing as low as the minimum wage.

Knaster: How was their work kept track of? Did you have a foreman who clocked their hours?

Debenedetti: Yes. Well, either the owner of a farm or whoever's handling the farm. I have a foreman that keeps track of that. In those days I had Italian foremen. Of course most of the Italian foremen go out on their own, the first chance they get. The foreman would usually keep the time. We had various ways of keeping track of the hours. When you had a small crew you used a payroll book. And transferred the information. If you had a large crew then we had the employees numbered. We'd have badges when we had two hundred and fifty, three hundred people. We had them with number and badges. It's pretty hard watching that many men. But today with the smaller numbers you know the good men from the bad. You know whether they're putting out and the foremen are certainly capable of doing that.

Knaster: How often were they paid?

Debenedetti: We paid either weekly, like for the pea harvest and things of that kind, to as long as a month in some cases when they were living in our camps. Sometimes we made advances to them, but generally now we pay every two weeks. Pay about three days following the end of the payroll period. Which reminds me, I've got a payroll today.

Knaster: You said you had Filipino workers in the '30s; that was also the time of the dustbowl. A lot of Oakies migrated into California. Did you ever use Oakies as workers?

Debenedetti: No we didn't see many of them. There were very few along the coast. I think most of them settled in the Central Valley. Of course this was difficult work and the weather was inclement. I'm sure that there're not many people who want to work rain or shine and in a rainstorm . . . they're still out there picking sprouts. It took a hard character to do it.

Knaster: Were they mostly single men?

Debenedetti: Yes.

Knaster: So after the Filipino workers, when the Bracero Program started, did you drop Filipino workers?

Debenedetti: No, we kept them *always* as a matter of fact, but there weren't as many of them in the forties. We had a certain nucleus that came to us. But then as industry expanded and war jobs and shipyards and everything else we started losing them. They went into other endeavors. So they start leaving agriculture and going into other work. But now they're old and they phased out almost entirely. So we had an awful time getting labor. Especially along this coast where the weather is terrible in the winter time. Thank heavens for the Bracero Program. It really saved the day for a lot of farmers.

Knaster: What kind of workers do you have now? Have they been Mexican since the '40s?

Debenedetti: A lot of Mexicans came into this county and that population is building up. We've had a lot of the local Mexicans and there's some that seem to show up with their green cards in the fall. We have the same four, five or six that come, go back to Mexico, and then come at a certain time of the year. Some of them are here legally. Others come in and they're around the area. I guess you

have to go out and look for them. Mostly Mexicans. Well, no whites. I haven't seen any whites do our kind of work. Occasionally we get somebody. They just won't stay.

Knaster: Did you ever have Hindustani workers? From India?

Debenedetti: No. I think they went pretty much to the Sacramento Valley and up in that area.

Knaster: Did you also provide housing and food for the Mexican workers?

Debenedetti: At first we had our cook cabins, right. We had our own cooks and supplied them. Of course that started with the Braceros, where we had to provide kitchens and dormitories and all that sort of thing. Blankets, everything that they required in those days, under contract with the government. After that was phased out, then we kept up more or less the same procedures with anybody we could get. It isn't practical to have family people because it requires too much housing. So we couldn't very well get family people to come in. It was seasonal work and you need a lot of men at one time . . . Ours was somewhat restricted to single men.

Knaster: Do you see a big difference between Filipino workers and Mexican workers?

Debenedetti: The Filipino workers were excellent workers and he had a sort of a sense of responsibility on how much work he'd give you a day. You couldn't push him necessarily but they give you, always give you a day's work and excellent work. The Mexican Braceros that came over from Mexico during the Bracero Program were fresh out of Mexico and were very anxious to please and hard-working. They worked a lot more here than they do in their own country.

They were excellent. There's always a few that wouldn't work, why sometimes you'd have a right to transfer them. But today those that come out of Mexico, I must say frankly that they are much better workers than those we have in California, in the states.

Knaster: They are better workers when they come straight from Mexico?

Debenedetti: They're much better. They really are. They know what hard work is; they're not looking for excuses; they're not looking for easy jobs, and they're good workers. They're much better workers. Very honestly, it's very hard to get local Mexicans. We have some during the harvest. We hire women occasionally to be our graders and things like that as much as we can, and anybody else.

Knaster: Is this the first time that you've used women in your labor force?

Debenedetti: No, I've used them off and on for a long time. Especially in the cleaning end of it, I've always used women. Of course in our packing sheds we used primarily women. Lots of Italians, some Portuguese, in Santa Cruz and around. One or two Mexican women we used to hire in our packing shed, and out in the fields. Now we get a few Mexican women that work for us . . . there's an awful lot of people that come from Mexico into this area and then they go back to Mexico in the winter there. They seem to be around and available, men and women.

Knaster: Were men and women working alongside each other, or were the tasks fairly segregated?

Debenedetti: No, they're working in some cases together. With separate sanitary facilities.

Knaster: Were they paid the same wages?

Debenedetti: We pay the same wages.

Knaster: Did you ever have any problems with workers, general problems like . . . oh, they would get drunk, or they would destroy property . . .

Debenedetti: Well, you have a certain amount of that, sure. Particularly when they tried to phase out the Bracero Program. At that time they required the farmer to truck people in from the urban area, from the black areas, and the ghetto areas and everyone else there on the street corners. So, consequently, you got some of the dregs of humanity. You got some of the drunks that want to make enough for a bottle and you had all those problems. You got an element that was pretty rough. I don't know a great area in which they could work. I'm talking about the Negro, the Black people, or the city Puerto Ricans, Chicanos. If they wanted to they could go out and work on these farms. And they'd be welcomed if they would work. They really would. There's a place for them But they just won't do it. It's the truth and we've tried it. And you could certainly help the employment situation if you were willing to go out into the fields.

