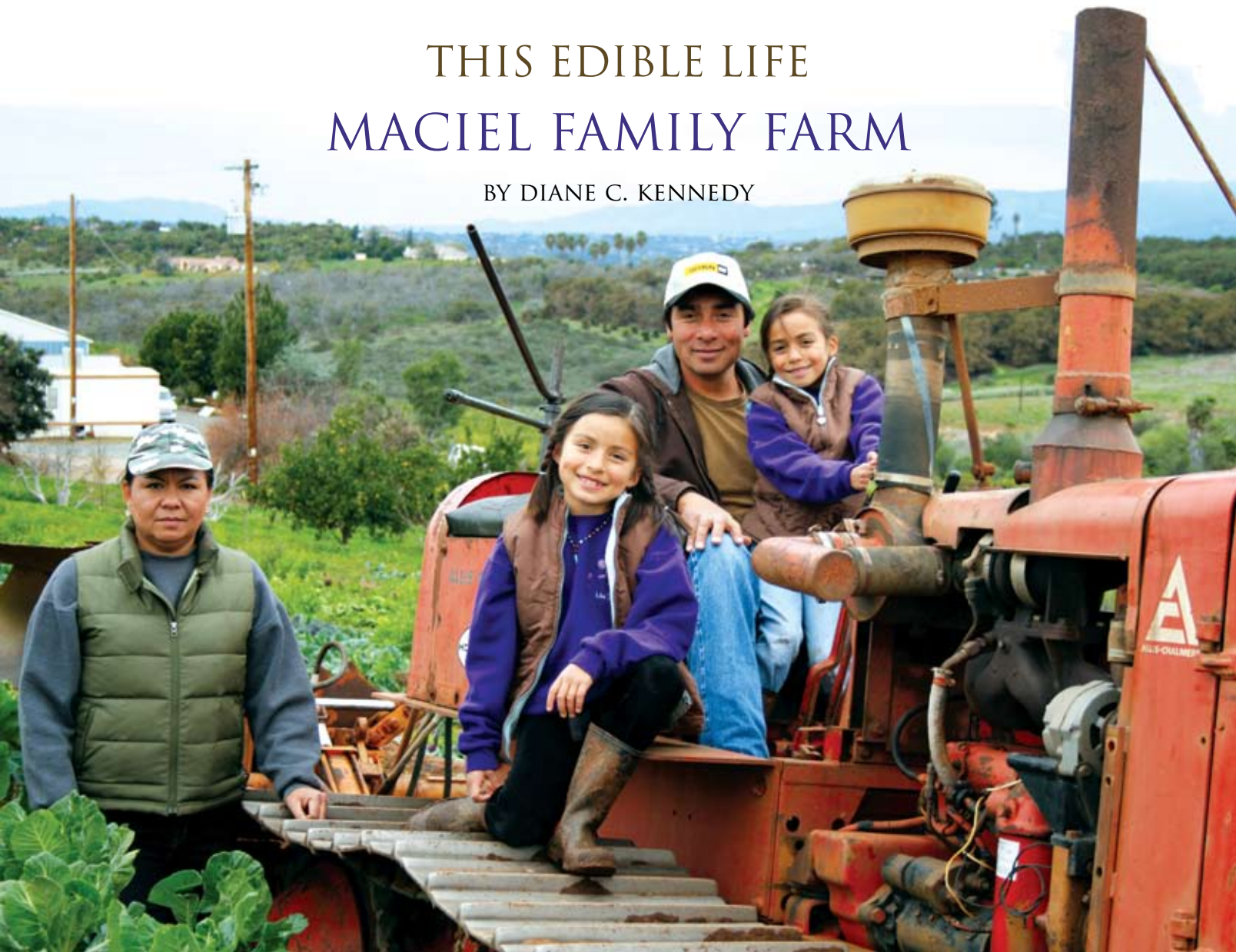


# THIS EDIBLE LIFE

## MACIEL FAMILY FARM

BY DIANE C. KENNEDY



Laura Maciel lives the life of which many people only dream. From her sunny hilltop home in Bonsall it's only a few steps to the rows of vegetables, herbs and flowers that partially form Maciel Family Farm, co-owned by her husband, Adam, and his family.

