

Jim Cochran



Photo by Tana Butler

Swanton Berry Farm, Davenport

Jim Cochran was born in Carlsbad, California in 1947. He came to UC Santa Cruz in the late 1960s as an undergraduate student to study child development and 19th century European intellectual history. As a student at Merrill College (one of the UC Santa Cruz residential colleges), he lived up the hill from the Chadwick Garden (Student Garden Project) and admired the organic food and flowers grown on that steep hillside. After he graduated, Cochran took a job as an assistant to organizers of Co-op Campesina, a farm worker-owned production co-op in the Pajaro Valley, California. He later helped several farmer co-ops in Central California with marketing and financial planning. This shaped his future role as founder of Swanton Berry Farm, famous as the first certified organic farm in the United States to sign a labor contract with the United Farm Workers (UFW). Swanton Berry Farm offers

their workers low income housing on site, health insurance, vacation and holiday pay, a pension, and other benefits including an employee stock ownership program. In 2006 Cochran received the Honoring Advocates for Social Justice in Sustainable Agriculture (Justie) Award from the Ecological Farming Association.

Cochran began Swanton Berry Farm in 1983 because he wanted to try to grow strawberries organically. He was the first (modern) commercial organic strawberry farmer in California, and in 1987 the California Certified Organic Farmers certified his farm. Cochran's methods became a resource for other organic strawberry growers, and in 2002, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency awarded him the Stratospheric Ozone Protection Award for developing organic methods of growing strawberries that did not rely on the soil fumigant methyl bromide. A key component of Jim's success was his partnership with UC Santa Cruz agroecologists Steve Gliessman and Sean Swezey in on-farm research.

Travelers along the North Coast of Santa Cruz County visit the Swanton farm stand on Highway One, where they pick strawberries by the sea, and savor the fabulous jams, truffles, strawberry pies, scones and other treats concocted in the kitchen. When no one is minding the store, customers pay on the honor system, a lesson in trust that Cochran encourages. A photo exhibit documenting the agricultural history of Santa Cruz County and of the United Farm Workers is displayed above long comfortable tables where customers sip coffee supplied by the Community Agroecology Network.

Ever a visionary, Cochran joined the Roots of Change Council's Vivid Picture Project, which is "daring to dream up a comprehensive vision of a sustainable food system in California." He discusses all of these aspects of his career in this interview conducted by Ellen Farmer on December 10, 2007, at Swanton Berry Farm in Davenport, California.

Additional Resources

Swanton Berry Farm: <http://www.swantonberryfarm.com/>

Farms Not Arms: <http://www.farmsnotarms.org/>

Roots of Change; Vivid Picture Project: <http://www.rocfund.org/resources/reports/the-vivid-picture-project-reports>

Patrick Connors, "Way Beyond Organic," Rodale Institute article on Jim Cochran. April 19, 2005. <http://newfarm.rodaleinstitute.org/features/2005/0405/swanton/index.shtml>

S.R. Gliessman, S.L. Swezey, J. Allison, J. Cochran, J. Farrell, R. Kluson, F. Rosado-May, and M. Werner. 1990. Strawberry production systems during conversion to organic management. *California Agriculture* 44:4-7.

S. R. Gliessman, M.R. Werner, S.L. Swezey, E. Caswell, J. Cochran, and F. Rosado-May. 1994. *Conversion to an Organic Strawberry Production System in Coastal Central California: a Comparative Study*. Agroecology Program, UCSC, Santa Cruz.

S.R. Gliessman, M.R. Werner, J. Allison, and J. Cochran. 1996. A comparison of strawberry plant development and yield under organic and conventional management on the Central California Coast. *Biological Agriculture and Horticulture* 12: 327-338.

Desmond A. Jolly and Isabella Kenfield, *California's New Green Revolution: Pioneers in Sustainable Agriculture* (University of California Small Farm Program Publications, 2008) Contains an extensive interview with Jim Cochran.

Samuel Fromartz, *Organic, Inc.: Natural Foods and How They Grew* (Harcourt Books, 2006).

Beginnings

Farmer: This is Ellen Farmer and Jim Cochran on December 10th, 2007, and we're in Davenport, California, at Swanton Berry Farm. So, Jim, what we've asked everybody to start with is where were you born and where did you grow up?

Cochran: I was born in Orange, California, in 1947, back in the days when there were orange groves in Orange, California. I lived in Southern California until the age of sixteen, at which point I went to the University of California at Santa

Barbara for a couple of years and then dropped out and was in the military, U.S. Army, from 1966 to 1968, at which point I came for one semester to San Jose State, and then came to UC Santa Cruz in the fall of '68 and spent a year and a half or so at UC Santa Cruz, and then I took some time off and came back in '73 and finished up my degree.

Farmer: And what did you study?

Cochran: My degree was in child development, a psychology degree, but I really got that by default because I was teaching nursery school at the time and it seemed appropriate. My real interest was nineteenth-century European intellectual history, and UCSC was very strong in that area at the time, so I took classes on different aspects of intellectual history in that period, as I had at UC Santa Barbara as well.

Farmer: So that was pretty much the beginning of UCSC, wasn't it?¹

Cochran: Yes, it was the third year. I was in Merrill [College] in its first class, and we were located right next to Alan Chadwick's garden. So even though I didn't really know him personally, I was friends with a number of the people who worked there, and of course you wander over there during breaks and so forth. So all of that was in the back of my mind for a number of years, the experience there.

Farmer: So what was it about the way you grew up, or the atmosphere that you grew up in, that maybe contributed to how you're living today?

Cochran: My father and mother loved to travel and loved Mexico. So we, as children, spent a lot of time in Southern Mexico, away from the tourist spots, in an area near Córdoba, which is sort of not a particularly—nobody really ever goes there. [Laughs.] But it's agriculturally an interesting place. It's about 3,000 feet elevation, so it's away from the humid tropics. It's humid, but it's not anywhere near as humid as it is at sea level, and there's a lot of interesting stuff growing there.

My dad had a little attempt at a farming operation there, which was very low key, which we went and tended to every summer for ten or fifteen years. So I grew up with a little bit of that in the back of my mind. We were able to visit a lot of places in Mexico that were way out of the way. We had a friend who was a missionary, who ran a school for kids from different Indian tribes. Every other weekend he'd pack half a dozen kids into his old International Travelall suburban-type vehicle and head off, drive a day in some direction to some remote village, and everybody would disgorge from the trucks and go say hello to a lot of the old family members, and we'd have dinner with somebody who lived there. It was really interesting, because we went to places where you had to park the truck and then take a canoe across a lake, or you had to park the truck and walk through the jungle for a while to get to the village that they lived in. Or, in many cases, you'd drive to this village, but they were all very remote, on dirt roads and so forth, all over Southern Mexico.

Farmer: So were they speaking different languages?

Cochran: They spoke different languages, and we'd go to lots of places where nobody spoke Spanish, places where they had seen just a handful of white people in their lives, so it was really interesting.

Farmer: I wonder how long the villages had been there?

Cochran: Well, of course, none of them were substantial, in the sense that the buildings were not made of anything substantial, but the village may have been there for hundreds or thousands of years. But it wasn't like there were any major buildings there, just little houses and a couple of places that were little attempts at a store, and supply places and so forth. But they were all extremely modest.

