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Title

Cynthia Sandberg: Love Apple Farm

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/75v443mg>

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Publication Date

2010-05-01

Supplemental Material

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/75v443mg#supplemental>

Cynthia Sandberg



Photo by Tana Butler

Love Apple Farm

Cynthia Sandberg is proprietor of Love Apple Farm—an establishment unique among Central Coast small farms in its combination of biodynamic techniques, an exclusive supply relationship with a single high-end restaurant, a focus on heirloom tomatoes, a rich public offering of on-farm classes, and a successful Internet-based marketing strategy.

Love Apple occupies two productive acres in Ben Lomond, in Santa Cruz County's San Lorenzo Valley. Sandberg farms according to the biodynamic principles developed in the 1920s by Rudolph Steiner, and is seeking certification for Love Apple through Demeter USA, the country's only certifying agent for biodynamic farms. In addition to shunning synthetic pesticides and fertilizers, a certified biodynamic farm must also be managed, according to Demeter's website, as if it were "a living organism," minimizing waste and external inputs.

As the kitchen garden for upscale Manresa restaurant in nearby Los Gatos (Santa Clara County), Love Apple enjoys a symbiotic business relationship with the two-Michelin-star restaurant and its executive chef-proprietor, David Kinch, who often visits the farm. While Sandberg grows a wide variety of produce for Manresa and for sale in her seasonal on-site farm cart, she specializes in heirloom tomatoes, of which she produces more than 100 varieties. (Locals sometimes refer to her as “The Tomato Lady.”) She sells tomato starts every spring, and teaches popular classes on a wide variety of topics including growing tomatoes from seed, building tomato cages, and gardening in containers. And she has cultivated an effective online marketing strategy centered on her blog/website.

Farming is a second career for Sandberg, a former attorney. She unwittingly launched her new life in the early 1990s, when, hoping to improve her rudimentary gardening skills, she enrolled in horticulture classes at Cabrillo, Santa Cruz County’s community college. A few years later, her early-spring gardening preparations proved unexpectedly successful, and she found herself puzzling about what to do with 290 excess tomato seedlings. She arrayed them in the driveway along with a sign and an honor-system money jar—and passersby quickly snapped them up. Thus was born Love Apple Farm.

“Love apple” is an old French name for the tomato, historically associated with aphrodisiac qualities. The farm’s name also commemorates Harry Love, a former Texas Ranger who led the attack on Mexican Robin-Hood figure Joaquin Murrieta and his band of outlaws in San Benito County in 1853. Sandberg has been told that the house she inhabits, now surrounded by garden beds and greenhouses, was built with Love’s reward money.

Sarah Rabkin interviewed Cynthia Sandberg on the back porch of Sandberg’s Love Apple farmhouse in Ben Lomond, California, on March 9, 2009.

Additional Resources:

Love Apple Farm/Growbetterveggies.com: <http://www.growbetterveggies.com/> [Includes a link to extensive press coverage of Love Apple Farm]

YouTube videos about Love Apple Farm:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bbQjUG_BD-M

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t1MruVo_YVQ

Beginnings

Rabkin: This is Sarah Rabkin, and I am with Cynthia Sandberg at Love Apple Farm on March 26th, 2009. So, Cynthia, I'm going to start with basic background about you. Where and when were you born?

Sandberg: I was born in California, in Redwood City, in 1959.

Rabkin: And tell me about your schooling.

Sandberg: I was raised in on the east side of San Jose, California, right next to a pear orchard. I remember that was significant for me because they eventually tore the pear orchard down to make way for a school and all the urban sprawl that was happening in Silicon Valley at that time, taking out all those great fruit orchards and putting in housing and the accoutrements that go along with the housing: schools and whatnot. But I remember playing in the pear orchard quite a bit and in walnut orchards nearby. I didn't have a real love of plants then. I went on to high school and college and eventually decided that I'd become an attorney. I went through law school, and I was practicing law for a while, bought one of my first houses, along with my husband at the time.

Horticulture at Cabrillo College

Rabkin: Where was that?

Sandberg: That was in Capitola, California. I started to garden there, and wondered the first year why some of the plants that I had put into the ground didn't survive the winter—because we have mild winters, particularly near the coast. And I thought, well, I'm putting all this time and effort into my garden. I'm going to go learn about this a little bit more. So I started taking horticulture classes at Cabrillo College at night, in addition to practicing law during the day. And I found out that there was this thing called an annual. And that's why some of my plants didn't make it through the winter, because it was an annual. I had no idea, starting out as a new gardener, that there was even a difference between something that basic. And, of course, Cabrillo College changed everything. I think that they're a fabulous community resource. It's a wonderful horticulture program that they've got up there. I applaud them, and I recommend it to anybody interested in a career in horticulture.

Rabkin: Did you have any particular teachers that you remember from that time?

Sandberg: Richard Merrill¹ was quite a force in the horticulture field in Santa Cruz County. He was a long-time professor and probably the driving force behind the whole horticulture program there. I went through the program, and right at the end of it my ex-husband and I bought this farm. It wasn't a farm at the time; it was just a two-acre piece of land with an old farmhouse on it, up in

the Santa Cruz Mountains. It was right around that same time that I quit my job to focus on raising our small son.

A Passion for Tomatoes

And since I can't just sit around and not do anything other than mothering, which I love doing and I love being a mom, I started putting in a vegetable garden here at the farm. It wasn't a farm then, again. So I started ripping out lawns and putting in vegetable gardens, and every bit of the garden, every subsequent year, more of those bits were devoted to tomatoes and less were devoted to other vegetables.

Rabkin: Why is that?

Sandberg: Well, that was what really became my passion: tomatoes.

Rabkin: Why tomatoes?

Sandberg: All different kinds of shapes and colors and tastes and sizes and intricacies go into heirloom tomatoes. Every color of the rainbow, you can get in an heirloom tomato. So I wanted to grow this one and grow that one, and oh, I have to grow this one too—until every nook and cranny of the property were covered in tomatoes every year. Then I'd take a break in the wintertime and start looking at seed catalogs and getting familiar with the new varieties and new growing techniques to really master tomato growing.

Rabkin: What were you doing with all those tomatoes?

Sandberg: That's a good question, because there were too many. The way I started my little cottage business ten years ago (because we bought the property thirteen years ago, maybe twelve years ago—it was right after we started living here), I wanted to grow—I remember this very distinctly—ten varieties of tomatoes. I laugh at that now because I'll grow 125 this year, but at that point I thought, wow, ten! I bought ten seed packets, and I had really good luck germinating them, and all of a sudden I was faced with 300 healthy, fabulous tomato plants. What to do with them? Well, I live on kind of a busy road—the road that's on the way up to the dump, which sounds scary, but it's actually been quite the blessing. I put a sign at the end of my driveway, and I said: "Tomato Starts, a Buck." And people came and loved it.

I had this idea: Aha! I could pay for my seeds every year, and my little tomato hobby if I sell the extra tomato plants in the spring. And I can make a little bit extra money selling all this extra tomato fruit that I'd get in the late summer and fall, because that's our season here in Central California, coastal California. And people started to come. I had a fruit stand loaded up with tomatoes.

Rabkin: Right here in the driveway?

Sandberg: Right in the driveway. It was on the honor system back in those days. I was too busy working in the garden to come interact with all the people that wanted me to weigh produce or take change. I couldn't be bothered with that. And the only reason I couldn't be bothered was I didn't have to make a living at it, because my husband still went off to work and made good money and supported my habit. I still tried to make some money off it so that I wouldn't feel

so bad about expending this huge sum of money on soil and trays and pots and seeds and garden beds and soil amendments and everything that I was doing to experiment with, trying to grow as good a tomato as I could get.

Eventually I became totally tomatoes, and since I was growing a hundred varieties here on the farm and offering them for sale as starts in the spring and on the tomato stand later, I started getting noticed by various media: What is this freaky tomato lady doing and why is she doing it? First off, newspapers would come and do a little article, just a filler article, maybe in the garden section. And after that, some magazines. I got into *Sunset* magazine. In California, the pinnacle of every gardener's dream is to be in *Sunset* magazine, so that was good fun. And along about that same time, I was featured in a couple of different television shows.

