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Andy Griffin: Mariquita Farm

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Andy Griffin



Photo by Tana Butler

Mariquita Farm

Andy Griffin runs Mariquita (“Ladybug”) Farm on twenty-five acres in Watsonville and Hollister. In collaboration with Steven Pedersen and Jeanne Byrne’s High Ground Organics in Watsonville, Griffin and his wife, Julia Wiley, sell much of their produce through a community supported agriculture venture called Two Small Farms.

Possessed of a quick mind and a powerful command of language, a wry and robust sense of humor, and strong opinions gleaned through extensive experience in the farming and marketing of organic produce, Griffin is also a prolific writer, blogger, and radio commentator. With farming roots reaching into California’s 1970s organic-farming renaissance, he has plenty of stories to tell.

The great-grandson of California farmers and son of a plant ecologist, Griffin took agriculture classes through the Future Farmers of America

program at Carmel High School, then went on to UC Davis to study range management. Disillusioned by the pesticide-heavy focus of that program, he eventually completed a bachelor's degree in philosophy.

Griffin's practical education took place in a series of jobs on farms—including Cargill-owned sunflower fields in Davis, an organic garden that supplied produce to Alice Waters' Chez Panisse, the Straus family dairy and Warren Weber's Star Route Farms in Marin County, and a ranch in Santa Barbara County. After stints as a produce distributor, he eventually established Riverside Farm with partner Greg Beccio. The proceeds from that successful salad-greens business funded the creation of Happy Boy Farms, now run by Beccio—and eventually helped Griffin establish Mariquita Farm.

Sarah Rabkin interviewed Andy Griffin at her Soquel home on November 6th and December 16th, 2008. In addition to rollicking anecdotes, Griffin's extensive transcript provides trenchant insights into the evolving economics of organic production, distribution, and marketing on both small and large scales.

Additional Resources:

Mariquita Farm's website: <http://www.mariquita.com/>

Two Small Farms website: <http://www.twosmallfarms.com/>

"The Ladybug Letter," Blog from Mariquita Farm: <http://www.ladybugletter.com>

Root: A Seasonal Journal from Mariquita Farm. The UCSC Library's Special Collections owns several volumes of this journal.

Elizabeth Henderson and Robyn Van En, *Sharing the Harvest: A Citizen's Guide to Community Supported Agriculture*, Revised and Expanded, (Chelsea Green Publishing, 2007).

Steven McFadden, "The History of Community Supported Agriculture, Part I: Community Farms in the 21st Century: Poised for Another Wave of Growth?" Rodale Institute.
<http://newfarm.rodaleinstitute.org/features/0104/csa-history/part1.shtml>

Steven McFadden, "The History of Community Supported Agriculture, Part II: CSA's World of Possibilities," Rodale Institute.
<http://newfarm.rodaleinstitute.org/features/0204/csa2/part2.shtml>

The Robyn Van En Center, a national resource center about Community Supported Agriculture. <http://www.wilson.edu/wilson/asp/content.asp?id=804>

Alternative Farming Systems Information Center at the National Agricultural Library. Site of resources about CSA: <http://www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/pubs/csa/csa.shtml>

Beginnings

Rabkin: It's Thursday, November 6th, 2008, and this is Sarah Rabkin. I am with Andy Griffin of Mariquita Farm, and we are in Soquel, California. So, Andy, I'm going to start with a really straightforward background question: Where and when were you born?

Griffin: I was born in Oakland, California, in August of 1959.

Rabkin: And where did you grow up?

Griffin: Oh, in different places, but probably most importantly for me, from [age] eight until I left for school, I grew up on a university field station in Upper Carmel Valley called Hastings Reservation, which is a field station for the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology.¹ My father was a resident plant ecologist/botanist researcher there.

Rabkin: Hastings is part of the University of California Natural Reserve System.

Griffin: It's part of the National Land and Water Resources System, yes. And there are sprinkled all around the state different facilities that are intended to serve as study sites for every major sort of ecosystem. When I was a really young kid, and my father was still a student at UC, we lived at the research station up at Sagehen Creek, in the Sierra Nevada. I was at Sagehen Creek in '59 and '60 during the summers and whatnot. And then my father worked for the U.S. Forest Service at the Pacific Southwest Range Experiment Station, and then later on for the university. So from eight until eighteen, I was living in Carmel Valley.

Rabkin: Did that influence your ultimate decision to become a farmer, do you think?

Griffin: Oh, a great deal. My father was a child during the latter part of the Depression and grew up in a family of migrant farm workers. His father and mother had worked on farms their whole lives. I would come and visit them over here in Corralitos when I was a kid. My grandfather at that time had a little sheep ranch. That's where I live today. So I got exposed to it on that end.

But growing up in Carmel Valley on the research station—you know, it's a fairly remote location. Even today it's twenty, thirty miles from town. When I was a kid and wanted to earn money, I got jobs working on our neighbors' ranches. I loved being outside and never really seriously considered doing anything else. For a long time, I was thinking I would be a cattle rancher.

I could never understand why people didn't do things that they wanted to do. It never occurred to me that you need a lot of money to do all these things. That came as a terrible shock later on. But it gradually dawned on me that in order to have a cattle ranch you need to have millions of dollars. I found I really enjoyed working on organic vegetable farms, and that's what I wound up doing. But, yes, growing up in Upper Carmel Valley was really key for me.

Family History—Roots in Pajaro Valley Agriculture

Rabkin: Tell me about the history of the land that you now farm, where your grandparents were when you were growing up. Did it begin with your grandparents' tenure there?

Griffin: We have twenty acres there, and I do a tiny bit of farming there. It's important to point out that the row-crop farming that I do, I do not conduct on the land where I live. We farm out in Hollister, on rented land. The only reason I can do this is really because I have the place I live at. Our lifestyle is very low-end. It doesn't cost me much to live there. I was able to inherit part of that property. When my partners and I sold Riverside Farms in '96, I got a big chunk of money. I was able to buy the rest of the land from my family.

Now all we do there, I raise some sheep and goats. I have a few cows. I have the neighbor's ranch leased. Altogether I have about fifty acres that I'm running my livestock on there now, and I grow one acre of herbs. But that's more along the lines of a hobby farm. It's not like my vegetable farm, which has to make money day in and day out.

When I was a child, my grandfather raised sheep there, and my grandparents—they didn't have any money. Social Security only kicked in for farm workers the same year that he retired.² They had a very, very tiny stipend, so they always produced all their food. Otherwise, they wouldn't have had anything to eat. It came naturally to them, but they weren't back-to-the-land hippies. They'd never really left.

That land was in our family because my great-grandfather had purchased that land getting on about a hundred years ago now. They had traded that land. Actually, they were farmers down in Southern California in Farmersville, and they traded land along the Kern River for this land. We used to have much more land. They planted apples, and the apples didn't do very well, and they sold

pieces of land off gradually. Everybody got sick with tuberculosis in the twenties, and they sold the rest of the land. One of the land buyers turned out to be my other great-grandfather. He was recently arrived from Denmark. He came here from Denmark around the turn of the [twentieth] century, [in the] 1890s. He bought that piece. During that sales transaction, his daughter met my grandfather. They got married. So my father's side of the family sold, in the end, all their land, and my grandfather retired on a piece of that land because he was married to my grandmother and it came to her. So—convoluted on both sides of the family. It stayed in the family.

Rabkin: You said a little bit about how the use patterns of that land have changed over the generations. Are there more things you can say about that?

Griffin: When they originally got the land, they planted apples and apricots. There used to be a lot of apricots around this area. In fact, the house that our neighbors live in, which has been remodeled a gazillion times, was at one time [our] apricot drying shed. Most of the land from Lakeview Road towards Santa Cruz, the Pinto Lake area, College Lake—a lot of that land is really pretty marginal. It's got about a foot of topsoil, and underneath that it's clay. Only on the real valley floors is it worth farming. Their apple orchards didn't do too well, so they tore them out. After that, it was just in livestock.

Education and Training

Rabkin: Tell me about your schooling and education and any other training.

Griffin: My formal agricultural education pretty much ended with high school. I was in the FFA program in Carmel High, the Future Farmers of America, raised beef steers, and went to the fair and all that kind of thing, took ag classes through FFA. I went to UC Davis originally with the idea of studying range management. When I got there, I discovered, to my dismay, that you actually had to pass science classes. Beyond that, range management then consisted, as far as I could tell, in learning all the sprays you would need to get rid of the sagebrush off the Great Basin Desert and replace it with alfalfa. It didn't really interest me at all, so I left.

I figured I'd learn how to farm by working on farms. I worked on the Straus Dairy. They're pretty well known now for being one of the first organic dairies, but they weren't an organic dairy then. They were in the throes of really hard times. The dairy business was in deep shit. And that was a really interesting time to be there. Really nice people. Ellen Straus—she's passed away now, but she's the woman who started the Marin Agricultural Land Trust, and that grew out of the concerns that they had just trying to keep their farm going in West Marin. I lived with her son, Albert, who runs Straus Dairy now. That was a real interesting experience because they were such interesting, nice people. It's also hard work, working on a dairy. It's really brutal. So I went back to the university, but I went back and got a degree in philosophy.

Rabkin: Why philosophy?

Griffin: I already had in mind that I was going to be working on farms and that I would have to learn how to farm by working on farms. I wasn't going to go back

to UC and study their version of farming. That didn't appeal to me on any level. I didn't see it leading to anything. But I wanted to go back to school and, you know, meet girls and whatnot, and I was so out of touch. I just figured I would study whatever I felt like. It never occurred to me that you don't meet the bubbliest girls in a philosophy class.

Rabkin: (laughter)

Griffin: I had a lot to learn. But I enjoyed philosophy. I knew would never have much time to focus on it if I was trying to farm or being a farm worker. So I just went back and took the classes and enjoyed them. And actually it freed me up. I did very well at it. If you don't have a whole lot of concerns except learning the material for the joy of it, it turns out it's easier. (laughter) But I had grown up in an academic environment, and I didn't want to pursue that at all. I enjoyed taking the classes. I got a lot out of it, and at the end of the bachelor's program, I was anxious to get back [to outdoor work]. During the summers, I worked on farms, and on the weekends I worked on farms. So I got a lot of experience that way.

Rabkin: Had you heard, when you were applying to colleges, about the apprentice program at UC Santa Cruz, at the Farm and Garden there?

Griffin: No, I hadn't heard, and it wouldn't have appealed to me. I grew up in the University of California. I was a university brat. So I can remember people talking about UC when they were first starting UC Santa Cruz, and things like that. Growing up over in Carmel Valley, we always called it Uncle Charlie's Summer Camp. It's where the least motivated kids, who wanted to spend the

most time getting high, went. It was easy to get into college back then. I didn't—you know, it never occurred to me to go to Santa Cruz. (laughter) It never occurred to me.

No, what turned me on to organic farming was a summer job. I worked for the Cargill Corporation one summer in Davis. That was just straight-ahead fieldwork, a large, vast, conventional farming operation. We were [growing] sunflowers. I like being outside. I like farm work. I wasn't very happy with the whole Cargill program. They would even spray the sunflowers with herbicides. They all died at the same time. I mean, it's real serious conformance. That didn't appeal to me. But it was a job, and I got paid, and it was outdoors, and it was in the Sac[ramento] Valley.

Farming for Chez Panisse

The next summer, when I was looking for a summer job, I got a job offer off a job board in North Hall or whatever, some student employment center, for a job on an organic garden. It paid six bucks an hour, and I thought, why not? I went out there. What turned me on there were actually the people. This farm was run by a fellow named John Hudspeth, who was working as a chef at Chez Panisse in Berkeley. He came from a lot of money. They had a large piece of property there near the airport out on Garden Highway. And he wanted to have a biodynamic, French intensive garden and sell the stuff to Chez Panisse.

One of the things he was doing at Chez Panisse was sourcing stuff, and he saw a way to kind of combine it all together. He hired a woman named Karen Montrose, who came up from the Golden Door, which was a [health spa] down

in the hills behind San Diego. She came up to put this garden together for him. John [was] not about to go out there and pull roots or something like that. That [was] not his style. But he really had the vision of what he wanted to do. And so what I found was this very different farming system than I'd ever encountered before.

Rabkin: What year was this?

Griffin: This would have been in 1979 or 1980, something like that.

Rabkin: So just a few years after Chez Panisse had opened.

Griffin: Well, Chez Panisse started in '74, I think. By the time I was working on their garden, Jeremiah Towers was already gone. But they had a real established sense of who they were already. I was never really part of the Chez Panisse community. That was as close as I ever came, working on that farm. I got pulled into the orbit, heard a lot of stuff, was exposed to a lot of people. And the thing that I liked about it was, number one, having fun was a big part of what they were all about. And, two, they were so turned on by what they were doing. That enthusiasm is infectious.