Farmer: But they were able to grow the food that they needed themselves?

Cochran: Yes, yes. Of course, I spent most of my time talking to the kids rather than adults, but it seemed like life was pretty good. You didn't have to work very hard. There was food everywhere, and you could be a farmer and grow some stuff. It was pretty relaxed. (laughs) You grow a little corn; you grow a little squash and pick a bunch of mangos and pineapples, and go hunt every once in a while for something or another. It wasn't like it was a rough life; it was a pretty nice life, actually. They didn't have refrigerators and cars, but they had lots of free time. They worked hard, but not *that* hard. It didn't take a lot to support yourself. Life was simple. Growing corn is not terribly demanding.

Farmer: But they weren't in any kind of big market environment where they would be growing huge crops to sell, or anything like that?

Cochran: No, it was just subsistence farming. They'd grow a little bit of stuff. Maybe they'd grow something for the little farmers' market that they'd have four miles away, and they'd haul it all to the market once a week and sell some of it and make a little cash, but apart from that, it was really not hard to live. The temperature was always nice. It was always seventy-five degrees, eighty degrees, and it rained. And there were flowers everywhere.

Farmer: Do you have any idea if it's still there like that, if there are still places like that?

Cochran: I doubt that they are the same. It's been a long time since I've been back, at least twenty years. When I was going back twenty-five years ago, I was sort of on vacation more than wanting to get out into the remote places. I've seen a lot of them, and I've done a lot of that, and I just wanted to relax on the beach, you know? (laughs)

Farmer: Yes. But I can see how that would put pictures in your mind about farming and that kind of life.

Cochran: Actually, oddly not. I didn't think much about agriculture. The town that I grew up in for high school was called Carlsbad [California], which at the time was a small farming community. It was next to a Marine base, so we had a

lot of military families, and we had a lot of small farmer families with cut flowers and cherry tomatoes and strawberries.

Farmer: Hmm, strawberries.

Cochran: Yes. It was population 7,000, high school of 450 kids. Excellent school. It was a nice place to grow up.

Farmer: And that was a California public school?

Cochran: Public school, yes.

Farmer: And it sounds like you went to college really early.

Cochran: I did, yes. I finished high school early and started at the university and enjoyed that a lot.

Co-op Campesina

Interestingly enough, while I was at UC, at Merrill College, I was living with a bunch of Chicano students. We'd all gotten a big house someplace and sort of crammed ourselves into it. One of the students told me about a job that was opening. They had hoped to find a Chicano, a Mexican-American student to fill this job, but none of them really wanted it; they wanted to pursue their education. And they said, "Well, you know, Jim can do it," (because I spoke

Spanish) and so I got a job as an assistant to the people who were organizing a farm worker-owned co-op, a production co-op in Watsonville called Co-op Campesina.² It had at that time four members, and they had leased four acres of land down in Harkins Slough in the Watsonville area and were growing squash. I think that was about it, just squash, on four acres. They actually hadn't incorporated yet as a co-op, but the idea was to incorporate as a co-op and then get loans from Wells Fargo and grants from the Catholic Church to start a farm worker-owned cooperative. The idea was that each family would have its own little plot, but they would share the equipment, the tractors; they'd lease the land together, and they would buy supplies together and market together and get the benefits of the economies of scale.

And so my job in that enterprise was not central, in the sense that I was not one of the organizers or one of the members, but I was the "gofer," the guy that checked things out and helped—I just ran around and did everything. I did that for five or six months.

Then I worked at the migrant labor camp down there as a teacher's aide in the childcare center for about six months. And then I decided—this was 1970, and about that time, I inherited \$12,000 from my grandfather and decided to buy a piece of land in Santa Cruz County, which I did.

Farmer: Smart move.

Cochran: That was the smartest thing I ever did. It was remote, up here in Davenport area, up in the hills here, and it was covered with brush and stuff, so I spent several years clearing brush and building a little tiny cabin. I got a job at the university children's center and worked there. I spent several years—four or five or six years finishing my degree, working at the childcare center and building a house. So I had done that by about 1976, and then I worked for a couple of years helping—I was still interested in co-ops, so I started helping a group of artisans sell their wares cooperatively. I was one of the people that worked on something like that. It was an offshoot from the Santa Cruz Art Center at the time, which later morphed into various co-op forms located down at India Joze Restaurant in the Arts Center Building. My job was to do marketing for a group of weavers there. And so I got into that and helped them organize into a wholesale operation.

But by then my friends who had been working on co-ops in Watsonville had been doing it continuously since the time that I left, and the co-ops had grown and had become quite a big enterprise, with a couple of hundred families and a thousand acres. It was a pretty big deal. There were seven or eight co-ops covering from Watsonville down to Santa Maria area. However, that was also at the time when interest rates were eighteen and a half percent, and many of the co-ops had expanded too fast. Some of the land purchases turned out to have been a good thing. But in pretty much most of the cases, they had taken on too much debt and expanded beyond their capacity to produce a high-quality product efficiently. It was fairly typical of small businesses everywhere. A lot of them expand too quickly. So that's what happened. They were in trouble with

the banks. They needed somebody to help sort out their loans and how to survive.

Farmer: Plus, with all the group ownership, that must have been difficult.

Cochran: Yes, yes, it was all extremely complicated. I was recruited back in because they knew me, and because I could talk to both farm workers and bankers. I somehow was able to cross both of those worlds. And I was willing to work eighty hours a week for not a whole lot of money. So I did that for about four years.

But during that time, we sprayed. We used a lot of chemical pesticides because the members all loved pesticides and loved spraying poison on things. But I had come from Santa Cruz and had a little bit of exposure to organic farming, and I kept asking people in the business—from the members in the co-op to the Strawberry Commission to people who worked in Salinas—I said, “Can’t we grow a strawberry that tastes good, and can’t we grow a strawberry that doesn’t have pesticides on it?” And the answers to those questions were, “No. What people really want is a big red strawberry, and they don’t really care what it tastes like, and they don’t really care whether it has pesticides on it.”

Starting Swanton Berry Farm

I spent about two years trying to talk people into a different approach. I finally said to myself, and actually with the prompting of one of my friends from the

original days at the co-op back in 1970—we'd get together every week and have dinner, just for old-time sakes. He [taught] psychology up at the university—Ralph Quinn. He said, "Well, Jim, if you're so damn smart, why don't you do it yourself, with your own money? Because what you're telling people is that they should take their money and their risk and their business and change it. So maybe you should do it rather than try to get somebody else to take that chance." So that's what I did. Another co-op manager and myself rented four acres of land down here in Swanton Valley, and we did half and half, half chemical and half organic, because the chemical industry did a pretty good job in scaring the daylights out of us. I have to admit I was a little bit less worried about what would happen than my buddy, the guy who was my original partner there. So we did side-by-sides. Actually, it turned out that our production was a little bit lower, and we had more problems when we farmed organically, but it wasn't disastrous.

Farmer: You thought it was going to get eaten by insects?

