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Rebecca Thistlethwaite: TLC Ranch and the Agriculture & Land-Based Training Association

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Rebecca Thistlethwaite



Photo by Tana Butler

TLC Ranch and the Agriculture & Land-Based Training Association

With her husband, Jim Dunlop, Rebecca Thistlethwaite runs TLC Ranch on 20 rented acres in Watsonville, Santa Cruz County. The initials stood for “Tastes Like Chicken” until the ranch stopped raising meat chickens; now, in keeping with TLC’s social and environmental philosophy, it’s “Tender Loving Care.” TLC currently raises pork, lamb, and certified organic eggs—more than 200 dozen per day, from more than 3,000 pastured chickens.

Thistlethwaite and Dunlop emphasize scrupulous “beyond-organic” animal husbandry and resource stewardship. They sell pasture-raised meat and eggs to local restaurants and at farmers’ markets in Santa Cruz, Monterey, and

Santa Clara Counties. TLC eggs are also available through several CSA programs and at a variety of grocery stores and other retail produce outlets in the Monterey and San Francisco Bay Areas.

In addition to the family business, Thistlethwaite has worked with the Agriculture & Land-Based Training Association (ALBA) as Director of Programs and as manager of the organization's Rural Development Center and Farm Training & Research Center. Since the time of this interview, she has taken a research position with UCSC's Center for Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems. And she opines regularly about farming, food, and social justice on her blog, HonestMeat.com.

Thistlethwaite grew up on the fringe of a Portland, Oregon, suburb, with a love of the outdoors and an interest in environmental issues. She majored in natural resources management at Colorado State University, with a semester abroad in Belize studying ecology, biology, and sustainable agriculture. While working as a ranger in Idaho's Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness, she sampled organic produce proffered by a backpacker. That taste lured Thistlethwaite into an apprenticeship with the farmer who produced it: Mary Jane Butters, of Paradise Farms—a former wilderness ranger herself.

Other farm apprenticeships followed, and then a master's degree in international agriculture and development at UC Davis. After graduate school, Thistlethwaite worked and studied in Guatemala and Honduras, pursuing interests in tropical agriculture and biodiversity, eventually returning to the U.S. to work for ALBA. After she and Dunlop met at a California Small Farm Conference in 2002, they founded TLC Ranch.

Sarah Rabkin interviewed Rebecca Thistlethwaite on July 15, 2008, at Thistlethwaite and Dunlop's home in Aromas, California.

Additional Resources

TLC Ranch: <http://www.tlcrancheggs.com/> Includes extensive photographic and video footage of TLC Ranch, as well as links to media coverage of the ranch.

Agriculture & Land-Based Training Association (ALBA): <http://www.albafarmers.org/>

Rebecca Thistlethwaite's blog, "Honest Meat: Ruminant on This": <http://www.honestmeat.com/>

Beginnings

Rabkin: This is Tuesday, July 15, 2008. I'm in Aromas [California] with Rebecca Thistlethwaite. This is Sarah Rabkin. Rebecca, I'm going to start with some really basic background. Where and when were you born?

Thistlethwaite: October 25, 1974 in Portland, Oregon.

Rabkin: And where did you grow up?

Thistlethwaite: I grew up in the suburbs of Portland, in a town called Beaverton.

Rabkin: And tell me about your schooling and any other relevant education or training.

Thistlethwaite: Well, I grew up right on the edge of suburbia, right on the rural-suburban interface, and was more interested in environmental issues, not necessarily agricultural issues, when I was a teenager. There was a lot of deforestation going on in Oregon and that really bothered me, and my dad would get all riled up when he'd see a clearcut. That's what really resonated with me when I was a teenager. Then I went to the University of Colorado, Boulder, to study environmental studies when I was seventeen. I lasted about a year and a

half there, before realizing the program wasn't really for me. It was more for those wanting to become environmental lawyers, but it wasn't really the practical biology, ecology of ecological systems. It was more policy and law. So I transferred to Colorado State University, started out in forest management there, and then ultimately graduated with a degree in natural resources management.

Rabkin: This is in Fort Collins?

Thistlethwaite: Yes. And the initials for that program are NRM, which we used to call No Real Major.

Rabkin: (laughs)

Thistlethwaite: Because it was just a little bit of everything. I had a very interdisciplinary education, but I didn't have any profound knowledge in any one particular subject. So I got out of school there and couldn't get a paying job anywhere.

Rabkin: NRJ—No Real Job?

Thistlethwaite: Yes, no real job, exactly. So I took a volunteer position with this organization called the Student Conservation Association, and they set people up with internships all over the country. I ended up working as a wilderness ranger in Idaho, in the second-biggest wilderness in the lower 48 states. It is called the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness, and it was a fabulous opportunity to get to know myself. It was just me, myself, and I for three months.

Then one day I met a backpacker who had all this fabulous organic food, and I was just eating freeze-dried crap the whole time up there. He fed me, and he told me about the lady that he was farming with, who actually was the first female wilderness ranger in Idaho. She had been a ranger in that very wilderness that I was working in, about twenty-five years before. Her name was Mary Jane Butters. He said, "You should come out and visit some weekend when you're not working." So I went up there one weekend and dug carrots for three days in a row, and it was best experience I'd ever had.

Rabkin: Where was her farm?

Thistlethwaite: In Moscow, Idaho. It was called Paradise Farms, and it was really Paradise.¹ So when I finished my internship as a ranger, I asked Mary Jane if I could intern on her farm until the winter came. I was there until about Thanksgiving, until snow blanketed all the crops. We actually put mulch on top of the carrots and we would roll back the mulch with snow on top and dig carrots that had been slightly frozen. They were the sweetest carrots ever. It turns out carrots need to be frosted a little bit on their greens for them to really pull a lot of sugar into the root and be sweet. That's why you can never get a good carrot in California. It's too hot. (laughs)

So I worked there until the winter, and then I went back to Colorado and I skibummed for another winter in Steamboat [Springs]. And then I came back to Oregon and worked at a natural foods store as a cashier, and hated it. And I met—somebody checking out their groceries through my line (laughs) said he had a farm in Washington and was looking for an intern. He and his wife were

going to England for a month and they needed someone to housesit and watch all their goats. I was like, “Well, I’ve never worked with goats before, but that sounds like fun. I’ll come out for a weekend and see what it’s like.”

He was on this land trust in Washington of about four hundred acres. It was absolutely gorgeous, right on the Columbia Gorge. It was its own little valley. He had goats; he had sheep; he had horses. The horses were free range. They just walked all over and mowed the grass and ate the apple trees and did whatever they want.

I ended up going there and I stayed for about a year. I actually ended up taking over the farm because the farm manager left, sort of in a tiff with the landlord. So I tried to farm there by myself for a year. And when winter came (in the Northwest in the winter you don’t really farm), I sat down and started doing the numbers, realized I made about thirty-seven cents an hour, and said, you know, I think I’m going to go back to grad school, because I have a lot of student-loan debt, and I have to get a real job one of these days to pay off this debt. I applied to a bunch of different universities, and ultimately chose UC Davis because there was a professor there that I wanted to work with, and he was going to pay for me to go to school.

Studying Agroecology at UC Davis

Rabkin: Who was that?

Thistlethwaite: Stephen Brush. He was in the Human and Community Studies Department. (He just retired.) So I went to Davis and I studied international

agriculture and development; that's what I got my master's in, with an emphasis in agroecology.

Rabkin: How had you gotten interested in the international aspect of farming?

Thistlethwaite: Well, as an undergrad I studied abroad in Belize for a semester. I went there to study forest ecology, marine biology, and sustainable agriculture. What really struck me in Belize was visiting some of the small Mayan farms there, how the farms there really felt like they were a part of nature. They weren't separate from it. There were no hard boundaries. They did agroforestry, so there were all these different tree crops, and they were using all the vertical space, and edible vines climbing up the trees. And some of the trees were for wood, or firewood, and other ones were for coppicing and feeding animals. They did do slash and burn, but the way that they practiced it was very sustainable. They would never come back to the same spot for fifteen years. A tropical forest that's fifteen years old looks incredibly mature, actually, and supports a lot of wildlife—monkeys and toucans—an amazing amount of biodiversity. In fifteen years the soil was able to recuperate and rebuild itself. It was a sort of rotational agricultural system.

I did my undergraduate capstone project on traditional Mayan agriculture, and that's what I wanted to study in grad school as well. So that's what got me interested in the international aspect. I felt like our country could learn a lot from models in other countries. I wanted to learn more about what people were doing in other countries. As well, I thought at the time that maybe I had something to

teach to people in other countries. But it turned out that wasn't so much the case. (laughs) It was them teaching me.

Rabkin: I'm looking forward to getting to that. And before we do, I'm curious about what it was like to study agroecology in the context of a traditional land grant agricultural university.

Thistlethwaite: I felt pretty isolated at Davis. There was a just a very small handful of us, probably a dozen or so students studying agroecology. Even their ecology department—it's a very well known ecology department, but it's sort of a quantitative ecology.

Rabkin: As opposed to—

Thistlethwaite: As opposed to, well, first of all, looking at social systems was something that their ecology department was really not used to. I was studying crop biodiversity, and the professors there really didn't understand that, because it was about human choice. It wasn't about the natural system without humans. There is no such thing, really, as a natural system without human impact. Even our "climax forests" that have been around—mature, old-growth forests—have been impacted by humans. So I was one of the few people studying crop biodiversity. But the ecology professors and students were kind of fascinated by what I was doing. It was very different for them to think about social systems. I remember giving a presentation at the conservation biology symposium and I was the only person looking at crops. But there was a ton of questions from the audience, and people were really interested. So that aspect was kind of nice.

I hung out a lot at the student farm there. That felt like family. I think if I didn't have that— And I also lived at this place called The Domes, which was a little hippie community on campus that had our own organic farm, and it was five acres. If I didn't have those things, I probably would have felt really alone and isolated there, because it is dominated by conventional agriculture. I remember one year I wanted to take a plant breeding class, wanted to take a traditional plant breeding class, just wanted to learn, mostly for my gardening, how to save seed and select for crops and improve varieties. They didn't offer it. It was only genetic engineering. They didn't have traditional plant breeding any more.

Rabkin: Whoa!

Thistlethwaite: I remember getting really angry with the poor secretary working in the plant production or crop production office. She's like, "I don't know. They just don't offer it. I mean, they offer it every four years or so." And I was only there for two years. So that was disappointing. But I hear things have changed quite a bit there. They have a sustainable agriculture institute now, and a major in sustainable agriculture that's coming along slowly, but surely. But there are still a lot of competing forces, like big GMO corporations trying to buy new colleges or buildings there. Every year I hear that the student organic farm is threatened with some biotech building that they want to put on top of it.