Outside, her two young daughters do homework accompanied by laughing dogs. Down between the lines of young red lettuces, Adam uses the last colorful light of the long farm day to check the readiness of his crops, something he's done all his life.

"It's his passion," Laura says. "It's in his blood."

Vivacious and obviously in love with her lifestyle, Laura has met each change in her life with a natural creativity. "I grew up on [Verboom] dairy. Both my parents worked, and I had a loving grandmother who spent time with me."

As a teen, life was all about becoming a teacher (specializing in English as a Second Language programs) not about food. After marrying Adam, she taught second grade in Escondido. Her school schedule allowed her to spend her months off hanging out at the family booth at the farmers' markets.

Photographs: Mary Willis

"I tried making bouquets to sell, but they were a disaster. I had two left hands." She studied why some arrangements sold and others didn't, listening to her customers. Was it the price or her design? "I went to bed thinking of what color went with which, and when I realized it wasn't formulaic, I was delighted."

After the birth of her first daughter, Laura left teaching, always intending to go back. "I never thought I'd be a stay-at-home mom," Laura admits. Then, after her second daughter, she was faced with a dilemma many women face: Who would watch the children? "It wasn't affordable to hire a sitter for them, and I didn't know people who I would trust to watch them all day. To me, I didn't have a choice."

Leaving her job cut into the family finances, especially with the cost of health insurance. So Laura adjusted again; she took over the farm's accounting, helped harvest crops and used her creative energy at the booths.

"I began arranging the produce and flowers in baskets. I coordinate cloths to bring out the colors of the produce and the textures of the vegetables. People take pictures of the displays," she says happily.

Discussing her customers makes Laura glow. “Customers who come weekly are accustomed to seeing us.” She explains that some customers are just as much a part of her family’s life as her family is of theirs. Once, she insisted that the family come back a day early from vacation so as not to miss the Saturday markets. “People expect to see us there. They get worried if we don’t show up, just as we get worried if we don’t see them. I couldn’t not be there for them.” Some of Adam’s customers have been with him for half his life.

Laura helps choose seed for new varieties. “Kohlrabi excited our German customers. They’d say that their grandmothers used to cook it.” There is a black Japanese tomato, a striped beet with a swirled interior and strangely shaped Romanesco cauliflower that is mild in flavor and pretty on the plate.

“I like showing new things to my customers. I say, ‘Try this. Here’s how you cook it.’”

In the fields, Laura takes the time to answer questions from her daughters, ages 7 and 9. “Everything offers a lesson.” They help Adam stretch the drip irrigation tape that shrinks on cold nights, and count out vegetables for bagging. At the booths, they make change and help the customers. “They ask if the customer wants fruit that is ripe now, or that will be ripe the next week. They’ll take dripping bouquets from people and wrap them so that they won’t get their clothes wet.” Knowing that the fields around her house are organic is vitally important. “We’re all in there working, so nothing should harm us. We live it, breathe it, eat it.”

Laura is now excited about the taste, textures and colors of the food she grows. She shares recipes with people, and enjoys waiting for a seasonal crop such as basil to come in. “The most important thing you get from farmers’ markets is knowing where the food is from. It’s

something we put in our body; we nourish our families with it. You can get firsthand information, ask what has been sprayed or not.”

Like anything worthwhile, this dream life takes a lot of work and sacrifice. Customers who are amazed when they see the Maciel booths set up in the rain don’t realize what missing a day’s sales would mean.

“We’re in the fields on freezing nights, and in the rain harvesting or protecting the plants.”

Crops are planned months in advance, and require days and nights of planting, irrigating and keeping off freeloading bugs and wildlife that can wipe out rows overnight. Laura tells of a virus-infected arugula crop that had to be turned under, and rows of lettuce that disappeared into the local rabbits.

There are future trends in food that must be guessed at. “Last year people wanted mint for Mojitos.” Then there are shifts in the economy that force them to focus on what people are willing to spend money on. Whether a crop makes it to the sales booth, or if it sells, is a constant gamble. “I’ve never doubted Adam,” Laura says firmly. “He’s good at what he does.”

Laura and her family radiate the aura of affection characteristic of caring people who take the time for the important things.

“I’ve learned to look at things differently,” Laura reflects. “It’s worth it.”

Maciel Family Farms can be found at the Pacific Beach, Temecula, La Jolla, Horton Plaza and Coronado farmers’ markets.

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