My own experience working with vegetables was very, very limited. I didn't know anything about vegetables. And I was exposed to many different kinds of crops which I had never heard of before, which most people back then had never heard of before.

Rabkin: Like what?

Griffin: Well, like arugula, which is almost a commodity now. Nobody knew what that stuff was. There must have been 150 different things in that garden. We grew everything from valerian root to borage flowers, the edible flowers. All this stuff which became a rage later on, they were doing.

My background up to that point had been in cattle-raising, which is a very unsentimental business. It didn't take me very long working there to look around and see that they were essentially trying to re-create for themselves sort of a Provençal lifestyle. I hadn't gone to work there because I wanted to live in Provence or have a Provençal lifestyle. It never occurred to me. I mean, I didn't know from Provence. The first year I worked there, I heard that they lost twenty thousand dollars. The second year that I worked there, I heard that they lost twenty-six thousand. The numbers aren't exact in my head. It could have been thirty thousand they lost the first year and forty thousand the second year. Anyway, they were big numbers of money that they had lost. And as somebody who did a lot of the work there, I looked around and thought, you know, this double digging, this massive planting of all these vastly different kinds of crops for sort of putative [Rudolf] Steinerite principles—this is all having a really hip, faux-Provençal lifestyle, but this is not making any money. If you operated a specialty organic vegetable farm on production principles [instead], you might make money. You might not have as much fun, but you might make money.

Working at Straus Dairy

So when it was time to leave school at [UC] Davis, I left that farm. I knew that I was going to be leaving Davis, and I had gone back down to the Straus Dairy in

Marshall and spoken with Ellen Straus. I didn't want to work on dairies. I knew that. But she knew a lot of people, and she and I had always gotten along well. I had been maintaining a garden at the house when I was living on the dairy there. And she told me one time—she said, “You really enjoy vegetable gardening. You should think about being an organic vegetable farmer. You're not going to make much of a dairyman.” Because I didn't want to milk cows. I didn't want to milk cows, not because I'm afraid of milking a cow. I mean, I actually know how to milk a cow. I didn't want to milk cows because they paid well enough. I was concerned if I got a job milking and I was used to the money, that's all I'd ever do. I wanted to sort of see where my family's roots were. I wanted to know about dairying from the inside out. But I didn't really want to follow in my grandfather's footsteps and milk cows for my entire life. I had declined to become a milker there, and I earned less to do the other chores just because didn't want to slip into that. She knew I didn't have any future in dairying.

Working with Warren Weber at Star Route Farms

I went back and I said, “Well, Ellen, can you think of any place where I can go get a job in an organic vegetable farm in West Marin?” Because I loved living in West Marin. It was just wonderful. It was like a park. And she said, “Well, you should go down and talk to Warren Weber in Bolinas.” So I went down there and got a job. Went straight from Davis to Warren's farm, Star Route Farm[s], and spent the next five years there. That was a fascinating experience for me, exactly the kind of thing that I needed, because Warren was really running the farm on business principles. It turns out Warren had a lot of money, too. When I was

working at Warren's, he was married to Marion Rockefeller, who would be Laurance Rockefeller's daughter. They have more money than God. Of course, Warren would not have met Marion if he didn't have a lot of money to begin with. I mean, you don't meet girls like Marion Rockefeller at QuikStop.

Rabkin: (laughter)

Griffin: Warren ran his farm as a business, not a hobby. From my perspective now, having run a farm for a long time and supported myself off it, the luxury I can see that Warren had, the only luxury he allowed himself was that if he made bad decisions and his farm went bust, his family didn't suffer. In a way, that really freed him up to make business decisions from a fairly fearless point of view. But his farm had to pay for itself. Monday had to pay for Tuesday, Tuesday had to pay for Wednesday. They were not going to the grant or to the foundation. They weren't going to the trust fund or anything like that for money. It had to make money for itself. And that was really a curative experience to working for the vegetable farm [with Chez Panisse], because you make different decisions when you make them from an economic standpoint. You make different decisions. Sometimes you're not making decisions about the very best way things can possibly be done, but if you're basing your decision-making process on what *can* be done, you're going to be around. You're going to be sustainable. I loved it there, and I stayed there for five years.

One thing that I learned from Warren that I found has really been useful later on, was his conception of the farm as employing people year round. You could only achieve some degree of stability as a business if you have a stable crew. You get a

stable crew by not firing them at the end of every season and starting over again. At the end of the first season, when most other organic farms at that time were small enough [that] they would have just said, “Well, it was great. See ya next summer,” what Warren said was, “We don’t have enough work here for the whole winter. I certainly can’t pay you guys to sit around. But what I’ll do is I will pay you for four days of work a week, whether or not we do any work.”

And it turned out that the farm flooded that winter, so I got the best end of that deal. There were five of us working there at that time, and we were there in the spring. On the very first day we could get into the ground, we were there, and we got into the ground. He wasn’t out looking for a crew. That was a very important thing to me, and I’ve tried to run my farm on that sort of principle ever since I had the opportunity to make my own decisions.

Rabkin: So it’s actually worth it to a farm owner to pay out wages over the period when the farm is not actually in production?

Griffin: I wouldn’t generalize and say that that’s true for everybody. But it certainly turned out to be worth it for him. It was a gamble on his part. And it’s certainly been worth it to me. It’s a really basic decision. You make your decision about farming: Am I going to make this farm run on the principle that every day is going to be as profitable as possible, every single day? Or am I going to make the farm try and be profitable on a yearly basis? Some guys that I have worked with, when they see that their income is starting to slow down and their wages as a percentage of their gross receipts are rising, will lay a bunch of people off. Other people might look at that and go: What do we need to change to create a

more year-round cash flow? It's a fundamental decision. Every farm wouldn't necessarily find it in its own interest to make that decision, but I really appreciated what he [Weber] was up to there and have tried to emulate that. It's certainly worked to my advantage to run my farm that way.

So I was there for five years, and learned anything that I do know about farming from him, and also a vast amount about marketing. Because at that time, in the early eighties, organic farming was still really hippy-trippy, and there was a cultural bias against salespeople. So many of the problems that organic farming had were cultural problems. Warren used to laugh because he went into town one day, into Bolinas, to deliver food to the Bolinas People's Store, and some customer at BPS accosted him and demanded to know if he was farming for people or for profit. It's kind of hard, now that Whole Foods dominates the scene and whatnot, to remember that there was a time when you had to put up with that kind of idiocy. You can't just give everything away.

Warren's father was the kind of ad executive whose accounts included Anheuser Busch and Colgate Palmolive. Those were his accounts. I think Warren's father was responsible for "The Pause That Refreshes" or something. He was a heavy hitter in the advertising field. And one of the most fun things that we would ever do is we would be out there hoeing weeds on Star Route Farm, and this was when Warren worked in the fields with the other four of us, and we would design ad campaigns for what it would take to bring organic beyond this little niche, hippy market out into the big wide world. Some of these ad campaigns were sort of cynical riffs on the culture that we were living within. So we had the "Pure as the Driven Snow" campaign where we would envision the different

video shots and the hyperbolic promises about how—you know, the degree of purity. If somebody else was eliminating any kind of chemical contamination, we would have to outdo by eliminating any sort of spiritual contamination.

Rabkin: (laughs)

Griffin: This would mean that we would promise the customer that we were only harvesting these crops with actual Buddhist monks.

Rabkin: (laughter)

Griffin: Since some of our friends were at the Green Gulch Farm right down the road, this stuff was based in— I mean, it was all based on something. I really enjoyed that. It was a kick in the pants, and it also was, I think, probably the equivalent of a bachelor's degree in marketing. Because we learned a lot about marketing from listening to Warren talk. One of Warren's brothers was a consultant, the kind of consultant who was working for the Republic of Congo, bringing in a hundred thousand Chinese laborers or something to build a vast dam, these mega-international kinds of projects.

Talking to Warren was different than talking to people who had no conception— You got a much more 3-D vision of the world around you. One of his very close friends is Orville Schell, who is the dean of [the] Graduate School of Journalism at Cal [UC Berkeley] now, and who was a Chinese translator and scholar. Another one of Warren's close personal friends is Bill Niman of Niman Ranch. Niman and Schell were our neighbors and his friends. And so it was an

intellectually charged milieu, and they were talking about how to make it in this whole thing.

There's a copy of a book, a photographic book. All the people in it have probably tried to track the copies down and burn them, but it's got pictures of all these guys when they were in a hippy commune in Bolinas back in the real dark ages, when they were still thinking about changing the world and living without money and all that sort of thing. It was funny to hear them talk about it and interact with them.

Rabkin: What was that book? Do you remember the title?

Griffin: Hah! Well, it had something to do with Paradise Valley Produce in it. Paradise Valley was the name of the commune. It was the next piece of property up the creek.

Rabkin: So what made you decide to leave Warren's farm, and where did you go from there?

Griffin: Well, I had a girlfriend who wanted to go to film school down in Southern California, so I followed her down to Santa Barbara. But it was time to leave, because it was beginning to dawn on me that I could live in Bolinas and live on the farm forever, but I wasn't going to be buying a house in Bolinas. Being a serf has got its limitations. I wanted to learn about farming and I wanted to get out there in the world more. I had gotten everything that I could, I thought, out of that farm.

One of the things that I had done while I was on the farm was set up a delivery route to restaurants in San Francisco. So I was spending part of the time driving in San Francisco. I had an epiphany one day. Warren had a great big International Bobtail. It's a truck that's small enough that you don't have to have a special license, but it's got eighteen gears, so it's a real pain in the ass to drive in city traffic, a very big flatbed. I would take this in and do these deliveries. I do deliveries in San Francisco now. I look back on that and I just shake with fear. I would never, ever send anybody into San Francisco in one of those trucks. I just would never do it. It's totally unsafe to be doing deliveries in these great big trucks—downtown, narrow alleyways and whatnot. On steep hills, you're trying to change the gears. It's got eighteen gears. It's just a lot of work. You don't see anybody driving these things in the city anymore. It's all these Iveco cab-overs, Isuzu cab-overs, these little, short delivery trucks.

But we were doing a delivery to the Campton Hotel. The delivery route called for me to go up Washington Street and make a left onto Stockton, I guess, go through the Stockton tunnel and then deliver to Campton Hotel down there by Union Square. So I was going up the street. I was in Chinatown. It was midday, one o'clock in the afternoon, something like that, and that particular day, [along] the entire length of that street, the right-hand lane had been ripped up by a city crew. They were putting some sort of gas main in or whatever, and so all the traffic was over on the left-hand lane.

It was slow going up the hill. There was a little alleyway right before Stockton, and some Chinese kid driving the same kind of truck as I had, had been trying to back his truck out of the alley, and he had dropped the rear duals down a

manhole. They had an open manhole there. He had effectively shut the street off, because the nose of his truck was in a dead alley, the duals are down a manhole, there's a ditch on one side—I mean, you're not going anywhere—and they couldn't figure out how to get a tow truck in there. It was a total nightmare.

I had to back down street after street back through Chinatown. And all these people were crowding around, all those little old Chinese ladies in a rush to go someplace and not paying any attention at all. I had to keep on letting out the clutch and putting on the brake, and I was so freaked out and nervous about it, my leg, my right leg was starting to seize up, there was so much tension there. A cop finally came along and saw the problem. He was swatting these people out of the way and clearing the way so I could get through. When I got down to Columbus, I pulled over. I flipped the blinkers on. I went into a bar. I sat down and had a couple of beers. My leg was actually so stiff with stress at that point, I couldn't move it, hardly, you know? This took forty-five minutes to an hour, to go three or four blocks down this hill.

Rabkin: What a nightmare.

Griffin: I thought, I'm working on farms because I want to live out in the country. And I'm in Chinatown in the middle of the day, driving an overweight Bobtail backwards down a hill? Something's terribly wrong. I said—you know, readjustment. I went back and I told Warren, "Find another driver. I'll keep working as a driver until you find another one. But find another one, because I need to do something different." I was working on the farm three days a week, working in the city three days a week on deliveries.

So he found another driver, who lasted a couple of days. The guy said, “That’s nuts.” Warren went out and bought a little Isuzu cab-over, and it all worked out from there.

Winchester Canyon Ranch

I went down to Southern California. The women at Veritable Vegetable, who were a big account of ours—I asked them if they had any suggestions on where to work in Southern California, and they told me to go try at Winchester Canyon Ranch. They’re still around. They had another ranch that was down in the hills behind San Diego, but I worked on the ranch that they had up in Santa Barbara County, outside of Goleta there.

[It was a] beautiful place, but compared to working for Warren, totally, totally chaotic. You never had any idea when you went to work what time of the day you’d be getting done. We were loading trucks in the wintertime in the rain at midnight after having started at seven in the morning. It was a corrective experience for me, because I realized—Lord almighty, Warren was really a good manager. This fellow—he was very wealthy, too. He owned several hundred acres there in Santa Barbara. Their family owned vast amounts of land in northern Mexico. They owned big chunks of land right around UCLA. He wasn’t paying that much attention to the daily grind. It was hell to work there.