Rabkin: How ironic. So you were, I think, about to talk about your graduate field work.

Thistlethwaite: Yes. So I was working with Stephen Brush, who has spent thirty or forty years studying crop biodiversity around the world. His main areas of study were wheat biodiversity in Turkey, potato biodiversity in Peru, and corn biodiversity in Mexico. Those were the centers of origin for those three crops. And what was interesting about him, he was a sociologist. So he was interested in how cultural diversity intersects with crop biodiversity, really fascinating stuff. But he also had a very old-school mentality. For example, he felt that the Green Revolution style of economic development and international development was good for countries. Which was ironic, because I felt like it really clashed with the things that he was studying, and that was cultural diversity and crop diversity. I once had to edit a paper that he was writing where he said he was trying to basically prove that genetic engineering and GMOs [genetically modified organisms] was not a threat to crop biodiversity. (laughs) I was shocked. I remember inking up his paper and having huge arguments with him: "How you can say this? They've found GMO genes in the most remote corn populations in Mexico. It's everywhere now." And he just said that he didn't feel like it was actually a threat to those varieties. So we clashed a lot, but I also respect him enormously.

He wanted me to study a singular crop and its center of origin, and I wanted to look at a system, a cropping system. Home gardens was what I was most interested in. That's what I got turned on to a lot in Belize, was the amazing amount of diversity in these tiny little kitchen gardens outside the house that mostly the women would take care of. I wanted to look at how the diversity in people's home gardens was changing as a result of economic integration, and

remote villages being brought into a more commercialized agricultural system, and a more monetized system. That required me to learn a little bit about economics, which is not my forte. I had an economist on my major committee, and after crunching lots of numbers and doing all this research, he said that the economics portion of my thesis was really weak, and that I should just throw it all out. By doing that, I basically couldn't really prove anything. I just said, "Some villages seem to be losing their crop biodiversity, and these seem to be the villages that are moving towards cash crops and a cash economy. And then the more remote villages seem to be holding on to a lot of their biodiversity because they need it. They need to provide for themselves, whether it be medicine, or fiber, or wood, or food. They were more subsistence-based so they needed that biodiversity to survive."

I studied 120 families in 16 villages in northern Guatemala. I was there for about six months. I would interview the family and then we would go out to their home garden and they would tell me what each plant was—if they knew the Spanish name, if they knew the indigenous name for it, and what were the uses for each plant. And then if they couldn't identify it, which happened sometimes, like if the husband and wife both weren't there, and one or the other knew what a plant was for, then I would take a sample, if they didn't know what it was, and I brought it back to the university in Guatemala City, where they had an arboretum, and they helped me key them out. There were only about sixteen species that we couldn't figure out what they were.

Rabkin: So it sounds like you're fluent in Spanish.

Thistlethwaite: Yes.

Rabkin: And did you speak any indigenous Mayan languages?

Thistlethwaite: No. I had a guide. I was looking at mainly two different Mayan areas, two different dialects—Quiché and Ixil. He spoke both dialects and he spoke Spanish. I picked up: hello, goodbye. That's about it. (laughs)

Rabkin: So when did you finish your graduate work?

Thistlethwaite: I graduated from Davis in 2001. I actually didn't finish my thesis until 2003. I was actually almost ready to just give it all up, because I was having a hard time getting my committee to give me the green light on it. They just kept wanting revision after revision. And some other grad school friends said, "You can't not finish this, because then you won't get your degree, and all this time, and all the parasites you picked up in Guatemala, and the pain and suffering you went through to be down there will be for nothing if you don't finish this thing." So I finished it in 2003. That's when I officially graduated.

Rabkin: Did you have pretty big loans at that point?

Thistlethwaite: I didn't pay for grad school, but I paid for my undergrad, and I'm still paying for that. I had a research assistantship, and then I was also a TA, and then I got money from the university to do my research. And I got paid pretty well as a TA. So I did pretty well (financially) in grad school, actually.

Rabkin: And how, and when, and why did you begin to work for ALBA [Agriculture & Land-Based Training Association]?

Research in Honduras

Thistlethwaite: So after I left Davis in 2001 in June, I got a job working for Dr. William Loker of California State University, Chico. My major professor, Stephen Brush, was friends with Dr. Loker, and he told me that he had an internship opening up to do research down in Honduras, and he thought it would be a good fit for me. I applied and I got that job.

I left right away in June and spent six months down in Honduras in a beautiful village called Copán, where some of the most beautiful ruins of the Maya are. They call it the Paris of the Mayan world, because a lot of the Mayan ruins are more utilitarian, whereas the ones in Copán were extremely artistic. And he used to be an archaeologist down there, discovered some of the original stuff from Copán thirty years ago. Now he was doing ecological anthropology, and Dr. Loker was looking at how different cultural groups manage their natural resources.

I was his research assistant and I did everything from interviewing families to GPSing different forest types. I don't know exactly when the ancient Mayan town of Copán fell, but they say that it fell because of ecological ruin—because of deforestation, primarily. Even today the mestizo community blames the deforestation on the Mayan community, and the Mayan community says, no, it's the *Fincas*. The *Fincas* include the beef cattle ranches and the coffee plantations. And then there was a lot of tobacco production down there, and they use a lot of wood to dry it. So the Mayans blame the deforestation on the mestizos; the mestizos blame it on the Mayans. He was really interested to see where really

was the deforestation happening. So we did GPS out in the forest on different people's land, trying to track where active deforestation was happening, and where reforestation was happening. And he found that actually the Mayan-controlled lands were reforesting.

One of the interesting dynamics there is that Honduras actually gave back a lot of the mestizo land to the Mayan communities. The Honduran government purchased land from the wealthy mestizo landowners and gave it back to the Mayan community. What was really interesting about that, is Honduras, for about a hundred years, didn't recognize that it had any indigenous population left. They just said, oh, they've all been assimilated. I don't really know what changed their minds. Maybe because Guatemala makes a lot of money off its tourism and indigenous communities. Maybe Honduras decided they needed to do a little bit of that too. But they recognized this one Mayan community because there was still the language, and some of the cultural practices still existed. And then, instead of taking the land, they actually purchased it from the mestizos, who were really happy because the coffee industry was failing there anyway. And tobacco was basically gone too. They bought it from them and then gave it back to the Mayan communities.

The Mayan communities were probably three or four generations removed from owning and managing land. They had just been farm workers, basically. So they had a steep learning curve to re-learn how to take care of all this hilly, steep land and manage it communally. So in addition to doing the research, we actually helped some of these Mayan villages do mapping of their land, and then sort of

community natural-resource management plans, where we would put up on a big wall a big white piece of paper of the drawings that we had made of their land, and the different forest types, and pasture and streams, and this and that, and facilitated them to talk about what they wanted to do with it. Do they want to actually divide it to each family, which would mean that in a couple of generations the kids would only be getting these tiny little pieces of land? Because if you just split it equally amongst all of your children, in a couple of generations then the children don't have anything they can really do with it, because it's not big enough to even subsistence farm. Or did they want to manage it more communally? So that was really, really fascinating.

Working for the Agriculture & Land-Based Training Association

I did that for six months, and the research was coming to an end because Dr. Loker was going back to Chico to teach. I found on the UC Davis jobs website this position with ALBA. I sent in an application. They actually flew me up from Honduras for a job interview. It was a great interview. I went back to Honduras, finished up my work, and about a month later I moved to Santa Cruz.

Rabkin: Tell me about the organization of ALBA and why it appealed to you.

Thistlethwaite: What I really liked about ALBA was that to me it felt and looked like doing international development work, but domestically. And after working a little bit in developing countries, I realized that, for the most part, while there are definitely traditional models of agriculture and development in those countries, all the modern stuff was coming from our country primarily. Especially in Latin America. Maybe Africa is adopting more of a European

model, I don't know. Latin Americans were mostly adopting the American models and technology and usually the worst of it, not the best of it. So it made me realize that I don't really have any business going to these countries and thinking that I can help them with their agricultural system when there are so many things that are wrong with our model in this country. So that appealed to me, as well: to come back to this country, and work on making agriculture sustainable here, and especially with people who are of other countries, because they'll transmit that knowledge. A lot of them go back, and they come back, and maybe they go to Mexico and retire, or they have land there, or family managing their land. So that information could be transferred down there. It would be like doing international development, except it would be coming from the people themselves, rather than me going down there and trying to save something, which is kind of patronizing. And like I said, our model leaves a lot to be desired.

Rabkin: What were your responsibilities at ALBA?

Thistlethwaite: I first started as a natural resources manager, which is one of the things that really appealed about the job, because I thought, wow, this is the first time I've actually seen a position asking for my background, which is just a little bit of everything. And I was really fluent in Spanish at the time. They wanted Spanish language skills, an understanding of agriculture, an understanding of natural resources, restoration, and I had all of that. So the first two years I primarily managed the natural resource aspects of the two-hundred-acre farm that we have in North Monterey County, called the Triple M Ranch, and to a lesser extent, the farm that we have in the Salinas Valley. That farm, because it

doesn't really have any natural habitat, and it's flat, there's not really as much erosion issues—there wasn't as much work to be done there as there was this farm in North Monterey County where we have a conservation easement and two thirds of the land was protected as habitat, but it needed a lot of serious restoration because it had all been farmed and farmed poorly for about fifty years. So that's where my emphasis was.

And then that after that I became program manager of that farm. So beyond just the natural resource management, I was also leading educational programs there, working with the farmers. There was anywhere between six and ten farms out there. Helping them on different aspects—business, marketing, agronomic issues, production issues.

Then [I] also developed a continuing education program for experienced farmers called Ag Matters, which was a short-course series. Every year the topics would change depending on what was most pressing and pertinent for farmers. We did ones on direct marketing; we did ones on integrated pest management; I did a couple of classes on alternatives to methyl bromide for strawberry producers, probably thirty-some-odd short courses.

Then two years ago I became director of programs for ALBA. So I managed six different programs, both of the farm managers at both farms; I created and implemented an evaluation program for all of our programs; I did all of the grant reporting, and supervised a lot of staff.

Rabkin: Wow. What were the most satisfying or enjoyable aspects for you of working with ALBA?

Thistlethwaite: I think seeing when farmers really got it, when they really understood a subject, or when they embraced it and implemented a new practice or a new way of doing marketing. That was always really satisfying, seeing farmers get into farmers' markets, or start to sell to restaurants, or start a CSA, rather than just wholesale all their product.