Rabkin: Was all this publicity coming to you, or did you enterprise any of it?

Sandberg: I think that the first couple of things, I actually asked one of my customers. I needed to sell a lot of tomato plants. I had too many. I said, "Would you mind calling up the radio station and telling them that there's a lot of good tomato plants over there at Love Apple Farm?" And they said, "No, not at all." I had to give it some pushes. I think that that's been instrumental, the little nudges I've given it, because otherwise I'm just a crazy gardener sequestered in her garden. You really have to put yourself out there to try to make a living.

That was about, I guess, the pinnacle of the tomato craziness, about four years ago. After that, my ex-husband kind of gave me an ultimatum. He says, "You're

working yourself to death. I kind of want my Martha Stewart wife back that I used to have.”

Rabkin: Was he still your husband at this point?

Sandberg: He was still my husband. And I said, “Well, I really don’t want to stop Love Apple Farm.² I’ve created this. I created it out of my own sweat, blood and tears, and my effort, and I’ve got thousands of customers that come onto the property and tour around.” But it was getting to be too much for him, the lack of privacy because of the people on the farm. I could totally understand that. I could see where he was coming from, and I empathized with that, but I said, “You know what? If that’s what you want and this is what I want, then I agree with you: We’ll part company.” And it was a mutual thing.

Love Apple Farm

In the divorce settlement, I got the farm, but I also got the big fat mortgage on the farm, too. And I had to make a decision: okay, now I have to really support myself. It was no longer a hobby. I have to make the farm pay off.

Rabkin: When was this?

Sandberg: This was three or four years ago. So I started giving gardening classes. I had so many people asking me—they’d come on the property, and they’d go, “How do you grow these tomatoes? How do you do this? How do you do that?” And I found myself— If I allowed them to take up all my day, that would happen, just one after another asking me how I do this, how I do that, and pretty soon I’d attract a little crowd in my garden of people that were coming just to the

tomato fruit stand or to get some seedlings. And I thought, Well, I'm going to see if I can actually charge for a gardening class.

Now, four years later, that has become a huge part of my business: giving gardening classes. I started giving tomato gardening classes, and tomato seed-sowing classes, and summer vegetable gardening, and winter vegetable gardening. Now we're up to jam-making classes and beekeeping and compost and vermiculture. So we have a lot of different things that people are interested in, and I'm happy to accommodate them. It's been a nice way to supplement the farm income.

Another way was my partnership with a local restaurant by the name of Manresa in Los Gatos.³

Partnership with Manresa Restaurant in Los Gatos

Rabkin: Let's talk about that. How did that begin?

Sandberg: Well, the chef, David Kinch, had heard about me. David Kinch loves to source local farmers and local produce and meats and fowl, fish. He loves to do local stuff. Somebody kept telling him about this crazy tomato lady, and he asked me if I would start supplying him with tomatoes. I'd had that request before, from other restaurants, but I always turned them down because it was all I could do, really, to produce the tomato the way I like to grow them, which is very labor intensive. It was all I could do to do that and put them on the tomato stand and manage my other stuff that I had to do now that I was newly single and I needed to manage the farm by myself. So I usually turned down those

requests from chefs because I can't be putting the tomatoes in my truck and schlepping them around to one county, let alone another county over, which is where Manresa is. But I said yes to Chef Kinch because his restaurant had recently been named one of the top fifty restaurants in the world. I thought, wow, that's pretty posh! I'm going to go check that out.

So I had dinner at the restaurant. It was fabulous. It was a life-changing experience. It was the most wonderful, wonderful thing to eat there, and I agreed to supply him with tomatoes for a season. And the season ended in late October, like it does here in Central California, and that was that. I went back to scraping by and trying to do some other things. He didn't get all my tomatoes anyway that year. I still had my tomato fruit stand. But the following spring, he called me on the phone, and he said, "I'm looking for my own farm." And what he didn't see at the other end of the line was me raising my hand, like: "Me, me, me, me, me!"

Rabkin: [Laughs.]

Sandberg: "I want to be that. I want to be that farm." Because I needed to have another revenue source. And I also knew what the chef's cuisine was like, and I told him right away—I said, "It can't be by the pound, because you give such care with your food and you have such small little bits and pieces of all these different things on your plate— I know you want borage flowers, for example. I'm not going to charge you by the pound for borage flowers that weigh one-eighth of an ounce." So it would have to be something like a community

supported agriculture chef, but with one restaurant. And so I joked that it's an RSA [restaurant supported agriculture] instead of a CSA.

So we struck a deal for a monthly amount of money, and we started out small, very small, just to see how it would go, the relationship. Now, three years later, almost all the things we do here on the farm go towards the restaurant. All of our planting beds are devoted toward creating something for Manresa, not just tomatoes. I got back full swing into every kind of fruit and veg you could imagine. I can't grow everything up here in these cold mountains, but I can grow a lot of stuff that you can't grow down in Santa Cruz proper, near the coast.

Rabkin: Like what?

Sandberg: I can grow stone fruits here, where they can't. They need x number of chill hours every year. I can't grow citrus or avocados up here. What's nice is in every garden, no matter where you're located, there's a niche for you. There's something that you can grow that's edible and wonderful, so you don't always have to bemoan the fact that you're not in California or you're not in the San Joaquin Valley. In Maine you can grow some fabulous stuff. And in fact, sometimes things grow better in Maine than they grow here in California, believe it or not. So we don't have a whole lot on Maine or Vermont; we just grow different things. I hope that answered the question about the restaurant connection.

Rabkin: What are the particular pleasures for you of having this relationship with a restaurant?

Sandberg: It's always a challenge. Growing for the restaurant is a constant challenge because I have to produce something for him fifty-two weeks out of the year, and it has to be two-Michelin star level, and we're shooting for three Michelin stars. It has to be at the highest level possible. He's renowned for his vegetables, and that's where I come in. I have to uphold that reputation. So it's always a challenge trying to make sure that I give him enough different things, and new things that he can't get anywhere else, because it's got to be a mutually beneficial relationship. He's got to see some value in having his own farm. So we can give him stuff that he can't get anywhere else. It gives me challenges that I wouldn't find in another type of a farm that has to be more consumer-driven.

A market farmer is still a commercial farmer—not that I'm *not* a commercial farmer, but it's a whole different kettle of fish, because a market farmer is still trying to go: okay, what's the average Joe coming to a farmers' market—what does he want? Does he want white-when-ripe tomatoes or green-when-ripe tomatoes? Probably not. I know the answer to that because I had them on my tomato stand and they don't sell. I still insist on growing them because those are some of the tastiest tomatoes around, but I have a kindred spirit in the chef who will taste that white tomato and realize it is so fabulous that it needs its own spot on the menu, when the time is ripe, in the middle of the tomato season.

So it's always a challenge for me to satisfy him and the amount of veg that the restaurant needs, and the number of different things. I'm always trying to shake it up: new stuff, new varieties, new things that he's never seen before. And I try to grow it. Sometimes it's not always successful, and other times it's fabulously successful. Whenever I get something new that he really likes, he gives me this

statement—I'm not even sure he realizes this statement, but he says, "This is the single best thing we grow here."

Rabkin: [Chuckles.]

Sandberg: And then three months later it'll be something new, and he'll go, "This is the single best thing we grow here." [Laughs.] And it's just become kind of a running joke for me, to see if I can get him to say that yet again about something different.

Rabkin: Does he ask you for particular produce, or do you pretty much call the shots as to what you grow for him?

Sandberg: It's both. It's a very collaborative relationship. He'll ask me, "Well, you know, I found this"—he does tons of research himself. He goes to a lot of seminars. He goes to restaurants all over the world. That's part of his job, to find out what's new and exciting and improve on it, make something new that nobody else has made before. So if he comes across a new vegetable or a new variety of something, he will ask me. He'll collect seeds for me in other countries and make sure that I get my hands on them. People from other countries will contact him. He just had some guy from Australia contact him and talk about these two kinds of squashes he grows. And Chef said, "Well, can you send me some?" And I don't know how that fits into our customs laws—whether or not you can send seeds, but we get to have seeds from all over the world here, and we try to grow them.