Cochran: Well, I didn't really think—but everybody told me that it was— And in retrospect, I didn't really know. I mean, it could very well have been true. So that's how I got started. We started selling direct to the public, running around selling to restaurants and just right in the immediate area here. There was a food co-op downtown on the Westside, which later grew into New Leaf Market. Gayle's [Bakery] was starting up, and Kelly's [Bakery] was just starting up, and a few restaurants, and we got a couple of accounts over the hill, and then I sold strawberries out on the highway for a while.

We made enough money to pay all of our bills, but actually not enough money to pay ourselves. For the first three or four years we seemed to be building our reputation, but if you looked at what we were getting paid for the product, we just weren't getting paid enough. And my friend was going to MBA school at Santa Clara, my partner, and he said, "Well, I can do the math. It isn't going to work out." He decided to get married and finish his MBA and go on and do something else.

So that left me. By then I had a house, so I put my house up as collateral and borrowed money and kept going, and kept working on getting the customers to pay more for the product, because it was abundantly clear that I just could not afford to sell organic strawberries at a ten or twenty percent premium to conventionally-grown strawberries because my yields were so much lower and costs were so much higher.

Farmer: Was that labor costs mostly?

Cochran: Yes, labor— We hired people to work with us, and it wound up costing way more than what the conventional berries did. And that was a tough one. It took about five or six years to move the price up to the point where it needed to be, which is essentially about double what the chemical strawberry price was. At that point, I started to feel a lot more confident about the future. I also was able to stop working during the winters. I worked as a laborer on construction projects, and I worked at the nursery school that I used to work at during the

winters to make some extra money. But after five or six years, I was able to actually make my living off of the farm.

And shortly after that, probably by about 1990 or so (I had by that time been in business for six or seven years), Whole Foods came along. So I started selling to Whole Foods. And they all of a sudden started using a lot more product than the smaller stores had been using. The fact that they were willing to pay more [for organic] and buy a lot helped me to be able to expand.

Farmer: Did they do contracts ahead of time with you?

Cochran: No, there were no contracts. But, of course, I was the only organic strawberry grower at the time. After a few years other people started in, but by that time I had established myself as a reliable supplier of high-quality product. So for a while I pretty much had that to myself. Then as the years went by, more and more people started getting into it, and every once in a while somebody would come in and sell product at a price that I knew was too low, but they didn't really know that. There's a learning curve, and people tend to be a little too optimistic about what it costs them to grow something and not realistic, and not really adding in all of the costs. To this day, there are a lot of people coming in and undercutting you in price. They last a couple of years and then they drop off and go away. But at this point, there are a couple dozen at least, organic strawberry growers in the area. It's quite competitive at this point.

So in the meanwhile, there's sort of a subtext of learning how to grow the berries. There was a combination of just sticking with it and also help from Steve Gliessman³ up at the Agroecology Program, who always was a great source for me to go to for ideas.

Farmer: Did you do an experiment together?

Cochran: We did an experiment in, it seems like '87, '88, '89, or something like that. He was instrumental in providing the scientific underpinnings for what I was trying to do. Also encouraging, in the sense that when you're out there all by yourself, it's nice to have somebody come along and say, "Well, you know, maybe we should try this?" Being sort of hopeful, you know? Because at that time, in the very first years, I think a couple of people had grown organic strawberries at the time where there was a one-year waiting period to become organic, and so if you took over a parcel which somebody else planted and established, using fumigation and chemicals and so forth, and then waited a year, then that same parcel or those same plants would produce "organic" strawberries. And so a couple people did that a couple times, and so there would be an influx of fruit that had been taken over. But that dropped off after a couple years, especially after the waiting period became three years.

Farmer: Because that's just too long for people—

Cochran: Too long for people to do that. In the first couple of years, there were a couple people (Dale Coke was one, and a couple of other people)⁴ who had some

strawberries, but basically my goal was to become primarily an organic strawberry grower, and to start from scratch, to plant the field in strawberries and carry it all the way through, plant them into an organic field.

The Challenges of Growing Strawberries Organically

Farmer: And what did you do for your soils?

Cochran: Actually, when it comes right down to it, I just went back to good, old-fashioned farming practices, which are crop rotation and adding good soil amendments. It came down to that, really. Managing soil disease was a problem that Steve Gliessman and I worked out, looking at some of the old literature and coming up with the notion that the Brassica families—plants like broccoli or Brussels sprouts or mustards—might help suppress soil disease. And sure enough, when the farm grew a little bit, and I leased a piece of land that had been half in Brussels sprouts and half in artichokes, and I disked the whole field and planted in a section that had been part artichokes and part Brussels sprouts, the part that had had Brussels sprouts had less soil disease. That really accelerated the practical implementation of the theory, because I said, “Gee, not only is it theoretically possible and there’s some references in the old literature, but in my practical experience here, it’s also true.” So bingo, I added broccoli to the rotation and started growing broccoli and cauliflower as part of the rotation, and then adding high-grade compost and various kelp extracts and that sort of thing to the field to try to improve the general health of the soil.

Farmer: So that's what the fumigation is for, is the diseases?

Cochran: The chemical fumigation serves several purposes, probably the most important of which is to kill soil disease down to about twelve inches.

Farmer: And is that why they put the plastic over the fumigated fields?

Cochran: Yes, they put the plastic over the field. It's the same chemical that they use in fumigating houses for termites. It's very deadly and very effective. It also kills weed seeds and gophers and snails and all the little crawly things in the soil, sow bugs—all the kinds of things that could be problematic to a crop. The fact that it kills weeds is a very big deal. It really lowers the costs of growing the strawberries. And then all the things that are in the soil that die because of the fumigation decompose quickly, and they become readily available as nutrients for the plants, so the plants get this extra boost from all this other, decomposed plant life and animal life in the soil. So it produces this terrific, this twenty-percent at least boost in yield, not to mention the fact that you don't have any soil diseases or weeds. So it's really quite a magic chemical.

Farmer: What's it called?

Cochran: Methyl bromide is the primary one. Chloropicrin is another one that they use. Everybody was using this, and able to generate really high yields, so they were able to produce fifty percent more strawberries than we were just right off the bat, because they're using these chemicals. They were also using slow-

release fertilizers, which are perfect because you know how much nitrogen you need in March or April, and if you have a slow-release, capsulated source of nutrients, you can meter that out exactly when the plants wants it. Whereas if you're farming organically, you don't really know when things are going to be available, and so you're not really able to have as much "control" over the crop.

It was really a tough thing. But that's part of the reason that I undertook the challenges, because of the barriers to entry. It's not hard to grow organic peas or broccoli or some crops, so a lot of people planted that stuff and grew it, and there really aren't very many problems that you have with those crops. But there is a lot that can go wrong with strawberries.

I correctly assessed the situation in thinking that I would probably have five or six years to develop the system without having a whole bunch of people switch over right away, because it's not that easy to do. That was the case.

CCOF and the Organic Farming Movement

It all came together in '88, '89 as Whole Foods came in. The demand got better. Interest in organic food from the Alar event in 1989.⁵ CCOF [California Certified Organic Farmers] was doing more, had a much bigger presence in the media. Having Bob Scowcroft and Mark Lipson to talk about organics intelligently was a really important thing, because it widened the market for us.⁶ And all of a sudden there were more people, more scientists interested in organic. The Strawberry Commission wasn't at all interested in this subject, but there were

stray scientists coming in from here and there. But probably the most important is the peer support that you get from a group like CCOF, where you've got all these different farmers. We're all struggling with the same thing—different crops, trying to get customers to understand what it is we're doing. So it was quite a good time. There was a nucleus of people here. The symbiosis of all of our various efforts— There was enough of a core group here to really build on.