ARTICHOKES

Santa Cruz Artichoke and Brussels Sprouts Association

Knaster: Last time I mentioned that I wanted to get into artichokes. I think we briefly mentioned the Santa Cruz Artichoke and Sprouts Association. Someone told me that you were president of it?

Debenedetti: Yes.

Knaster: Do you know when the Association formed?

Debenedetti: Well of course I was shipping on my own and there were two or three other organizations. Of course it was in competition with us as far as sales was concerned. Then when I closed my own company I joined the Artichoke Association, which is a cooperative association.

Knaster: Do you know who was instrumental in organizing it?

Debenedetti: It was a group of growers. If I'm not mistaken I think some of the originals were a man named Lorenzi . . . Antonetti was another one . . . could have been the Mungai brothers, Tambellini brothers, and a few others that decide to join in this cooperative. Of course there were several, many of the growers, I can't remember all their names offhand.

Knaster: Why did they organize it? Was there something happening at that particular time that urged them on?

Debenedetti: Well we had our own company and we were in competition with them. Pfyffer brothers had their own outlets. They were more or less on their own so the advantages of a cooperative with their own manager probably had some appeal to them and I suppose that was the reason. Marketing outlets of their own.

Knaster: But basically the association is a marketing group?

Debenedetti: Well, actually it operates very similar to any other private organization, only it's cooperative in the sense that it's non-profit and the growers get together and hire their manager and they do everything that an individual would do. If they had to deal with an individual, possibly they'd have to pay their own commissions and this way they retain all their commissions,

have a say in the distribution and handling of the product, and I suppose that's one of the incentives.

Knaster: What was your function as president of the association?

Debenedetti: Well, as president of the association, I think I've been president for the past five years, the function is to run the meetings and possibly oversee that certain decisions of the board are met and just in general overseeing management . . . not really direct management, but just fulfill the wishes of the board of the directors.

Knaster: How has the association helped you?

Debenedetti: Well it relieved me of a lot of personal responsibilities of running my own. We have a manager and we do enter into the decision making of the operation of the association as well as consult with our own managers to markets and prices and things like that. From that standpoint it's been a relief to me and it's been quite effective. I think it's a good way to do business.

Knaster: Were there associations of that nature back in the '30s?

Debenedetti: Well, I think that possibly they started, this association started around 1958. I think there were other associations started around that time and there's been more since.

Knaster: I'm wondering whether they were instigated by a change in the economy and changes in agriculture as a business?

Debenedetti: Well it may have been that by joining together they weren't at the mercy of the individual operators who handled their products on commission or bought outright and resold at a profit. I imagine the thinking was that by getting

together they could get the profit margin; it'd be non-profit and they'd divide any profits in the end and eliminate the middle man and sell direct to the markets.

Knaster: Do you know why the association was organized around artichokes and Brussels sprouts, rather than one or the other?

Debenedetti: Well, I think they complement each other. Artichokes were the original primary crop around here in the early days. Then little by little the Brussels sprouts market expanded and possibly was due to the depletion of the soils in some cases where through ordinary irrigation before we had sprinklers a lot of the topsoil may have been eroded. You have to have really good soil for artichokes. Then sprouts were planted in its place and gradually expanded with the demand.

Knaster: Are you growing artichokes now?

Debenedetti: I grew artichokes on my Purisima ranch, Half Moon Bay ranch, til I leased it out and turned the crop over to the lessee. So I'm not growing artichokes now.

Knaster: I was wondering if growers struck a kind of balance between Brussels sprouts and artichokes, what the percentage would be. Whether you'd grow artichokes eighty percent and Brussels sprouts twenty percent.

Debenedetti: Well, I think years ago possibly that was about the percentage. Then the artichoke industry moved down to the more fertile soils of the Salinas River bed and in the Castroville area, where the soil is much heavier and the crops much heavier, and so competitively speaking it wasn't too desirous for them to farm here. Their yields were down along the coast and so they went to

the Brussels sprout. Brussels sprouts were in the small fields now and the shallower soil lends itself to a more economic crop.

Knaster: I've taken a bike ride up Swanton Road and I remember passing fields and fields of Brussels sprouts.

Debenedetti: Yes, it's just beyond Davenport north about four miles. In that little valley . . .

Knaster: Do you know who owns those fields?

Debenedetti: I don't know who's farming them. How long ago was this?

Knaster: Last summer.

Debenedetti: Well, originally all that land was in artichokes and it went out into Brussels sprouts and now they're going back into it again because that's fairly good soil there. I think it was the Pfyffer Brothers who cut down their acreage of Brussels sprouts and went into artichokes. Of course artichokes take much less labor than Brussels sprouts and labor has been a concern. That may have been one reason. Maybe they were growing too many Brussels sprouts for their outlet. I don't know the reason, but they did go back. I think it's possibly an operation of the Pfyffer Brothers Company. The land itself is owned by an old pioneer Davenport person who was in the store business there and then together with the Louis Poletti family he bought quite a bit of acreage in that area.

Knaster: I thought perhaps the globe artichoke was specifically developed for this area because of the growing conditions. Then I found out that the globe artichoke was first cultivated in Naples, in the middle of the fifteenth century,

which I thought was very interesting. Then the Italians brought it to California as early as 1899. Unless earlier—you mentioned something about somebody around here being a really early cultivator.

Debenedetti: Oh that could have been around 1915, 1918, 1919, when Rovei started growing them . . . I was surprised it was brought in that early. I wasn't aware of that myself. I thought that the artichoke industry was started just south of San Francisco, in the San Pedro Valley, and then worked itself south, I thought around 1910. When they really started an acreage. Of course my father was manager of the Half Moon Bay Growers Association. I think that was started around 1915. He was president of that in 1916, as I remember.

Knaster: Could you talk about the climate and soil requirements for growing artichokes?

Debenedetti: They want a cool, cool climate such as we have along the coast. They want some warmth and perhaps a more humid climate with seasonal rains and they need moisture when they need it, you can't suffer an artichoke plant, and so naturally it fits more where they have fogs and they have a cooler climate. They're going to thrive more than they would in a dry climate. In a dry climate they seem to vegetate more and you don't get the quality or yields. So this, I would say is an ideal climate.