Rabkin: What was he growing?

Griffin: We were growing all kinds of mixed vegetables. Southern California has the early season. So we were doing early tomatoes and strawberries and celery—

and all kinds of mixed organic veg crop, pretty much the same kind of thing as we were able to do on Star Route Farm. Not restaurant-oriented particularly, more oriented towards the wholesale market. A lot of the same customers, like Veritable Vegetable, because at that time the organic market was still very, very small. I knew all the customers. The biggest customer base was up in the Bay Area, but he was trying to get us into the farmers' market in Santa Monica. This would have been in '85, something like that. Even then, it was hard to get into Santa Monica. He got into some farmers' market out in Pacoima, which was just not where you were going to go to make money selling organic vegetables back then.

Rabkin: How had he decided to run an organic farm?

Griffin: It was a cool thing to do. They had the land. [He was a] socially progressive, interested person. Their family had big cattle operations, and he grew up in a cattle ranching scenario. A little bit like me, you know? He found that the organic scene was really cool. I don't fault his motives at all. He had money. He had the land. It was a great idea to grow early-season vegetables organically in Southern California and tap into this new market.

Rabkin: Not a lot of competition at that point.

Griffin: At that time, very, very little competition. Paul Garrett. That was his name. Paul was a real interesting figure.

Rabkin: How long were you there?

Griffin: I was there for less than a year. I was there throughout the winter. The idea had always been, from the time when I went down there and talked to him initially, that I was going to be able to live on the property so that I would be getting paid a wage plus a place to live. Working at Star Route Farm in Bolinas, we'd been given a place to live. It is very difficult to make money as a farm worker and live in Santa Barbara and pay Santa Barbara rent. It was actually just impossible. I went and got a job for a while gardening in downtown Santa Barbara and made enough money to pay the rent, barely, then moved up here. So I was down in Santa Barbara about a year and a half, all told, and came up here.

Baby Lettuce Salad Mix

Rabkin: During this period when you were in Bolinas and in Santa Barbara, it sounds like you were pretty tuned in to the shift, or the expansion, of the popularity of organics, and looking at the markets for produce.

Griffin: Oh, very much so. I started out working with Chez Panisse and harvesting these little organic greens, these baby vegetables that were a fad for a while—but especially things like arugula, the little lettuces. When I was working with them, these things were completely unknown. I went to work for Warren Weber in Bolinas, and a woman was working there named Wendy Krupnick.³ She started there just a few weeks before me. Wendy had been a waitress at the Bay Wolf Restaurant over in Oakland, where they were doing a menu that was seasonal, California-based. So Wendy had a lot of the same sort of experiences I did, but from the other side of the equation there. She and I had talked to Warren about, “Hey, you should grow these baby lettuces, man. This stuff kicks ass.

They want them out there.” And Warren was still, “No, we are growing food for people. It’s got to be for profit, but we are growing food for people.” And we used to laugh about that because Warren came from a really wealthy background. He didn’t want to see organics become an elitist sort of crop. He wanted food to be grown organically for everybody. So we were selling food for people. We were selling big truckloads full of potatoes and cabbages and cauliflower, all the staples.

And it became apparent to me at that time, having sort of been first exposed to organic through John Hudspeth, that hippies were just dreadfully conservative. You don’t get much—even by the early eighties, I mean, hippies were already getting old. They only wanted what they’d always had. They didn’t want to try anything different. They just wanted it organic. Kind of boring and tedious. John had his issues, but he was a lot of fun, and he was really into cooking. He’d come trotting out in the garden early in the morning. He was going to be making breakfast, so he’d be dressed in full chef drag, with a little white hat and whatnot. He would go out, and he would pick the peas, and then he would rush back in, and he would do this fantastic little thing with a little bit of handmade, homemade butter and these peas. He’d bring some out for us. It was really good! I thought, God, this food is fantastic! And then you go to Bolinas, and it’s all hippies, and it’s got to be brown rice and lemon juice and a cabbage and a great big chunk of tofu. It just wasn’t the same.

Rabkin: (laughter)

Griffin: When Chez Panisse lost so much money on little projects like John's, they started looking around at getting more professional growers to step in and fill this niche. Their restaurant was rocking out, and they were especially selling a lot of these salads. So they sent Sibella Kraus over. She was working at the restaurant at that time as a forager/procurer, whatever. She came over (she is now the empress of a nonprofit called Sage), and she started the farmers' market at the Ferry Plaza up in San Francisco. That was a project of hers before this. Anyway, she came over one day, and we had a field of lettuce—red-leaf, green-leaf, butter, romaine—twelve-inch centers, forty-inch beds in front of the office there. She came over, and the plants were about four and a half, five inches tall. She stepped out of the car and introduced herself. She was from Chez Panisse. We were there talking, and she looked at the field, and she said, "Well, I want to buy the lettuce." Warren explained to her very patiently that it would be weeks before that lettuce was mature, and she said, "No, I want it that size." Wendy and I knew all about it. We'd been doing this for a while already. But Warren wasn't really too hip to it. He was so hardcore he said, "Well, you know, when these are full size and mature, I'm going to be able to sell these for fifty cents a head. I can't sell them to you for less just because they're small. I mean, I've already put all this work into it." And she said, "Oh, I'll pay fifty cents a head."

So we cut these things. They were tiny. We loaded them into recycled Styrofoam grape lugs we picked up. We were putting seventy-two heads per box, which works out to thirty-six dollars a box. Warren was dumbstruck. We put more value into the back of a little Ford Courier than we had in this great big International Bobtail. He just said, "Lord! We gotta switch gears here."

Rabkin: (laughter)

Griffin: Even by that time, the organic market was [changing]. There was starting to become more production online. It was still so limited. There were more farmers selling to the same accounts. There were more farmers, but there weren't more wholesale accounts, and there weren't an appreciably larger number of customers yet, and so there was an over-supply relative to the market. So, it was getting tougher. He saw this as an opportunity to open up into a new market, and one that made sense for the farm because we were close by the Bay Area, and he had two people on staff who felt very comfortable and confident about this.

So we charged into that, and we started taking stuff over to Chez Panisse. Chez Panisse stepped in and turned us on to sources for the seed. Chez Panisse had a really instrumental role in gluing all of this together, because we wouldn't have known what to look for or where to find the seed. Chez Panisse helped people bring the seed over. They helped people get all of this started. So they were a seminal influence in many ways. We started doing quite a bit of business with Chez Panisse. It became a considerable account, although by no means the farm's only account. We were still doing stuff with Veritable Vegetable. And if we had an over-supply, we would have to take it down to and sell it on the conventional side in the South City Market. That was always an ugly experience. We were never dealt with fairly or honestly. It was an ugly scene compared to the little organic world we were in.

Rabkin: South City Market was a wholesale produce market?

Griffin: It is a wholesale produce market down there, yes. You'd take stuff down there and they would sell it on consignment. They would take a percentage of what they sold it for, but they were under no pressure to sell it for a good price. They would often sell the stuff at a very cheap price in order to satisfy their customers, at our expense.

The great thing about selling to any restaurant is that after you've sold to the restaurant for a little while, there is inevitably a dispute between the chef and the sous-chef, or the chef and the owner. The chef leaves, and the sous-chef gets a battlefield promotion. And if you've been good to everybody, the chef who leaves takes you with them, and the sous-chef who comes up through the ranks keeps you on. So one account turns into two, turns into four. If you're being good to everybody down to the dishwasher, there's a mathematical progression built into your relationship, and it just spreads.

So we were at Chez Panisse, and then we were at Santa Fe Bar and Grill, and then we were over at the City of Stars. Sibella left Chez Panisse, and she went to Greenleaf Produce over in the city, which is still a produce company, not dealing exclusively in organic at all, but dealing with a restaurant clientele. We started dealing with Greenleaf through Sibella. Greenleaf was taking a vast amount of our restaurant-oriented things. By that time, we had changed production quite a bit to satisfy this emerging restaurant market.

When Greenleaf suddenly started buying a lot less, we were kind of stymied because we'd produced for this level of sales. We thought we had an understanding with them about how much they would take, and yet we saw the

amount that they were taking was going down very rapidly. Where we had sold, say, fifty boxes, we were selling ten. It seemed odd to us because it looked like it was all just rock-and-roll over in the city as far as the restaurants were concerned.

So Warren told me—he says, “Go find out. The next time you’re down there, find out why this is going on.” I would do the deliveries down there, and so I stopped the truck to do the deliveries, and I just walked in the cooler and looked around, and I saw that loads and loads of stuff in the cooler were from this other farm.

We discovered Sibella had begun buying a lot more produce from another farmer and thus edging out Star Route Farms. Warren said, “What do you think we ought to do about it?” I said, “I think we just ought to go direct, just go straight to the restaurants. Cut Greenleaf out of the equation.”

The thing that I love about Warren to this day is that he’s the kind of person who, if you show some initiative, he gives you the wherewithal to see if you can do it. He does not hover over people. He’s not a micromanager. It was clear to me when I was working there, and clear to me certainly now, that he was able to get far more out of people than he was paying them for because he was able to engage them on a couple of levels. They weren’t just doing it for the money. They were doing whatever they were doing for the opportunity to try something out.

He gave me the keys to the Courier. He said, “Don’t come back until you’ve got some accounts.” That was that. End of conversation. So I went down. I didn’t know what to do, because I had never really done any kind of sales before. We

hadn't had to do sales to these restaurants; they had come to us. We weren't reaching out to them; they were coming to us. So I drove down to Greenleaf, and I parked out there in the nighttime, around three in the morning. I had a clipboard and a piece of paper, and they had half a dozen trucks there. I just picked one out, and I dropped in behind it. I had no idea what kind of restaurants would Greenleaf be selling to. I mean, I didn't even eat in restaurants. This was a very foreign scene to me. I wouldn't have known where to start. I didn't know anybody. We had a couple of phone numbers, but [I was] just very distant from the whole restaurant world. Dropped in behind the Greenleaf truck and drove around the city and just wrote down the names of these different restaurants.

There's a lot of restaurants in San Francisco, and we wanted to go after the ones that were doing our kind of thing. And so, went back to the farm, got a bunch of boxes of produce, drove around the city, went to the door, knocked on the door. I said, "Hello, I'm from Star Route Farm, and I want to start delivering directly to your restaurant." I was received like God. I got every single account I ever tried to get.

Rabkin: Were you able to under-sell the people who were hiring distributors to deliver for them?

Griffin: It wasn't a question so much of under-selling. We didn't want less money. We just wanted the business. We didn't have to under-sell. The thing of it is, at that time, the need, the perceived need on the part of the restaurants was way out ahead of the supply. It's now a cliché. They interview a chef, and the

chef inevitably today says that their cuisine is based around local, seasonal, organic. I mean, this is a complete cliché. These days, chefs have the opportunity to really do that. Back then, they had the desire, but they didn't have the connections. There wasn't the infrastructure at all. There were farms doing organic produce, but they were not in the same culture as the restaurants. They were coming from a completely different perspective.

The restaurants didn't know where the farms were. The farmers didn't know where the restaurants were. It was even more profound than that, because a lot of the farmers thought that the restaurateurs were a bunch of effete little French fags, and a lot of the restaurateurs thought that a lot of the farmers were a bunch of bumpkins. And so, there were all these levels of interference. If you just showed up at the door, and you're well spoken, and you've driven to them and you say, "I'm an organic farmer, and I want to deliver directly to you," it's like, "Lord! Where have *you* been all my life? Here, have an espresso. Would you like a shot of grappa in that?"

Rabkin: (laughter)

Griffin: It was great, and I got every account that I asked for.

Rabkin: Fantastic. When was this, Andy?

Griffin: This would have been '82, '83, '84, '85, during that period. And what we saw was that these salad greens that we were producing—they were very, very popular. They were very, very limited. Only a few farmers were growing them at that time. The same day that Sibella came out to Star Route Farm, or the same

week, at the same point, anyway, she went down and she talked to Dale Coke.⁴ She might have talked to other people. She'd gotten a few different places to grow things for Chez Panisse. It was a very small world. I used to know everybody in it.

Warren saw how popular these salads were in the restaurants. You still couldn't throw the stuff away in the organic world, because the organic world was still ruled by arch hippies, who were mostly concerned about not being poisoned by capitalism. There wasn't a role for this stuff yet. But we reasoned that so many people in the East Bay had been eating these salads at Chez Panisse and at Santa Fe Bar and Grill, that maybe there would be a retail opportunity for this stuff opening up. You couldn't see the stuff in the farmers' markets yet. And there weren't the same number of farmers' markets as there are now. We were working with Monterey Market by this time. Sibella had helped us find some other accounts. We were working with Bill Fujimoto in Monterey Market in Berkeley, and we approached him with the idea of trying to sell some salad greens, the baby mesclun salad greens through Monterey Market. And he said, "Sure."