Farmer: Who do you remember in particular enjoying working with in that organization?

Cochran: In CCOF there were some very smart people involved. Bill Brammer was a grower from Southern California, president of CCOF for a number of years, and Bob Scowcroft and Mark Lipson. That was before Brian McElroy's time. The Lundbergs were very good on giving moral support, as well as financial support to the organization. There were a lot of really smart, hard-working, innovative people, both in the area and then within the larger organization. I think it was really important for us to feel like we were part of a larger movement, and we had very articulate spokespeople for that movement. Zea Sonnabend⁷ worked her butt off on all of that stuff; Wendy Krupnick⁸ and a number of people worked really, really hard for years to pull together a movement out of a kernel of motivated individuals.

I think that the fact that UCSC was here created the possibility—you know, sort of the intellectual effluent of—[both chuckle]—or byproduct of the university—I mean, depending on your point of view—

Farmer: (laughs)

Cochran: —was a lot of smart, creative people who were thinking differently, organizationally about the way the world is organized, as well as how our food is produced. There were a number of people who came out of that, came out of the area here. And the fact that the humanities program here at UC seemed to be able to encompass the Farm and Garden in an informal way was very important, because even though the Farm and Garden never really had any academic status, there was a lot of cross-fertilization there among the students. It had an appeal to students who put a great deal of effort into intellectual, academic pursuits, and loved nothing better than to get out and dig in the dirt for two hours during their break. So UCSC had a lot of effect. Of course, Alan [Chadwick] was a very charismatic person with a message that got through to a lot of people.

And then, of course, there's a nucleus of people willing to try things, and then the fact that at the time, there was also some number of people who went through the same system, who were willing to be our customers. So I think that was important. And there were a few co-ops around that were willing to try our product. They, being fledgling organizations, were willing to try different ways of selling products and so forth.

Farmer: Did you have a farm stand out here from the beginning?

Cochran: No, the farm stand has only been here for about six or seven years, so it wasn't until much later. I rented land and I've kept renting. We don't own any of

the land that we farm. It's way too expensive. But I rented from a private family down the coast a ways, and then when State Parks took over land, the farmers around here who grew Brussels sprouts and artichokes would give up their least desirable pieces of land from time to time, and so I would pick them up. And then Larry Jacobs⁹ started doing the same thing, as did Route One¹⁰. We'd get the leftovers, what other people didn't want.

The farm stand evolved over time. I sort of resurrected it after maybe twelve years of dormancy. [Laughs.] But, of course, the idea had always stuck in my head.

Re-inventing the Food System

The other thing was that the organic movement evolved outside the conventional movement because the conventional growers didn't really want to be bothered with us much, and so we had a hard time getting our stuff into the distributors, or at least at a good enough price to make it worthwhile. Of course, if you sell it really cheap, the distributors would take it and sell it, but we couldn't really afford to do that, so we had to develop our own markets pretty much customer by customer.

We had to teach the people who worked in the produce departments how to display the produce, how to handle the produce, how to tell our story, how to price it. We were working with new organizations, new retail outlets, so they were more open to new ideas. Whereas when you go in to sell to an established

marketplace that normally buys its food from some central distributing place, gets it on pallets and packaged a certain way and priced a certain way, the people who work in those produce departments have a system that they get paid to execute, and there isn't really much room for organic or anything like that.

Farmer: Anything different.

Cochran: Anything different. They're not paid to think, really; they're paid to execute the retail produce program. So we cut our teeth on the produce, or the sales or marketing side of things, with individual interactions with individual customers and individual produce managers. I think a lot of us, not just myself but all the other small farmers around here, realized how important it was for us to spend time with our customers, listen to our customers, listen to the produce people. And they said, "Well, this kind of packaging doesn't work very well," or, "You made a nice sign, but it's too big," or, "You put too many words on here," or, "Your photo is cluttered. It needs to be simpler," or, "How 'bout a brochure? What would you say in the brochure?" All these kinds of things. Dozens of us small organic farmers, and some that were growing to become mid-size organic farmers and even large organic farmers, had to reinvent the marketing wheel, in addition to reinventing the production wheel, and distribution. We developed a parallel system. And since it was new, that gave us a great deal of latitude in changing things. As it turned out, it was very successful because it was very responsive to the customers.

Farmer: Yes, and probably everything tasted better.

Cochran: And everything tasted better. Yes, of course. Well, see, when you'd talk to a customer they'd say, "Wow, this tastes really good." And then you take them something else, and, "I don't like this variety so much." Well, you know, the farmer is going to grow the variety that tastes good. You do that, you have dozens and dozens of farmers listening to that kind of feedback and adjusting their growing styles, the way they handle the produce after it's picked. All these kinds of things had to be pretty much invented from scratch.

Farmer: Were you involved in the farmers' market that got started here?

Cochran: I was involved after it had been in existence for a couple of years. For a while, I thought that I didn't really want to get involved in the direct retail again just because it was so much work. For a while, I thought I'd rather concentrate that effort on an individual produce department and spend time getting them to be able to sell it, because I saw how much work it is to get out there and sell it. But then I came to think, well, I can hire people to do that. So I did make a foray into the Downtown Santa Cruz farmers' market, after it had been in existence for a couple years.¹¹ I've been there ever since. I think it started in '89 or something? It's been around for sixteen, seventeen years. It started after the earthquake. We do about ten farmers' markets a week now. And they vary. For one or two years, one market will do well and certain products will do well, and the next two years that won't do so well.

Farmer: Because you sell other things besides strawberries now.

Cochran: Yes. We sell broccoli and cauliflower and peas, and a little bit of kiwis and artichokes. But you find out what you really are looking for is the average. Because it depends on the person that you have selling at the market; it depends on the market manager, where they place you. Sometimes the demographics of the market will shift, or the interests—whether they let in eight other strawberry growers or not. The location—sometimes the market moves. All sorts of things change, so you wind up actually coming to the conclusion that you're just shooting for the average over the long term, because you can't get perfect results consistently.

The Farm Stand

Farmer: Now, you do a lot of cooking here for sale. And that's different from a lot of farms.

Cochran: Yes. So the farm stand kitchen came about because I was able to lease this ranch after it was abandoned by an artichoke grower who didn't have enough water anymore to irrigate the entire ranch.

Farmer: Was that well water?

Cochran: It was diverted stream water and well water taken from a different location. And once both of those things got shut down, he figured out, look, I'm not going to have the water to irrigate 200 acres of artichokes anymore, and he gave up the lease. So I took over the lease. On this land were various farm

buildings, as well as an abandoned kitchen for a farm labor camp. The place was a total mess. I mean, it was just horrible and hadn't been used in years. It was in very bad shape. But I thought, gee, I could convert this into a kitchen and sell the stuff that we make, jam and pie and so forth. So I spent about three or four years remodeling. We didn't really actually do too much in the way of remodeling, just repairing things—buying new refrigerators, stoves, putting new floors in and putting a new roof on and just tidying the place up. So now we're to the point where we do probably ten percent of our sales out of this farm stand here.