Knaster: Do they need a soil that drains well?

Debenedetti: Yes, they like a very heavy soil. The ideal soil is a well-drained heavy loam and I've seen excellent artichokes in the dark dobe soil. They like heavy ground, although I've seen them grown in sandier soil and they seem to do very well. Then they have to have a great deal more fertilizer. Give them

more water in a sandy soil. But generally speaking the heavier soils like the river bottom overflow soils of the Salinas Valley and the Salinas River is ideal for them. You'll find that the artichokes grown in California are grown pretty much from the San Francisco County line, although to a lesser degree in San Mateo County than formerly, and in Santa Cruz of course, and not too much now as predominantly sprouts. But the Salinas River area around Castroville, where they're grown primarily, then you don't have any artichokes grown until you get to the San Luis Obispo area . . . where the climate is somewhat the same, perhaps a little warmer than it is here. But in all of the warmer areas in between you don't find artichokes. To my knowledge there is no other area in California where they grow them. They've tried them north of San Francisco, with some success around the Point Reyes area where the national [seashore] park is now.

Knaster: Are they still grown there, or was that just an experiment?

Debenedetti: No, the federal government took it over as a park, most of that land. So it's not grown there now. Of course formerly we got a great deal more rain up in that area. They can stand a great deal more rain than most crops because they're ditched out anticipating rains, and you have big ditches on each side, so the drainage is usually taken care of. But you don't find them growing in warmer climates. In the last four or five years there was some tried in Baja California. As I understand it was too warm for them there, and they weren't too successful.

Knaster: Are there any grown in other parts of the country? Or is it strictly on this coast?

Debenedetti: As far as I know, there're no other areas in the United States where they're grown.

Knaster: What about around the world? Are you familiar with other countries that grow artichokes?

Debenedetti: Well I haven't traveled too much in the European countries although I have seen artichokes in small patches grown along the Italian Riviera, in the French Riviera and then even closer to some of the larger cities. Italy, I know they're grown there, but as I say mostly two or three acre patches. I didn't see any grown in England.

Knaster: Does Castroville rightfully call itself "The Artichoke Capital of the World?"

Debenedetti: Well, there's a concentrated area in production. I suppose that would be an accurate statement.

Artichoke Propagation

Knaster: Could you tell me how artichokes are propagated, how you'd start the planting. Do you use old plants or do you use new seeds? How do you prepare the earth for planting?

Debenedetti: I'm not sure how the original artichokes came over. I know that they tried to develop seed. I have seen some artichokes that've grown from seed. But after the plant is established the way to propagate the crop is to divide the plant after three to seven, eight, nine years, depending on the soil. They dig out the plant; divide the plant like they would a bulb of some kind and take part of the main root and transplant it. They divide a plant into several plants so that way they can replant their acreage. I don't believe they've ever developed or can make seed from the artichoke in California. I don't believe they're able to, for some reason. I think they've tried to transplant some of those into the valley

areas where it's warmer, to see if they could develop some seed. But I don't know whether it's been too successful.

Knaster: Certain plants you can take a cutting, put it in water, it develops roots and you put it in soil. Other plants you can't do that at all.

Debenedetti: Well, the artichoke, of course, you just take part of the root like you would, I guess, divide an orchid plant.

Knaster: How was the land prepared for planting?

Debenedetti: Well generally it's the same as most crops. With an artichoke crop the more you work the land like any other crop the better it is, normally. They either plow or chisel their land. They fertilize and then they plant—I don't know exact spacing now. I think something like eight feet apart is what they plant now.

Knaster: What did they used to do?

Debenedetti: Usually farther apart. But now it's done a little more scientifically; we've cut down the land use by concentrating more plants. They fertilize more, so they get more crop per acre. The artichoke market insecticide control is very substantial and could endanger the growing of artichokes, actually. Because of the high costs now.

Knaster: What kind of insects do you have to deal with?

Debenedetti: Primarily the moth, the artichoke moth. It lays its egg on the stalk or in the artichoke and then they develop into a worm and eat the artichoke. You don't want worms in your artichoke. They're not salable. The state government has standards and are very strict as to the presence of worms in any artichoke plant.

Knaster: Was this always a problem, this particular moth? Or is this recent?

Debenedetti: Well, we've killed off beneficial insects, the predatory insects, so you end up with more of the insects that you don't want. With the stricter quality standards we've set up and the demands of the public not to have insects present, why everything is tightened up and consequently you have to spray them in order to meet the standards.

Knaster: How was this dealt with back in the '30s? Were you using a strong insecticide then?

Debenedetti: Years ago we had more predatory insects that controlled them. We didn't have as many, for reasons I don't know. Maybe it's because year after year we put in the same crop, maybe we built up an insect attracted by this particular crop. Maybe your soil isn't quite as strong. If you have plants that're not as strong or we don't rotate as much as we did before, or we don't have new ground to go to as we did before. There must be a reason why the plant is weak and the plant's weak like ourselves. We're more susceptible to disease or insects.

Knaster: What kind of things did you use in those days to kill the insects you had?

Debenedetti: Well, I don't remember that they used too much on the artichoke. You were expected to look at your vegetables before you cooked them, and to wash them and possibly we weren't as strict. But then again, I think there were less insects then to control than there are now.

Knaster: How much fertilizing is done? Has that changed over the years?

Debenedetti: I think that fertilizer applications have changed over the years since the land is less fertile than it used to be. I mean you farm it all the time, so therefore you increase the amount you need to apply to your crops.

Knaster: Have you changed over from natural manure to chemical fertilizer, or have you always used chemical fertilizers?

Debenedetti: We've used a lot more of the organic fertilizer before when it was available. But now it isn't readily available.

Knaster: What do you think accounts for the lack of organic fertilizer?