Rabkin: Are there particular individuals, farmers or farms, that you remember vividly—examples of that kind of success that you witnessed?

Thistlethwaite: Yes. One of the farmers that I was assigned to be mentor [for], his name was Guilebaldo Nuñez. He started out a few years ago as a farm worker on another organic farm, and he came to ALBA wanting just an acre to start with, to do essentially the same crops that he knew, which were cool-season mixed vegetables. And got into some farmers' markets, and got on the wait list for a lot of really good farmers' markets. And now, I think it's four years later, he's in Mountain View and Moraga and a couple of really good farmers' markets. He markets probably ninety percent of his crops through farmers' markets. He has developed a banner. He has got a really nice price sign that he developed, with pictures. He's learned how to cook everything that he puts out, even fennel and dandelion greens and radicchio and stuff like that. And one of my favorite things about him is he has learned how to say hello in about twelve different languages. He's really into customer service. His customers love him. He always smiles. He sets up a beautiful display. We did a farmers'-market class

a couple of years ago, and he was one of the students in the class. We had one day where we were teaching people how to set up a nice display, and me and this other lady set the display up before the students came. He came and he's like, "Do you mind if I change that?" He changed it all and it looked ten times better. So he became the teacher, and now he's helping mentor other beginning farmers. He's one of my favorites.

But just things like that, when they really embrace direct marketing and they feel really proud of their product, and they are proud to represent it and price it correctly, and really put themselves out there. Whereas a lot of the farmers that we worked with are still in sort of the wholesale mentality—that their job ends at the farm gate and that someone else should take it away and sell it for them. Unfortunately, those farmers are the least successful. When they leave ALBA, they're probably not going to survive, because there is too much competition. When they're competing against the likes of Earthbound Farms and Lakeside Organics and Cal Organics for the same product, their price is obviously going to be more expensive because they're smaller—they're just not going to survive.

So when our farmers learned how to direct-market their stuff and price it fairly instead of just accept the wholesale price. So often they're price takers. When they became price makers, when they're like, "This is my product. It's the best strawberries you're ever going to have and I'm going to get thirty dollars a flat for it, or you can go get it from somebody else," when they really step up like that and are proud of their stuff, that's when I would feel really good. Because then I knew that they could be successful.

Rabkin: So it sounds like marketing education is crucial to what ALBA does in helping farmers become successful.

Thistlethwaite: Yes.

Rabkin: Is that a big part of ALBA's work?

Thistlethwaite: It's huge. But a lot of it, you can't educate someone. A lot of it's just personality. For a lot of farmers, they were just never going to be that person. So I'd encourage them to find family members. Do they have a child who is American-born, maybe savvy with the Internet, likes to talk, likes to socialize, would be willing to stand there at the farmers' market? So some of them have done that. J.P. Perez, for example, he was younger, and American-born.² He embraced the marketing. He wanted to be the face and the front man for his product. His parents had been farm workers their whole lives, didn't speak very good English. But now they are working for him and with him. It's a great model.

Rabkin: Do you have a sense of about how many farmers ALBA has helped get established?

Thistlethwaite: ALBA took over a program called the Rural Development Center that was around since 1985.³ And it essentially assumed the same educational program, the PEPA program, [Small Farmer Education Program (*Programa Educativo para Pequeños Agricultores*)], which is the beginning farmer education program, but improved the curriculum dramatically. So I think since the PEPA program started, we would use the number, based on the graduation lists for

each year, of helping over six hundred farmers get their start. We didn't have good data on what percentage were still farming, because a lot of them, their addresses change. They don't have Internet access or any good way to get a hold of them. Maybe they went back to Mexico; maybe they moved out of state. But typically, each year, of the graduates of that program about a third would go into farming. Which may not seem that much, maybe it was four or five students. But it was really more about quality than quantity. We actually felt good about keeping some people from starting their own farms, maybe getting them to think about it a little bit more, or decide that they needed more experience, or maybe they were going to work for a farmer for a couple of years. Because we'd rather not have people lose their shirts by jumping into something that they're not cut out for, or they need more training in.

So those that really wanted to farm would be the third or so that started farming right after the class. Most of them are still farming. Just like any small business, it takes them a few years to really start to take it seriously, and figure out what their niche is, and maybe develop a good market. That was true for most of the ALBA farmers. By the third or fourth year in the program was when they really started to take off, or they decide it's not for them.

Rabkin: How do farm workers and prospective farmers find their way to ALBA?

Thistlethwaite: A lot of it is word of mouth. A lot of research has shown, at least in this area, that the Latino community gets a lot of their information through family and friend networks, not through media channels. So a lot of it is word of mouth. We also tabled at festivals, like Day of the Farm Worker festival in

Greenfield, and went to the county fair a couple of years, and would go to Salinas Adult School and make presentations to classes at the Adult School. We did a little bit of flyering and brochures that we would drop off at community centers and adult schools. We even flyered at laundromats. Radio as well, PSAs on Spanish radio. But the audience isn't only Latinos. The program just two years ago became fully bilingual because there is demand by some English speakers. And we've also had some Southeast Asian people who spoke English, and sometimes even Spanish, go through our program as well.

Rabkin: What aspects of the work with ALBA did you find challenging or frustrating?

Thistlethwaite: Well, one thing is that ALBA is a business incubator. The term 'incubate' means that it's going to leave the nest eventually. And if you look at other business incubators around the country—there's technology incubators; there's kitchen incubators. We're one of the few farming incubators. But there's a system in place for those businesses to eventually leave and go off on their own. ALBA wasn't very good at the leaving-the-nest part. We made it a little too easy for people to stay. And to me, it felt like we were just subsidizing businesses that would fail on their own.

Rabkin: What do you mean by "stay"? Do you mean that they would be farming land provided by ALBA?

Thistlethwaite: Yes. They would stay on the land. They would continue to use our equipment, continue to be very dependent on our wholesale marketing

program, and had business models that wouldn't stand on their own. They would stop innovating. They would stop reinventing themselves, and would become a little complacent, wouldn't be striving to try new crops, or improve their quality, or try a new marketing outlet. They would get a little stagnant. It doesn't make room for new farmers. It took up a lot of our time. It kind of created this paternalistic environment where new people would come in and feel like they could get this charity as well. I don't think it created the kind of environment that was good for us, good for staff and good for other farmers.

Rabkin: Were there limitations, requirements, or rules to try to get people to move on?

Thistlethwaite: Yes, there were. But they weren't strictly enforced. So that was unfortunate. We had a wholesale marketing company called ALBA Organics. It's still there. And I almost feel like that should be a marketing outlet, maybe for the first few years when someone is trying to get their production system down and figure out which crops they're good at and just how to grow and all of that. But then, I almost feel like, after the first few years then that should no longer be a marketing outlet for them. Because, like I said, some of the older farmers that have been there for a while were very dependent on us doing all their wholesaling. And it just is not a sustainable financial model. One of our longest-time farmers there is close to bankruptcy because he is now a medium-sized farmer. He has some other properties and quite a bit of equipment, but he wholesales all of his product. And he just can't survive there. But we never pushed him to direct-market more. We never said, "Look. We're cutting you off."

Or, “You can only sell so much through us.” We let him continue to utilize us. If we are creating a system where people become so dependent on us that they don’t have a sustainable business, then I don’t think that’s a good way to go.

Rabkin: How has ALBA responded to these problems?

Thistlethwaite: Well, one thing that they’ve been talking about for a couple of years, and I think will probably happen in 2009, is that the wholesale component is going to spin off, become its own business, probably an LLC [limited liability company]. And a couple of ideas for an LLC model is that ALBA, the nonprofit, would be the majority owner, but that farmers who were interested could buy into the LLC. So the farmers who really want to wholesale could buy into that LLC, and they could actually build some equity in it. They would be a lot more invested to manage the wholesale market, and to make sure that it was run really well, they were getting their best prices for it. So that’s one idea that I think would help. There would only be a small handful that could invest in that.

But another idea is that people could invest really slowly over time, like per box basically: there would a dollar charge per box that would be buying them into LLC over time. So that way people who have less money, or are newer, could buy a stake in the LLC.

Other things—we’d work so hard to provide them with other marketing opportunities. We would always have huge lists of farmers’ markets they could get into. We’d introduce them to chefs and other markets. But I think maybe if we started the program, the very beginning students, and said, “All we are going

to teach you is direct marketing. We are not going to teach you anything about the wholesale market. And we're going to do tons of field trips. And, in fact, to graduate you're going to have to go stand at a farmers' market booth at least twice, and help sell"—really immerse them in that, that might help as well. But, like I said, a lot of it is cultural, because a lot of the people in our program have been farm workers for wholesale companies, so they've known wholesale agriculture, industrial agriculture, for a long time. They never were involved in the marketing and where the product ended up. So it's a big shift for them to take that on, not to mention language barriers and stuff like that. There is a stronger emphasis on teaching English as well, which I think is really important.

Rabkin: It sounds like you're saying that wholesale marketing can be a real dead end for small farmers trying to compete with the mega-organic farmers.

Thistlethwaite: I don't think it's a viable business model. A small farmer can't sell more than fifty percent of their product wholesale and expect to make a profit.

Rabkin: Do you see a lot of remaining, still-open opportunity for new direct markets?

Thistlethwaite: Not around here. We would sort of jokingly say to our students, "Okay, now that you've graduated, go move to Nebraska or Kansas," or even the Central Valley, for that matter. But a lot of them had roots here, and have been here for a couple of generations, and their kids are in school here. I can understand they don't want to leave. But there are vast opportunities in other

parts of the country where farmers'-market managers are struggling to find enough farmers. That's true in probably seventy-five percent of the country, where they can't find enough farmers, and here we have giant waiting lists. So unless someone is really willing to try something completely different, it's not really a good market to jump into and try to do cool-season vegetables, or berries, or any of that kind of stuff.

Rabkin: What do you see as ALBA's greatest strengths and accomplishments as an organization?

Thistlethwaite: I think that we really made a lot of other organizations and agencies aware of the different techniques that were needed to get through to Latino farmers, and that it's not just a matter of translating something, but that you actually have to interpret it, sometimes at a different level, a different academic level, or you have to make it culturally relevant. A lot of farmers learn in more tactile environments; things have to be more tactile and hands-on—and that, also, farmers often learn best from their peers. So almost all the workshops that I ever put on, I would always have a speaker panel with farmers, or we would go visit a few farmers' fields. Learning from your peers is the best way. So we really helped groups like Cooperative Extension, and the Ag Commissioners' office. We worked strongly with CAFF [Community Alliance with Family Farmers] and the Ecological Farming Association, and other groups, to make a lot of their information more accessible to Latino farmers, or also limited resource farmers. So that was really positive about ALBA.