Farmer: It's really convenient if you're driving between San Francisco and Santa Cruz.

Cochran: Yes. And it also gave us the opportunity to have a little education center here where people can come and learn something about the wild animals and the plants and the history of Davenport, and something about labor, and that sort of thing. It's worked out well. It's grown slowly, ten or twenty percent [annually] it grows in sales in here. It's all word of mouth. We don't advertise. But people have picked up on it, and we now do U-Picks here, which have turned out to be very popular. It's quite successful. It's a relatively inexpensive way for somebody to come and spend an afternoon as opposed to—well, if you've got kids, taking the kids to Disneyland or Magic Mountain. It's an alternative to going to a museum in San Francisco. You can come down here and walk around on the farm, pick some strawberries and spend twenty-five bucks and have a whole day out of it.

Farmer: Yes, yes. Can you talk about the honor system?

Cochran: Sure. When I first moved to Santa Cruz, there was a doughnut shop that—I always got up early in the morning, and until about eight o'clock in the morning, there was just a cash register that was open, and the guy was in the back, making doughnuts. Every once in a while he'd come in and take twenties out of the till, but the idea was you'd go in and you made your own change. I mean, he literally left the cash register open. I liked that. [Laughs.] I decided when I opened this place to do the same thing. So that's what we have.

As somebody pointed out, I mean, the actual amount of money that we go through here—it's probably one of the largest open tills in the world or in the country. There are many little small farms in Oregon and Vermont where somebody puts out a little bit of maple syrup, or ten boxes of apples, or something or another, but when you actually look at the number of dollars that pass through there, it's a few thousand dollars maybe in a season. But we do quite a number of dollars. Quite a number of dollars pass through here on the honor system.

Farmer: Well, you have truffles. You have fancy things here, chocolate-covered strawberries. High value. It's great.

Cochran: Yes. It's fun. It's fun for us, and it's fun for the customers. Of course, there are always customers who just stumble in off the road, and they can't believe it, and they take their picture here.

Farmer: It sounds like a lot of what you've been interested in [in] all these different parts of your career has been education, educating people about how economics works, how farming works.

Cochran: Right, right. Well, it's partly discovery, and then education about the results, because none of these things were guaranteed successes. The idea that this open-cash thing would work is—that's a big question. Would growing strawberries organically work? That's another question. Would having a union contract work? That's another question. Would having an ESOP [employee stock ownership program] work is another question. It isn't so much education; it's [chuckles]—it's experimentation and then sharing the results.

The United Farm Workers Contract and the Employee Stock Ownership Program

Farmer: Can you talk about your labor philosophies?

Cochran: Sure. Well, as you may remember from my history here, I actually got my start in the farming business from what is now called the social justice angle or direction. That was what I was interested in: finding a way for farm workers to get a better deal in the system. The co-op model captured my imagination. So what we were trying to do was to translate that into a farm worker production model, which is really different from the model that was done in the Midwest, where you had established farmers who owned a farm and a car, and they had been educated, and they had equipment and so forth. They had a business with substantial assets, each one of them, and they got together and marketed their

product together. Well, this was working with a group of people who had little or no education, little or no understanding of the larger economic culture here in the United States, little or no understanding of the crops that were being grown. They knew how to grow beans and corn and a few other things (some of them), but not complicated crops like strawberries or other crops.

So it was really quite a challenge. The idea when I first started out was to just survive on my own with a handful of employees. It took ten years to at least feel like I was just surviving. Even longer, really, maybe more like ten or twelve or fifteen. I mean, it took five or six years where I made money most of the years in a row to feel more comfortable. I'd move the wages up a little bit, but it wasn't any formal commitment.

Then I got to thinking. Making a commitment to being an organic farmer and being certified meant that you went through a process of certification, and you followed a set of rules that not only helped you grow and learn about farming and follow a system, an established system, or an evolving system, but had the effect of an outside agency or person coming in and verifying that you were in fact following those practices. So it was a dual thing of developing good practices and having those practices reviewed.

Well, I thought, gee, if we can do it with fertilizer and plants and soil, why can't we do that with people? There wasn't much interest in that in the organic community in certifying labor standards. So I thought, maybe the thing to do is

to become involved with the UFW [United Farm Workers union], which has, of course, had a long history of working for farm worker rights.

So we got together in early in '98 and negotiated a contract. It was a complex process with all sorts of things in there that I'd never thought of, but it was an excellent learning process for me. I mean, a grievance. I'd heard of a grievance, but it never occurred to me that there should be something formal, written: how do you handle something like this, and how do you handle seniority, and how do you handle these kinds of things? It was all very informal before. I thought, well, you know, this is good. It's sort of like getting beyond, in organic farming, the point where somebody just says, "Oh [snaps fingers], that's organic" and waves their hand and says, "Oh, you know." It needs to be more formal, really, especially when you get to a certain size. And that's the way I felt about labor issues. It was an issue that was not being addressed in any formal way by the other farms, and I felt like it was really important to do that.

We've now had a contract for eight years. So we have processes for all these things. An employee has a problem with something, they talk to so-and-so and so-and-so, we have a little meeting, and we resolve it this way. And there's a process for that; there's a process for talking about wages, and we have a health and dental plan, and we have vacation pay, and we have holiday pay and a pension plan.

Farmer: It really respects the work and the fact that these individuals work so hard.

Cochran: Yes. I mean, it's natural when you think about it. Of course they ought to have way more than they have even at our place. They ought to have better wages and a better health plan. We do now. But it's expensive, so our costs are probably twenty percent higher than other farms' costs when you add all those things in, not to mention the cost of the extra effort to the human relations things.

Farmer: How many employees do you have?

Cochran: We have around fifty employees, but it's about thirty or so people in production full time most of the season, nine months out of the year, and then it drops down to fewer. They take vacations during the wintertime. Because in the nine months or ten months, they work around two thousand hours, so they work a full year's worth of work in nine or ten months. By now, they say [claps hands once], "Well, you know, I'm outta here. I'm going to go hang out and kick back for three months."

Farmer: Do you stop production this time of year?

Cochran: No, no. Half of them do that and half of them don't. There's not as much to do during the winter, and it works out fine.

What we've done now is started an employee stock ownership plan, which is also not done in agriculture. We're the first farm in the country to attempt it. We added a profit sharing program on top of the wages and all that other stuff. So

when we have a profit we contribute a pretty significant portion of the profit to this profit sharing plan.

Farmer: It's just for employees.

Cochran: Just for employees. And so in a way, you can't really "buy" the stock. You have to earn it. It's all done in a democratic way. It operates under the ERISA [Employee Retirement Income Security Act] laws, which are Department of Labor laws. They're very highly regulated. It costs us twenty thousand, twenty-five thousand dollars a year just to administer it, between lawyer's fees and accounting fees just to administer it and be in compliance with the law. It's very expensive. But it's a great system, because it's a way for people to accumulate equity in the company and then leave in an orderly manner because the company buys the stock back from them.

Farmer: And they're stakeholders.