Rabkin: What are some of the crops you've grown from seeds that come from outside the country?

Sandberg: A wonderful salad green, which is called ficoide glaciale. It's a really, really strange plant that has what looks like ice crystals on it. That was the hardest seed I've had to acquire, and it was very hard to grow because on the seed packet that I got from France (of course, I had to have it translated because I don't speak French), and then my first attempt to grow it, it didn't even germinate because the seed package directions were incorrect. The seed needed light to germinate—not being covered, which is what the seed packet said. So that's been a fabulously successful crop, one of the most oft written about and photographed crops that we have here on the farm, because when you hold that up to the light, the light shines through the ice crystals on the leaves and on the stem of the ficoide glaciale.

Another one is Bordeaux spinach. If I see something online—and I do a lot of research at night, whether it's on pest or disease control or new varieties—if I see something online that looks intriguing, I'll acquire the seed and I'll put a little test patch in the garden. Sometimes I won't even tell the chef that I've got something new going until it's ready. I'll say, "Taste this. See what you think." Then it's that, "This is the single best thing we're growing."

Rabkin: It must be gratifying to have that kind of enthusiastic response to what you grow.

Sandberg: He's very involved. He loves the garden, loves to walk through the garden. He's always tasting and smelling and touching and thinking. I can just

see the wheels turning in his head as he walks through, about recipes that he might make out of this or that, that he hadn't considered. He'll even take things from our pine and fir trees and juniper trees to make gelees and infusions of redwood. He'll go foraging in our tiny little stand of redwoods. Sometimes he'll pull out a weed that he knows is edible, or a mushroom that he knows is edible. And later that night one of our weeds is on a plate at Manresa restaurant, being served to the *Michelin Guide* director.

Rabkin: [Laughs.]

Sandberg: I find that a lot of fun. I really do. And going to the restaurant—when I get to go to the restaurant, which is quite often, at least quite often for a farmer like me, it's fascinating and wonderful to see stuff that I've grown on the plates and what he can do with it. I don't like eggplant. It's one of the very few things on this Earth I do not like to eat—but when David Kinch makes me eggplant, I will eat it because it is fabulous.

Rabkin: Is eating at the restaurant part of your deal with him?

Sandberg: It's not part of my deal with him, but he knows how much I enjoy it, and he's very generous about inviting me. There's an annual tomato dinner, where everything on the menu has a tomato in it, even the dessert. He gives me a table, usually for six, and I bring my really good volunteers and interns. I run on a system here of volunteers, interns and apprentices. People love to come in and learn, and I'm happy to put them to work. I reward them by taking them to the tomato dinner or taking them at other times to Manresa. And it's a reward for

me, too, because it really regenerates my batteries and makes me want to do even more stuff for the restaurant. So that's been great.

Rabkin: How many months of the year are you supplying produce to Manresa?

Sandberg: Twelve months out of the year.

Rabkin: Wow.

Sandberg: I have something going constantly for them. *That's* our deal. Our deal is to have this be a productive farm year-round. They're open year-round, and they need produce year-round. The chef is very seasonal in what he likes to put on plates. And his diners are very savvy diners. They don't want to see a tomato in January or a tomato in April. They know better. So you better be having the tomato in the right time of year. You better be having the broccoli in the right time of year. And it's wonderful because the chef realizes that; his diners realize it. I can only do so much as far as the seasons, but we still have, in the middle of winter, maybe a hundred different varieties of things growing at the height of winter, and at the height of summer, maybe 200, 250 different things growing for the restaurant.

That's what's challenging about being that kind of farmer, is that even a market farmer has just a set number of things that they'll grow. They'll maybe concentrate on two or three things, or maybe, at the most, fifteen things because maybe they have a CSA, too, in addition to their farmers' market stand. Me, I'm juggling and trying to make happy 200 different things. And that's where the challenge comes in, because every plant wants a little bit different care. Every

plant has a little bit different pest that attacks it or disease that you need to watch out for, or watering needs, or pH of the soil that it wants, the fertilizing regimen, or spacing issues, or companion planting. So it seems like every little thing wants something different, and we have to supply it. If we can't, then we can't give that produce to the restaurant, and so it goes. You gotta keep your boss happy, and right now the restaurant is my main customer.

Rabkin: Do you have any others?

Sandberg: No, that was part of our contract as well, is to have an exclusive relationship.

Rabkin: So you are the sole farm provider to Manresa.

Sandberg: I try to be, and I think we're up to about eighty percent now of what he does. What is on the menu is driven by the garden. But I can't produce everything for him. Like I said, I can't produce citrus or avocado. My climate doesn't allow me to do that, and being such a haute cuisine restaurant, he's got to have citrus in there, and he's got to have avocados and all the things that I can't grow. So we try our best. I think when we first started it was thirty percent, and then it got up to fifty percent. I think now he's running at about eighty percent. And he tries really hard to ensure that everything that we produce, he uses.

Rabkin: Do you know of other relationships like yours in the state or in the country?

Sandberg: Well, I know of more now than I did when we first started out. When we first started out over three years ago, it was a new business model for farmers.

Rabkin: As far as you know, it was the only thing going like it.

Sandberg: As far as I know. I don't know every farmer. I don't know every business arrangement, and certainly I don't know every restaurant. But we got a lot of press because of that interesting relationship. I know Blue Hill at Stone Barns, above Manhattan in New York—they have their own farm. But it's kind of a different relationship because that farm is supported by grant monies and—I heard; I could be wrong, but I heard Rockefeller money. And when you go there, it is a wonderful, fabulous place, but it's not a farm that has to make a living doing what it's doing. *I* have to make a living doing what I'm doing, so there's always a mind towards: Is this paying off? Am I saving money on this? Am I saving energy? Am I able to buy that bag of feed for the chickens, or can I produce enough compost and worm castings here so that I don't have to go buy my fertility?

Chef and I decided the farm would be biodynamic from the get-go. One of the tenets of biodynamic agriculture is creating your own fertility and having a closed loop between your inputs and your outputs so that you don't have very many inputs that are off-site. That necessitates us needing a lot of our own compost and fertility. So we have chickens; we have a pig. We have our worm bins. We have our compost piles. We get the kitchen scraps from Manresa. Everything goes in the compost or to the chickens. That gets regenerated through

the compost and into the garden. It's a very good, closed-loop system that includes the restaurant in that closed loop.

Rabkin: So you're not having to bring in any outside inputs besides what comes from the restaurant?

Sandberg: The first three years, as we were getting better and better at producing our own compost, I needed to bring in organic fertilizers. But slowly we've got to the point where we generate now, I would say, ninety percent of our own fertility through compost and worm castings. We'll fertilize crops with worm casting tea that we make, or compost tea, sometimes both. Every time we plant a new bed, it gets amended with compost and worm castings. On a few beds, where I still see that there is a fertility issue (each crop tells me whether or not there's a fertility issue in that bed), then I'll be more heavy-handed with our own homemade stuff, and then I might put some supplemental organic fertilizer in there. But for the most part, I think the transition in the last few years to complete biodynamic status—and I'm not Demeter® certified yet, but I'll be seeking that certification this spring—the transition is almost one hundred percent; it's about ninety percent now. My amendment cost has gone down dramatically in those three years. Once you start to produce your own fertility, then you're really reducing the amount of costs that you have on a lot of stuff.

Interns, Volunteers, and Apprentices

And going to a system of interns and volunteers and apprentices keeps my labor costs to—puts it down to zero, basically. When I first started the farm, I did everything on the farm, or my husband helped me or my son helped me or my

friends helped me. People who were interested in gardening but they didn't have their own patches of land—they'd come over and help me. Even my customers started helping me. They became my volunteers, and that's how we've worked for many years now. I can grab some great farm interns from UCSC. They have a fabulous program, and the young people that I get here from that program are very well educated, very passionate about making things grow properly, about pest management, about disease control, all organically done, and they learn a little bit about biodynamic agriculture and get a chance to get their feet wet and their hands dirty.

Rabkin: Do you get them through the Environmental Studies Department's [undergraduate] internship program?

Sandberg: I do. Sometimes, though, I'll just have somebody that just inquires.

Rabkin: Word of mouth.