One of our best accomplishments is there were new water quality regulations that were implemented about five years ago. And as part of it, every farmer had to take fifteen hours of education around water quality, every farmer who uses irrigation. We were the ones who said, “This course has to be in Spanish, not only for farm owners, but also you should be training your foreman and your managers.” So we paid for it to be translated into Spanish. It wasn’t just directly translated with the same academic language, but it was actually interpreted to more of an eighth-grade education level. Then we helped find speakers, and we helped design the pilot course, and we actually created— The farm plan that the UC Cooperative Extension developed was seventy-two pages. We created one that was seven pages and got it approved by the Regional Water Quality Board. It’s in Spanish; it’s more of a checklist, and much simpler for farmers to fill out. So now farmers can use that version instead of the seventy-two-page version. So that was really positive.

And I think helping with the Eco-Farm conferences and other conferences and educational programs, helping them bring in a different audience, and helping them look at their assumptions about how people learn, and what people want to learn about, and what their education level is, I think we helped open their eyes to the fastest-growing percentage of farmers in the state and probably the country—who are Latino farmers.

Rabkin: Have you seen those changes reflected in recent Eco-Farm conferences?

Thistlethwaite: Yes, they do an all-Spanish day now, with four or five workshops in Spanish, and they have a mixer in Spanish. It’s getting better. Now

their director is talking about maybe having a Hmong track of workshops, in Hmong. We helped with the California Small Farm Conference to develop Spanish workshops, and find the speakers, and ensure good interpretation for those workshops. At Cooperative Extension now, whenever they want to put on a workshop that's going to have Spanish-language interpretation they call us and they ask: "What speakers? What interpreters? What kind of outreach? How should we do our outreach?" Because it's not the same-old, same-old outreach where we send out a mailing and people come, but maybe radio PSAs and in-person outreach. We do a lot of phone calling for workshops that other agencies don't do. So I think that's one of ALBA's strengths.

Rabkin: Do you have any funny memories of working at ALBA?

Thistlethwaite: (laughs) Oh, goodness. Well, I have a lot of good memories of working with ALBA. But one that was funny, is we would do field trips with fourth graders. CAFF helped fund that program. We were doing a field trip with a school, the Hall Elementary School, which is right across the street from the Triple M Ranch. And one thing that was really funny is the school wouldn't allow them to walk across the street with a couple of crossing guards. CAFF had to pay all this money for school buses to literally drive across the street. So that was really hilarious—all the time it took for these kids to board the bus, drive across, get off the bus—when they could have just walked across the street. But we planted pumpkins with the kids at the end of the school year, and then brought them back in October to harvest the pumpkins, and didn't realize just how crazy these kids were going to be about harvesting *their* pumpkins and

making sure they got *their* pumpkin from the seed that *they* planted. I think we had four classes that day. The first group of kids, it was just utter chaos. People were elbowing each other and fighting over pumpkins. So the next group of kids, we made them line up in groups of four at each row of pumpkins, and we made one kid at a time walk down their row, grab their pumpkin and go back to the end of the line. And then the next kid. So there was no fighting over the pumpkins. (laughs) So that was really funny. And it was great to see their joy over these pumpkins.

What else? I think my first year working for ALBA we were trying to put up this greenhouse. And there were about six of us just trying to get the plastic on this greenhouse, and everyone barking orders at each other: "Go this way! No, go this way!" The wind was howling out in Salinas, and the plastic was flying in the air. We finally got it done, and didn't work in the office at all that day. We just played with the greenhouse all day. That was really fun. When I first started working for ALBA we were a really small organization, so we got to play outside a lot more and actually work in the field a little bit, and that was really fun. But now that ALBA's grown there is more specialization and hierarchy.

Rabkin: When did you leave ALBA, and why?

Thistlethwaite: I left at the end of May 2008. I had been there for six and a half years. Working at ALBA instilled an entrepreneurial spirit in me. That's what I was doing, working with all these farming entrepreneurs. And so partially, I just wanted to go out and become an entrepreneur myself. I tried for a little while to cut down my hours at ALBA so I could work more on our farming business that

I have with my husband. But they didn't want me to, because I had a lot of responsibilities there. So I was trying to work at nights and on the weekends on the farming business, and it was getting a little overwhelming. Our farming business is really taking off now, so the timing was right, in many ways, for me to take on more of the farming business. And like I said, ALBA had also grown quite a bit and become more bureaucratic, and I was kind of a slave to the desk and paperwork, didn't get to be outside hardly at all. I had less and less interaction with the farmers. I was moving in a direction that I didn't want to be going.

Tastes Like Chicken [TLC] Ranch

Rabkin: So tell me about how TLC Ranch got its start.

Thistlethwaite: Well, I met Jim [Dunlop] at the California Small Farm Conference.

Rabkin: When was that?

Thistlethwaite: That was back in 2002. Then I ran into him again in 2004 at the Heartland Festival out in the Central Valley. We were both single then. And seven weeks later we got married.

Rabkin: Wow!

Thistlethwaite: In Vegas. (laughs)

Rabkin: (laughs)

Thistlethwaite: He was living up in Mariposa, near Yosemite, trying to raise animals and vegetables up there. It's hot in the summer, cold in the winter, horrible soils. I was like, "I'm living down here. I've got a great job and the climate is perfect for animals. Why don't you move down here." So he came down here, and ALBA had some land at the Triple M that was fallow, that wasn't good for row crops because it floods. So we started off by renting him ten acres of land. He started raising meat chickens and we had a few laying hens. We were debating for about a month or two what the name should be. Everyone said about the meat chickens, "Oh, this tastes like chicken. This is like the real flavor of chicken. This is like the chicken I used to have as a kid, or my grandmother had." We thought that was funny, so we called it Tastes Like Chicken Ranch, or TLC Ranch. We wanted a little humor in the name.

Rabkin: Why did you choose to raise chickens and meat animals as opposed to vegetables, fruits, flowers?

Thistlethwaite: Well, he was already doing it up there in Mariposa. I think part of the reason why he was doing it there was because the ground was awful for most crops. There just wasn't a lot of soil, good soil. He grew some nice tomatoes and garlic. But for the most part he raised chickens. He had a CSA up there and he actually got his vegetables from T&D Willey Farms in the Central Valley. He raised the animals; they provided the vegetables. He had a captured audience up there—up in the [Yosemite National] Park he was the only source of fresh vegetables—so he had a really successful CSA up there.

So he had experience with the animals and he brought that here. And partially, there's just so much competition for vegetables. You know, why bother? And it's just way less—I mean, there's a lot of work raising animals, but it's not the same back-breaking work that vegetables require. You're not weeding all day, bent over all day, doing the same thing all day. And the market seemed really open and wide for animal products.

So we did meat chickens, and we started with a small flock of laying hens. We tried out a bunch of different varieties of laying hens at first, and then narrowed it down to one or two varieties of laying hens. The demand for eggs was enormous. We've steadily increased our flock. We went from—last year I think we had about eight hundred, and this year we have between three thousand and thirty-five hundred. So we increased it hugely in this last year.

We did meat chickens for two years, and Jim did all the processing on the farm. There's a federal and a state loophole that allows you to process, I think it's up to ten thousand chickens on your farm, and direct market them. You can either sell them on the farm, or you can sell them at certified farmers' markets. But the county health inspector in Santa Cruz decided he was going to enforce his own rules and tell us that we couldn't sell at the farmers' markets there unless we processed in a certified kitchen, or something like that. And those were our main markets. We couldn't sell enough off the farm because people in Santa Cruz think driving to Watsonville is just way too far. (laughs) (I think you are a little spoiled up there.) So we got out of doing the meat chicken production. It was

also a ton of work. He probably spent two or three full days a week processing chickens from sunrise to sunset.

Rabkin: Did you have to have big refrigeration facilities?

Thistlethwaite: We had coolers and we bought a lot of ice. We were renting a house. We didn't have any space for walk-in coolers or anything like that. And we sold the chicken the next day, so we didn't actually have to freeze it. We just put it on ice.

So we stopped raising meat chickens, got more into the laying hens, and then about two years ago started raising pigs. We've fluctuated with the pigs. Last year we did a lot of our own breeding, and had quite a few sows. And this year we got rid of all of our sows and we're just buying weaners. We realized raising our own sows was too expensive because we are using all-organic feed and we can get weaners for a lot cheaper. It also potentially gives us a little break in the wintertime when we may not have animals, or less animals, anyway.

Rabkin: How long does it take to raise a weaner to slaughtering age?

Thistlethwaite: About six months. We raise ours big, between 300 and 350 pounds. We find that they get a lot more intermuscular fat, so the pork is juicy and tender instead of dry. Conventional pigs they only raise to two hundred pounds or so. So they're pretty young and they don't get that fat that we're looking for. So the pork is dry.

Rabkin: And where do you do the slaughtering and butchering?

Thistlethwaite: Right now we're going with Johansen's Meats up in Orland, which is near Chico.

Rabkin: That's a big commute.

Thistlethwaite: It's a big commute. This year I think we've gone three times. He loads up his livestock trailer with a dozen pigs at a time, and then we have a delivery guy who picks them up who has got a freezer van. He picks up the pork all cut up and packaged and ready to go and brings it down to us. And then we're storing it in a cold-storage place in San Juan Bautista on pallets. So right now all of our pork is on pallets, and we're getting weaners in the next couple of days.

Rabkin: Are you getting hit hard by gas price increases?

Thistlethwaite: Oh, yes. Huge. Yes. I was actually just looking at a bunch of gas receipts yesterday. Jim had to drive out to the Central Valley to pick up egg cartons. He paid \$5.50 a gallon for diesel, which was ridiculous. It cost him \$75 to fill up his tank. I looked at a receipt for the same gas station a couple of months ago, and it was \$3.75, and it cost him \$60 to fill up his tank. So there was a \$15 difference there. And that's just in the matter of a couple of months. It's almost gone up \$2.00 a gallon just in a couple of months. So yes, it's hitting us. It's hitting us on our feed. Our prices have gone way up. Everything. It makes us consolidate our trips. If we're going to sell to anybody it's got to be combined with some other markets. We now have a distributor who distributes a lot of our product around the Bay Area. So he absorbs a lot of those costs. But he's also

really, really efficient. He's got routes, and he's got to have a minimum amount of business to do a drop off.

Rabkin: So you have the pigs and the laying hens. Any other animals?