Debenedetti: Well, of course before we had horses that we used for our cultivation. You had a horse population that was large. Now I guess the only horses that are around pretty much, where you get in a commercial quantity, would be the race tracks. If you could use all organics you'd do a lot better. Because you keep your soil warm, humus, there's no question about it, it would be better, but it's just not available. It's much easier to just to put it on according to the book on how many units of nitrogen phosphate and potash you apply. The farm advisors have done so much experimenting, I suppose, they tell you, "Well, you need so much of this," they don't guarantee it, but they've been helpful in our present day farming. If you can't get the organics, or you can't rotate your crop because you have to utilize all your ground, why then naturally we're forced to use commercials.

Knaster: You said people had working horses. Did you use horses on your ranches?

Debenedetti: Yes, we used to have ten to fifteen horses that we used for cultivating. Great, big, marvelous horses when I first got into farming in the late

twenties. Then in the thirties we started going with tractors more. Oh I can remember having a dozen Percheron horses. Beautiful animals, great, big husky horses for cultivating and plowing. They were trained to cultivate; they get aware of what they're supposed to do; they'd follow like a trained dog. They knew in some cases more than the driver. (Laughter)

Knaster: Did you ever work with the horses yourself?

Debenedetti: Personally? No.

Knaster: When did the tractors come in, in the mid-'30s?

Debenedetti: I'd say early '30s.

Knaster: Did most people change over to tractors?

Debenedetti: They could have been using them elsewhere where they had flatter grounds but we had small fields along the coast. And that's when we started using them in the late '20s and early '30s.

Knaster: Do you think people were fairly receptive to the introduction of tractors or were people resistant and wished to continue with horses?

Debenedetti: Well, I think for economic reasons a lot of people kept their horses. You didn't have to buy gasoline for them.

Knaster: How do you cultivate artichokes?

Debenedetti: Well, there again you can probably get more practical advice from somebody else. But you have cultivating machinery to go through your crop and keep the weeds down. You have heavy equipment to go in and ditch your crop where it is necessary. Everything is mechanized now, there's no great

amount of working with an artichoke crop. It's not as meticulous or as complicated as growing a row crop or a Brussels sprout. I think it's a much easier crop. They take less doing than a row crop.

Knaster: When did that become mechanized? I assume that was all done by hand before?

Debenedetti: No it was all done with the horses and cultivators thing. But again it's pretty much around the same time, in the '30s.

Knaster: I'm trying to picture how the whole thing gets started. You were talking about before about dividing up the plants. So, they're all planted and how long do you have to wait until they become full-grown plants?

Debenedetti: Well, you water them well when you plant them and you'll see in a matter of days that they start to grow leaves. In just a week or two you can see that they take hold of the soil. I would say if you plant in the spring, you'd maybe get a few artichokes in late fall. Of course the next year you'd start getting a good crop. But you can get them the first year if you plant early enough.

Knaster: Well, I could see the advantage to growing artichokes over apples. With apple trees you have to wait years til they produce.

Debenedetti: That's true. But the crops increase over a few years, where the apple tree gets older and produces more. The artichokes produce for a certain number of years and then they start declining. The artichokes get smaller.

Knaster: What is the life-span of a plant?

Debenedetti: Well, depending on the soil, say from three to seven or eight years. As you get less production, smaller 'chokes, you'd better take them out. It's like the strawberry industry; they've found that with certain varieties it's better to take them out every year and replant, rather than let them stay in the ground for two or three years like they did before. I guess the artichoke industry's pretty much the same. The plant starts going over the hill, depending on the soil—then you'd better come back and replant them.

Knaster: How often do you have to irrigate artichokes?

Debenedetti: It depends on the heaviness of the soil. More along this coast, less north than you would south, but maybe every two or three weeks.

Knaster: How many little heads come out? How many globes?

Debenedetti: That's pretty hard to say; it depends on the soil and everything else. I couldn't really tell you the exact artichoke production per acre. Of course I handle them now in the half box instead of a full, whole box. I couldn't say. Maybe six, seven hundred boxes an acre. Incidentally, I have three boxes of artichokes in my car and I'd be happy to give you one if you could use them.

Knaster: Oh my goodness! That would be real nice, thank you!

I've noticed that they're large plants, that take up a lot of land and they'd have to produce a lot in order to make that worthwhile. As I drive by I've never been able to really count how many heads you get from one plant.

Debenedetti: Well, it depends on the time of year and this time of the year they're more prolific. This is their natural bearing time. You go down to the Salinas Valley or down Beach Road in Watsonville and you've never seen so

many artichokes on the stalks. They're so plentiful, they're not worth much today. So consequently the farmers in many cases are letting them go and not harvesting. They're just dozens on the plant, really.

Harvesting Artichokes

Knaster: Could you talk about harvesting?

Debenedetti: Originally artichokes were harvested by a man walking along the field with a sack over his shoulder. Then they had a contraption on their back where they start throwing them into the sack on their back. Now some of them go in there with trailers and the tractor goes along the row and the artichokes are thrown into the trailer; harvested directly into the trailer. Then they're put in bins, most cases brought to a centralized packing shed where they're done in volume packing, and they were able to standardize their pack much more. Most of them are located in Castroville.

The harvesting is done when the plants start bearing the fruit, but harvest season varies according to when a man cuts his crop down and starts them again. As I explained, those that don't cut their plants down and keep them going, they keep on picking pretty much through the years. But the naturally heavy harvest for artichokes is in the spring of the year. They're all concentrated now and because of the inclement weather that we've had this past winter, everything's coming in now in May. Now it could have been with rains before, or heavier rains, and the plant was pushed more. You could have the heavier period in April. It would be nice if through the cold months, if they would produce more, but they're like any other plant. They want a certain amount of warmth to mature. You have a much slower production during the winter months and in the spring it accelerates.