Sandberg: Word of mouth. I've had a young woman earlier this year. She was in the agroecology program. She didn't set up her internship, but she came out to volunteer anyway. That's always really nice to have that, I think. As we speak, there are six people here on the farm that are all volunteers, working, pricking out plants [from seedlings], turning in cover crops, watering tomatoes in the greenhouse, thinning vegetable beds. I've been really blessed to have that kind of help.

Rabkin: What's the difference between an intern and an apprentice?

Sandberg: I have to figure out somehow to differentiate them. A volunteer is somebody who comes for just a few hours maybe once a week. I have a lot of great volunteers who come Tuesday mornings from eight to twelve. That's their deal. Those are usually my old customers that are interested in learning more about how to grow things.

My interns are people that I consider have committed to a certain amount of months and come more often than once a week. They're many times associated with the university or if they've made this verbal commitment to me—you know, "I really want to learn how to do this. I don't need housing. I don't need board on the farm, but I really want to learn," and we set up three days a week they'll come over at certain times for six months, and they'll do that. Those people, I consider interns.

And then my apprentices—I've just got one apprentice now, and she lives on the farm with me and works and learns. She wants to be a farmer one day, and this has been a fabulous help for me because then I don't have to do all my opening and closing chores like I had to do for years and years and years here. That was really quite exhausting. I have somebody else that can help me out with that. Because people come, and they go, volunteers and interns, but if you have an apprentice actually living on the farm with you, they can go out at midnight and lock up the chickens that you forgot to lock up earlier. That's very nice.

Rabkin: How do you find apprentices? Do you advertise for them?

Sandberg: I found her through advertising at the ATTRA [National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service—formerly Appropriate Technology Transfer for

Rural Areas] website. It was a lark one day. I was doing some research on the ATTRA website, and I noticed they had a page on farm apprentice programs or internships, and I thought, well, I'll put something on there. And since I put that on there, I've had dozens and dozens of inquiries from people wanting to be an apprentice.

I see a marked increase in the amount of people wanting to get into farming and agriculture. I think the fact of my association with the restaurant means that I get more press than a funky, two-acre microfarm would normally get. People want to be part of that world-famous restaurant connection. I'll take it. Anybody who wants to come give me a hand and shovel some compost around, I will take that help. And they get a benefit, too, because they learn how to build a proper compost pile. They learn how to sift compost. They learn how to apply it, what's going on there, what's the benefit of it.

Rabkin: Do you spend a lot of time training, teaching, or supervising your volunteer help?

Sandberg: I try to get out there at least once during the time a volunteer is here and give them some direction. But I find that the more income streams that I have on the farm and the more media attention I get, the more I need to address—be on the Internet, be ordering seeds, making Excel spreadsheets. I still do all my own accounting, so I've got that to do. I've got shopping to do of my seeds and my trays and my pots and the varieties that I select. I've got irrigation to install. I haven't taught anybody how to do that yet. I've got class administration to handle, which is quite onerous. I've got to market the classes.

I've got to market my tomato seedling sale. It's ironic, because I started the business because I like to get my hands in the soil and I didn't want to be at a desk job anymore. And now I've made the transition of not being able to be outside working as much as I'd like, and I have to sit at the desk again. So I'm not sure how I get back outside other than hiring people to do the accounting and do the marketing for me. I'm not quite ready to make that commitment yet, nor is that in the budget. But maybe one of my good interns or volunteers can set me up with that.

Developing a Website

I have had a fabulous volunteer that has helped me a lot on my website and my blog. She's a software engineer in Silicon Valley, and she would drive over from San Jose every Sunday morning and volunteer because she wanted to learn more about gardening. And then one day she just mentioned it to me. She said, "Cynthia, you should have a blog, and I can help you with that." And I said, "Oh, yeah?" I said, "I don't want to do that. It sounds really complicated to me. I'm not very computer savvy." She says, "I'll walk you through it."

So we spent every Sunday morning for about twelve weeks crafting the website and getting it up and running. She's the force behind it being so fabulous. I do the blogging now, but she's taught me everything I know about it. And when I get too tired to blog, she's the little voice in my ear that says, "Cynthia, you need to put up a new blog post. Let's do it." She'll even come over and take pictures for me, because she knows that sometimes I can't even take the pictures, I'm so

busy. So Annette has been great with helping me with the technical side of things.

Rabkin: I'm so surprised to hear you say that you're not particularly computer savvy yourself, because you have a reputation as someone who does a lot of successful outreach online.

Sandberg: You know, that's funny to me that people consider me that way. I was even asked to speak at Eco-Farm [the Ecological Farming Association] about website marketing.

Rabkin: I was at that session. You sounded very knowledgeable.

Sandberg: I thought, wow, this is really funny, that people consider me some sort of a quasi—I'm not even going to use the "expert" word because I'm just so far from being it.

Rabkin: [Chuckles.]

Sandberg: But a girl's got to pay the mortgage, and you just got to continue doing your best to try to get customers. You have to go computer or die. You really do. Even farms that are off the grid have websites, and you find them via Internet searches. That's just the way of the world now. You have to do that. If you don't have a web presence and continually push that, you're going to have another farm that *can* do it and will spring up in your place and compete with you. And competition is good, but you need to pay your farm mortgage. [Laughs.]

The Economics of the Farm

Rabkin: So how *is* it going on the paying-the-mortgage front? Is the farm now supporting you and itself?

Sandberg: The farm, I'm happy to say, supports the various income streams I have on the farm, from renting out living structures (permitted living structures, I might add), to my restaurant contract, to my annual tomato seedling sale, which has grown to the point where I have people coming from all over California to my annual tomato seedling sale—

Rabkin: Wow.

Sandberg: —to my farm stand, which is— Actually, my little farm stand doesn't ever clear a profit, and it never did because it costs me far more to produce a sellable tomato than I could charge for it, because I just put so much effort into it. And despite me trying to teach the public that heirloom tomatoes are funky-looking but they're fabulous, they still want a perfect-looking tomato, and they'll only choose the perfect-looking specimens on the tomato stand.

Heirloom Tomatoes

Rabkin: Do you mean round and smooth with no indentations?

Sandberg: Right, no little imperfection, no tiny yellow fleck. Because in the supermarket that's what you get. You expect a perfect-looking fruit. Heirlooms are not like that, and I'm all about the heirlooms, so I try to teach people. And, you know, they've really come around. They're much more accepting of the

flaws now and the weirdo colors. A lot of them end up coming to my tomato seed-sowing classes and end up having their own tomatoes in their garden, rather than just getting the strange ones on the tomato stand.

Rabkin: Do you think it helps that people are encountering heirlooms more often now in farmers' markets and places like New Leaf Market?

Sandberg: Yes, it actually scares me a little bit. When I first started out with my passion for heirloom tomatoes, I was kind of one of the only games in town, as it were. You could not buy heirloom tomatoes at Safeway or Costco back in those days, ten years ago. When you went to a farmers' market ten years ago, you maybe got four or five different varieties of heirlooms, maybe a bicolor, maybe a black, like a Cherokee purple. But you didn't have the kind of selection you have now. And that's not because of me. That's because people have reconnected with their love of gardening, their love of heirloom varieties. The whole thing Alice Waters started and so many restaurants like Manresa continue, is eating local, buying local, growing your own food. So I have had nothing to do with it other than realize that, wow, the competition is really increasing there. So I continue to try to adapt and change my production methods and my way of doing things so that I can still earn a living.

Rabkin: How so? (Without giving away company secrets.)

Sandberg: I do a lot of research and experimenting on improving the flavor of the tomatoes. I'll do a lot of research in the wintertime on varieties of tomatoes worldwide that we don't have here yet in California and you can't get at any other nursery. I'm on these tomato boards all over the world, and I converse with

other gardeners. If there is a tomato that somebody loves in Iran, I'll acquire that seed somehow. I did one year acquire a fabulous tomato seed from Iran. I got it from a friend of mine who is Iranian. He brought it to me, and he said, "This is the kind of tomato we have in Iran. We only have one kind of tomato. It's a red tomato." He says, "I don't know the name of it, but here are the seeds. Let's try it." So we brainstormed some names, because we have to name it something, and I asked him what the word for tomato was in Farsi, and he said some word that—it was way too long and complicated. I said, "Well, we can't have that." So I said, "What's the name for beautiful?" And he said, "Ziba." And I said, "Well, let's call it Ziba." And that was a popular tomato for a few years for me. So that's what I try to do. And that's how I adapt, always trying to offer my customers new stuff.