Thistlethwaite: Not right now. Right now we sell beef for another farmer, Joe Morris, out in San Juan Bautista. Morris Grass-fed Beef. We sell his beef at our farmers' markets. And he sells our pork at his farmers' markets.

Rabkin: Is that a helpful arrangement to both of you?

Thistlethwaite: It is, because we have a lot of customers who don't eat pork, so it's nice to have something else. It doesn't really compete with our pork. It's not like people buy less pork so much because we have beef. It usually draws in new customers who otherwise wouldn't come. And then they buy eggs. We make a little bit of money off of it. It's not a big money maker. But it's also nice to have some beef in the house. I get kind of porked out, you know. (laughs) As much as I love bacon.

We have raised a few beef cows here and there. We raised a couple of cull cows of Joe's last year. And then we raised a couple of dairy cows. We got some calves from Claravale Farm and raised them for beef. That was nice. But we only have twenty acres now that we're renting, so that can only support a couple of cows. It's not really the right type of animal for our production system. Pigs are a lot more efficient. And you can put a lot more pigs on an area than you can steers.

We did lamb last year, for the spring. That was not very lucrative. And they are really hard to keep in with electric fencing. They kept getting out. We have other farmers on the land out there, so we don't want cause them too much grief with our animals getting out all the time. We might bring in a few more lamb this year, or cows, just mainly to keep the grass short for the chickens. Right now we've been cutting hay. We have a hay cutting guy who cuts the grass in front of the chickens and bales the hay. Then we rotate the chickens on afterwards. But it's nice to have a few ruminants around just to keep the grass short. Because the chickens can't really utilize grass that's taller than six inches.

Rabkin: So pigs are easier to contain than lambs.

Thistlethwaite: Yes. Believe it or not

Rabkin: Because they don't jump over fences?

Thistlethwaite: Lambs are insulated with all that wool and they'll (laughs)— They're really dumb creatures. I don't know what they do exactly, but I think the group of lamb will pick one of the weaker ones and push him up against the fence and use him as the shocker while the other ones jump through, you know? (laughs)

Rabkin: (laughs) I never thought of—

Thistlethwaite: I don't think they get shocked nearly as much as the pigs do. So with the small pigs I think we use two or three strands of electric fence, just

single strand. And then with the larger pigs we only use one strand. With the lamb last year we had five strands, and that still wasn't enough.

Rabkin: Does that up your electricity bill?

Thistlethwaite: Well, you need to have more chargers, and it takes a lot more labor to put up the strands and to move them and stuff.

Rabkin: So what are the biggest challenges of raising meat animals and laying hens?

Thistlethwaite: Oh! [sighs] There's a gazillion. I mean, one thing is we live in California and grass doesn't grow very well here for eight months out of the year. So we have to irrigate our pasture. Water. Around here our water is metered because we're part of the Pajaro Valley Water Management Agency district. So water is expensive. If we were in the Central Valley it would be free. We would just pay for the electricity to pump it, but here we pay for the electricity and the water.

Rabkin: Are you using tertiary treated water?

Thistlethwaite: No. We have well water. They didn't bring the piped water out to the Elkhorn Slough watershed. It's just out sort of near the beach. And I'm glad, because I don't want that water anyway. (laughs) I'm concerned about all the heavy metals that sewage water is reported to have. But anyway, we use well water, and like I said, it's expensive to irrigate.

We do have a really nice climate here for animals. But there is so little animal production in this area, that there's no infrastructure. Our slaughterhouse is five hours away. There is one that's a little bit closer that's three hours away. And then there's a new one that just opened up close to Los Banos, but they're having all kinds of production issues because they're just getting started. There are not a lot of slaughterhouses. That is a huge problem in California, a lack of USDA-inspected slaughterhouses. In California, there's no state meat inspection program. To retail anything it has to be USDA-inspected. Other states, you can get away with just a small, state-inspected slaughterhouse. Like up in Oregon they have a state-inspected program. And for a slaughterhouse to become USDA-inspected it's a lot of money, a lot of investment. And then they have to pay an inspector to be on site, so it's very expensive. So consequently, there's very few left in California. You have to go really far. A lot of times you have to actually get on their calendar months ahead of time. They may be booked up.

Our place, Johansen's, is booked in the summer for, I think, lamb, or maybe beef. So we had to get all of our pigs slaughtered before June or we wouldn't be able to do anything until the fall. And then we have these little local slaughterhouses, but like I said, they're not state-inspected. I think they're county-inspected, like Freedom Meat Locker or Corralitos Meat Market. But it's not legal for us to have our animals processed there and then re-sell it to the public. We can only have our own personal animals processed there. So that's a big problem in California.

There's not a lot of feed mills in California. Most of our grain is coming from the Midwest, so it's really expensive. I was just up in Oregon and I met some pig

producers that grow their own alfalfa so they don't have to buy soy from Iowa, so their feed costs are a lot lower. But land is a lot cheaper in Oregon and they have rain in the summer, so they can grow nice alfalfa. If we were to grow alfalfa it would be just tons and tons of water. Land rent around here is really expensive. And then the infrastructure to cut hay and to even deal with grains, if we wanted to raise our own grains, doesn't exist anymore in this area. Maybe in South Monterey County there's a little bit of grain production left, and then a little bit out in San Benito County, there's still a few people that do cut hay. The guy that cuts our hay is kind of the only game in town. We're really lucky to have found him. His equipment is like fifty years old. But it's weird, like when I went up to Oregon last week, everyone cuts hay everywhere. There's not a field of grass that's not cut. They utilize their grass a lot better. California, I don't know why people don't cut more hay here. I mean, even on just these little five-acre ranchettes in Oregon, people are cutting that hay, baling hay out of it. So it's a lot cheaper up there. So yes, our feed prices are expensive; our gas is ridiculous. Oregon was seventy-five cents cheaper a gallon for diesel.

I guess there are advantages in California. One is that the state does allow you to process chickens on your farm, up to ten thousand chickens. In a lot of other states that's not allowed at all. And, this doesn't really pertain to us, but at least raw milk is still legal in California, although that's potentially about to change. We're one of eight states where it's legal for human consumption. What else have we got good going for us? Well, we have fabulous markets and customers and all that, well-educated and well-to-do. So. (laughs)

Rabkin: Let's talk about your markets. How do you sell what you produce here?

Thistlethwaite: We sell at four farmers' markets.

Rabkin: Which ones?

Thistlethwaite: Westside Santa Cruz, Downtown Santa Cruz, and Live Oak, and Mountain View. And then our eggs go to another farmers' market where we don't have a stand but they go to the Old Town Monterey Market. Serendipity Farms, Jamie Collins—she sells our eggs for us there. We tried to get into that market and they just didn't have a space for us. And Jamie wanted to sell our eggs. She's also going to start moving our eggs through her CSA. And then we move a lot of eggs through the Live Earth Farm CSA. They actually contract us to grow eggs for them. We have a distributor in the Bay Area for our eggs, and he sells to a lot of independent grocery stores up there, like Bi-Rite Market and Canyon Market—small, independent, high-end grocery stores. Rainbow Co-op now, I think, we're in.

Rabkin: Bi-Rite is in San Francisco, in the Mission District.

Thistlethwaite: Yes. It's supposed to be really nice. They have their own creamery and make their own ice cream.

Rabkin: Yes, it's pretty good. I was just up there for the annual opening show for the San Francisco Mime Troupe on July 4. People were streaming by the Bi-Rite Market on their way. And there's a big sign across the street from Bi-Rite Market saying, "Bi-Rite Ice Cream. You Know You Want It." (laughs)

Thistlethwaite: (laughs) And then, have you heard of Weston Price Foundation? They buy a lot of our eggs. Weston Price Foundation has chapters all over the country. It's this foundation that's about eating whole foods and raw foods, and animal fats and animal products, raw milk, pastured meat, pastured milk. They have chapters that have buying clubs, and that also do monthly dinners and stuff. The San Jose chapter has a buying club and they buy a lot of our eggs. Sometimes we sell pork to them.

Rabkin: How many eggs do you produce, roughly, in a year?

Thistlethwaite: I think right now we're producing 225 dozen a day.

Rabkin: That's hard to picture.

Thistlethwaite: Yes. I'll show you our egg washer and our garage that's full of eggs. That will slow down as the day length decreases in the winter. Then they'll molt for four to six weeks, where they actually don't produce. Then it will pick back up again.

Rabkin: So did we hit all your marketing outlets?

Thistlethwaite: Oh, well, we also direct-market to a few restaurants—pork and eggs. [Ristorante] Avanti in Santa Cruz has been a big supporter of our pork. Stokes Restaurant down in Monterey loves our pork as well. Bernardus Lodge in Carmel Valley. Carried Away Foods. Who else is buying? The Quail Lodge is buying from us. Big Sur Bakery uses our eggs for all their baked goods and breakfasts. There's a few others here and there. Like, we had suckling pigs for a

while and we sold to a lot of high-end restaurants in San Francisco, but now we don't have them. We're actually low on pork right now, so we're not really selling much to restaurants except for leg roasts and shoulder roasts and stuff we can't move very well at the farmers' markets. But almost all our pork right now is going to the farmers' markets.

Rabkin: Boy, between the farmers' markets and the CSA and the restaurants and your various outlets, it sounds like there's a certain amount of bookkeeping you have to keep track of.

Thistlethwaite: Yes.

Rabkin: Who does that?

Thistlethwaite: Well, Jim and I have been doing that together, and actually we just met with a lady yesterday who does bookkeeping for Big Sur Bakery and lives right here in Prunedale. So we're going to start working with her next week. She's going to start using QuickBooks and all that good stuff.

Rabkin: You look happy about that.

Thistlethwaite: I am very happy. (laughs)

Rabkin: And while we're talking about labor: who does the work on your farm, and how does the labor get divided up?

Thistlethwaite: Jim, for the most part, has been a one-man show until the last, about a year. He had a lady help him process the chickens when he was

processing about a hundred chickens a day. And then he's had a few guys help him here and there, build his big chicken coops that are built out of old cotton trailers. I can show you some pictures. But now he's got two guys that actually live out on the farm. There's another property that's owned by somebody else that's sort of in the middle of the farm, a horse ranch. They got jobs there working on the horse ranch a couple of years ago and then Jim befriended them. They know a lot about animals and slowly have started working for him. And now they're pretty much working for him full time. So since they live out there, they check on the animals a couple of times a day, make sure they have water. They help him set up his fencing when he moves them. They help him with the move. He moves the chickens now every other day. They collect the eggs. They bring them over here. They help wash them. They were just here this morning at 5:30 a.m. washing for a few hours, packing into cartons. They help fill up the feeders.