Knaster: When you go in there to harvest the artichokes, is that globe broken off? Is it whacked off like this, or is the whole plant . . .

Debenedetti: Usually they take a knife and they just cut the top of the stalk, below the artichoke part. An inch below the artichoke itself.

Knaster: Do you know of any other varieties of artichoke besides the globe?

Debenedetti: No. There were two or three other varieties brought over from Europe but weren't too successful. This was the most successful in the area. I don't know the names of them.

Knaster: Are they washed or prepared prior to packing?

Debenedetti: They're not washed. They go through size graders and then into sizing bins and then they're packed from there. Formerly everybody had his own packing arrangement in his own barn. He brought them in and packed them himself. But you can see that the pack wouldn't be standard; it wouldn't be uniform. Maybe some would want to throw in a few artichokes into a pack that shouldn't be there and, so by centralizing their pack they could control the quality better.

Knaster: Have there been changes in the way they pack? I remember you talked about changes in Brussels sprouts boxes.

Debenedetti: Well, originally the boxes were three to four feet across and four feet deep and five or six feet long. One man couldn't handle them. They'd be packed bulk in those tremendous boxes. It took two men to lift them on a truck. I know when my father was in the business that they used the old apple box size in the early 20s. It was a wood crate, an apple box. They were almost the same as

an orange crate, not quite the same. That was used for many years and then in the late '30s, early '40s, the corrugated box came into its own. I think I mentioned before that perhaps it was a good thing because even with the standard apple-type box . . . the measure of a good pack usually was the bulge that they had on the top, on the cover, and the buyers would look for the bulge because it meant that there were more artichokes in the container or a better sizing or more weight. So the buyer was always looking for that.

In reality, because of the high iron content of the artichoke, that would naturally bruise them. An artichoke that was rubbed by the top and squeezed in the pack, why naturally when it was opened up, the next day it was practically black from bruising. So it wasn't the best method. Now of course with the corrugated boxes there's no bulge and they're sitting in a place in the box and there's no bruising, a minimum of bruising, so you really do get a better product in the market.

Knaster: Are they placed in layers with the papers between or are they just all put together?

Debenedetti: Well, I don't think they even use a paper now. We used to use a paper and then fold them over. Just lay them in, so many to a layer.

Knaster: How many to a box now?

Debenedetti: Well, the size determines the count. The larger, the smaller the count. Normally the twenty-four, thirty-six, forty-twos is about the range they put in. Of course, that, as I say is only half of what it used to be.. Before it used to be 48, 60, 72s. and now they've cut them down in 24, 30, 36, and so it's really half a box compared to the old package.

I don't think the plants are as robust as they used to be when the soil was better and everything else. I've seen some tremendous artichokes, and then I've noticed too, that where the climate is a little cooler, you get a better shaped artichoke with more of a blunt top instead of the pointed top. I always thought that was a better artichoke. I think that's why the artichokes originally from the north counties here were excellent.

Knaster: After they're harvested do they cut back the plant at all?

Debenedetti: Yes. Most ranches cut down their plant to the ground. Then they rework their soil, usually in the spring of the year. By doing that you revitalize the plant and new shoots come up. Some growers prolong the harvest after the artichokes are picked off. They cut the stalk, and it doesn't take any of the vitality of the plant; it strengthens the stalks so they perpetuate the growth more. Sometimes they go through a year without cutting them down just by keeping their old stalks cleaned out, and that way they keep them going longer. Possibly the best method is to go in there and clean them out, because you clean out the insects and everything else and you start fresh.

Knaster: Before the artichokes are shipped, are they stored under particular conditions? Or are they able to store them immediately? Do they hold on to them for awhile?

Debenedetti: It certainly doesn't improve their quality when you hold them. The fresher you get them to the market, the better off. Otherwise they dry out.

Knaster: Are they kept refrigerated before they're sent?

Debenedetti: When they go locally, they're not refrigerated. They may be put in the refrigerated truck, possibly, or kept under refrigeration in some instances

but they're not top-iced or anything like that. They're kept dry. Or maybe put in an ice-box when they get to the chain store. I imagine they are until they're on display. Or, if they're shipped East, they're refrigerated, yes.

Knaster: I know a lot of plants are washed and it doesn't seem to damage them. They're sprayed, like lettuce, whereas the artichokes have to go dry. What would water do to the artichoke? Would it make it rot or something?

Debenedetti: Well, it could promote certain growth, bacteria growth on the artichoke. I suppose maybe that's it. And then it's a sturdier plant. It holds up somewhat better than a Brussels sprout. A Brussels sprout breaks down quite fast. It builds up a lot of heat, whereas an artichoke is one entity in itself; they don't bunch up and there's not the density. So they just seem to hold better.

Knaster: Who buys your artichokes and have they changed from when you first started out?

Debenedetti: Most artichokes now are sold either direct to chain stores who probably consume more than any other outlet. The independent stores probably get theirs through the commission markets, in terminal cities. I suppose that's the way it's done. The others are shipped to certain merchants in the East and distributed by them, or maybe even go to chain stores direct in the East.

Knaster: Have your markets changed from when you first dealt with them, in the '30s?

Debenedetti: Well, I think they've changed inasmuch as the market has been broadened a great deal. They've gone to areas where they didn't know a artichoke. Most practically everybody knows what an artichoke is. It wasn't very many years ago that they didn't know what it was at all.

Knaster: Do you think that's through advertising?

Debenedetti: Advertising, word of mouth . . . and everything else. The funny thing is the young children like artichokes, perhaps more than even the older. Young . . . I mean, six, seven, eight, nine. The youngsters seem to like the artichokes and develop taste, and I guess it's been some years now, so they're using more, and their children are using more, and there's more people who've come into contact with them. But they still have an advertising program, the artichoke industry. It seems to be quite effective.

Knaster: Have you noticed changes in terms of the percentage of artichokes growing fresh and being processed?