Cochran: And they're stakeholders. But it's a system that's been worked out over the last twenty-five years, so there's this whole body of knowledge about how the agreements are written up, and what kind of training programs people can have, and what's the fairest way to allocate the stock, what's the fairest way to value the stock. There's twenty years worth of knowledge about that.

So we're plugging into this other level of— You know, first it was organic. Then it was just basic workplace issues, and then it's this ownership piece, which is

another level of complexity that we're just embarking on, so it's going to be a few more years before people have much of a grasp of what it's about. But we've had our meetings, and they get a certificate with how many shares of stock they have, the value. We make a cash contribution sometimes, too, and that's in there. So they have, like, their own IRA account. And unlike most IRA accounts, they have some control over the value of their stock. Because they think about things and say, "Hey, let's try this" or, "Let's quit doing that." They have the ability to make things work.

Farmer: So do you have manager's meetings with people that are pretty responsible for the decisions around here? Or do you get to decide everything?

Cochran: No, we have a fairly traditional structure, in the sense that we have three managers. I function as the general manager, but I'm trying to move away from that. We have three managers: one for production; one for on-farm sales, which includes the farm stand and the U-Picks—that person also handles all the HR [human relations] stuff and the buildings—we provide housing for people, maintains the buildings, all that kind of thing. And then a third person handles wholesale sales and farmers' markets. So those three people are responsible for coordinating everybody else's activities.

Oh, you asked how many people work here. It's around thirty. It gets up to thirty-five at the peak, but it's around thirty people most of the season in production, and then three managers, and then maybe ten or fifteen more people in various sales positions, probably about three or so of those who have full-time

employment, and the rest of them are part time. They do one or two farmers' markets, or they come and they work for three months doing deliveries, or six months doing deliveries, but they're not real full-time, year-round. But we have probably the equivalent of around thirty-five to forty full-time employees basically. And there're about ten people in sales who sometimes don't work much at all.

Farmer: I didn't realize there were that many people in sales on farms.

Cochran: Well, it's sales and distribution. See, the kitchen is about two full-time equivalents.

Farmer: But it could be four people.

Cochran: It is four people. And then the farmers' markets are two full-time equivalents. But that's eight people. And the deliveries are one and a half full-time equivalents. That's four people. But that's okay. That works well with ex-college students who want to do this for a few years.

Farmer: But that makes the HR job really big.

Cochran: The HR job is very complicated. Because not only do fifty people work here, but twenty-five of them live here. Then there's who's playing the radio too loud and—

Farmer: Do they have families?

Cochran: Not living with them.

Farmer: Oh, so people who don't have families come live here.

Cochran: Right. Yes, we figured out right away that we couldn't do as much for as many people if we tried to do families. We'd have four families here instead of twenty-five employees.

Farmer: So how does this work when you talk with other farmers that have farms about your size, and you tell them about these labor practices and the union and the ESOP? What kind of reactions do you get?

Cochran: Well, generally there's a lot of interest among other small- to mid-size farms. Some of them do have health plans and so forth. But they tend to operate much more informally. They don't really have somebody who's in charge of HR. And they don't have written agreements about this and that, and written procedures about this and that. I think there's a lot of interest among a number of small- or mid-size farmers, mostly the mid-size people. The people that have ten employees or more, or eight employees or more, are saying, "Gee, how do you do this?" and "How does this work out?" and "How much does that cost?" So there is interest. I don't think there's a lot of interest in signing a union contract, but there's a lot of interest in trying to do many of the things that the union

contract stipulates. The truth is that very few farm workers in this country are represented by a union, just a tiny, tiny percentage.

Farmer: Have you experienced any kind of pressure to find workers because of the immigration issues, the border issues?

Cochran: No, we've always had real good luck finding people.

Farmer: Even in the last year or so, when it's gotten much tougher?

Cochran: Yes.

Farmer: Probably there's word of mouth, right, that this is a good place to work?

Cochran: Yes, there's word of mouth, I think. There might be other farms where people might make more money per hour than they make here, in which case somebody—you know, like somebody that pays piece rate, for example. People could say, "Gee, I'm twenty-two years old, and I can make twelve dollars an hour cash. I'd rather go do that."

Farmer: Yes, just because of their personal needs.

Cochran: But we have real stable work force, and we tend to have a higher percentage of older workers, because the health care is more important to them. They have a hard time keeping up with the twenty-two-year-olds, and so getting

a flat wage is an appealing thing to them. They don't have to worry about getting fired because they're old.

Farmer: There are advantages.

Cochran: There are advantages, yes.

Farms Not Arms

Farmer: Yes. So can you talk about your Farms Not Arms program?

Cochran: Sure. I'm actually following the lead—this is the brainchild of Michael O'Gorman. The Farms Not Arms group is a national group of small farms, actually some large farms, and veterans groups, that are trying to find a place for veterans to go after they have been serving in the military, a place that's healthy and good for them for their spiritual regeneration after having gone through a lot of difficult times. That's the concept behind it.

We were attracted to it. I'm a veteran; I served in the U.S. Army, and our sales manager served in the Vietnam era also, and perhaps in Vietnam, I think he did, in the Navy, but not in the middle of combat, I don't think. So we have this sympathy for the vet coming back and trying to get reoriented. It's quite a heart-wrenching experience, because some of the principal leaders of the group are parents, mothers who've lost a son or daughter in the conflict. To participate in meetings with them is emotionally very charged, because there they are, trying

to keep a smile when the fact is their son or daughter is dead now and isn't going to be able to benefit from something like this themselves. But they say, "Gee, if he'd come back, it would have been awfully nice to have a farm for him to go to and get his life back together."

Farmer: So they're doing it for someone else because they can't do that.

Cochran: Yes. And it's really powerful to sit there. We sat here in this room a few months ago. We had three moms, each one of them had lost a son. Their looks on their faces were pained, to say the least.

Farmer: So are they farmers themselves?

Cochran: No.

Farmer: They're wanting to partner with farmers.

Cochran: They're wanting to partner with us because they feel like this is a good cause. In fact, one of them has taken the lead and is putting something together up in Sonoma where they're going to be farming and they have a place to live. It'll be a transitional place. It'll be small, but that's all right.

Farmer: Yes. Well, I think even just the publicity around the formation of the group was powerful for people, to remember that veterans are coming back and they may look whole, but—

Cochran: You know, that's a really good point. I hadn't thought about that, but you're right. Even if it's only a small number of people, the whole notion that it exists maybe would even give hope to some vets who come back and feel like, well, there's nothing like that here for me. But, on the other hand, it exists somewhere, so maybe I can find something else. And maybe they will.

Farmer: Is the group getting referrals?

Cochran: Oh, yes, yes. It's one of those things that appeals to people of all stripes. It's gotten all sorts of support from all different quarters.

Farmer: So actually that's on people's individual farms now?

Cochran: No. What we're doing is creating this farm— It's going to start with this one place. Although, actually it turns out that there are farms that do have vets. We've had vets here, and the Homeless Garden Project¹² is probably the one that has done the most in that regard, because they have vets involved in their program. So we're trying to integrate what we do with the kinds of things like the Homeless Garden project that exist all over the country. My role is more lending moral support and a place to meet. I talk about it occasionally. I'm just one of the people that Michael tapped on the shoulder a couple of years ago and said, "Hey, will you help with this?" I said, "Sure, I'm into it." Other people are doing most of the work. We have meetings here, that sort of thing. And when they get started up there, I'll go up and help them figure out what to grow, and where to sell and that kind of stuff.