Rabkin: This is all work that Jim was doing by himself before?

Thistlethwaite: Yes.

Rabkin: Wow! And how about you?

Thistlethwaite: Well, I was working full time for ALBA. I have a daughter, so I was mostly just helping with the marketing and a little with the bookkeeping. Now that I'm not working for ALBA, I'm going to try to do three farmers' markets a week, and help him get more markets for his eggs, and just organizing and some of the bookkeeping, mostly accounts receivable. I don't really want to

know how much money he's spending, so I'll let the bookkeeper handle that.
(laughs)

Rabkin: How *are* the finances? Are you guys breaking even, turning a bit of a profit?

Thistlethwaite: It's really hard to say. We haven't even done our taxes for last year. We got an extension. I'm not really sure how we're doing. We're not selling all of our eggs right now. Part of it is one of our main markets had been shut down because of the fire down in Big Sur.⁴ I think once we're selling all our eggs it will look better. And then two of our markets, the CSA and then the distributor in the Bay Area, we're selling them eggs for half price because they gave us money up front in the winter, sort of an interest-free loan. So I think once we're getting paid full price for the eggs, after we pay our loans off, then it will look a lot better. So I can't really tell. It's hard to say. We'll see if we can pay rent on this house next month. (laughs) Since I'm not making a salary at ALBA anymore.

Rabkin: What do you guys do about health insurance?

Thistlethwaite: Jim's a veteran so he can go to the VA Hospital, and I just got Blue Shield for me and Fiona, my daughter.

Rabkin: So you just pay for it out of pocket.

Thistlethwaite: Yes. It's not too bad. I'm paying about \$150 a month for me and Fiona. It's a high-deductible policy. It's more like an emergency policy.

Rabkin: Yes. Do you see your farm as sustainable?

Thistlethwaite: Well, I think what we do is beyond organic. We're not even certified organic. There's a few reasons. One is, our slaughterhouse isn't organic, so for our pigs it would be hard to be certified organic. We'd have to pay a lot of money to get our slaughterhouse certified. And another thing is that there are some practices that are allowed in organic for animal agriculture that we don't agree with, that we think are really weak.

Rabkin: Such as what?

Thistlethwaite: For example, with egg production they're supposed to have outdoor access. But if you go to any large organic egg farm, outdoor access might be a small door and a tiny little dirt yard, and that would be it. And the chickens don't even go out there, because there's no water and no food out there and it's just a tiny little dirt yard, so why would they go out there?

Rabkin: Can chickens under those conditions be labeled, or can the eggs be labeled, free range?

Thistlethwaite: Oh, yes. Free range can just be walking around inside a big warehouse, on top of dirt and feces and all that. So that bothers us. They can have their beaks fully cut off. Organic pigs can have their tails cut off. The pigs can be in confinement, not necessarily on concrete in little stalls, but they can be in big warehouses—maybe on straw, but no outdoor access, still hanging out on top of their manure all day. You can still have ten thousand chickens in a building and call it organic. And honestly, we don't even know how these systems work. How do these animals even survive without antibiotics? Chickens,

especially, when the manure starts to build up, it's just ripe for disease. Like whenever we've started our own chicks, you have to keep them in a warm area indoors for the first four weeks or so. If we're not there changing the bedding on a daily basis, there's this one disease called that Coccidiosis that starts and can take over really quickly.

These industrial organic systems, I think they're kind of ruining the term organic. "Pasture-raised" is more important to us. That's what we tell our customers, that they are pasture-raised and organically fed, but the term "pasture-raised" is more important to us than "organic," because we want people to know that they are actually raised outdoors. And when we say "pasture," we actually mean green, growing vegetation. We don't mean a dirt yard. So even if you do find free-range eggs in the store that might be outdoor-raised, it's usually a dirt yard. Because unless they're moving those chickens or those animals on a constant basis, it turns to dirt in a matter of a couple of days. We're always moving our animals. We do rotational grazing so that manure never builds up in one area, and so they always have access to green, growing vegetation.

Rabkin: What do you do with your manure?

Thistlethwaite: We don't do anything, because we move our animals every couple of days. They poo on the spot, and the grass and the microbes break it down, and we don't come back to the same pasture for probably at least three months.

Rabkin: So you don't get enough build-up to make use of it. Interesting. On your blog⁵ you talk about providing an alternative to what you call "Big Chicken," and also confinement-based agriculture.

Thistlethwaite: Yes.

Rabkin: You've been talking about the confinement in the context of organic certification, but do you want to say a little bit more about what you mean by these phrases, and why you see it as important to provide an alternative?

Thistlethwaite: Oh. [sighs] I've just been reading a little bit about "Big Hog," they call it, out in North Carolina. I think in the West we don't realize how devastating it is to these communities, because they're so removed—North Carolina and Iowa, especially. I read the manure produced in North Carolina alone is more manure than the human waste produced by the cumulative populations of the thirty-two biggest cities in the United States. And there's a lot of flooding in North Carolina and a lot of wetlands and rivers, and every time it floods it fills up those lagoons, and they spill all that manure right into the rivers. It's devastating. I'm going to try to do a two- or three-part series on my blog about it because there's just so much information I can't put it in one post. But I don't think people out here—because we're so removed from it—I don't think we realize how devastating that industry is. It's atrocious for the workers. I mean, you gag when you go into these buildings. The communities that live nearby, that may have been there for generations and generations—and these aren't people who are against agriculture; they're not NIMBY types—but when one of these hog factories moves in, the value of their properties drops to

nothing. They have to keep their windows shut and their air conditioning units blasting all summer, because God forbid if they open a window. You can't sit out on your porch and drink ice tea anymore. It sounds absolutely awful.

The meat that comes out of one of these animals that's been so stressed out its entire life—it's probably [had] tons of panic hormones and adrenaline [pumped] into its [body]. I forget what the term is, but they say that something like thirty percent of the pork that's produced in these confinement operations has come from such a stressed-out animal that the pork is mushy and they have to use it for dog food or animal feed. They can't even feed it to humans. And instead of trying to reduce the stress conditions of those animals, they're trying to breed new pigs that don't exhibit this stress hormone or stress gene or something. It's inhumane.

Rabkin: Did I read somewhere that you and Jim were once both vegetarians?

Thistlethwaite: Yes. We both were for twelve years each, which is kind of funny, because we didn't know each other at the time. But we both were for exactly the same amount of time. I started eating meat again when I met him, because he was producing it, and I loved him, and I saw how he raised his animals and decided that I could do it again.

Rabkin: So your vegetarianism had been based primarily on principles about the way meat animals are treated?

Thistlethwaite: Yes, and environmental destruction and water use and deforestation and all that. But primarily it was that there wasn't a lot of access to

high-quality meat. It was probably out there. You just had to know a farmer and I didn't know any. You certainly couldn't walk into a grocery store and expect to find anything that wasn't produced from a confinement operation. Things are a lot different now, but surprisingly, there's still a lack of access. Like if I go into almost any natural food store in Santa Cruz, their lamb is usually coming from New Zealand. It's grass-fed but it's coming from New Zealand. We have beautiful lamb fed in Los Banos, up and down the I-5, Central Valley, gorgeous lamb. And instead it's coming from New Zealand.

Rabkin: And why isn't that being sold in our local natural food stores?

Thistlethwaite: It's cheaper from New Zealand, even with the transportation. I think that that's primarily it. And it's probably available year round, whereas the lamb from here would be seasonal because the grass turns brown in May and that's when you kill all your lamb. So that's probably part of it. Oh, and then also grass-fed beef. These stores have very little grass-fed beef. They have organic beef, but who knows where that's from and if it's confinement based. But they have very little one hundred percent grass-fed beef. And very little local meat, period.

I think, just in general, there's a lot of hurdles that local restaurants and grocers face in serving local meat. They've got to learn how to deal with different kinds of cuts. They have to learn how to deal with the whole animal. They also have to learn to deal with the seasonality of meat. In California, when the grass turns brown, that's when most of the meat is available. That's when everyone kills their animals because you don't want them trying to get nutrients off of a brown

field. They don't put on any gains. So then what do you do the other times of the year? Well, you got to learn how to break down whole animals and freeze them or cure them. I just think most chefs and retailers, they want to buy a fifty-pound box of rib-eyes so they can serve every customer a rib-eye steak. They don't want to serve some customers shoulder, and some customers leg, and some customers a loin. They just want fifty pounds of the same cut. There's a learning curve that retailers and restaurants have to get over.

Rabkin: Have you seen any signs of hope of that changing?

Thistlethwaite: Well, yes. It's becoming very trendy, for restaurants especially, to deal with the whole animal, and to do charcuterie, and to learn how smoke stuff and cure stuff, and put in their own curing rooms. That's become quite popular. There's more and more restaurants even serving offal, which are the organ meats.

Rabkin: I was at Gabriella's Café in Santa Cruz a little while ago, and they had all kinds of unusual organs on the menu.

Thistlethwaite: Yes. I think that's good. To really support the producers we need to learn how to eat and honor the entire animal. In other countries they would be appalled to find out how much of the animal we don't use and throw out. So that's changing.

In terms of the retailers, I don't know. I think the only way to get through to the retailers is maybe joining forces with a few other producers so you can have more product more of the year. Or there also needs to be more local

slaughterhouses, so this new slaughterhouse over near Los Banos is hopeful. They are just starting. If we could have a closer place to slaughter animals it means we could do it more often. And if a restaurant was like, “I need a half a pig,” it would be much easier for us to run over to Los Banos than it is to drive all the way up to Orland. I mean, that’s part of the problem. If we can only go once a month, or once every couple of months up to Orland, and then all the meat comes back frozen, restaurants often don’t want to deal with frozen meat. They want fresh meat. And they usually don’t have the storage capacity to deal with a bunch of frozen meat anyway. So yes, things are slowly changing.

Rabkin: Does consumer demand make a difference at the retail outlets?

Thistlethwaite: You know? [sighs] I don’t know if the retailers are really hearing it. We tried to get our eggs into Whole Foods down in Monterey. They didn’t get it. Some of the small independent retailers, like I said, up in San Francisco, are getting it. But I go into some natural foods retailers and none of their eggs come from pastured chickens. I don’t know if they’re not listening to their customers, or what? They can’t get over the price point of our eggs. And it’s like, “Listen. You sell them for six dollars a dozen, and there *are* customers out there that want that. Yes, it’s two dollars more than you’re used to paying, but you charge two dollars more.” And they just can’t get over this mental hurdle of getting their eggs for \$1.75 a dozen, or whatever they get them for. But our farmers’-markets sales attest to the fact that there’s local demand for it, and more and more people are reading books like *Omnivore’s Dilemma* and stuff like that where they’re finding out that those free-range eggs they think they’re buying are not truly

free-range. They're not on range. They're on dirt, dirt and feces. So yes, I would expect the retailers to be a little bit more savvy and on the boat. But you know, I think with the economy the way it is right now, I think everyone is feeling a little stingy and not willing to take risks.