Rabkin: What drew you to heirlooms in the first place?

Sandberg: You know, I don't even remember the year, or the time, or really what the catalyst was, or that "aha" moment. I don't have that good of a memory.

Rabkin: What do you love about them?

Sandberg: I love all the different colors and the tastes and the shapes. You know, your standard red supermarket tomato—I'm loath to grow that. Of the hundred varieties of tomatoes that will be in my garden this year, not very many of them will be red beefsteak varieties. I might have some red oxhearts, some red elongated tomatoes, some red ruffled tomatoes, but only a couple will be big round red tomatoes. The vast majority of them will be different colors and shapes and flavors.

Biodynamic Farming: A Closed Loop System

Rabkin: You mentioned earlier that you are adhering to biodynamic principles here, and that that's a decision that you and the chef reached together. What made you decide to go biodynamic?

Sandberg: It was even before I had met the chef. I was at a farm that grows biodynamically, and I had never heard that word before. I didn't even know what it was. This was in October, maybe five years ago. I was looking at these tomatoes in October, and anybody that grows tomatoes realizes that by October, they're all looking really peaked. They've already passed their prime. They're going into the winter. We're getting some cold nights. Ugly-looking tomato plants, usually, in late October. But these tomatoes were not only thriving and producing fruit, they were probably the most beautiful tomato plants I'd ever seen, and I've seen a few tomato plants in my day.

Rabkin: This was a local farm?

Sandberg: This was up in northern California. I couldn't ask the farmer that day what was going on, but I ended up seeing him a couple of months later. His name is Jeff Dawson. He's very famous in biodynamic agriculture. And I said, "Jeff, how can you get a tomato to look that great in late October?" And he said, "Biodynamics." I had never met Jeff Dawson before. To me, he was a rock star. It was like meeting Bruce Springsteen for me, to meet Jeff Dawson, because he's a big tomato guy. And he told me that one word, "biodynamics." I said, "What?" He got a look on his face like he'd probably had to explain that to too many people, and he said, "Just Google it; just look at it." And I go, "Okay." I didn't

want to take up too much of his time. I went back home, and I Googled it, and I realized, Oh, geez, this is kind of strange. This is kind of weird. This is kind of out there, biodynamics, because you're looking at moon phases, you're looking at cow horns buried in the earth for six months, you're looking at chamomile stuffed into stag bladders and buried in a muck for another six months. What's going on here? This is kind of weird. If I hadn't have seen those tomatoes growing, I would have completely disregarded it, if I had just stumbled upon "biodynamic" on the Internet. But the proof was in the pudding for me, or the proof was in the health of the plants and what was going on there.

That was going into the wintertime, and the tomatoes were finishing up, and I didn't think anything of it, but when I was discussing the way the farm would shape up for the restaurant, when I was discussing with Chef Kinch, at some point during the conversation he says, "You know, Cynthia, I also want the farm to be biodynamic." I had this expression on my face like: What, what?? I didn't realize that we were on the page about that. I didn't even want to mention it because it's too strange. But he says, "No, I see that as a viable option in the future for organic agriculture." It was kismet. We were on the same page at the same time, and we started full-force in on learning about it.

I went up and took the biodynamic gardening series up at the Rudolf Steiner College in Sacramento, took their intensive workshops, and now we try our best to meet the Demeter® standards of biodynamic growing. We can't always achieve it, but the great thing about that is that they don't require you to achieve—no farm is perfect. As long as you continue to strive towards being self-sufficient

and self-reliant, moon-phase planting, compost, animals, using the preparations, then you're going a real long way toward biodynamic agriculture.

We make two of our own preps here, Prep 500 and 501. I buy my other preps, my compost preps from the local biodynamic association, which is much easier for us all to get together as a group and make our preps together, because it's a little tough acquiring stags' bladders, I'll tell you that much.

Rabkin: [Laughs.]

Sandberg: So we do it as a group.

Rabkin: So has your relationship to, or your understanding of, the moon-phase planting, the special preparations, the stag bladders, the cow horns, changed? Does it make more sense to you now than it used to?

Sandberg: It not only makes more sense—we had an interviewer write a newspaper article about us and made a little bit of fun of us by saying that it's a lot like *Spinal Tap*: the speaker is going to eleven rather than ten. So what's one more than organic? It's biodynamic. And, of course, there's no such thing as going to eleven, so the writer was making a little bit of fun of us, poking fun at us, and a lot of people do when they start talking about the cow horns, and the cows' horns are generating cosmic energy, and it's being infused with Earth's energy while it's underground—a lot of weird stuff. But what makes sense is the fact that you're a closed-loop system. You are creating your own fertility. You're saving your own seed. You're creating cultivars of plants that adapt specifically to your microclimate (which is also an important tenet of biodynamism). And

when you think about that, and the health and fertility, and lowering your carbon footprint, and creating your own cultivars of plants that do really, really well on your little sandhill in Ben Lomond, then you see the benefit of it.

You see the benefit of having animals on your farm. The seventy laying hens that I have on my farm are such an important part of the farm. In organic gardening or farming, you don't have to have any animals to be organically certified. But with us, it's a requirement to have some sort of animal on the farm. We feed them the excess. We try to produce all of the food for the chickens. I can't do that on my two small acres. If I had a hundred acres I would do my best to provide all the food. But every harvest we do for the restaurant, every bed that we remove to put in another bed, that veg goes to the chickens. They eat it. They poop. That manure goes into the compost piles. That decomposes, gets mixed with our other veg waste and restaurant "waste." I'll tell you, these chickens get the best waste on Earth, because you're giving them getting Manresa kitchen scraps.

Rabkin: [Chuckles.]

Sandberg: That goes back onto the beds for the fertility; that goes to the restaurant. And so it goes, a fabulous closed-loop system. There's something beautiful about that and really valuable about it. So on that basis alone, I can get behind biodynamic agriculture.

Rabkin: And the other stuff that seems a little more esoteric?

Sandberg: You got to have faith. I'm not a very religious person, but there are some things that you have to take on faith. And Rudolf Steiner, the guy that

thought of all this stuff—he was a lot smarter person than I am, and he had a lot of really good reasons for what he prescribed the farmers to do in Europe back in the 1920s, when they were losing all their fertility. Probably the biggest thing he did was tell them to get away from chemical additions and fertilizers and chemical pest control. He was the granddaddy of organic agriculture. Started talking about that back in the early twentieth century, and almost a hundred years later now, we're returning to it and embracing it and realizing the long-term benefits of it.

Rabkin: Are you certified organic here?

Sandberg: I'm not. I've never attempted that. I've never sought that out. And these are the reasons why: I'm only one gal. I have a lot of volunteers now, but back in the day, when it mattered, or when it could have mattered, I should say, I didn't have the time, nor did I have the money to seek the organic certification. It takes a lot of effort. It was effort that I couldn't do. I was already working eighteen hours a day trying to make this business go and doing it by myself. I couldn't then put on top of it all these restrictions and requirements of organic certification.

The other reason that was very important was all my customers come to the farm. You come to the farm to buy your tomatoes. You come to the farm to buy your seedlings. No part of my property, including the interior of my house, is off limits to people, because they have to go into the house to go to the bathroom. So everybody goes everywhere on this property. They see what I do. They see how I do it. They see that there aren't a stack of Roundup in the corner or a stack of

Miracle-Gro® over there. They see what's going on. They see the compost piles working. They see the chickens in action. They see the worm bins. They see us working every day. So my customers didn't need that additional validation from a government entity of what I was doing, because they could see it with their own two eyes.

Rabkin: Yes, that makes sense. I want to go back briefly to your relationship with Manresa and David Kinch. You had said that one of your early trepidations about establishing a restaurant relationship had to do with not having the time to cart your deliveries across county lines. How are you working that out with Manresa?