Thinking Big: The Vivid Picture Project

Farmer: Yes. Can you talk about the Vivid Picture project?

Cochran: Sure. The Vivid Picture project is very exciting, and I'm spending actually a great deal of my time on things related to that. It's abstract, which I like a lot. I've spent the last close to thirty years dealing with thousands of nuts and bolts and little pieces, and very concentrated small things—individual interactions with people, individual interactions with tractors, individual interactions with trucks, individual interactions with plants and water systems and pumps. All this practical stuff that is “real world” and all that kind of stuff has its place. But when somebody has spent their entire life doing all these little small things, the idea of being able to think big, and really think abstractly and take really big leaps is very exciting.

It's frustrating as hell to people who have been being an activist or being involved in theoretical stuff their whole lives, and will say, “God, why don't we just work on this project here and do some real good?” So it's the meeting of those two worlds, because what it amounts to is that there are thousands and thousands and thousands of people my age who've spent the last twenty, thirty, forty years dealing with small changes, working very hard to figure out how to get a refrigeration system to work in a co-op grocery store, or figure out all this kind of stuff.

So there are a lot of us who are realizing that if we really want to make any real progress, we need to step away from our day-to-day small projects in our community and say, “Okay, we need to make some serious changes here if we’re going to survive as a culture or as a species. And that’s going to require more than just my individual efforts on this particular community food program, or this particular publication that I work for, or this particular farm that I work for, or this particular whatever.”

I’m beginning to see that really it has to do with giving people the place to think big. It’s not in style to think big. It’s very much in style to think very small and very local—“Let’s change the way we recycle stuff in Santa Cruz County.” Well, that’s really important; that’s really good. But the world is going to die in the meanwhile. And so what’s important, I think, is for us to be able to think big. That requires a shift for a lot of people, because a lot of people are very secure thinking small and are not accustomed to the idea of really major moves. But Wal-Mart is. Wal-Mart makes a major move into South America and spends \$11 billion and does a whole program. The way they do it is they get six really smart people together and figure it out and do it. It only takes six people to do it. You sit down and they say, “Okay, you’re in charge of raising six billion; you’re in charge of marketing; you’re in charge of locating all the stores; you’re in charge of supplying all the stores.” And one person to run the deal. Six people. That’s all it takes. And they do it.

Well, we could do that too. We’re just as smart as they are, and we could compete the daylights out of Wal-Mart. We can do a better job. [Laughs.]

Farmer: I believe that.

Cochran: [Laughs.] But you get somebody who is working on a small community food program and saying, “Well, no, no, I am worried about fighting Wal-Mart next door. This stuff is not—” So it’s really difficult to get people willing to think really big. Let’s open 2,000 new stores. Let’s open 100,000 new acres of farmland to small farms. Let’s build forty-two processing plants. Let’s buy 7,000 trucks. Let’s own a biodiesel or three biodiesel companies. Let’s own an insurance company. Let’s have a bank. I mean, a whole big deal. Let’s make a \$25 billion project divided into tens of thousands of little units. And let’s change the whole school system. Let’s change the securities law, tax laws. Let’s change a whole bunch of stuff.

Farmer: So are you working with a group doing this?

Cochran: Yes. There’s a council that has a plan. It’s an evolving plan, but our job is to keep the faith in the big picture, and to help create a space where all of us who are doing our 10,000 small things can start to work together better, and also start to think big as a group. It’s not about funding this or funding that. It’s more about the space to think big, and networking all these people who have been really busy for the last twenty-five years, so busy that we have lost track of the big picture.

Farmer: But you have so much experience, that that’s what you can lend to them.

Cochran: We collectively know how to run banking systems. We know how to run insurance companies. We know how to run construction companies. We know how to run farms. We know how to run distribution systems. We know how to run processing plants. We know how to run regulatory systems. We know how to run schools. We know how to run all this stuff. We're all between fifty and seventy years old, and we know how to do all this stuff. We know all the nuts and bolts, and we've heard every story, and we've dealt with all problems, and we know how to do all that kind of stuff. I mean, I don't know how to do all of it, but I know how to do a part of it, but I know somebody who knows how to do another part, and they know somebody who knows how— And so the idea is to get all of us together and figure out a more rational way to have things work.

Farmer: Is it international?

Cochran: Well, we're connected internationally, but California is a big thing to bite off. How we fit into the rest of the world for sure is a big deal, because almost all of us have some connections to some international organizations as well.

Farmer: But what California does, a lot of people are affected by.

Cochran: Yes, but oddly (in fact, I'm starting to work this into the way I talk to people), I think the days are over when we can say the little refrain that you hear undoubtedly repeated at three hundred Rotary breakfasts around the state this

morning, as some speaker gets up and says, “Well, as you know, California is the seventh largest economy in the world, and innovation starts here and then moves out to the rest of the world.” That’s not true anymore. That is not true anymore. We are little bit too full of ourselves here in California, I think. There is a lot happening in the rest of the world that is way more innovative than what is happening in California. It’s time for us to pay attention to a lot of these things that are happening in the rest of the world and mix that together with what we’re doing here. We need to, I think, get over our California centrism, or whatever it is that we have here.

Farmer: “Ain’t we lucky that’s where we are?”

Cochran: Right, right, right. We’re patting ourselves on the back and thinking that the ideas of the future are going to come from California. I think some of them will, but—

Farmer: So how often does this group meet?

Cochran: We meet about three times a year. We have a website. You can look under Roots of Change. <http://www.rocfund.org/>. That explains a lot. There are networks of people forming and working on things. It’s a twenty-five-year project.

Farmer: And what year are you in?

Cochran: About year four. I would expect that in another year or so we'd become more of a part of public discussion. The idea is to shift people's perspective a bit. It's intangible. And it's hard for people who say, "Well, you know, have you built any health clinics? Have you started any farms?" The answer is, "No, we don't intend to do that. That's all of our jobs right now. Our jobs are to connect those." People are working on connecting things, but our job is to even have it all connected at a really meta level.

Farmer: Yes. Well, the planet may need that kind of coordination.

Cochran: Yes, yes. We're not going to survive unless we get coordinated here.

Farmer: Yes. Well, let me ask two final questions. First, what is the vision for the future of your farm?

The Vision for the Future of Swanton Berry Farm

Cochran: The vision for the future is going to come not just from me. I'm trying to institutionalize something that is an organism. I don't think as much about the farming, as much now as I think about trying to create an organism which farms, and houses people, and educates people, and feeds people. It's this "thing" that exists that isn't about me. It's about all those people saying, okay, well, we agree on these things and we're going to do this for a while—you know, three months, three years, thirty years. And they somehow associate in this organism for an

appropriate amount of time, and then the organism hopefully does a reasonably good job of farming and producing food, but sometimes it doesn't. [Laughs.]

Farmer: Yes. [Laughs.]

Cochran: Most of the time it does. So it's creating or nurturing this institution, is what I'm thinking.

Farmer: That sounds like you trying to have it be sustainable, sustain something.