Rabkin: Tell me about what it means to be a predator-friendly meat and poultry producer.

Thistlethwaite: Well, we've had issues with predators off and on. And before we pull out a rifle, we will look at the system and find out where the holes are. Quite often, literally, it might be a hole in the fence, you know? (laughs) So we look at our fencing. Our guard dog—is she not hanging out around the chickens? Is she hanging out around the house instead, or not doing her job? Maybe we'll tie her down there for a few nights in a row so she gets re-habituated to sleeping down there. Often it's birds, like hawks: maybe we'll shoot into the air just to scare it, shoot around it, scare it for a few days. Maybe we'll move our animals somewhere else so the animal is not habituated, or gets thrown off. Like, hey, where did my chickens go? I think a good producer has to look at their system and ask themselves all these questions before they result to lethal control. One thing we do kill are squirrels. But they're not predators. They're just voracious grain eaters and the ground squirrel populations are overly high out there. It's mostly because we have a lot of over-grazed pastures next to us, with this horse ranch. And ground squirrels love over-grazed pastures, so their population is out of control right now.

Rabkin: So you *really* don't want to be shooting those hawks and eagles.

Thistlethwaite: Yes, exactly. Yes! I mean, that's how I feel, is that if we start taking out the predators, like the coyotes and the bobcats and the hawks, then our rodent populations are going to go up, and there might be more deer hanging out. I think it helps keep the deer on their toes. There might be more wild turkeys eating all of our feed and all of our pasture. So it's good to have that balance. We heard of a producer, I'm not going to mention who, but someone who was also raising chickens, who killed a bobcat because it was habitually killing his chickens. Bobcats are amazing predators and they very rarely get habituated. They're not usually associated with humans like coyotes are. I think that farmer should have looked at his system a lot better, and thought, why is this bobcat—who usually are very skittish creatures who don't usually get habituated to a site—why is this bobcat killing my chickens? I think this producer would have found out the fact that they didn't have an electric fence—they just had enclosed chicken coops, but there was no perimeter fence—that that probably would have solved the problem. Nor did they have a guard dog. I think you have to put in these other practices before you resort to killing an animal. It's almost a sign of laziness or quick fixes. And, what we do, we call it management-intensive grazing. Heavy on the management. Or some people even call it Intelligence-Intensive Agriculture, where you got to put your brain to something instead of your brawn. (laughs)

Rabkin: (laughs) What do you enjoy most about having a farm?

Thistlethwaite: Well, I love the food. I love having freezers full of meat and eggs galore. I love having product to trade with other farmers, and bartering with

other people. When I lived over at the farm, I loved living on the farm and taking walks around it, and the animals and their personalities. Unfortunately, one of the things about California is most farmers are tenants. They're not owners. And it's also really hard to actually live on your farm in California. So now we don't get to live there anymore because we lived in the ALBA Farmhouse, which was converted into office space and intern housing. I don't know if we'll ever have the luxury of getting to live on our farm in California.

Rabkin: How far is your house from the farm now?

Thistlethwaite: It's like eight minutes in a car. But I liked walking around it. I liked having my daughter raised in that environment, being around the animals—you know, riding on the back of a pig, feeding the animals, helping collect the eggs, stuff like that. I like that nothing ever goes to waste. I don't feel bad about throwing out anything in my refrigerator because it all goes to the animals. Even the parts of our animals we don't use, they go into our compost pile. We actually grow garlic with most of our compost, or it goes in our garden. And then something comes out of that. So it's a great way to recycle stuff. Pigs and chickens are really good recyclers. (laughs)

Rabkin: Yes. (laughs) Are there aspects of this life that keep you up at night?

Thistlethwaite: Yes. Mostly the finances of it. Figuring out how to reduce some of our costs. You know, how can we potentially grow some of our own feed; how will we ever be able to secure some land tenure? I don't think Jim is going to be able to farm on that piece for much longer, and we're having a hard time finding

something else that's suitable because there's not a lot of irrigated pasture around here.

Rabkin: Why won't you be able to stay with that piece of land indefinitely?

Thistlethwaite: Oh, some of it is political issues with ALBA. The other part is that for some reason ALBA sort of bought into this hysteria that animals shouldn't be next to vegetables. When he was first there, Jim actually rotated his animals with the farmers. There was one farmer in particular who liked to rotate with him. But now that farmer is scared of *E. coli*, and ALBA is scared of its buyers perceiving something wrong. Animals get out occasionally, not that bad and not that often, and Jim is usually right on top of it. But a farmer freaks out and calls up the ALBA director and says, "I saw one pig in my field," and all hell breaks loose. So I think that's part of it, that they don't want livestock producers out there. Which is too bad, because I really feel like any sustainable farm has to have livestock, for the fertility and for the weed control. I mean, what Jim's animals have done to those pastures out there is amazing. The hay production is way up. The fertility is way up. You can see it in how green and bright the grass is, how tall it grows. There's a lot more earthworms in the soil. It's ten times better. And anyone who grows crops on those fields will thank Jim for all the fertility that he's added. Otherwise vegetable farmers and fruit farmers just import their fertility from somewhere else. Not to mention that animals are great at recycling all the culled vegetables, or the stuff you bring home from the market that you can't sell, just returning those nutrients to the soil. So I think it's good for ALBA to have a livestock producer out there. And also, I think that

some of the students that go through their program should consider livestock because there's too much competition in broccoli and strawberries and raspberries. So I think it's good to have a model of someone who is doing it well.

Rabkin: Do you subscribe to the concerns about possible contamination in the fields?

Thistlethwaite: No.

Rabkin: Why not?

Thistlethwaite: I don't believe in it. I don't believe in any of it. *E. coli* comes from CAFOs, the concentrated animal feeding operations.⁶ People are looking at band-aid solutions, and why aren't they looking at the CAFOs? That's one of the main problems. And then, I don't know the exact statistics, but most of the *E. coli* outbreaks in leafy greens have been from bagged, cut and processed leafy greens. I've never, ever heard about it coming from any of these farmers around here who bunch their greens and sell them at the farmers' market. So it's something about the processing, where it's coming in.

Rabkin: Yes. We were talking about what aspects of this life keep you up at night. Is there anything else you wanted to mention about that?

Thistlethwaite: Oh. [sighs] Well, that issue, the whole *E. coli* issue, bothers me. I even heard [U.S. Congressional Representative] Sam Farr⁷ ramble at one point, saying how Monterey County should just ban livestock from the county or something, because the vegetable industry was so big and strong there, and

maybe they should just be free of worry. But it really bothers me how much habitat is coming out as a result of all of that. And for no reason, because they've actually found statistically insignificant amounts of *E. coli* in wild animals. There's almost none. In fact, they've found none in rodents at all, even though they're putting up rodent traps and poison everywhere, which is going to have a huge impact on birds of prey.

California and this area is not very hospitable for livestock producers. But on the other hand, because it's not very hospitable, we kind of have the market cornered. The infrastructure for livestock in this area has disappeared. The last dairy just left Santa Cruz County, for example. Like I said, there's no hay cutters left anymore and there's no one growing grain anymore. But, on the other hand, if people in Santa Cruz want to get pork, it comes from Iowa. So that aspect is good for us, (laughs) that there're no other producers around here.

So it's one of the hardest places to produce, most costly places to produce, but we have the market cornered. So, how to figure out how to balance all that and secure some land somewhere— It doesn't mean that we have to own it. I just want to know that we can be somewhere, and invest in a piece of land and improve the pastures, and grow really nice pasture. To actually seed and grow good pasture could take three, four, or five years to really get the species mixture down that you want, and get rid of the weedy species that you don't want, and all that fertility that you're adding to really make a difference. I'd love to have a place for a minimum of ten years to see those things start to pay off, and to know that there's some security in our business. If Jim has to move by the end of the

year and he can't find somewhere to farm, then his business is done for. So he has a hard time even planning. He's thinking about, do I want to do a couple of beef cow? Do I want to do a few lamb? Do I want to expand my pig production? Do I want to start breeding my sows again? He can't plan for any of that when he doesn't have land tenure.

Rabkin: Wow. That's a huge problem.

Thistlethwaite: Yes.

Rabkin: Are there other farmers, or other individuals, or local organizations that have been supportive or helpful to TLC Ranch?

Thistlethwaite: Organizations? Not really. We tried to get FarmLink to help Jim find some land and they haven't been particularly helpful, I think mainly because they don't deal with a lot of livestock producers, or they don't have the suitable land for livestock.⁸ They just sort of assume he's got everything in the bag, which isn't true. When I first met him he had like \$1.23 in his checking account. (laughs) He's not given everything just because he's a white male.

But there's been several farmers that have been really great. Jerry Thomas of Thomas Farms.⁹

Rabkin: How has he helped?

Thistlethwaite: He provided one or two production loans to Jim. No interest, no timetable to pay him back. Just, "Here you go. I really believe in what you're doing." Helped introduce him to people like the lady that he gets his weaner

pigs from, and just is always giving him articles, and trying to give him advice on how to raise pigs. Jerry's been a real cheerleader for what Jim's doing.

Live Earth Farms has given us production loans for two years, sort of like a contract to raise eggs for them. That was extremely, extremely helpful because it gave us money in the wintertime when we didn't have any. It's really nice to get money without having to go through getting a USDA loan or a bank loan and paying interest and filling out tons of paperwork. Jim didn't have several years of Schedule F tax forms to get a USDA loan and all that. So getting these personal loans with no interest has been really helpful and a big vote of confidence in what he's doing.

Slow Food Conference in Italy, 2006

Who else? That's about it.

Rabkin: Well, you've been really generous with your time. I'd like to ask you a couple more questions before we wind down. And one of them is a little bit tangential to this, but I read somewhere that you had attended the Terra Madre [Slow Food] gathering in Italy. Could you talk just a bit about that?

Thistlethwaite: Yes. We got sponsored to go by the local Slow Food chapter, the Monterey Bay one. They helped raise money for our airfare. And then once we got there, everything was free through Slow Food—our hotel and our food for five days, I think.