So we started planning on doing a retail side to this. We thought it would be really big. We thought, well, in order to make it really big, what we ought to do is we ought to get Alice Waters in on the act. Because she has got the publicity mojo to kick this into high gear. So we called her up, set up a meeting, we drove over, and the whole way over there, Warren and I are talking about how we're going to set this thing up. It didn't occur to us that she might not want to do this. Because we saw this money that's so obviously there for the taking. How could

you not want to take it? I mean, there it was, this whole product. How often are you gifted with a product that's never been done before that you know goddamn well will sell? Not very often.

We drove over there, and we had a little meeting at lunch with her. She listened to us, and she said, "You know, you're absolutely right. This could be huge." She says, "I don't really want to be a part of it. No offense. My restaurant has been more successful and busy than I ever could have imagined. I have a very young daughter. I'm in over my head. This could be huge, but I kind of like things small. I can give you the names of some people who might be able to help you with packaging and things like that. Go for it!"

She was real clear. I remember thinking to myself, Man, the woman's nuts! Of course, now I realize that actually, she's kind of screwy sometimes, but she's deeply sane. I look back on that, and she was sane enough to know how much money could be made and just not try for it, just figure, hey, things really *are* better on a small scale.

Interestingly enough, one of the names that she gave us was a friend of hers, Todd Koons. Todd Koons came out, talked with us, and he was hired by Warren to put together the packaging. What we were looking for was a David Lance Goines-style label. David Lance Goines had done the image crafting for Chez Panisse. We wanted that look. We couldn't afford David Lance Goines, but she also gave us the number of her friend Patricia Curtan who's done all the botanical illustrations for her cookbooks—beautiful, beautiful, beautiful work.

Rabkin: The prints?

Griffin: Yes.

Rabkin: The woman who's done the persimmons.

Griffin: Yes. I've met her, actually met her last year with John Hudspeth. I ran into them after having not seen either of them for many, many years. Ran into them twice in the same week. Went out and had dinner with John. Had a lot of fun catching up with him.

So she did the label. Todd crafted this whole clamshell approach that we were going to use. Because, if you go and cut a lettuce, it starts to wilt right away. There was no technology at all for washing this stuff, spin drying it. All that technology had not been created yet. It was difficult to create the technology until you had the market. But it was difficult to build the market without the technology. It was a slow process, and the clamshell approach was the first way we went.

We harvested whole heads, reasoning that they would wilt slower if we cut whole heads and tried to make a whole blended salad. So we packed these little clamshells with four kinds of lettuce, with tufts of mizuna, chervil, arugula, things like that, put in there with a mesclun label, stuck it out there. I remember Todd looking at this the day that we finished, saying, "This is gonna be huge. But not like this."

We took it to Monterey Market. They didn't sell very well. Bill Fujimoto took us aside and said, "You know, the problem here is people don't perceive the value yet. If you raise the price, these will sell more." So we raised the price, and they

started selling more. Bill is a profound thinker. There isn't much about produce that he doesn't know, or about marketing that he hasn't learned in the trenches. He was aware of the fact that at that time that product still had sort of an elitist spin to it. It was something you ate when you went out to a fancy restaurant. If you price it low enough for just people to eat, that was degrading the image of the product at that time. Nowadays it's sort of funny to think like that, because nowadays you can get the stuff at McDonald's. It's really changed. But back then, that was an intelligent marketing decision.

While I was down in Southern California, Todd Koons started TKO Farms. And when I was down in Southern California, Earthbound Farms⁵, which has got a big name now (they had their little tiny farm in Carmel Valley), they started buying raw product from Star Route Farm and other places, and washing it to make their salads. Dale Coke was the first person I'm aware of who figured out how to spin dry it well enough. He started selling three-pound— The standard at that time became a three-pound food-service pack of mixed baby lettuces. So there was a lot of changes going on in a short period of time.

Organic Matters

When I came back from Southern California, I came to Watsonville, and worked for a while in a little organic produce company.

Rabkin: Which one was that?

Griffin: It was called Organic Matters. I was working there before and during the whole alar scare. Everything really changed after the alar scare. Up until the

alar scare, we were still sort of in the old hippie world of marketing. Fabricated or not, alar was a point at which the wider conventional world began to recognize organic as having market juju. There's the world before alar and the world after. When I came up and started working for Organic Matters, it was still the world before alar.⁶

Organic Matters was a collective. I was not a member of the collective. I was an employee. You know, collectives all have all kinds of issues. They had had numerous issues. It had been founded at Community Foods in Santa Cruz. One of the lead people in it had come from VV, from Veritable Vegetable up in the city. Veritable Vegetable used to be a radical lesbian feminist activist co-op vegetable company. That's where she came out of.

In this collective, they just couldn't get along. They had had a big falling out, and several people had left, leaving four of them behind. So they started hiring people to fill in for the missing collective members. I was one of the people hired, and we were starting to sell some of these food-service salad packs. Not a lot, because there still wasn't a whole lot of interest beyond the restaurant world, but we were starting to see a few sales to some of these little stores.

Coming and working in Watsonville for that produce company was really good for me, because it gave me a chance to learn the whole network of little organic natural-food produce stores in this area. I was back into the city in the nighttime because I was driving trucks up there. I met all the farmers down here. That was really a good experience for me, and also to watch what happened in the wake of

alar. Because the organic model, the business model that had prevailed up until alar just didn't survive being the focus of conventional interest.

The very first thing that happened when the alar scare came along was that Coast Produce started an organic division, and within weeks had taken most of the business away from Organic Matters. Most of the retailers were happy to buy from Coast because they knew that if they bought stuff from Coast, it would get there on time, whereas if they bought stuff from us, it might get there on time or it might not. And we might care or we might not. One of the women who was in charge of the collective—one day, she decided she was going to do the deliveries that day up to the city and do Palo Alto and all of our stops up there, and she was feeling kind of stressed, so she smoked a couple of joints and she took the truck down Skyline [Boulevard].

So these people are in their little stores, waiting for their produce delivery, and it doesn't come, and it doesn't come, and it doesn't come. They call, "Where's the truck?" "We don't know where the truck is. It left at five in the morning. It should have been there hours ago." She shows up, blissed out, late in the afternoon, just stoned off her ass. At the last place, up in Felton, at Sequoia Family Market, she's so in love with the world, she gives the hand truck away.

Rabkin: (laughter)

Griffin: She shows up in the nighttime, just ripped. And the hand truck's gone. Because she was just loving people that day. Just totally, totally incomprehensible business practices. We did cheese. We sold cheese to these little stores, and she'd get so high, she'd confuse the price— You'd sell them blocks of cheese, and we'd

have the weight and the price. She'd get so messed up, she'd charge the weight and put the price down instead of the weight. You can't make any money doing that. Just out to lunch.

I was there, hired specifically because one of the collective owners had kind of a religious revelation that our bodies are ecosystems in and of themselves, and you really damage your own body's ecosystem by washing all of your microscopic friends off. They were getting phone calls, "Look, if your guy can't take a bath, we are not buying from you any longer." I mean, these sorts of issues are just inconceivable in a modern business environment. And you can't fire somebody. That's not very cooperative. So they had to get somebody else to come in. [That guy], it turns out he didn't need to be fired. He could feel the distrust, so he drifted off. But you can't run a business like that. There was always some tale like that every single day.

So they lost their business to Coast right off the bat.⁷ That was interesting to see, that whole process. They were sort of an exaggeration, but they were an exaggeration of every kind of little business trend out there. One of the things that began happening, too, is the Westside Co-op here in Santa Cruz—it became New Leaf [Market].⁸ You could see the changes happening. Now, of course, [many] of those little stores are gone. They've been gobbled up. They're out of business, and [mostly] you're left with just a couple of very, very large wholesale chains that are nationwide.

I got a chance to go start farming, first with a fellow that I'd met, and then later on with another friend, and left the produce business part of it behind. But it was

really informative to have been on both sides of the aisle there—to have been doing restaurant sales and get to know those people; to have been in the produce distributorship side and get to know the wholesale customers, get to talk to them. As a farmer, to have worked as a wholesaler and as a distributor—to understand what the issues are that confront them was very, very helpful.

California Certified Organic Farmers [CCOF] and Organic Certification

Rabkin: Tell me about the certification scene at the time when you were in Bolinas and then down in Southern California.

Griffin: Well, when I was in Bolinas, my employer was the president of the California Certified Organic Farmers. The most important thing back then with the certification, the reason that certification mattered back then, was because there was so much distrust and suspicion on the part of the public that you could do even do any of this stuff organically. This idea that you couldn't was constantly being reinforced by all of the companies that are now the largest organic food suppliers. The consuming public needed some sort of assurance that this stuff was organic. Organic farmers needed some sort of assurance that somebody else couldn't sell something as organic that wasn't.

So the certification was really important. We always worked with CCOF. Later on, when I was farming with friends of mine, we were certified with CCOF. There's just gazillions of these [certification agencies] now. It was a big deal. People wanted to see the seal. I'm not certified organic any longer. I gave up, not on the growing practices, but I personally gave up on the certification process as

good as lost once it became federalized. Certainly the marketing need for it has disappeared entirely. A seal and a gun can't get you a sale in this market. The market is so totally dominated now by very, very large corporations, whether they're farming corporations like Mission Ranches or Earthbound Farms or Grimmway Farms. There's a handful of companies that just run the show.

You're not going to get the sale because you're certified. You're going to get the sale because you've got a personal relationship. If you're going to base your sales on relationships, if you're going to have a small farm and you're going to deal with people you know, people know that you can do this stuff organically. They may not trust you *are*. But it's not like it used to be, where they just don't even believe that it can be done. I remember ag commissioners and other farmers and people saying, "You can't do this organically. You *can't*. I know. I've been a lettuce grower all my life, and I know you can't grow this shit organically." It's not like that anymore. But in the early days, yes, the certification was a big deal.

Rabkin: So tell me about after you moved on from the disastrous organic produce company.

Frogland Farms and Ocean Organics

Griffin: Well, one of the women who had been part of this little cooperative, Organic Matters—she left, and she went down and worked for the first organic shipper, sort of broker/shipper, called Ocean Organics, down in Moss Landing. They were the first of these shipping outfits that was dedicated to organic. It was a company that was owned partly by [Bud] Capurro. They're a large, conventional outfit now. They were kind of the money behind it, and also a guy

named Tony Scheer. Ocean came along just about the same time as Alar Sunday, and what Ocean was telling the farmers was, “You bring all your stuff to us, and we will take money for the cooling. We will take money for the sales. And we’ll handle the sales of all this stuff. We’ll be able to sell customers consolidated loads of a wide number of items, and this is going to be of interest to the customers. This is going to open up a nationwide marketing opportunity for you, as a farmer. It’s going to rationalize your life, because instead of driving around to a bunch of dysfunctional little hippie co-ops and stores, you’re going to drive a flatbed into one place, drop it off. This stuff is going to be cooled and handled responsibly,” et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

Sounded good, and it’s actually what’s happened. It was what was really missing. You know, a lot of people had this idea that organic food, organic vegetables were kind of ragged because they were organic. They *were* ragged, but it wasn’t because they were organic. It was because there was no sensible post-harvest handling in place. Ocean was the first company to sort of step forward and take on that role.

One of the farmers, a friend that I’d met while I was working at Organic Matters—he had done one year’s worth of farming for Ocean Organics. It also made it difficult on the little produce company because they had to go buy the stuff from Ocean instead of having the farmers deliver directly to them. So they were no longer very competitive compared to, say, Coast Produce or someone like that, who could buy more product. So I could see that tension developing, too.

My friend had this little farm called Frogland Farms, and he had a deal with Ocean. So he and I worked out an agreement where he would essentially bankroll me. I was going to do the day-to-day running of the farm. I spoke Spanish and had a lot of farm experience, so I could do that just fine. He didn't really want to run the farm anymore. He was sick of it. He'd been working too hard. So he would front the money, and he was coming to the partnership with this relationship with Ocean Organics, and we would grow these items for Ocean Organics, and then we would split the profits. Unfortunately, it turned out there were big problems for us with the way Ocean contracted to buy and sell our produce and the way they followed through.

Rabkin: So did [other] storing and shipping companies come in to take their place?

Griffin: Yes. Definitely.

Rabkin: So this farm was—

Griffin: This farm was called Frogland Farm. The end of that season was 1990. We had really serious frost. There was a period of fourteen, fifteen days in the Pajaro Valley where the daytime temperature never got above thirty-two [degrees].

Rabkin: Wow.