Debenedetti: Well, the percentage was much higher fresh in the past. Now I think percentage-wise they may be going a little bit more into processing and you see more artichoke hearts and everything else than they used to have before. But the bulk of artichokes are sold fresh.

Knaster: Is anything else done besides marinated artichoke hearts?

Debenedetti: Well, I must say the reason that most artichokes are sold fresh is that the only ones can really process are the real small artichokes that are tender. They only take the hearts normally, and the bottom portions, so they have to be the real small artichokes. Other ways to process artichokes include frozen artichoke hearts; and small, small artichokes put up in brine, or in bottles you find them in vinegar packs. So it's not only the marinated type that you get in jars. They're put up in other ways. The frozen artichoke industry has also expanded. If you want to make your own fried artichokes you can buy the little hearts and cut them and fry them, or you can put them in salads. Now, you

wouldn't want a marinated artichoke in the salad because it would distort the taste.

Knaster: Do you know whether any artichokes leave the country?

Debenedetti: I really don't know. Conceivably they could be. They could be exported to Canada or Japan. I know there's vegetables that go over there in the refrigerated boats. As to other countries, I really don't know. I doubt it.

Production Costs

Knaster: Is there a great deal of difference in production costs for artichokes and Brussels sprouts? You gave me pretty much a good breakdown of how many Brussels sprouts you get per acre and how much that costs.

Debenedetti: Well, it costs you less to grow an acre of artichokes. I really don't know today's costs. The land cost is up more than it has been. The insecticide cost is much greater than it was. The labor cost is higher. They're getting three and a half dollars or more basic pay for artichoke workers now. They used to get a third of that. So relatively speaking, I don't know. I think there's leaflets out by the University of California that would give you that breakdown, better than I.

Knaster: What are the labor needs for growing artichokes?

Debenedetti: Well, they're not too great. Possibly three men to a hundred acres would be adequate for year-round labor. You may need additional labor sometimes during the harvest season but it's way down compared to a Brussels sprout crop.

Knaster: Have the labor needs changed over the years? Are they using less or more labor for growing artichokes?

Debenedetti: I think they're using pretty much the same because they have the same tractor drivers, the same everything else there. I would say pretty much the same within the change.

Knaster: Sounds like artichoke growing has not undergone the same kind of mechanization that Brussels sprouts have.

Debenedetti: Other than the method of taking them out of the fields . . . that's been changed; instead of having a man with a sack, maybe they go and put them in a tractor, which expedites. That, and instead of packing on a ranch they go to a centralized packing place. Other than that, there's not much more you could do. Because there's much less need for laborers in growing artichokes, there's no reason for mechanizing.

Field Labor

Knaster: I remember when I talked about your labor needs for Brussels sprouts that you maintained kind of a camp for the workers and they would come. Is this true also for artichokes or did you use a labor contractor?

Debenedetti: Well, not to the same extent, because you use less labor. Usually I think they have a steady crew the year around. It's not as transient as it would be in Brussels sprouts. Brussels sprouts you need quite a number at a certain time of year, and then very little after. With artichokes we'd use so much less labor; a two-hundred acre ranch you'd have three to five steady men and that's about all you'd need. Normally they're picked up from the area around here, our Watsonville area and our Salinas area. So they usually are more apt to be family people, maintain their own homes, and are more permanent.

Knaster: Have the workers in the artichoke fields changed over the years in terms of ethnic makeup?

Debenedetti: Yes. Originally they used to get the immigrants, especially Italians. They usually were put up in the camps. In most cases they were bachelors and they came over to this country to find a fortune and would work in these ranches; stay in our ranch housing and had an . . . excellent Italian cook where they ate better than we did, I'm sure, at home. They had marvelous food. They were ambitious people and they came over for a purpose and opportunities were available to them and they went into business for themselves. You don't find that any more of course.

The Filipinos never really have been too active in the artichoke industry. It's mostly Italians and there were so few needed to work on it that usually a family did it themselves in most cases. When they grew a little larger then Mexican laborers is what they primarily used. Outside of their own family and their own help. But they don't need quite so many.

Knaster: Are the workers mostly men for artichokes?

Debenedetti: In the fields they're all men. Whether or not they use women in the packing houses . . . handling the artichoke . . . the women could do it certainly, all right . . . but with the spurs on and everything else and the handling of the box after it's . . . maybe it's more suitable for a man to do than a woman. Grading of them, of course, a woman can do.

Knaster: Do they do that? Are women in packing houses?

Debenedetti: Yes, they do in some of the packing houses.

Knaster: Are the processing plants for artichokes around here too?

Debenedetti: In the Castroville area if you talk to Reno Cassella, now Reno is with Associated Growers down there, and Reno's the heart of the artichoke industry, and he could give you that kind of information. He's been in the industry for a long time.

Knaster: In all the time you've been a grower, what has been the most difficult aspect of your work? Or maybe the greatest challenge?

Debenedetti: In farming there're always obstacles and difficulties you encounter . . . It seemed to be so much less complicated years ago when we had good labor—available. The costs were down, now we're in a crop, say in Brussels sprouts, where your costs have climbed dramatically. Most of the crop is handled by processors and it isn't always possible to get the prices you should get and the margin of profit that should be forthcoming. We've had to fight the elements in the past, and especially with the hand-picked varieties where if you get too much rain in the winter time, you could lose a crop. The margin of profit is not as great I would say that it is in other crops, like in lettuce and strawberries where you can make enough in one year to carry over for three or four. In the sprout business the margin isn't there. So I think, coupled together with the increase in insecticide costs, because of higher standards, the increased costs for everything we buy, and the more or less controlled extra money we get at a price, we're pretty much under the control of what the processor wants to pay. It's a difficult position to be in, because we're only thirty or forty growers in one area and maybe eight or nine processors. So it isn't easy to get a price. Insecticide problems . . . the extra cost from the fertilizers, equipment and everything else

and then difficulty in getting a price that warrants all the problems involved. I guess I've included everything.