Sandberg: Well, the chef comes and picks up the harvest. He loves to be in the garden. He's often told me that when he retires [chuckles], he wants to come live on the farm.

Rabkin: [Chuckles.]

Sandberg: I don't know how that's going to work. I think he really wants to retire and be a sailor, go off. But he loves being on the farm. On occasion he says that, but he loves being on the farm. He's always on the farm. He's on the farm three, four, five days a week.

Rabkin: Wow.

Sandberg: Year-round. He will come and help harvest. He will come and taste and look and see, and we'll plan together. We'll look at stuff. I'll show him things. He's always looking and observing and tasting and suggesting.

Rabkin: So is he taking produce back to the restaurant a couple of times a week?

Sandberg: Yes. Actually, he was here this morning, and he was here yesterday, and he was here Wednesday. Today is Thursday?

[Both chuckle.]

Sandberg: The plants and the animals don't care what day it is.

Rabkin: They don't care. They don't consult their—

Sandberg: Yes, it's like having a baby. They don't care that you're tired or that it's Sunday and it's your day off; they still want food and water and love.

Rabkin: When I asked you what the special pleasures are of having this relationship with the restaurant, you immediately just responded with what the challenges are. So I'm inferring that the challenges in some way are a pleasure. Have there been challenges or pitfalls or disasters along the way that have been less than pleasant?

Sandberg: Wow, that's a— I think that because I have to make a living doing this and pay the bills, making sure that that's all covered can be really draining at times. I see a lot of other farms working because it's usually a couple. And since I'm not part of a couple, I think it's a little bit tougher for me. The chef, though, is very understanding about what I can and I cannot do. That's made it much easier, because of his support.

Another challenge is growing organically, biodynamically, when there are so many pests around. That's why I'm positive why so many big agriculture farms

don't grow organically, because of not only the cost, they would lose too many crops to pests and diseases without the real strong chemical stuff. Having said that, though, I applaud the fact that we're putting more acreage into organic farming in this country. It's still a challenge. And the more we do, the more we know, and the more good organic controls come in.

I do a lot of purchasing of beneficial insects and attracting of beneficial insects through plantings that I do. I've seen over the years, websites that have come up with more and more predatory insects. Five years ago, there weren't nearly as many predatory insects on the market as there are now. It seems like every six months, labs come up with another good predator for the bad bugs on the farm. And that's exciting, too, because that helps us. The explosion of the Internet has helped us because we don't have to wonder why something has succumbed to a disease. We can look up images and go, "Oh, that's what it is. This is the problem. This is how you can possibly deal with it."

Pest Control and Advice

Rabkin: Are there particular websites that you find especially helpful?

Sandberg: Oh, boy. I just do searches if I have an issue. The UC Cooperative Extension Office—their agricultural guys down there are very helpful, too. I had some black spots on some of my tomato plants in the greenhouse earlier this spring, and it *completely* freaked me out because that's a nursery stock that I'm going to sell. And I cannot be selling diseased or infested nursery stock, not only because the ag department won't let me, but also because I've got to sell a person

a healthy tomato plant. They need to have a productive year so next year they come back and buy more plants from me.

So I freaked out. I sent a couple of tomato plants over to the entomologist over there. He was able to respond that same day and tell me that it was a benign spore that had sprung out of my compost piles and not to worry; it would go away shortly.

Rabkin: Whew! What a relief.

Sandberg: That was a huge relief, because I just thought it was just something awful.

Rabkin: Are there other bureaus, organizations, nonprofits that have provided help or support to you as you've developed the farm?

Sandberg: The UC Davis pest folks and their website for organic pest control have been great. You can find all sorts of pest photos and ways of control on the UC Davis website. Although UCSC doesn't have a website like that that I'm aware of, you could access their internship, apprentice programs online, information on the CSA there, on their plant sale. I think that that's been beneficial to local gardeners and farmers as well, absolutely.

There's a nice website that's growing by leaps and bounds constantly for home gardeners called GardenWeb. They've got tons of forums on gardenweb.com. They have a tomato forum, for example. And you get people that are known for expertise in their various fields helping other fledgling gardeners and farmers on the forums at gardenweb.com. I find it to be very, very helpful.

Rabkin: Dispensing free advice?

Sandberg: Dispensing all free advice.

Rabkin: Fantastic!

Sandberg: It's a free website. You can post a picture. Let's say you've got an issue in your garden. You can post a picture and ask. And within hours you're going to get somebody that knows exactly what's gone wrong, and answer your question, and give you advice on how to fix it.

Rabkin: Wow, fabulous! And what *are* your biggest pest and disease problems on your farm, and how do you deal with them?

Sandberg: I don't have a lot of disease issues. I started investigating worm castings and their benefits. [There is] a lot of agriculture university testing on benefits of worm casting tea. So now I'm big on feeding my plants and giving them foliar sprays of worm-casting tea because it does triple duty: it is a pest deterrent, it is a disease preventative, and it is a nice, all-purpose, organic fertilizer. Those three whammies are really all you can ask for in organic gardening, so we do a lot of worm-casting tea applications and trenches and amending with that.

To answer the question about the pests: having said that, I still have some good challenges with cucumber beetles and squash bugs. And a few years ago, I'd lost the battle every year to them at some point during the summer. In early fall I would just give up. I'd go, "Okay, have it! Have that patch of squash. Have that patch of pumpkin. I cannot deal with you anymore," because [using] organic

pesticide, you've really got to squirt that bug right between the eyes with an organic pesticide. That's why they're organic, because they're so benign that the bug really has to have a couple of good sprays to its face in order to make it succumb. The last couple or three years, though, we've been able to get a better handle on those two pests every year. As long as you're early with them and you keep a regimen on of hand-picking, some good organic pesticides, you can win the battle against those guys. But they're very formidable warriors.

Rabkin: Before the recorder was on, we talked briefly about gophers. Are those a perennial problem for you?

Sandberg: They haven't been up until a couple of weeks ago for me. When my ex-husband and I first bought this property, [there were] lots of gophers out there. And I started trapping for them right away and was able to trap about, oh, twelve, fourteen, fifteen gophers that first year. After that, for twelve additional growing seasons, I'd only have maybe one pesky gopher. One is not a lot. Having one gopher and maybe he takes down three out of your hundred tomato plants, that's not a problem. That's really not a problem. But then this past spring I've got five or six out there back. And that's five too many. [Both chuckle]. So we do have to do some do gopher control this year.

Rabkin: And tell me who you're working with.

Sandberg: I'm working with Thomas Wittman of Gophers Ltd. He is a gopher hunter. So many people give up gardening because of gophers, and they do not have to. Sometimes you have to call in a professional. If you had a heart condition or if you had a rat problem, you'd call in a professional exterminator or

a professional surgeon. You're not going to try to go, oh, okay, let the rats have the basement or let the rats have the laundry room. No! You've got to have a professional, a professional carpet cleaner. Sometimes you've got to bring in a pro. He's a pro. I'm not going to fool around. I'm not going to give up. He will come and eradicate the gophers organically, without chemicals. He traps them. Then you're rid of them, and you can enjoy maybe ten years of relative gopher freedom until maybe you have to go through the whole thing again. He'll also show you how to do it yourself. You can get traps from him. You can get a video from him. You can start doing it yourself. I think it's a fabulous resource, and I recommend it to many of my gardening students or people that e-mail me out of the blue. I get twenty e-mails out of the blue every day, people asking this or that question about gardening, and I try to answer all those e-mails.

Rabkin: Is there something Thomas Wittman is doing differently from what you did when you first trapped?

Sandberg: Yes. [Laughs.] I've learned some new stuff this time with Thomas. He uses cinch traps, and that's what he recommends, and I was not quite setting the cinch trap the way Thomas likes it.

Rabkin: Oh, interesting.

Sandberg: And even though I was setting it properly, he gave me a couple of tips that I wasn't aware of. I was making the hole too big to put the cinch trap in. So he says, "No, just use this tool." He has a tool called the hori-hori knife, and he never puts his arm in the hole or his hand in the hole, just puts the hori-hori knife

in there and is able to— So he gave me a few tips that I didn't have before. I'm hoping that that'll be the turning point.

Rabkin: Oh, good.