Riverside Farms and Greg Beccio

Griffin: It killed everything. And Joe and I said, “This is too hard. We can’t do it.” Joe never went back to farming. I went to Bolivia, just to go someplace and chill out for a while. When I came back, I started up with my friend Greg Beccio, who is now the owner of Happy Boy Farms. Greg had a little farm. He had had a partner, Steve. And his partner had left at the same time as Joe and I split the company up for the same reason: The frost killed everything; there was no money; they were broke.

So I started working with Greg. He said, “Do you want to be a partner?” I said, “I haven’t got any money. I’ll work for you, but I can’t be a partner. I don’t have anything to contribute.” At that point, he had a \$20,000 debt. What helped there, in that partnership, was Greg was in charge of the farming, and I was in charge of the sales and then running the harvest crews. He had seven acres and about seven employees. He was doing the little salad greens. But he didn’t have the perspective on it that I did. He didn’t know the restaurant environment at all. His background was running a tree trimming service. He didn’t have the restaurant sensibility that I’d developed. He didn’t know much about the marketing of the produce. He had started the year that Ocean Organics did, and he’d only taken stuff in to Ocean. And he’d taken some stuff into this little place, Organic Matters, after Ocean hadn’t done a very good job selling it. I’d met him when I was still at Organic Matters. I had met him because he was trying to sell this stuff, because Ocean couldn’t take it.

Just by coincidence one day, I ran into him at the corner market, and we were each buying a six-pack of Coors. We started drinking beer and talking about what a mess [distribution] was, and he said, “We should partner up. You can do the sales, and I’ll do growing.”

I didn’t want to do that. I was still working with Joe at that time, but we had made a decision, Joe and I, to do all direct marketing. And Greg was coming to the conclusion that he was going to have to sell all his stuff too, only he didn’t know how to or where to. So what we worked out was an idea where I would do all the sales for both farms one day, and he would do the delivery the next. And then the next time around, he would do all the sales and I would do all the deliveries. That would give each of us the chance to spend more time on our farm and run our farm. It would give each of us a chance to get this stuff out there. It would give these potential customers the opportunity of getting the stuff on some sort of reasonable—

So we worked in that way together. When I closed the farm and went to Latin America, I came back, went to work with him as an employee. And within a short period of time, we’d grown the farm from seven acres and seven people. Within five years, we sold the company for three and a half million dollars.

Rabkin: Wow.

Griffin: We’d grown it from seven acres and seven people up to—we had 250 full-time employees, and we had about 700 acres under our own lease and then 500 acres we were farming in partnership with Dick Peixoto⁹, who’s now at Lakeside Organic Gardens. We had a big company. We ended up getting that

facility that is now the Natural Selections facility. Our growth was just completely explosive.

Rabkin: What were you growing?

Griffin: We were growing salad greens. We got together, and I said, “Well, I’ve seen these salad greens since I started growing. And man, it’s all out there. All we got to do is simply give these people a year-round product, and the market’s right there.” We knew that we had a unique opportunity because the powers-that-be, all the big Salinas companies, were still really distant from it. They didn’t “get it” yet. They didn’t understand. They didn’t pay attention. They didn’t respect it. And they said you couldn’t do it. And as long as they were willing to believe that the market was only French faggots and you couldn’t grow the stuff organically anyway, the world was all ours, because we knew that while French faggots might eat it, there aren’t enough of them out there to justify the amount that we were selling. We were selling the stuff to soccer moms. We were selling the stuff to everybody you can think of. So we just went for it.

Dale Coke had a great scene going; Earthbound was growing a lot of this stuff; TKO [Organics] was growing an awful lot of it. We ended up diversifying our marketing so that we weren’t ever dependent on any one aspect of it. We did farmers’-market sales so that we had cash coming into the company. We did our own route of retail stores and restaurants in the Bay Area, so that we had checks coming in thirty to sixty days with all these different people. And we would always hear from our customers what was wrong, because you never want to lose touch. We were selling to people who were on the ground, learning that

way. We were selling to wholesale produce companies like Greenleaf and Veritable and whatnot, all over the place—air-shipping it around the country, selling it to produce terminals all over the place, like the Denargo Market [in Denver] or Hunts Point Terminal Market [in the Bronx, New York].

And we were selling raw product to our competitors. We were selling raw product to Earthbound Farms. We ended up being the organic grower for Earthbound Farms. Earthbound Farms has always cultivated an image of being a farm, but they've always cultivated a very small amount of actual product of their own. They've always had some other company growing a lot, if not all of their stuff for them. We were a large organic supplier for them, the largest of their organic suppliers by the time we sold the company.

Rabkin: When you say “raw product,” does that mean pre-packaged?

Griffin: No, it means just raw, right out of the field. We had kind of a funny experience. Greg and I flew back East to a conference, one of these produce industry conferences. It was cute. You go into Washington, D.C., and they've got these girls that are all painted green, and they have broccoli hats on and they're trotting around in green high heels. You know, it was wonderful, but it wasn't really doing much for our business. We thought we could do a lot better, instead of talking to our peers, if we would just go out and talk to the customers.

So we ran up the East Coast. We'd go to a different produce terminal each night, and then drive during the day from town to town, going up the coast to New York. We wanted to go up to the Hunts Point Terminal Market. We had a customer there. They'd been buying a fair amount of radicchio from us, radicchio

and chicories and things like that. We'd always been hearing that they were all Mafia. So we thought, well, we're going to go to Hunts Point. We're going to meet this guy and his partner. And so we got up there, New York City, and we thought we'd go to the Hunts Point Market, but we were going to want to go real early so we could go to the whole market and check it out, and put this company in perspective of the whole New York experience.

By this time, we'd been at a whole bunch of different produce terminals up the East Coast. So we go into the Hunts Point Market around dark. It's in the Bronx. It's really in a crappy neighborhood. When you go in there—because they'd had all kinds of violence there because it's all—a lot of it's cash. It's not open like the Oakland market is, or something like that. You go in, and they stop your car, and they pat you down. They do the metal detector check and things like that. They take your picture. They want to know who you're going in to see, why you're going in to see them, and then they give you a temporary little ID card for that day so if you're stopped by somebody you can explain how you got there.

So we go in, and it's in the fall. It's already really cold. And the very first place we—you know, the market's huge. It's a gargantuan terminal market. The rail lines come in at the back. It's near the airports. There's shipping nearby. It's the biggest terminal market in America, in North America, outside of that one down in Mexico City. It's vast.

And so Greg said, "Let's go talk to the guy." So we go and talk to the vendor there, and he says, "Oh, you're probably here to collect from a company that was going bankrupt, and they weren't paying their vendors, or their suppliers. We

knew about [this] because one of our friends, another farmer in Watsonville, was owed thirty or forty grand by [this company] and wasn't getting paid.

He said, "You poor farmers out there in the sticks. Man, you guys don't know nothin.' It's hard. You know, here if somebody doesn't pay me I'll break their legs. But out there, all the way out there in Nevada or California, I guess if they don't pay you, you just have to take it up the ass, huh?" He says, "Welcome, to New York."

So we think, well, that's an interesting conversation. We go down, get to the next stall, and we introduce ourselves. This guy's got some salad mix on the dock. He introduces himself, and says, "You're salad mix growers. You're probably out here to collect from [this bankrupt company]." We said, "Well, no, not really." He says, "You poor guys. [That company] is going down hard. I'm going to get *my* money, though. [They've] got a whole shipment of Dutch bells coming in. I'm going to get those bells and I'm going to sell those bells. I'm getting *my* money. I feel sorry for all those suckers out there, all these growers like you that can't get paid. But you know what? This is a tough town. *I'm* gonna get paid."

And all night long, we're going to these different stalls, and we keep on running into people who are telling us, "Yes. Watch out for [that company]." And they're all going to get these Dutch bells. They're going to get these Dutch bells and sell them for cash, and they're going to pay themselves. We finally get down to the very dark end of the market, and there is our New York produce buyer and his partner in a pool of light, surrounded by Koreans. He's got a tower of Dutch bells behind him, and he's selling Dutch bells like there's no tomorrow.

Rabkin: [Laughs.]

Griffin: It was just a sight! It was a sight to see. And we show up and yell, “How’s it going?” And he’s, “Guys, guys! I’m busy right now. Have a seat. [We’re] gonna make you espresso. When I’m done with these bells, we can talk. We gotta have breakfast. Welcome to New York City.”

So we go on and sit down and watch what’s going on. These bells—there’s a lot of them. They cost a lot of money, and people are coming. And our produce buyer has so many hundred-dollar bills in his sweat pants, it looks like he’s wearing jodhpurs.

Rabkin: [Laughs.]

Griffin: He’s just shoving the money in there. Well, along about four in the morning, a guy from one of the companies that we had talked to earlier in the day, he comes down there. Now, he’d been selling all these Dutch bells because he was going to get these bells. He’d been selling them over the phone. And it was getting close to dawn, and his customers were going to come in and pick them up. And his guy hadn’t come back from the airport with the bells. He was short.

What they do in a terminal market is they each have their own relationships with their growers, and they sell this product amongst each other, too. So a customer can come and get a majority amount of their order from one stall instead of having to shop at every one of the stalls. They have marginal mark-ups on this

stuff so the price isn't out of line, but that's one of the real virtues of working in a terminal market environment.

So it was getting to dawn, and Joe didn't have his bells yet, and he needed to cover these sales. He went looking for them, and nobody had bells. He gets down there, and by this time, our produce buyer doesn't have so many bells.

Rabkin: Just a lot of hundred-dollar bills. (laughs)

Griffin: He's got a lot of hundred-dollar bills, and he's still got all these Korean produce vendors who are still buying the bells. The other guy is just unglued. He's, you know, "What the fuck?" You know? "Those are *my* Dutch bells!"

Rabkin: [Laughs.]

Griffin: Our produce buyer is not paying him any mind at all. The other guy is getting in his face: "I gotta have those Dutch bells." And our buyer is real clear. He says, "You know, if you want the Dutch bells, buy 'em." So after a minute the other guy says, "I'll buy 'em. I'll take 'em all." Our guy says, "Fine." The other guy says, "I'll write you a check." And our guy says, "Ha ha ha. You'll write me a check? You'll pay in cash like the Korean or you can walk." Well, the other guy doesn't have any cash. But just a minute later he finds some cash on his body, and he pays for all of his Dutch bells there, and their guy wheels them off. He was livid, but he had to do it. We were laughing because we weren't sure if we were happy that our customer was so sleazy, or we were happy that he was so smart. But it was really an interesting experience.

So we were doing that kind of sales, and we had the bulk produce sales. We sold raw product to Mission Arrow, to Earthbound Farms, to Capurro, to Ready Pac [Produce, Inc.]. We were selling a vast amount of stuff under other people's labels as well.

Rabkin: Were you guys called Riverside?

Griffin: Our farm was called Riverside Farm, yes. By that time, we were selling a lot, and the old guard in Salinas—that was the period when all the old guard left, and the young people came in, and they realized what a boon these salad greens were going to be. They were starting to feel the pinch. They were starting to see that they were losing market share, and that their attitude was getting in the way of their own growth. We were hearing about all these farms experimenting with salad greens. They were experimenting on scales that were bigger than some of the production on some of the organic farms. We knew it was going to be a period of real unrest. We weren't going to be able to predict how our sales were going to go.

By that time, we were working under a union contract. We were working with Teamsters 890 Local. We were figuring that if the price dropped any lower and we were competing with people who weren't unionized, we would probably not be in business. It was very easy to do the math at that time. The first company to really make a move on the salad greens market, the first conventional company, was T&A [Tanimura & Antle], and they sent out what you call a roller. It was a straight load of salad greens, all washed and packed. They took it out to different produce terminals and just dropped it off for free and they said, "Sell it if you

can. If you can't, don't worry about it. And if you sell it, pay us something. If you don't sell all of it, throw it in the dumpster." Well, you know, you can't really compete with free.

Rabkin: Wow.

Griffin: And that was disturbing because we knew that they had the deep pockets that we didn't have, the large companies. We had gotten used to working with the large companies. We had a relationship with Foxy, with Nunez, for example. Nunez is a real forward-thinking company. They were the first of the conventional companies to dabble in organics. They didn't have a clue about the culture of organics, so they chose, of all things, to start out with organic head lettuce. If they'd have known anything about the organic market, they would have known that that's almost an iconic product for conventional, that of all the products they could have chosen, iceberg was the least appealing to the marketplace.

They also went out there and they chose as their spokesperson Brooke Shields. If they'd had any clue about the organic marketplace, they would have known that Brooke Shields was a singularly inept spokesperson for the organic marketplace. So you could really, with some justification, ridicule Nunez. But they were also the first people to look at the market and go, "You know what? The market is way bigger than these hippies." I actually came to really admire the sort of ballsy approach they took to organics.

Now, their first organic effort with this head lettuce—it just stunk. I mean, it sank out of sight. They lost all kinds of money. But they were going to try again, and

when they tried again, we were there to work with them at Riverside Farms. We knew that we needed to diversify away from the salad greens because if T&A was going to get into it— I mean, this is the second largest produce company in America after Dole. If they're going to go in there, we needed to diversify.