Knaster: If someone came to you and said, "Well, I think I'm going to start out growing Brussels sprouts or artichokes and get into business," what advice would you give that person?

Debenedetti: I would tell them to stay out of the Brussels sprouts business, very definitely. I think there's more possibilities in other crops. You don't tie up your money for such a length of time. With Brussels sprouts you're depending upon just the processors for a livelihood; when you've got seventeen hundred dollars an acre, your gamble is so great. When you've got \$175,000 invested in that type of crop and wait for five or six months to get your money back, it's hazardous. I would say go into another line of business, or line of vegetables. I've done that with my son and thank heavens I have. Of course it's great possibilities in some areas of this agriculture business and the Salinas Valley is a good, good spot and there's others where if you hit it you can do it very well. It's a great life in many respects. Besides the worries. You are out in the fresh air and pretty much on your own. It's a challenge, but I don't know.

Knaster: Is that what you'd liked about it the most?

Debenedetti: And, probably to be perfectly frank, I was more or less born into it or dropped into it, because of the economic conditions of the thirties when it was as good as anything else. As a matter of fact, they were probably our most lucrative years, the depression years. We probably did better than we can do now.

Knaster: Why?

Debenedetti: Well, I think that everybody had moved to the cities and there was less farmers, and people still had to eat. Our costs were down because of the depression. People were anxious to sell fertilizer at less money. Labor was more competitive and more people were looking for work. As I say, the demand was there and the less people to supply it because most people had moved to the cities and were on their way back. So it was actually better then, for this particular crop. Now I think in the last eight months, when the people realize that they have to pay more for their food . . . it was amazing how it was kept down for the last few years and didn't match the inflation spiral. All of a sudden now, everything is heaped on them and with the drought and the inclement weather conditions and everything, people are used to paying more for their food now. Possibly the farmer that's dealing directly with the consumer is going to make more money from now on. I really think so. But as I say before when your food went up, of course you could pay five times as much for a sack of cookies and not say anything about it. But when your basics—vegetables and meat and everything else start climbing, then you start getting revolts. I don't know whether you agree with me. The price of a tractor could go up five times, and there's not as much screaming about that as there is if artichokes go up ten cents apiece or meat goes up thirty cents a pound.

Well, in explaining the past, I think I told you in Brussels sprouts that the price was \$225 a ton. That was back in 1942 or 43, as I remember. Up until three years ago, I don't think we were getting more than \$250 a ton for Brussels sprouts. Our labor costs and everything were going up tremendously. Well, the only reason we're able to do it is because of our farming methods and mechanization so we actually kept our price substantially the same as far as the farmer level was concerned than it was years ago. But in the last two or three years we got maybe

a two or three cent increase a pound. But, relatively speaking, the increase has been practically nothing compared to other products.

Knaster: Have there ever been agricultural subsidies here from the government?

Debenedetti: No. There's never been to my knowledge any agriculture subsidies in this crop. On dry crops, on your grain crops, on all your staples, maybe soybeans, even tobacco, are subsidized. But the vegetable grower, I think, contrary to public opinion, always thought that being taken care of by the government, they never have gotten a dime. As a matter of fact, they look down their nose at allowing them to get together in certain bargaining positions to control their price there.

Knaster: You mean like a marketing agreement?

Debenedetti: Well, the marketing order that we had was actually a great thing to protect the legitimate interests of the grower. Because you must realize there's so many middle-men between the grower and the consumer, and there's mostly your consumer prices is taken by the middle-man, really. I guess that's the problem with distribution.

1936 Strike

Knaster: That's good. You know, I forgot to ask you, I know this is a little bit off from what we're just discussing, but with workers, were there any problems in terms of strikes and unionization?

Debenedetti: During our farming operations? Well, yes. I can remember when we were hiring two or three hundred people in the Pescadero area, that there was a strike at one time there and quite severe, the strike.

Knaster: What year was that?

Debenedetti: Well, that must have been '36, '37. There were serious implications, with physical encounters with some of the growers down there and it was primarily the Filipinos that were striking that time.

Knaster: What were their grievances?

Debenedetti: Well, I suppose the same grievances as anyone else. Probably they wanted more money at that time. We had a few labor instigators, I think we may have the Civil Liberties Union was down there . . . advising. Other than that, I don't remember any strikes down along this coast

Knaster: How was that strike resolved? Did it last for a long time?

Debenedetti: It lasted for quite some time, maybe two weeks, or something like that. It wasn't everyone that was on strike. It was just a militant group, as I remember. I know that we had some sprouts thrown into the ocean along the Santa Cruz, San Mateo property. You know where the road goes right along the ocean?

Knaster: Did you lose a harvest because of that strike?

Debenedetti: Not really. We delayed our harvest.

Knaster: Were you able to get other workers in to replace the strikers?

Debenedetti: Well, I think it all washed out after a while. I think the laborers that came into the area disappeared, and the rest of them wanted to work anyway. They came back.

Knaster: Had they accomplished anything through the strike? Did they get higher wages or different conditions of some kind

Debenedetti: To be honest with you, I really don't remember the results of that. It's been quite some time.

Knaster: Was a union formed?

Debenedetti: No, we've never had any union along this area until César Chavez's U.F.W. and the Teamsters started coming in.

Knaster: When Chavez came in did his workers strike on any of the ranches along the coast?

Debenedetti: They didn't concentrate here. When you think of agriculture throughout California, we're just a little outcropping here on the coast. Ours is so seasonal that I don't think they wanted people to belong to the union necessarily—those that couldn't be with them all the time and pay dues all year. They have to support the unions. Workers in lettuce and grapes where they hire year-round people. At least they had a nucleus, where they had that same personnel. Here we get some Mexican nationals who come from Mexico for two or three months and go back to Mexico. They're not going to contribute much to his union.

Knaster: Right. We've talked off and on about changes that have occurred in growing Brussels sprouts and artichokes; changes in technology and labor needs

and I was wondering if you could recall anything else, any changes that you've noticed since the '30s.