Rewards and Challenges

Moving into some kind of big-picture questions, I'm wondering what you find the most gratifying or rewarding about this work that you're doing. What keeps you doing it?

Sandberg: I will absolutely tell you that it is the people that tell me how much they appreciate it. Other customers, when I'm in the restaurant eating, will come tell me how much they appreciate it. If they're too shy to do that, I'll get a lot of e-mails telling me. My customers who are returning to buy seedlings or to buy tomato fruit love that feedback. They're always really appreciative of it, and I find that inspiring. They say they're inspired by the gardens, but I get inspiration from them, and I keep getting encouragement from that. I can be having a really bad week with too many pests, too much heat in the middle of summer. It'll be one hundred degrees out there, and we're just working and sweating, and maybe the squash plants haven't produced the way they should because of whatever is the issue, or the pepper plants, and I'll be thinking about chucking it all in, and I'll have that one customer come in and just go on and on and on about how great it is and what a change it's made in their life. I can't believe that when somebody tells me that!

I had a gal wander in, and I was just by myself here at my tomato stand one day, putting fruit on it. She comes in, and she goes, "I want to thank you. I have lost 100 pounds." And she showed me an old picture of herself, and she says, "A year ago I came to your tomato stand, and I got your tomatoes, and it inspired me to eat more healthfully, and I have since lost 100 pounds, and I credit the catalyst being your tomatoes." And I thought, This is crazy, people saying that kind of stuff to me, and I'll tell you, that's great for me, because when you're in the 100-degree heat and you don't think that you could do it another day, somebody will come in and say something like that to you, and I'll be really inspired, or somebody will send me a lovely e-mail.

Or the chef—even one of the cooks or the chef at the restaurant will say something about, "We bought some black kale the other day from a farmers' market because we needed it for an event and you didn't have enough for us, and one of the cooks came to me, Cynthia"—this just happened the other day, a couple of days ago—"they tasted the dish made with the farmers'-market kale, and they said, 'We can't serve this. It is not up to the standards of the kale that we're getting from Love Apple Farm. We can't serve it.'"

I'll think about something like that. I don't know why our kale tastes better than their kale. Maybe it was an anomaly. I don't know. But that kind of comment will bolster me and I'll be able to continue doing what I do, even on the worst days. But I will tell you that the worst day gardening is better than the best day lawyering. I will tell you that. And there isn't even a word that is "lawyering," but I'll use it anyway.

Rabkin: [laughs] You have had two amazingly disparate careers, as first a lawyer and then a gardener/farmer. Is there any carryover at all? Do you feel like there's anything from your time as a lawyer that has come in handy in this life?

Sandberg: I think what's come in handy is when you're an attorney and when you're studying to be an attorney, you have to put in a lot of long-term effort for a long-term goal, a lot of hard work, just endless hours of studying. You have to have an ability to do that. A lot of other professions demand the same thing. If you're a great hairdresser, you've got to be very devoted to it. If you're a great salesperson, you've got to be devoted to it. You've got to put in your hard work, whether it's physical or mental or studying. You've still got to do that in a lot of different professions. So being an attorney I don't think has uniquely situated me to become a farmer, but I think maybe the discipline that happened, that was required of me, of just working really long hours transfers over.

It's very complicated, being a farmer. It's way more complicated and challenging than people think. I've had people come into the garden and make comments like, "Oh, things just grow so easily here. Oh, you've got such a beautiful place. All you got to do is dig that hole and water it, right?" And I have to just kind of take a breath, calm myself down, smile, and say something to the effect that it's a little bit more complicated than that. And that's where the gardening classes come in, because a lot of people try and they fail, and they go, Hmm. That's how I started taking classes. I said, this is a little more complicated than digging that hole and Miracle-Gro'ing—

Rabkin: [Laughs.]

Sandberg: It ain't such a miracle. Where is my miracle? [Laughs.] It ain't happening. It's much more complicated. Farming has been way harder than being an attorney. I will tell you that much. A lot more brain power, a lot more effort, a lot more frustration. It is not for the faint of heart or for the weak of mind. You really have to do a lot of studying and a lot of work to do it successfully. That's why there are a lot of failed farms in the world, because people think, oh, all you gotta do is dig a hole and put a plant in there and water it. That's all you gotta do.

Rabkin: Tell me about the name, Love Apple Farm. Where does that come from?

Sandberg: Two different ways. I couldn't name my farm Tomato Farm because that was too boring. The Europeans used to call tomatoes "love apples." It was a little nickname they had for them, and that was from when the conquistadors first brought tomato seeds over to Europe. The botanists could tell that they were members of the nightshade family. Didn't want to eat them, because they knew that they would be poisonous, or they felt that they would be poisonous. So they just grew them ornamentally because they were such beautiful plants and fruit. But at some point, they thought they had acquired some aphrodisiac-type qualities to them, so they called them love apples.

And my farmhouse was built in 1885 by a man named Harry Love. So between Harry Love and love apple and my passion for tomatoes, that all seemed to fit, and I named my farm Love Apple Farm. Since then—this was before the times of Internet searches—since then, I've come to know that there's another LoveApple Farm in New York, but they're not about the tomato, they're about stone fruits

and jams. Hopefully we can coexist on the planet with two Love Apple Farms, one on either coast. I hope they don't get too mad at me because I'll be on record right now saying they had the name first, and if it ever came down to some sort of a legal battle, I guess I could act as my own attorney.

Rabkin: There you go.

Sandberg: But I'd have to give it up because they had it first. I admit it.

Rabkin: And this is why your website is Grow Better Veggies.

Sandberg: Right, that's why my website is Grow Better Veggies, because if they ever made a fuss about it (even though they are two different types of farms—they're not about the tomato; they've got orchards and I don't), I would fold pretty easily in a legal battle with them, just because I wouldn't— One of the things I've learned as an attorney is that fighting losing battles is not very fun. A lot of people are always saying, "Well, we'll sue 'em for this or that." It takes a lot of energy to sue somebody, and a lot of times you just gotta let it go.

Rabkin: Yes.

Sandberg: You gotta let that stuff go.

Rabkin: Are there aspects of this life that keep you awake at night?

Sandberg: Oh, yes. Oh, all the time, constantly, just making sure that the bills are paid, making sure that the animals and the plants are happy. I mean, I'm in charge of tens of thousands of life forms here, and those life forms depend on me to keep them fed and watered and fertilized and happy and warm at night, if it's

tomato seedlings in spring or my chickens or my pig. Things have to be cared for. So I do worry.

And then I got to worry about my son, who was the whole reason why we bought this property way back when, is for me to stop practicing law and take care of him. He's now a freshman at Berkeley, so I think he's learned a lot, too, by being raised on a farm. He may not be completely cognizant of all of those benefits yet, but I think someday he will be. He's a fabulous young man, and I couldn't be more proud of him.

Rabkin: Did he stay with you when you kept the farm?

Sandberg: Right, yes, and I'm proud to say that we got him into Berkeley. I'll take a little bit of credit, though he did most of the hard work.

Marketing and Outreach

Rabkin: I want to jump back to marketing just for a moment. We talked about your online marketing. Do you do other kinds of advertising or outreach?

Sandberg: I'm happy to say that the amount of money that I have spent on advertising has been very, very low over the years. I was doing my taxes the other day, and I think my money that I've actually spent on advertising last year was less than \$300.

Rabkin: Wow.

Sandberg: And it's been like that year after year, because I haven't been able to afford it. That's where word of mouth is so important—my customer base,

keeping my customers happy, making sure they have a positive experience when they come to the farm. That's not always easy to do when you're a really busy farmer and you have somebody asking you the same question for the thousandth time, but fortunately people are pretty understanding that I can't always talk to everybody all the time or answer every question on how do you water a tomato. Part of my website is devoted to that information now, so people can go to that resource, or I can point them into that direction when they want to follow me around on the farm and ask me the umpteenth question about staking or what my favorite tomato is. It's all on the website. You can go on there and check it out. You don't have to take notes. It's right there in front of you.