So we were doing organic broccoli and cauliflower with Nunez. And we went in and got to know them a little bit, went down to their offices and talked to them and so on and so forth. They sort of showed us around. One of the things that Tommy Nunez [Jr.] wanted to really clarify at the beginning of this relationship was the nature of the relationship. He says, "You know, it's like this: I'm going to sell this stuff for whatever I have to sell it for in order to move it, and you're going to get your percentage; we'll get ours. And I gotta tell you, sometimes that price is going to be really, really low."

What I appreciated about Tommy Nunez was that he was just upfront about this. He says, "Why do you think there's only seven companies in Salinas that are worth a popcorn fart?" He says, "It's because out of all the farms in the valley, in the end, only seven had the balls to follow the market all the way to the bottom." He says, "You don't grow your company when the market's hot. You grow your company when the market's down." He says, "When the price is falling on something, I just tell my sales people, 'Keep selling. Keep dropping the price in order to move this stuff, I sell at a loss until my bankers are on their bended knees in front of me. And I'll keep it up even then.'" He says, "But you know what? If you can hang on through the down time, you pick up a lot of market share, and when the price is good, you don't have as many competitors because they all quit."

Rabkin: Right.

Griffin: He says, “That’s why there’s only seven companies in Salinas, because there’s only seven companies that have the balls to go all the way to the bottom.”

Rabkin: Interesting.

Griffin: “You want a ride to the bottom with us so you can ride to the top? Because it’s a roller coaster ride.” That was the Tommy Nunez speech. And we’re like, “Okay, yeah! Why not?” Because we were along for the ride. We were doing five-acre blocks, which now would be an insignificant amount in the organic marketplace because it’s grown so much. But it took the sort of approach that Nunez had to the organic marketplace to grow it. Only by having cheaper product, could you have a wider audience. Only by having a wider audience, could you encourage larger production. Only by having larger production, could you get economies of scale. Only by having economies of scale, could you afford the cheaper product, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. It starts you off on this conventional approach to organics. And that’s where the market has gone.

At that point in time, that was what I thought I wanted to do. So having done that with the Nunez Company, we knew just how ferocious the salad mix business could be, and we chose to sell our company because we thought that we didn’t have the wherewithal, realistically, to go all the way to the bottom. It wasn’t that we didn’t understand it, or that we felt hurt. We just didn’t have the money there, and we didn’t feel like becoming growers for these big companies. We had always done our own thing. We didn’t feel like working for somebody else. We only wanted to do our own thing.

We had these raw product relationships with all these different companies, with some of the biggest companies. We had a contract with Dole by that time that never went into effect because we sold the company before it kicked in, but we already had it inked. We had Mission Arrow, which was a growing label in the salad greens. We were [a major] organic supplier for Earthbound Farms. We were supplying all the salads for the Capurro label. We had some other little subsidiary labels, like Tony Tautillo, some produce maven, had his label out there. We had a lot of our own product out there under five or six different labels. And we had a large land base. That was important at that time, because these companies wanted to grow really fast, but they didn't have the certified organic land to do it. So there was a momentary alignment of the stars, where we had a volume of land; we had numerous sales contracts and market share; we had a legal, use-permitted, state-of-the-art wash facility, where Natural Selections is now, with an option to buy; and we had long-term leases. And that was what we sold.

Vegetable Growers Express stepped in to buy our company. Right after they had made the sale, they created that company, Natural Selections. This was a complete sea change from sort of the early hippie days.

Rabkin: Yes.

Griffin: This was sharp-toothed capitalism at work, taking advantage of the market. And for us, for Greg and I—we were sick of it at that time, because working with the union was no fun at all. We were in over our heads in terms of the amount of money that we could possibly lose, and it was a really elegant

escape. We got together, knowing that this was going to happen. We didn't know that we would sell. We didn't know exactly how it would work out, but we knew this market was going to explode.

My friend and partner at that time, Greg—he was really clear. He says, “You know, Andy, the important thing sometimes—it's not enough to have a good idea. Having a good idea is great. You got to have good ideas. You got to see the opportunity. But sometimes you're not successful really unless you know when to stop. The best efforts end beautifully. If you don't know when to stop, it's a great song, but it goes on for too long.”

And that was what we felt like. Okay, this is a moment. We've done what we can do here. We're out. If we get out now, we make money. If we wait six months, we probably lose. So we got out. We got the money, and I was able to buy my family's interest out in the property, and we started a new farm together, he and I, called Happy Boy Farms. We split it up after two years. He took the farm, and I went my own way. But it was an elegant ending.

It was also interesting because one of the things that we sold—besides the assets of the company, we sold a non-compete. It was an easy thing to sell, because I didn't want to do that anymore. I didn't want to operate on that scale.

Rabkin: You sold a what?

Griffin: A non-compete. You know, we promised not to compete for five years.

Rabkin: I see.

Griffin: To not involve ourselves in that business at all. I didn't want to compete. And actually, after I took the money, I couldn't. It really challenged he and I to come up with a new paradigm of how we would operate. We had grown accustomed to operating on a certain level and doing things in a certain way, and that wasn't an option anymore. We had the money, but we didn't have those relationships anymore. We had just sold them.

Rabkin: Right.

Griffin: When we restarted, we had the idea of doing farmers' markets. Greg said, "Let's just go back and do just the farmers' markets because there's a lot of cash there. This farmers' market thing is going to get big, and we should be there for it."

I'm a writer, and I think a lot in terms of the story of things, how the story drives something forward. The story had been organic versus conventional. We'd just seen how organic had become conventional. It was clear to both of us that the next story was not organic. That story was going to end. As soon as the federal government steps in and sucks all the blood out of organic, and it becomes just another federal program, that story would lose all of its interest to storytellers and also eventually to the public. The idea is always to get on to the next story before it happens, so that you're there to tell it, spin it your own way, put your own mark on it, and not just be some chump slogging it out in the story line. You want to be moving it forward.

We thought, well, if this organic is going to get big pretty quick, it's not going to be organic versus conventional any more—it's going to be big versus small. And we are now going to be small. We are repositioning ourselves as small.

Happy Boy Farms

Rabkin: It's December 16th, 2008, and this is Sarah Rabkin, and I am with Andy Griffin for our second interview, in Soquel. And, Andy, at our last interview you described selling Riverside Farms in '96?

Griffin: Yes.

Rabkin: And your deal included a non-competition agreement that bound you to avoid growing and selling baby salad greens for five years. Is that right?

Griffin: Correct, yes.

Rabkin: And you said that that challenged you to come up with a new paradigm. So I'd like to ask you to start by telling me about that paradigm, about the hopes and intentions that you harbored concerning your next venture as you left Riverside and moved on.

Griffin: Well, when we started Riverside—Greg [Beccio] started Riverside, and I joined him—we had a very, very clear idea of what we were going to do. That is not the case with the next venture that we started. When we sold Riverside Farms, we started a farm called Happy Boy Farms, which is still in play. My son was the "happy boy," and Greg says that *he* always is a happy boy. I had a happy boy, so that was the name of the farm. We didn't have such a clear-cut idea of what we were going to do. We had a very clear-cut contract of what we were not

going to do, which was we were not going to turn around and grow baby mixed salad greens for the wholesale market again.

Greg had an idea that we would be well poised to develop a farmers'-market business, so that it was all direct-retail, cash kind of business, and maybe supplement that with a little bit of wholesale here and there of non-salad mix items. That's what we started to do. We had already been doing some farmers' markets with Riverside Farms, and we increased that number up to about twenty a week. That was grueling because you're taking the money a dollar or three dollars at a time. I wasn't too happy with that.

Rabkin: Twenty farmers' markets, did you say?

Griffin: Twenty, yes.

Rabkin: How far afield were you going?

Griffin: We were going from Monterey in the south, as far as Novato [in east Marin County] in the north. He's still doing the same business plan. He and I had disagreements over what kind of business plan we should have eventually, and so we split the company up after two years. And the fact of the matter is that we were both right. He's still doing the same business plan that he started with, that he and I started with, and it's working out for him. He's managed to employ a big crew of market gypsies who run around and do all these markets. I'm not exactly sure, but I think he's doing over thirty right now every week, at least during the high season. In the wintertime it could be less. But when we split the

company up, one of the things I did not want to do was twenty farmers' markets a week. That was just grueling.

In our first year of Happy Boy Farms, we didn't make any money; we lost money. At the beginning of the second year of Happy Boy Farms, a woman named Wendy Banzhaf approached Greg with this idea of doing a CSA [community supported agriculture] farm. So we got together with Wendy. She talked to us about the concept of what CSA meant. She had become familiar with our stuff through the farmers' market, and, because we had a wide range of crops, she said that we might be able to pull off a CSA program. She told us that what we were going to do here would be to solicit subscribers who would pay us in advance for a weekly box of produce. We thought, well, why not? We'll try it.

We hired Wendy to set this program up for us, because we had no idea what she was really talking about. It was foreign. I've never really gone shopping. It's not part of my makeup. I always lived on farms. For me, the store was where you went for beer and toilet paper. So the idea of thinking like a shopper was fairly alien. Greg was probably more housetrained than me, but his wife took care of all that stuff. What he was interested in was the idea that these people would be paying up front, in advance.

Rabkin: Were you not familiar with the CSA model at the time?

Griffin: No, I never heard of it before. It was totally, totally alien. So anyway, we got started with that, paying Wendy to set this up for us. Greg is an eternal optimist. According to the vision that he had for this, by the end of the first year we would have a thousand customers. CSA starts to really make sense when you

have seven, eight hundred customers. But, of course, it doesn't go like that. Wendy was a very honest and thoughtful person but not very pushy about sales, kind of reluctant about sales. She got it up to about a hundred the first year. That wasn't really interesting to Greg, because after we did it for a little while it became obvious that there was a lot to learn about that business model. We weren't going to get to a thousand. It wasn't making any money

Rabkin: Were there at the time any thousand-member, or anywhere close to thousand-member, CSAs in the area?

Griffin: In the area? No, there weren't. We didn't have anybody we could really go look to, to copy or to talk to. There was another CSA in the area called Corralitos Connection, and we didn't really know them. It's not clear to me that they had any more than fifty or a hundred people, either. I think they might have started the same year.

Mariquita Farm

When Greg and I decided to split the company up, it wasn't very hard to split it up. It wasn't like Riverside Farms, where it had lots and lots of land leases. We had one field, and we basically split it down the middle.

Rabkin: Where was that?

Griffin: Out on the Santa Clara-Santa Cruz county line, off of [Highway] 129. We'd had that field when we were farming with Riverside, too. It was one of the fields that the company that bought us out didn't want to take. It had some significant right-of-way issues and water issues and whatnot. So we kept that

field. We just split it down the middle. He took one side; I took the other. And then we looked at the farmers' markets. I really didn't want to do farmers' markets. We didn't have to have some sort of big ugly divorce, because the idea was pretty clear: I took the San Francisco Farmers' Market because that was the one I'd been doing and they'd invited us to go up there originally during Riverside Farms because of my connections. Greg took the Santa Cruz Farmers' Market, which he had started right after the earthquake. And all the rest of them, I said, "Take 'em all. I don't want 'em."

My wife [Julia Wiley] was interested in the CSA. She wasn't interested in running it, because we had our second child right at that time, but she was interested in the concept. And so we took the CSA, the small CSA, and the one farmers' market, and Greg took the rest. We lost money that year.

Rabkin: What year was that?

Griffin: The second year of Happy Boy Farms was a loss. So the third year after Riverside, when—the first year that my wife and I were farming together, we called our farm Mariquita Farm, which means "ladybug." And we hired Wendy. We just basically kept paying Wendy after Happy Boy stopped paying her. We kept paying her. And she got it up to around two hundred, something like that. At a certain point, we just looked at it. We said, "In order to pay *us* something, after you've been paid, we need this to get up to, like, four hundred or we never see any money at all. We could just stay in bed."

We were still doing a farmers' market. We were actually doing the San Francisco Farmers' Market, and we started doing a Berkeley farmers' market. That was a

struggle for Wendy. She was going to get married. She wanted to have kids. It was easy enough for her to just pass it over to Julia. So Julia started doing the CSA. Before Julia was a farm wife, she'd been a schoolteacher, so she had all sorts of organizational skills, and little or no clue about farming. But that was probably a plus because she didn't bring a bunch of baggage to the table about the way things ought to be. She just looked at what we had there. Probably the most important thing that she brought to the party was—she's sort of my beta site. She thinks like a consumer; she thinks like a shopper. All of her friends are women who have kids and who shop and do all this sort of thing, so she can say, "Well, this isn't going to work. That might work. Don't do this, don't do that, do something else. This is what *I* like. If I like it, then my girlfriends will like it. If we have enough of my girlfriends signed up, we might make it to break-even."