Rabkin: Which year was this?

Thistlethwaite: Two years ago, '06. We didn't really know what to expect. But we'd been to Eco-Farm and other farming conferences, so I think we expected more workshops and more practical information. What we really hoped is that we would meet other livestock producers, learn about different breeds and production systems, especially some of the old European breeds of pigs. But it was hard to find anyone there. There were six thousand people. And unless we walked around with a sign on our chests saying, "Looking for pig farmers—" There was no sort of bulletin board or gathering space for different types of producers. There was for different regions, like there was a USA group. But that didn't really do us much good.

We had a lot of expectations, and I think we had too many. It was this giant auditorium with tons of people. They spent a lot of money on sort of the superficial stuff, like nice brochures and banners and stuff like that, but not on the content. The few workshops we did go to were really huge, translated into eight languages and not very practical or useful. But the part that we really did like was the Salon de Gusto, which was next door in this big pavilion. Hundreds of booths of charcuterie and wine and cheese and all this amazing food. You got to talk to the producers, and how do they do it— We learned a lot there. We talked to this British Pig Association and learned about different breeds of pigs. Learned about different types of cheeses. And prosciutto. They had prosciuttos hanging all over. (laughs) Slice me off a piece.

Rabkin: Were they giving out free samples at these booths?

Thistlethwaite: Oh, yes. We ate like mad. So that was good. And then we kept traveling for another week after that. That was really fun. So yes, we were a little disappointed in the content of Terra Madre. What was interesting is they gave us a survey afterwards and I gave them all this feedback. And then I said I really wanted to be involved in the Slow Food Nation that they were planning for the U.S. because I had a lot of ideas about how it could be better. And they never contacted me to help out or anything, because they had this planning committee for Slow Food Nation. I never got contacted again.

At Slow Food Nation [in San Francisco] they are having a charcuterie booth. But the thing is, legally, there's no way for us to do charcuterie in California because we don't have a USDA butcher that does charcuterie. The places that are bringing charcuterie to Slow Food Nation are just butchers. They're not producers. They're buying their product from who knows who. It could be Niman Ranch, but it's still all the way from Iowa. So it's not so much about the producers, as it is about the butcher. And if they had asked us to be involved, we could have told them that there's that hurdle for producers in California, that you can't do your own charcuterie. In fact none of our USDA butchers do any of these specialty cured products like salami. But we could have done pulled-pork sandwiches or something different. We'd love to sell just cuts of meat. But instead, it's going to be about Italian charcuterie. It's like, okay, that's the Terra Madre, Italy, European model smacked onto the U.S., you know? They may have some Southern ham makers but they're the ham *makers*. They're not the producers of the pork, and the pork could come from a CAFO in North Carolina for all they know. So anyway, we're not participating in that. We haven't been

invited and we haven't been invited to provide feedback or anything. So we're not really involved in Slow Food any more.

Visions for the Future

Rabkin: Well, coming back to TLC Ranch: you've talked a little bit about this, but do you have dreams or hopes or visions for what might happen with this operation in the future?

Thistlethwaite: Yes. Well, Jim was asked that question by somebody the other day—what was his vision for it? And he was kind of stumped. Because we haven't sat down in a couple of years and really thought about that. I think right now we just want to make sure all our eggs get sold. The pork is hard because there's so much demand for it, but for us to scale up to the size, to even come close to meeting that demand, we'd have to be a much bigger operation—more employees and more land and all that. I don't know if I want to go there. But it's hard just always not having enough for your market. Like, we've got a lot of restaurants really excited about our pork and now we don't have anything for them. It takes a lot of energy to build up these markets, and then you can't supply them so they look for something else.

Rabkin: What do you have to charge for your pork?

Thistlethwaite: Our wholesale price to restaurants is, I think, \$4.50 a pound is our lowest that we go. That's for a half a pig already killed and stuff. But for us to really scale up, I'm really afraid of that. Jim always talks about expanding and I'm scared of getting big—just the administration that it would take, and the

employees, and the land, and the capital and all of that. But it's also hard to stay small. It's really hard to stay small.

Rabkin: Wow, it's a rock and a hard place, isn't it?

Thistlethwaite: Yes. Actually, to be a medium-sized farmer is probably the worst place to be, because you can't compete with the big boys, but yet you can't direct-market all your stuff because you have too much. So I'd kind of rather stay small and artisanal and really expensive, than try to be medium or large, and wholesale everything. I just don't think it's viable unless we can get a lot of land and grow our own grain and our own alfalfa. Feed prices are just outrageous.

So hope and dreams. A few years ago I actually wanted to start an animal products CSA. Now a few people have kind of jumped into that a little bit. But I still think some model where we're collaborating with other producers would work. Either a CSA, or I've also thought that having our own butcher shop would be really cool, because we know a couple of lamb producers and we're friends with Joe Morris, who is a fabulous grass-fed beef producer. And then Claravale Farm—we're good friends with Ron Garthwaite, and we could have his milk. And Dee Harley of Harley Goat Cheese Farm.¹⁰ And then this woman, Rebecca King, who is starting a sheep cheese farm here in town. Just have like an all-local producer butcher shop with dairy products and eggs.

Rabkin: What a great idea!

Thistlethwaite: Yes, I think that would be great.

Rabkin: Have you seen any kind of models for that kind of an operation?

Thistlethwaite: I've seen a couple out in the Midwest, and I've heard of one out in Nebraska. But I've not heard of anything like that in California. I think there'd be huge demand for it. But I'm also sort of— Just the giant hurdle of opening up a shop like this. It would have to pass all this health inspection and— If I could find a butcher shop that was going out of business, that had the space and the infrastructure and everything, it might be a different story. Yes, it would be a huge step. Lots of debt. And then could I supply it? Could my husband step up the pork production so there'd be pork year round? I'd run into the same hurdles that these other people face. If I can only get lamb in the spring, I've got to freeze it the rest of the year. And grass-fed beef is all harvested in May and what do I do in October? I would have some of the same problems, I think, keeping a supply year round.

Rabkin: So you and Jim are looking at a lot of questions about what direction you might be going in over the next few years.

Thistlethwaite: Yes. And then there's always this pull to move back to the Northwest where land is lot cheaper. It's green. There's water. We're really concerned about the status of water in California. And it's going to get worse with climate change. Climate change is making the Northwest wetter. There's definitely flooding that's still happens in the Northwest, but get a nice farm that's out of a flood plain—

Rabkin: You might have to worry about sunshine?

Thistlethwaite: Yes, sunshine. (laughs) Might be too much mud for pigs. But, how could we do that? Could we sell the business here and start all over again? You know, the longer we stay here the harder it is going to be to leave.

Rabkin: Is there anything I haven't asked you about that you think we ought to address?

Thistlethwaite: I didn't mention this when we were talking about ALBA. But one thing that seems to bother me in the sort of—farmers are the new sexy thing, or the new trendy thing—is how (and this is probably true all over the country but it seems especially bad around here), is that there's this handful of farmers that get all the media and all the attention, and are kind of recycled over and over for Eco-Farm and even things like Slow Food Nation. They've just got the same-old, same-old people that they're using. And I'm always the one saying, "What about Maria Ines Catalan¹¹, or what about—" There's this woman in LA named Anna [Marie] Carter, who is an urban farmer in Watts.¹² She's a fabulous speaker too. She's gotten city kids interested in farming. It just seems like— I don't know if it's really— It's not so much racism in the food system. I mean, part of it is white privilege and all that. But I think that the young farmers and the non-white farmers just get overlooked, and it's usually these older white farmers like Jim Cochran, and Tom Broz, and Jeff Larkey and the people that have— I don't know.¹³ They seem to have all the popularity and get called to speak. I want Francisco Serrano, and I want Rudy Vasquez, and I want Guilebaldo Nuñez, and Gidago Gomez and all these guys from ALBA. I want *them* to be the ones speaking at Slow Food Nation, and speaking at Eco-Farm,

and speaking at farm dinners, and hosting farm dinners, and on the menus at restaurants. Don't ever see Serrano Farms on the menu in any restaurants. I want them to be the new sexy thing, the new popular thing. (laughs) So I'm waiting for that to happen.

Rabkin: What do you think it will take?

Thistlethwaite: It's everything from walking into a Whole Foods and seeing the pictures that they put up of their farmers— It's the magazines. I mean Jim was even in *Elle Magazine* last year in this hunky farmers article.

Rabkin: (laughs)

Thistlethwaite: And (laughs) I was really flattered, you know. But they're all white guys. The media just really is latching on to farmers right now. Just as they're blowing up chefs, they're blowing up farmers, too. It's just kind of the typical response. But the fastest-growing segments in agriculture are Latinos and women. Women chefs get no publicity. You look at *Food and Wine*. In their "best chefs of the year," there's usually one woman chef. Even though we're fabulous home cooks and we're doing a lot of the cooking in restaurants, we don't get any of the publicity. And it's true for Latino farmers and a lot of farmers of color. Hmong farmers. There are some amazing Hmong farmers over in the Central Valley. I would like to see them get a lot more exposure and media, as much as I love it when my husband gets lots of attention. I think he should, not because of him but because of what he's doing, because there's no one around here really

doing it. But there are plenty of other farmers who merit some attention. I just want to see them get their props too.

Rabkin: Great. Thank you very much.

¹ See <http://www.maryjanesoutpost.org/farmers/maryjane.asp>

² See the oral history with JP Perez in this series.

³ See the oral history with Jose Montenegro in this series for more about this period of ALBA's history.

⁴ In July 2008, one of the largest fires in California history burned much the Big Sur Coast—Editor.

⁵ See <http://www.honestmeat.com/>

⁶ According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, CAFOs are agricultural facilities that house and feed a large number of animals in a confined area for 45 days or more during any 12-month period. In 2003, the nation's 238,000 feeding operations produced 500 million tons of manure. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency estimates that CAFOs accounted for more than half of the manure. <http://www.cdc.gov/cafos/about.htm> See also the Community Alliance with Family Farmers (CAFF) website for more on CAFOs and E. coli O157:H7 pollution <http://www.caff.org/policy/foodsafetyindex.shtml>

⁷ See the oral history with Congressman Sam Farr in this series.

⁸ See the oral history with Reggie Knox in this series for more on California FarmLink.

⁹ See the oral history with Jerry Thomas in this series.

¹⁰ See the oral history with Dee Harley in this series.

¹¹ See the oral history with Maria Inés Catalan in this series.

¹² See <http://www.yesmagazine.com/article.asp?ID=576>

¹³ See the oral histories with Jeff Larkey and Jim Cochran in this series.