Cochran: Right, and it gets beyond the personality of the founder, or the individual key personality. There're lots of personalities that come in and do this. I have other people who speak to the public about the farm, and other people who represent the farm on different things. I'm not the sole spokesperson or the sole idea person for the farm. I'm trying to get away from that. The point is to identify other talented people and bring them in and have them help carry that forward so that the institution is more than just me.

Farmer: Yes. That's reflected on the website and when you call on the phone and various things. Especially, I suppose, because people are stakeholders, there's a sense of carrying it forward.

Cochran: Yes.

Greatest Rewards and Challenges

Farmer: Okay. And then what are your greatest rewards and greatest challenges?

Cochran: The greatest rewards are psychic. It feels good to work with a really great group of people. It feels good to work with appreciative customers. And it feels good to grow food.

The challenges are the money. It's really tough if you are trying to do all this innovative stuff, to do much more than break even over ten years. I'm sure you have a year when you make a hundred and fifty thousand; the next year you lose a hundred and twenty, and the next year you make sixty, and then the following year you lose, I don't know—but it comes out that you don't make a lot of money. You buy equipment, and— But we're not growing, really, in size. We've reached a nice size, I think. We have twenty acres of strawberries, and that's less than one acre for every year we've been in business. A lot of farms have grown much faster. They're way bigger in organic strawberries than we are. We only grow one percent of the organic strawberries in the state of California now, or one and a half percent.

Farmer: And you used to be the only one?

Cochran: Right, we used to be one hundred percent. And so I've gone for depth rather than expansion. We get some extra money, and we say, "Oh, well, now we can do something on the housing," or, "Now we can get a new septic tank," or,

“Now we can do that improvement to the website that we’ve been wanting to do,” or, “Now we can buy a new truck,” or, “Now we can buy a new tractor.” Oh, God! And so the money comes in, and then it just gets reinvested in the company.

Farmer: You’ve been waiting to do things, yes.

Cochran: The problem is, I’ve got a list, and so does everybody else, a mile long. And so you just say, well, gee, if we were going to make \$100,000 a year for the next ten years in a row, everybody has already got it spent. We already know how to spend a million dollars worth of surplus, between housing and improvements and a better dental plan. And so if you’re winding up making \$50,000 a year and then you draw out twenty or twenty-five of it to live on, then you just say, well, gosh, where is the big surplus? I think that’s the challenge, is that I can see off into the indefinite future just being able to improve the organization, but I can’t really see, like, oh, well, now it’s time for a fat payoff for me or for the employees. It’s hard to see how you make a lot of money at this.

One of the things that I do, and one of the things that I’m promoting, is getting rid of this phrase (which is common now), which is “do well by doing good.” I think that that’s misleading, because you really don’t do well financially; you do okay. There’s something wrong if you’re doing well by doing good, because it means that you’re perhaps in a product cycle where there’s three years where the kind of yogurt that you make happens to be in fad and you make a ton of money.

But ten years down the road it's something else. Or the kind of clothing that you make and pay everybody well—you know, that goes out of style.

Farmer: People want something different.

Cochran: People want something different.

Farmer: That's human nature, yes.

Cochran: Or it's a moving target. I mean, some people make a lot of money in the doing-well-by-doing-good field, but it tends to move around, and it's not consistent over a very long period of time. And furthermore, if you really are making lots of money, then you should be paying people more and doing more for— Or maybe you're overcharging your customers. Maybe you're charging them too much for whatever it is.

Farmer: So it's about values, really, what you're talking about.

Cochran: Yes. But what's the balance? What people really want is not money, but they want security. I mean, the part of life that is work, it's about fulfillment, but it's also about being able to feel secure about your future. Am I going to have enough money to live on comfortably when I retire? Am I going to have good enough health insurance if I'm sick? Am I going to be able to work here even if I come up with some disability or another? Am I going to be able to work in an environment that is friendly, and I don't have to work so hard that I kill myself,

and that I enjoy? I mean, it's pretty basic. And if society had those things already set—if you knew that you had guaranteed health care and guaranteed decent retirement—a lot of pressure would be off people to make a lot of money. The Vivid Picture project deals with that kind of stuff: how do we get the basics and then allow for people who work really hard to get an extra something.

Farmer: Okay. Thank you, Jim.

¹UC Santa Cruz opened its doors in fall of 1965—Editor.

²For more on Co-op Campesina see an article by Peter Barnes written for *The New Republic* magazine in 1971-72 available in full text at <http://www.progress.org/barnes11.htm>. It reads in part, "A somewhat different vision of the future - not endorsed by the USDA - can be found in a gently sloping field near Watsonville, California...Here on the edge of the Pajaro Valley is a bustling new enterprise called the Cooperative Campesina, a farming cooperative formed slightly over a year ago by four Mexican-American families, now expanded to twenty-five and still growing. The economics of the cooperative are relatively simple. There are 140 acres under lease, with 80 planted in strawberries and 60 in zucchini squash. (Eventually all will be planted in strawberries.) To avoid hassles the land is divided among the members by lottery, with each family responsible for its own parcel."

³ See the oral history with Steve Gliessman in this series.

⁴ See the oral history with Dale Coke in this series.

⁵ "A watershed event in the consumer food safety crisis was the release of *Intolerable Risk: Pesticides in our Children's Food* by the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) (Sewell *et al.*, 1989). The report attacked procedures used by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to estimate health risks from pesticide residues and the time taken to discontinue a pesticide's use once it is found harmful. At issue was a breakdown product of the growth regulator daminozide (trade name: Alar), which is sprayed on apples to prevent pre-harvest fruit drop and to delay fruit maturity and internal decay. Studies have shown that a component and degradation product of Alar, (unsymmetrical) 1,1-dimethyl- hydrazine (UDMH), may be carcinogenic. By NRDC estimates, Alar posed a particular risk to infants and children, who because of their low body weights absorb disproportionate amounts of residues from apples and apple products. A *60 Minutes* broadcast and other media coverage about the report created nationwide panic. Numerous school systems banned the sale of apples, parents poured apple juice down the drain and super-markets began independent testing of their produce for pesticide residues (Aidala, 1989). A new special interest group, 'Mothers and Others for Pesticide Limits', was launched to arouse citizen action for legislative reforms and increased availability of organically grown produce. Farmers were unable to meet supermarket demands for pesticide-free fruits and vegetables, while apple growers lost more than \$100 million in reduced sales and prices. Although government and other scientific experts refuted NRDC's charges, public outrage eventually resulted in Alar's voluntary removal from the domestic market by Uniroyal Chemical Company." M. Elaine Auld, "Food Risk Communication: Lessons from the Alar Controversy," *Health Education Research* Volume 5, No. 4, 1990. pp. 535-543.

⁶ See the oral histories with Bob Scowcroft and Mark Lipson in this series.

⁷ See the oral history with Zea Sonnabend in this series.

⁸ See the oral history with Wendy Krupnick in this series.

⁹ See the oral history with Larry Jacobs in this series.

¹⁰ See the oral history with Jeff Larkey in this series.

¹¹ See the oral history with Nesh Dhillon in this series for more about the Santa Cruz farmers' markets.

¹² See the oral histories in this series with Darrie Ganzhorn and Paul Glowaski of the Homeless Garden Project.