I think what's been key to my current success or ongoing success (I don't want to say future success because that's never a given) is not only that customer satisfaction and the Internet presence, and the word of mouth—but the fact that if you're really passionate about something, and in my case it was tomatoes and it still continues to be tomatoes, the media take notice of you and write stuff about you. If I was just a farm with a CSA—which is a wonderful thing, so I shouldn't have used the word “just”—but if you don't have something unique about you, then it's hard to get written about. I've had people over the years ask me, “I want to do what you do. What's your best advice?” And my best advice has always been: Find one thing that you can be really passionate about and be the expert in, because if you decide that you want to be the eggplant king and grow a hundred different kinds of eggplants and offer them on a farm stand—yes, that's really weird, and people don't like eggplant as much as they like tomatoes, but if you want to do that, media are going to start taking notice of

you, and you get such great press that way, and you don't need to advertise. Start writing maybe some scholarly articles about eggplants, and you submit your little eggplant articles to various gardening magazines. You can make a name for yourself without putting in a lot of money into advertising. But then Big Ag will come along and steal your thunder somehow and become the eggplant Big Ag provider. [Laughs.]

Rabkin: It's sort of hard to imagine Big Ag being able to appropriate what you do, since by its nature, it's about small, limited size and intimate business relationships.

Sandberg: Right. Well, I hope that's the case. Big Ag is never going to be able to come in and do what this farm does for Manresa. Chef likes to take things for every stage of its life cycle, from the tiniest sprout, to the seed. He takes it in every level of its maturity, depending on the plant, and experiments with that. From cucumber seeds, to lettuce, to newly germinated lavender sprouts, he'll take it all and experiment and try to make something edible and wonderful about it. And as long as you have that niche and you have the ability to do it, then I don't think that a factory farm can come and take that away, because it *is* all about detail.

Rabkin: Yes.

Sandberg: God is in the details. When you go to a restaurant like Manresa and you eat, there's no way that a factory could produce that.

Eating at Manresa Restaurant

Rabkin: What does it cost to eat a meal at Manresa? Do you have any idea?

Sandberg: It all depends on what you're going for, and if you go there for the chef's tasting menu. I think there's a couple of different kinds of tasting menus, which is what I always recommend, doing that, because you let the chef cook for you what's seasonal, what's in the kitchen fresh and ready to go, and that's how I've always eaten there, and I love it. I've never even actually seen a menu at Manresa, because I don't order off the menu; I just let the chef cook for me, and anybody can do that. You can go in and say, "I'll just let the chef cook for me."

Rabkin: Fantastic.

Sandberg: And he'll give you a series of small bites of things and just have a transformative experience. Having said that, though, I think it all depends on whether you want wine pairings, but I think he's got some really fabulous—in the winter and the early spring—some set-price menus that are three- or five-course menus of seventy-five or ninety-five dollars. When he goes into the summer, it's a little bit more than that. But if you have the full-on treatment, then it'll cost you a couple, three hundred dollars a person.

Rabkin: Wow.

Sandberg: But you're there four or five hours. You're treated with the most wonderful care and hospitality. I equate it to going to the spa for an afternoon. You're going to throw down some good money on a massage, on a facial, on a pedicure. You're going to spend four, five hundred dollars on that. And you're

going to spend less than that at Manresa, and it will be a meal to remember. It will be a meal of a lifetime. So if you're going to go to a spa, you might as well have a similarly transformative experience that you'll remember forever.

Rabkin: Do you think that this kind of model, with an exclusive farm-to-restaurant relationship, is possible with a restaurant that isn't quite so high-end?

Sandberg: I think that it would be difficult but not impossible if the chef and the farmer were really concentrating on fulfilling those needs, the quantity and the type of vegetables. But it takes a lot of money to run this farm, and you have to partner with a restaurant that can afford that. It's just the way it goes. And the farm, like mine—we don't rely just on that income. We have other revenue streams. We have the other things that we've mentioned, and I think that it's still possible to do that exclusive relationship, but a farm has to have other revenue streams, too.

Rabkin: What proportion of your total farm revenue comes from the Manresa deal?

Sandberg: Probably a third. Yes, a third to two-fifths may be come from the restaurant. As my gardening classes have become more popular, that's becoming a bigger part of it, and the seedling sale. Everything grows. Every year, things get bigger and better. My contract with the restaurant gets bigger and better, the seedling sale gets bigger and better. I think that it has to be a Rubik's cube of stuff that all fits together well. But the management of it, then, becomes more complicated.

Visions for the Future

Rabkin: Right. What are your hopes or visions for the next few years of Love Apple Farm?

Sandberg: I hope to buy a bigger farm. This is just two acres. We've maxed out every nook and cranny on this property to grow something edible. I'd like to have a bigger farm that I could have a CSA at, maybe, a gourmet CSA, one that's really focused on some weird and wacky stuff. I've got 4,000 customers on my e-mail newsletter list, so when I send an e-mail newsletter it goes to 4,000 people that have willingly signed up to receive that information. I think that I could get some good CSA members from that list.

You asked about marketing. That was one of the biggest, smartest moves I've ever made, was putting out a newsletter to people and the very first day, thinking, aha, why don't I have a sign-up sheet on my farm stand for a newsletter? I tell you, if I had thought of that from square one, I'd probably have 10,000 people on that newsletter list, but I only started thinking about it, oh, maybe three, maybe four years ago. I wish I had started it from the get-go. I don't care what kind of farm you are, you should be thinking of that in the future. Have a sign-up sheet. Have your staff, or you, if you're a sole farmer, think of a time when you *might* have a newsletter. It's not very difficult to create a newsletter and get it out there to your customers, just to let them know what's going on, what's fresh, what's available. You might start a CSA and you don't know that you're going to start it, but you might be doing it down the road. I

don't have a CSA, but I might. Well, I'll have some good fodder for CSA customers when I—*when* I get my new, bigger farm.

Rabkin: Do you subscribe to some kind of service that handles the mailings for you?

Sandberg: I do. I used to just send them out through my e-mail account, and then at some point that become too cumbersome, and my e-mail account thought I was spamming people.

Rabkin: Exactly.

Sandberg: So I stopped doing that, and I subscribed to a service called Constant Contact. It depends on how many subscribers you have. Under 2,000 it's x dollars; over 2,000 and up to 5,000 it's another price. But you have to make that worth your while. For me now, at 4,000 subscribers, it's \$50 a month. Am I getting value for that \$50 a month? I believe I am, because I attract a lot of students to take my classes and people coming to the farmstand and the seedling sale through that newsletter.

Rabkin: So in your search for a bigger farm, have you actually started looking at properties?

Sandberg: Just recently, since the housing prices and property prices have gone down. It's made it actually— I'm not going to say it's possible yet, but it seems more plausible now that I might actually be able to get another farm. I don't want to sell this farm.

Rabkin: So you would keep this place.

Sandberg: I don't know how that's going to work. I don't know if it would work, but I'm making steps and working with FarmLink, which is an association that matches farmers with properties out there. I'm working with them.⁴ I'm trying to see if it's possible.

Rabkin: Great. And is the chef working with you on looking for property as well?

Sandberg: Well, he's very excited about the possibility, but he still has to run his business and make that work, and in this economy it's tougher. Everybody's got to pay their mortgages. He's got to pay his; I've got to pay mine. He's supportive of it, and he's going to try to do everything he can to maybe help with some connection here or there. He's got some good connections. I know he will really like the fact that we'd become a bigger farm because then we can start having some meat animals for him, and he'll never run out of carrots and he'll never run out of beets. [Laughs.]

Rabkin: Do you give him eggs, by the way?

Sandberg: I do. I give him eggs from our chickens. That's another nice way that he has a farm connection. He's very, very famous for one of his appetizers that is a farm egg. It's just a nice other way that the chickens contribute to the farm. Any extra eggs, I can sell to my other customers. They're very happy to get them.

Rabkin: Cynthia, is there anything we haven't touched on that you'd like to address before we finish up?

Sandberg: I don't think so, Sarah. You've been really, really thorough. Thank you.

Rabkin: Thank you very much.

¹ See the oral history with Richard Merrill in this series.

²See <http://www.growbetterveggies.com/growbetterveggies/about-love-apple-farm.html>

³See <http://manresarestaurant.com/>

⁴See the oral history with Reggie Knox for more on California FarmLink.