Rabkin: Can you think of any examples?

Griffin: Well, a lot of examples that come to mind are crops that I might have grown because of my interest or knowledge of the restaurant market that don't translate into home cooking. I could grow, and have ever since I was first starting out in farming, grown all kinds of interesting, weird chicory varieties. These are still thirty years off from being accepted by the modern American housewife and househusband. So she said, "You can do chicories again in twelve years, but you're done for over a decade."

We're going to ship these people out a mix of vegetables each week. She'd say, "Well, this is great, but where is the starch? We need to build recipes around this stuff." Also prices. I have never spent a whole lot of time buying produce. When

I go to the store, on the rare occasions that I go and look at the produce rack, I just die laughing. I can't believe that people would buy stuff that looked like that. It just doesn't compute. She was much better at fixing what the price ought to be. She valued the stuff more than I did, in a way. Because for me, if it's not in a box then we turn it under. That's the hard part about being married to a consumer, is that they freak out and panic about everything that gets lost. You really can't take this sort of stuff to bed with you. If there's a field of tomatoes and we pick a ton, we're happy that we picked a ton. We don't spend a whole lot of time worrying about the ton that didn't get picked. It's not good mental health.

So she brought a sense of perspective to the composition of the box. And also, she recognized how much effort we ought to put into teaching people how to cook. She's excited about cooking. She started collecting cookbooks when she was twelve years old. But a lot of people don't know shit from shoe polish about cooking. And what we found out right off the bat, as she was talking to all these people, because she can get on the phone and talk to them all day long, talk to a hundred people and come back with information from them—what she found out was that basically these people—maybe half of them were signing up because they found going to a farmers' market inconvenient, and the other half of them were signing up because they really didn't eat any vegetables and they wanted to be prompted to cook. And the only way that they could think of being prompted to cook was to have put their money down, to have paid for the ride, and now they're going to take it. And so since she recognized that about these customers, she started putting her effort into recipe support.

Another thing she brought to the table, something that Wendy had had a hard time with, was computer skills. That didn't seem so obvious twelve years ago, but it is now. She had to learn all this stuff herself. She started creating e-mail newsletters, and that was a really key thing for us, because we had already focused on the South Bay as our natural market. The Santa Cruz area is over-served and also highly transient. You get a customer, and they're likely to be with you for a year, but then they're gone. We focused pretty quickly on the South Bay because it's simply a more family-oriented community, and if you get a customer, you're likely to keep him for a while. Also, [there are] more people with kids over there [in the South Bay.] [In Santa Cruz there are] a lot of people who have values that support sustainable local blah, blah, blah, but they're only there for eight months and then they're gone.

One thing that wasn't really obvious to us at first when we started to sell into the Santa Clara Valley was that out there, nothing is actual until it's a virtual. And so if we were putting effort into a[n] e-mail newsletter, that gave us credibility that all of the time in a farmers' market would never do, because that didn't matter. What mattered was that we could do things online. It opened up a whole new world of marketing to us. When you package stuff up in a digital format and you send it out to your customers, it's easy for them to just mouse-click on a button and, pow, it goes to their friend if they want to share this. So there was sort of a viral way of sending out the recipes and notes from the farm.

Once we started getting feedback from people that they were as interested in the newsletter as they were in getting the produce, we realized, okay, this is our opportunity. What we didn't really want to do was try and fight for the same

market share that we already knew that was there. I knew that I could take my product up to Berkeley Bowl and Monterey Market in Berkeley, just like everybody else was doing. But I didn't want to do that. I had been doing that since I was twenty years old. I didn't feel like stepping on people's toes and fighting over the same sort of diminishing pie. I didn't feel like going into all of the farmers' markets and trying to compete for the same share of the market there. I didn't want to try and go to Shopper's Corner. I mean, I love Shopper's Corner, but it's a small store.

Try to go to a place like Whole Foods. At that point in time, they just didn't care. They have an even more evolved corporate culture now, but it was very difficult to just sort of force your way in the door there. They were going through a period where if you couldn't go national with them, they didn't even want to go local.

So we were watching all the local food stores that we'd been counting on for sales, like Sequoia Family Market or the Westside Co-op—[many of] these little natural food stores in the Santa Cruz area were all getting gobbled up by the Whole Foods type corporations, like Pac-Man. At the same time, as we saw all of our old marketing options kind of dwindling away, we always [said], "Hey, a lot of the farmers in Santa Cruz are too Santa Cruz-centric. They're too focused on not going over the hill. They're essentially leaving the whole South Bay open for us to go into and to market ourselves to sort of middle America the way that other people aren't doing."

So we really aggressively pushed the educational aspect of the newsletters, got the websites up. When we'd send out a newsletter, we'd take a photograph of everything we were putting in the box because, believe it or not, some people just don't know what a red cabbage looks like. They want to know. When they can see it, they go, "Okay, that's the red cabbage."

Rabkin: [Laughs.]

Griffin: We'd always put something a little bit different in the box, just to kind of provoke them. We had no money to promote ourselves through buying any kind of ad, so we needed everybody to promote us for us, free. And we realized, hey, if we give them a red carrot and tell them a story about why this carrot is red and not orange, and how this carrot is an Indian carrot and you need to bake it or cook it; it's not a raw bunny carrot to eat raw, they will tell all their friends, because this is new and different. They get home from the cubicle; this looks fun to them. If we give them a bunch of familiar stuff and we give them something a little bit different each time, they'll talk about it. So we watched the numbers of our CSAs start to ramp up, and we got to a point where all of a sudden it actually made sense. It actually made sense as a business.

Rabkin: So just to clarify for a moment: when you talk about the South Bay, you're talking about the South San Francisco Bay Area, Santa Clara Valley—

Griffin: Yes, South Bay.

Rabkin: Not South Monterey Bay, Monterey.

Griffin: Yes. No, we went to Monterey Bay, but we perceived right off the bat—(and we still go there) but it doesn't have any kind of growth potential. We spent a lot of time trying to figure out: Who are these customers who are responding to what we're doing? You know, when you do something like a CSA and you're looking for subscribers—CSA stands for community supported agriculture, so what kind of community are you talking about? We don't live in a Mennonite community. We don't live in a Catholic community. We live in a very, very diverse community, and we had to figure out, exactly who are we aiming at here?

I think a lot of people who were starting out trying to do this sort of thing at that time—they looked at this notion of paying in advance, and they immediately suspected that what they were aiming at were rich people. And there are certainly a lot of rich people around, God bless them. But truly rich people don't cook. Truly rich people have other people cook for them. They're not a very dependable group.

The real *über* left wing is a no-no, because all they want is stuff really cheap. It just can't be cheap enough. It's in conflict sometimes with how much they want everybody to value people's labor, but they really don't want to spend any money. So that's kind of a no-go.

What we realized after a while [was] we had to focus on—we'll take anybody's money, but—we had to focus on people who cook a lot. What you end up with more than anything are stay-at-home moms. What we realized by surveying all of our customers was we had all kinds of people, but by far and away the big fat

part of the bell curve was stay-at-home moms. If there was any single element that unified all the people that we had in our CSA, or to this day have in our CSA, it wasn't income level, it was education level. Somebody without a whole lot of money [but with] a lot of education was a much better bet than somebody with a lot of money and no education.

Once we figured that out, it opened up more doors to us. That, and using the Internet got stuff around. We watched it build pretty steadily, not lightning fast but pretty steadily. If we had a hundred people at the end of the first year, we had two hundred at the end of the second year, and we had three hundred and fifty at the end of the third year, and we had four hundred and fifty or five hundred people at the end of the next year. It got to the point where it was finally sustainable as a form of business, but it was also totally exhausting.

Rabkin: Can I just jump in and ask about distribution? Were you doing deliveries, or did you have a single pickup point or multiple pickup points?

Griffin: We had a series of pickup points. In the beginning, for our CSA, most of them happened to be the backyards of my wife's teacher friends, or something along those lines.

Rabkin: So that your customers didn't have to go very far to get their produce.

Griffin: No, no—they were neighborhood pickup sites in different neighborhoods. We started out going all the way over into the South Bay from the very beginning. Julia would take the kids down to the park in Watsonville, and she would run into Jean Byrne, who's married to Stephen Pedersen, and

they were running the Corralitos Connection CSA. They had many of the same issues: kids the same age, you know, these two women married to farmers who were never there.

Two Small Farms

They started talking, and they thought that it might be easier for them if, instead of competing on some level, we joined our two CSAs together, and then the four of us, Jean and Stephen and Julia and I, split the responsibilities of running a CSA up, so that each one of us might have more time and attention to focus on our little sphere of responsibility, and not be so burdened with all the harassment of all the details.

So we did that. I think it was in our fifth year that we did that. Jean is really, really good with numbers, and extremely sober and precise and mathematical. She's, like, a genius from East Coast, Ivy League schools and whatnot, so she's in charge of the money. Julia was already doing all of the Internet kinds of things and the computer stuff. She really enjoyed putting out the newsletter and had gotten a lot of attention for that. Jean and Stephen understood how valuable the newsletter was for us. Our CSA was quite a bit bigger than theirs by that point. So they said, well, Julia's going to do that. Stephen took responsibility for the day-to-day distribution of the stuff, getting the boxes loaded and on the truck and out the door.

And then, even though the three of them are all very articulate, they were not interested in being the media slut who would try and go out there and promote this more, whereas I don't have a whole lot of shame. So by default, I got the

least demanding job on a day-to-day, hour-to-hour basis, and maybe the one that's most taxing on somebody's sense of self-worth if they don't want to just do anything to attract attention, which worked for me.

Rabkin: [Chuckles.]

Griffin: And then we just kept on going from there, and—

Rabkin: This is what became Two Small Farms?

Griffin: We called that Two Small Farms. So we folded the two together, and we just finished our eleventh year in the CSA. So we've done six years as Two Small Farms and five years as either the Mariquita Farms CSA or [in Jean and Stephen's case] as Corralitos Connection. We [have] over 1,800 people. We finally reached the point really where don't feel like growing it anymore. We feel like the issue now is to sustain it. It makes sense at this level. It might not make sense at a bigger level for us. We'd have to get more trucks—there's a whole lot of issues that it brings up. And of all years to have gotten to this point—I mean, you couldn't go to a bank and get credit with a gun right now, and we don't need to. We turn to our base of subscribers. Many of them have been with us for a long, long time, and they don't doubt that we're going to pull it off.

Rabkin: And do you do a year-round CSA?

Griffin: No, we don't, actually. We do it from the third week in March until right before Thanksgiving. One year we did all year long, a CSA, and we learned the hard way. When you take people's money, obviously you're obliged to pay them back. I mean, that might be news to people on Wall Street, but actually you are

obliged to do that. We had an El Niño year that year, and it rained and rained and rained and rained and rained. We did fulfill our obligation, but it just about killed us, and it just about drove us broke.

So we didn't do it the following year, and we learned something very, very interesting: when you shut the CSA down for the duration of the winter, you put your subscribers in the position of having to go to the store and pay the highest prices for the worst crap of the year, which helps, because they begin to look back with fondness. Whereas if you give people everything they ask for all the time, they begin to get jaded or expect more. If every once in a while you let them go back to the trough, then that helps them refocus on what exactly it is you *are* doing. It also gives us a little bit of a break. If it's flooding and we can't fulfill the obligation, I don't want to be broke trying to buy stuff to fill their box. If it's really abhorrent, appalling weather, I don't want to tell the crew, "Look, guys, you're gonna go out there and dig for this stuff, because I've already made the sale and banked the money." I don't want to do that. In the wintertime we're not really in control. I mean, we're never in control, but in the wintertime it's really day-to-day. We keep the farm running all winter long, but if we don't want to pick, we don't have to. By the third week in March, things are beginning to become stabilized, and so we feel confident jumping back in and running the program through until the fall.

Rabkin: Did joining forces with the Corralitos Connection folks enable you to further diversify your CSA boxes?

Griffin: It did, in the sense that I moved my farm out from Watsonville area out to Hollister, and that allowed me to grow in some warmer climates. His farm—he bought, with the help of Open Space Alliance, bought some farming property right out there off of Harkins Slough near the beach in Watsonville. It's very cool, so it allowed the overall box to have a wider range of stuff. In the middle of the summer, we could pull cool-weather crops as well as hot-weather crops and put them in the same box. So that was an effective way of working together.

More about Mariquita Farm

Rabkin: Tell me some more about Mariquita Farm. First of all, tell me about the origins of the name, which you said means “ladybug.”

Griffin: The ladybug is sort of the unofficial mascot of the organic farming movement. When we went to look up “ladybug,” it was already taken for all kinds of different things—like a children’s reading site or whatever, a publisher of children’s books. So we thought, well, let’s just go with the Spanish version. Everybody on the farm speaks Spanish, so we can just call it Mariquita Farm, and then it’s different. I wouldn’t maybe do it again today, just because some people have a real hard time with that name. It’s not maybe the best marketing decision I ever made.

