

TERRA BELLA FAMILY FARM

Growing Community along with Crops

STORY AND PHOTOS BY PATRICIA HAYSE HALLER

Maybe it's the abbreviation—**M**CSA. By reducing the term 'community-supported agriculture' to just three letters, it's easy to reduce the concept to little more than a box of fresh produce once a week. Terra Bella Family Farm in Pleasanton is a reminder that CSA is as much about community as it is about farming.

In just three growing seasons, Terra Bella has spread roots deep into a city where local farming had become a thing of the past. In the process, farmer Shawn Seufert has fostered relationships with local businesses, restaurants, other growers, and area residents hungry to regain a connection with their food and their heritage.

"Everyone is becoming more and more aware of eating locally, organically, and seasonally," says Seufert. "But no one is growing food in this area. We're the only family farm in Pleasanton, and the only real farm in the Tri-Valley that is consistently at the markets."

He gestures toward the cars rushing by on Foothill Road, less than three miles from downtown Pleasanton. Only a white wooden fence and spikes of lavender, hollyhock, and delphinium separate the road from rows of bright-stemmed chard and sprawling tomato plants. "It's so developed around here that people drive by and see this right here on Foothill and they just pull over and look," he says. "It makes us feel pretty good about what we're doing. And we are learning more every year. Our food is looking better and our land is looking better."

The farm is growing, too. In addition to maintaining a regular presence at the Pleasanton and Concord farmers markets, Terra Bella supplies restaurants throughout the East



Shawn Seufert prepares products for CSA pick up day

Bay, including Citron and Oliveto in Oakland; Café de la Paz, Venezia, and Poulet in Berkeley; Wente Vineyards in Livermore; and the Essanay Café in Fremont.

Seufert has teamed up with two other farms to supply a 125-member CSA program with more variety than one grower can offer. Terra Bella specializes in warm-weather crops like tomatoes, melons, eggplants, and peppers; J.E. Perry Farms, in Fremont, contributes cool-season crops like lettuce, strawberries, cabbage, broccoli, and cauliflower; and Lone Oak Ranch of Reedley supplies citrus and stone fruit as well as persimmons, apples, almonds, and grapes. To round things out, Seufert has enlisted Bibiane Bakery in Pleasanton to use the farms' produce each week in a fresh-baked bread or dessert for the CSA basket.

"Some of their members have become customers of ours and vice versa," says Bibiane's pastry chef, Amy Fitzsimons. "They get to see what we do with the fresh produce, they bring in their friends, and it gets everyone in the community more excited about food. That ripples into the rest of the food community, which is a big part of downtown and the Pleasanton community."

Today, the notion of a family farm operating in Pleasanton seems amazing. But this was once a town of many farms, large and small. Rich soil and natural artesian wells made it a turn-of-the-century agricultural powerhouse that produced hops for the world's breweries, sugar beets and grain for the nation, and sweet hay for the region's livestock. Residents enjoyed local vegetables, fruit, eggs, and dairy products grown by their neighbors. But the aquifers started drying up in the 1930s, the population kept growing, and the farmland sprouted tract homes in the 1950s and 1960s, followed by business parks in the 1980s, followed by ever larger executive-style homes and mansions in gated communities during the high-tech and housing booms of the last 20 years. By the time the new millennium began, Pleasanton was a city of homes and businesses instead of farms.

Seufert didn't grow up in the deep-rooted farming life. He was raised in suburban Los Angeles, moving every few years. At UC Santa Cruz he studied to be a teacher, but somehow never felt ready to go into the classroom. Instead, he discovered the UC Extension's Center for Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems (CASFS), where he learned about plants, soil, farm management, and food marketing. He had all the tools he needed to start his own farm—except for land. For several years Shawn and his wife, Beth, worked in the school systems, but as they followed opportunities that led to the East Bay, Shawn found himself working with the Alameda County Department of Agriculture, placing and monitoring insect traps. As he traveled through the county, he was always on the lookout for property—a place where he could sink his hands back into the soil. He found it where he least expected to, right next door to the groomed golf course, swimming pool, and tennis courts of Pleasanton's Castlewood Country Club.



The land that both Castlewood and Terra Bella Farm occupy was once part of an estate belonging to William Randolph Hearst. The palatial 53-room mansion built here by his mother, Phoebe Apperson Hearst, burned down in 1969. Hearst's hunting lodge is now the

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'main house' at Terra Bella, and home to the property's owner, Gretta Sladen. In 2005, Sladen walked her property with Seufert, listening to his vision of turning land that had lain fallow for over 40 years into a flourishing family farm. She agreed to lease him 3.5 acres, the barn, and a cottage on the property. Shawn and Beth moved in, tilled under the grass and vetch, and planted their first crop in the spring of 2006.

"That first growing season, we started with 20 varieties of tomatoes and 10 varieties of melons," Shawn says. The following year, he learned about a new venture at the Sunol Agriculture Park, where a group of farmers were sharing 18 acres of land. He planted 10 rows of melons in one of their fields. In 2008 he expanded to half an acre, adding several varieties of winter squash. This year, as Terra Bella works toward organic certification, Seufert planted 2.25 acres in Sunol. In addition, he keeps 55 hens and four ducks on the Pleasanton farm. These help keep insects at bay, eat up the overripe or sunburned produce, and lay about 25 dozen eggs each week.

In many ways, Seufert is still a teacher at heart. He conducts organic farming and composting workshops, encourages volunteers and community groups to experience the farm, hosts planting and harvest parties for hands-on learning, and plants a little of everything right next to the barn where families pick up their CSA produce each week. "It serves as a demonstration and reinforces for our members that this is where their food is grown," he says. "They can see how big tomato plants get, what peppers look like. They see things develop over the season, from turning under a cover crop to setting out seedlings to harvest."

With the first CSA pickup at the beginning of June, members park beside the barn and begin to select and weigh their produce. They fill bags and baskets with tall bunches of scapes and sweet red onions,



strawberries, Russian kale, cilantro, red leaf lettuce, white peaches and nectarines, and a fragrant round loaf of herb foccacia from Bibiane. Some browse through the overgrown or misshapen radishes and branches of bay laurel in the "bonus box," and a few use the "trade box" to swap something they don't like or need for produce that someone else didn't want. Members can also buy eggs, plants, and extra produce, and there's a display of hand-quilted potholders and aprons on one wall that CSA member Jackie Barnett is selling to raise money for the Valley Humane Society.

"I love CSA days," says Seufert. "It's like an old style post office, where everyone rubs shoulders. The kids learn to use the scale, visit the chickens, and play with other kids. People trade recipes and gossip, and make crazy connections—trading the names of babysitters, mechanics. There's a whole lot of great community-building going on here."

Pat Peck, owner of Bibiane Bakery, agrees. And it doesn't stop at Terra Bella's barn. Working with businesses like hers helps grow the market for both his produce and her products. "We support each other, and help promote one another," she says. "That strengthens the whole community, because small business is the basis of the community."

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