Debenedetti: As far as technology or in handling the product?

Knaster: Changes in varieties of plants, in irrigation, fertilization, labor, technology, mechanization.

Debenedetti: Well, I mentioned that the varieties of sprouts grown now are different. We got into the hybrid varieties. The one-harvest varieties, which made it practical for mechanical harvesting, where the crop matures in one time, therefore you can harvest at one time. And we began to use strippers, knives developed to strip the stalk from the sprouts.

All these developments came during the last fifteen years. The maturity date of the sprouts was cut so that you didn't keep them in the field quite so long. You didn't have to go into the rainy seasons. Another major change is the increase in the frozen industry; packing is taking 85-90% of the total production which changed pretty much from originally when it was all fresh. Brussels sprout processing, freezing started pretty much back in the late '30s. I think it was Knudsen in San Jose and California Consumers in Los Angeles came along in the '40s. So they started, and gradually, as frozen food expanded the packing of frozen Brussels sprouts expanded. Even so, now it hasn't expanded the same amount, I think it hit a plateau, and it doesn't vary too much. Maybe fifty, fifty million pounds of Brussels sprouts, approximately are processed every year. That's been relatively the same, maybe a little increase over the years. Maybe to correspond with the population increase but that's about all.

Knaster: Do you remember any tools and equipment that are not used any more? For example, horses were phased out.

Debenedetti: Well, horses, and your hand tools of practically every kind. You've got into some weed controls, which is different as far as there's less. Well, there's tractor and cultivator tractor parts.

Knaster: Is there less weed control now?

Debenedetti: There's more weed control by chemicals than there was before. There's more preparation. There's more fumigating and things to correct bacteria growth. The coastal outcroppings of land is beginning to get tired, you know. Or impregnated with club root in some areas. Important mostly north of San Mateo County.

Knaster: Would it be possible to replenish or reinvigorate the soil by planting something else? By phasing out this crop for a while? A kind of rotation?

Debenedetti: There's no doubt about it. Anytime you rotate your crop or any time you let it lay fallow, or put cover crop in and come back the next year. But these people, they grow so much, they have to have so much acreage to sustain their operation, so they keep growing. They don't have enough land where they can put in cover crops for one year and let it come back the next. Land is getting so scarce that you can't treat your ground that much. We'd be better off if we did. We'd probably save in insecticides and fertilizer and everything else. But we don't do it. We utilize every bit of soil we have.

Conclusion: Thoughts on Farming

Knaster: You mentioned something about steering your son away from growing. How many children do you have?

Debenedetti: I told them to stay out of the growing business. That's why we leased our ranches. He's in real estate development.

Knaster: Do you have any other children?

Debenedetti: I have two children. One boy and one girl.

Knaster: Is your daughter involved in agriculture?

Debenedetti: No, my daughter is married to a land developer. So they're involved in shopping center developments and land developments.

Knaster: Does it sadden you at all that the family doesn't continue in growing?

Debenedetti: Well, it would have been nice for my son to have been with me and taken over some of the responsibilities and continued in farming. But I couldn't see the future in it, to be honest with you, when you put all the minuses against the pluses. We decided to keep our land for land appreciation, hopefully, investment. I think I've explained to you before that it's going to be the big ones that survive in this business, like possibly all our economy. Now you've got to be big. Then it means lots of financing, lots of responsibility, lots of employment. So it's too many complications.

Knaster: Essentially it sounds like your operation was not a family-run farm; that you were running the business yourself, rather than with the help of your wife and children.

Debenedetti: Well, it was somewhat a family thing during my father's generation and mine up to a point.

Knaster: Were women in the family ever involved in the business?

Debenedetti: No.

Knaster: How about in the real early days?

Debenedetti: No, the women in our family were not involved anymore than I guess a good housewife would be involved in the business of her husband. But as far as the ranches along the coast . . . the smaller ranches, usually you'd find a woman out there cleaning the sprouts and contributing her part physically to help their operation along. But ours was not one unit, you know, it was many units and large acreage, so it wasn't practical.

Knaster: Did you know of any women growers? Or was everyone you dealt with a man?

Debenedetti: Well, I remember one woman in the Pescadero area, who after she lost her husband and had children to raise, was out there like a man running the operation and she was quite a woman. It was Mrs. Campanotti in Pescadero and she was a hard-working woman. She brought up her children in the same business and they bought her property there and her daughters were actively involved with their son in continuing the business. I don't know what happened to them now. I know she passed away and I think the family still has the ranch in Pescadero. Whether they're all involved yet, I don't know. It's the only woman I know of that actively went out and ran the ranch in this area.

Knaster: If you had to undo any act or reverse a decision, at all, and all of these years, what would that be? Something that maybe you wished you hadn't done or an opportunity that you wished you had taken . . .

Debenedetti: Well, it's a pretty hard thing to do. I usually don't want to look back and I've enjoyed doing, frankly. Although, I possibly would have enjoyed it more in another line. But perhaps staying in this one locality, or staying along the coast because we own property there and more or less tied down. During the Second World War I know I mentioned to you that we had packing sheds all around the country. Labor became so difficult to get, we naturally came back to protect our own home interests and farms, and we had to curtail our operation. If I had it to do over again, possibly I wouldn't have stayed married to our own properties in an area where there weren't as many possibilities. We were interested in the Santa Clara Valley and the Salinas Valley and we were operating to a certain extent there. If we had stayed there, I think our growth possibilities would have been much greater. But again, the grass always looks greener on the other side of the fence. If you had bought land there you would have been naturally better off than on this coast. 'Cause now you can't do anything with your land. But there's so many more opportunities. New horizons would have opened, I'm sure, instead of confining ourselves here. Even though we did do quite a bit of operating outside. I can't see any regrets that I've had, naturally I've had a good life, a rewarding one, and good family. I'm very happy with the way my life has been.

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