It has had a few unexpected consequences. We always sold up in San Francisco. We were selling at this Ferry Plaza Farmers’ Market up there until two years ago, and we still do our CSA up there. We do a lot of business up there. And one day, a woman comes in the parking lot, and she sees the sign there, and she immediately jumps to the conclusion that *mariquita* means this is a very pro-

lesbian farm. The farm's not anti-lesbian on any level. I mean, *marica*—*maricón* is the big *marica*, and that's a fag-y guy. *Mariquita* is the little *marica*, and that, in many Latin-American situations, can be construed as "the little fag" or the lesbian. I knew that before we picked the name, but it didn't make any difference. But she was so excited to find a farm that was really in solidarity, that she jumped right in there and spent twenty-five or thirty bucks. And that's fine. It's a hard name in the sense that a lot of people in the media can't pronounce it. But it always gives you something to talk about, too. The ladybug symbol is easily translatable. So it was not a bad name. It's worked out well. It's a cute little name.

Raising Animals

Rabkin: You mentioned at our last interview that you have a relatively small amount of land, where you live, that was family land, that you inherited and then were able to buy more of when you sold Riverside Farms. You also mentioned that the majority of your row crops are grown on the land that you rent in Hollister.

Griffin: Yes, the row crops we grow on rented land. The land in Watsonville that I was able to buy from my family, it's just rangeland, and I have animals on it. It's not a lot of land. And we don't have a whole lot of water there. It's not flat. It doesn't have any advantages. It's pretty. It's a nice place to raise kids, but it's not a nice place to try and make a living.

Rabkin: What animals are you raising there, and what do you do with them?

Griffin: I have goats, I have sheep, I have cows, and I have a couple of donkeys. The goats, I'm— Right now Bill Niman is making a big splash with introducing the goat as the new meat du jour, which I'm a little bit cross about because I wanted to do that ten years ago and didn't have Bill Niman's moxie and money. I've known Bill Niman for many, many years. So when he sold his interest in Niman Meats, I was just waiting to see what he would do next. My mind was in the right place. I knew that goat was going to be the next big deal on restaurant menus.

Rabkin: How'd you know that?

Griffin: Because I spend a lot of time selling to restaurants, and I know that restaurants always need something new. And if you look at goat, you look at America—the United States of America is the only culture that doesn't eat goat. Everybody else eats goat. Jamaicans eat goats. Jews eat goats. Arabs eat goats.

Rabkin: Mexicans.

Griffin: Mexicans eat goats. Italians eat goats. Nigerians, Africans—they eat goats. Everybody eats goats, except America. It's not like trying to make people eat an emu—

Rabkin: [Chuckles.]

Griffin: —or something. This fits in. It gives you a million different ethnic stories to tell. This is a very easy product to market, and I knew that, and I started getting goats about nine years ago. But I'm making money off the vegetables. That's my business. I didn't pursue it very vigorously. He got there first. It's not

a huge market, but I raised the goats in order to keep the poison-oak brush down, and then we slaughter goats. If somebody on my crew has a *quinceañera* or whatever, give him a goat. If somebody's getting married, give him a goat. Birthday party, give him a goat.

Rabkin: So you're not marketing goat meat.

Griffin: No, no. I'll invite restaurateurs down to my house that we do business with and tell them to bring their crew down, and I'll cook them a goat in the yard, you know, cook for them for a change. Actually, that's probably the very smartest way for me to use goat. It would take a lot of money to create some sort of parallel business that made money selling meat, but if I slaughter a goat that I might be able to sell for a hundred bucks, and I cook it for a restaurant, and their crew appreciates hanging out in the country and sharing some goat tacos, I may very well be getting way more than that in good will.

The funny thing about the restaurant market is all these people in the restaurants, they've all worked in all different restaurants. All the sous-chefs are always dating or sleeping with the wait staff in some other restaurant. It's a very small, inbred community. I've taught chefs how to slaughter goats. They go back home. They talk about that. Well, I get more publicity out of that than I could get if I got a banner, a billboard on Sunset Boulevard, because it's very, very focused. They all talk. The great thing about marketing yourself through word of mouth, as long as it's positive, is that the people who are broadcasting will say stuff you'd be embarrassed to say yourself. Everybody's going to tell a story, and the story is going to get better. It's not like a ripple in a pond, where you throw a

pebble in and over a little ways, the wavelet flattens out. No, this is where you throw the pebble in the pond and it gets bigger and bigger and bigger, because the further away you are from the source, the more you need to make out of the story. So if somebody from Restaurant A comes down and I teach them how to slaughter a goat, by the time it gets to the seventh restaurant down the line—he and I just went through a whole herd. So there is that.

Selling to Restaurants

Rabkin: How much business are you doing with restaurants now, in addition to the CSA?

Griffin: We do about fifteen percent of our business with restaurants. Our business is a little bit like a teeter-totter. Right now the restaurant market just rolled off a cliff because, of course, the economy is going down the toilet bowl. And so sales to the restaurants are going down. However, interest on the part of the public in cooking at home is going up. This will be the third collapse in the restaurant market I've seen since I was eighteen. There was the dot-com bubble; there was the earthquake; things weren't too slick in the early eighties with the restaurants. So that kind of business comes and goes. Right now it's going down.

But it's a useful way to promote the CSA, it's a useful way to get sales, and it's especially useful as a way to sell product that we couldn't cut for the CSA because it ripened towards the end of the week; we need to move stuff on the weekend. The CSA—people worry that if they were going to be a farmer, how would they grow this stuff? Well, it's not about growing the stuff. If you can't grow it, you can't even start. It's about how to manage your labor so that you

always have a constant flow of labor and you have a constant flow of cash and you have a constant flow of checks coming in. It's all about these very unsexy, not very hands-in-the-dirt kind of equations. The restaurants really help us balance out the harvest cycle for the CSA. We harvest Tuesday for Wednesday, Wednesday for Thursday, and Thursday for Friday. That still leaves us needing to harvest for the weekend. If we get to the end of a field, and we don't have enough stuff to give everybody in the CSA some [of a particular crop], I still need to sell that. So the restaurants are a way for us to achieve some degree of balance.

Rabkin: About how many restaurant accounts did you have before this most recent downturn started?

Griffin: Oh, we still have them. They're not going to really hit the wall until February. I think in February [2009] it's going to be a really slick time not to be in the restaurant business, because all the first-of-the-year parties will be over, and they're going to be looking at their bookings and they're going go, "Jesus, we don't have anything until Valentine's Day." But about sixty only concentrated in downtown San Francisco.

Rabkin: And do you have any other marketing outlets besides the CSA and the restaurants?

Griffin: No.

Rabkin: Farmers' Market in San Francisco?

Griffin: No longer. We don't do that anymore.

Rabkin: So it's all CSA and restaurants. We were talking about the range animals that you have, and you mentioned that in addition to goats you have—

Griffin: I have sheep, and I have some cows. Sheep—same thing as the goats. We actually slaughtered three sheep the other day and then just divided the meat up among the crew so that everybody had—instead of having a turkey for Thanksgiving, they had a haunch of a sheep. [Chuckles.] Which works, because these people that work for me all got their start on little ranches in Mexico, and they're able to help me do the slaughter and appreciate what they're getting there. They're not shoppers who are going to get wiggled out if it doesn't come wrapped in cellophane, at all.

And last year I got a handful of these Dexter cattle, which are a little small, half-size cattle, little Irish cattle. I got twelve of them right now. That's just a hobby. And then my donkey is just because I want to have at least one animal I don't eat—

Rabkin: [Laughs.]

Griffin: —that I can relate to.

Rabkin: That can be reliable pets for your kids, they don't have to say goodbye to at some point?

Griffin: Exactly. My kids don't care about the animals very much. That's my whole trip.

Labor Issues

Rabkin: Let's talk about labor, since you mentioned the people who work on your farms. You talked a fair amount about labor in our last interview, and you've written a good deal about it. One of the things you mentioned learning from Star Route Farms was the art of maintaining some year-round employees rather than constantly hiring seasonals. So how do you handle the need for labor on your farms now?

Griffin: In order to have steady labor, I need to give people steady work. If they're working there all the time, they're not leaving. These are not kids who come to Santa Cruz and want an experience. They're people who want to have a job and show up for work. In my experience, if I don't lay them off or fire them, they're still there. So it's a question of building a business plan that creates a way to pay them all year long. The restaurants are helpful in that respect, too. The restaurants will continue to buy from me all winter long. We'll harvest whatever we can. The restaurants will buy whatever they want. I'm not obliged with the restaurant market to try and give them a balanced mix. They can always get the stuff they need from someone else. They'll buy from me what they want. If I have enough business with the restaurants, this keeps my crew busy harvesting. Sometimes the winter can be relatively easy on my pocketbook. I may not make a whole lot of money, but it may not cost me much, either. We're not spending a lot of money irrigating. We're not spending a lot of money planting. We're not spending a lot of money fertilizing. We're just picking.

The days are shorter. It gets dark earlier. But everybody stays employed. We've never really shut the farm down, and I've consciously constructed the business model for the farm around the idea of keeping everybody employed all the time. We'll get to a point sometimes in February when there really isn't that much to do, and what I'll do then is put people to work at my home ranch, building fences or whatever, developing that property for my animals, or something like that, so that at least it's some home improvement.

The point that I want to make is that the very first day that we can get into the ground, they're all there. I don't have to run around and find them. I don't have to phone them and say, "Hey, we're starting up again." They're already there, and it's just a question of saying, "Well, what we're going to do now is X, Y and Z." And that gets us off to a start really early.

It can be kind of an alarming thing if the winter just doesn't stop, and we have a whole bunch of people waiting to go to work and we're not getting any money coming in. We'd be vulnerable if we got a really massive flood again or something like that. But people appreciate the fact that we're building the business around keeping them employed all the time. It's been a pretty successful strategy so far.

Rabkin: How many employees do you have?

Griffin: About twenty. I say "about" because in the wintertime one of the women stays home. She's the childcare provider for her sister-in-law, who's got some job someplace else so if she stays home, they all come out ahead. She's busy in the packing shed, and she'd just as soon stay at home if she's not going to be

packing. One of the fellows that works for me goes back every winter to Mexico to take care of his father. He's a driver of mine, and he knows that the season starts seriously in the third week of March. So in the second week of March he shows up every year, which is nice because I don't have very much driving work in the dead of winter, so if he was around, I'd be paying driver's wages for somebody who didn't have anything to drive. So it goes up and down a little bit, but not a whole lot.

Rabkin: Are most of these employees making a living from working on your farms?

Griffin: Oh, that's all they do. Yes, that's what they do.

Rabkin: So they're able to support themselves and their families.

Griffin: Yes.

Renting Land

Rabkin: Let me ask you about renting or leasing land, as opposed to owning it. Most of your vegetables are grown in Hollister on this land that you rent. What are the benefits and drawbacks of that arrangement?

Griffin: The benefit of that is that there's no way I could buy the land. Cropland in California is so dramatically and grossly expensive compared to what you're likely to make on the sales of the crop, you can't unless— My partner, Stephen Pedersen,¹⁰ is paying for the land that he's farming, but it's an unusual arrangement, in that he bought it for very, very cheap from the Open Space Alliance, which purchased that property and then sold it to him at a very, very

cheap price, having pocketed the development rights. Then his wife's family was able to advance for them a substantial part of the down [payment]. If you can find some sort of isolated situation like that, then great. However, most people can't. If you go around and knock on farmers' doors, you'll find that most farmers don't own the land they farm, not in California. The land that I am farming would cost me millions of dollars. Farming is an uncertain way to make money in the best of situations, but if I was paying a mortgage on that property, we would have no money at all. It's never even occurred to me to try and buy farmland.

What you see a lot of times, actually, maybe the land is still in a family, maybe the grandfather farmed the land. The kids didn't want to farm; they all went off and got white-collar jobs someplace. They had a bunch of kids themselves. The land got passed down to the sons and daughters. It's put in a trust, and then the land is leased out to a farmer, and the kids, who may not have even ever been to the land, get a check every month. Really good farmland can produce income like that. If all you have to do is go to the post box on the second of January every year and collect a check for thousands of dollars, why would you sell it? No, buying farmland to farm on is irrelevant. It's something that people can consider doing perhaps if they live someplace else where all the economics are different. I mean, maybe if I lived in North Dakota, where a house cost \$30,000 [chuckles], you know? But not here.

Rabkin: Are there any challenges or limitations you run into by virtue of not owning the land?

Griffin: Yes. If you are renting the land, you can have an unreasonable landlord. That's a very common— One of the big problems with land around here is so much land has been purchased by people with money. The place I'm renting right now, that fellow sold a couple of software companies and bought this land as investment, and it's probably a very good investment over the long haul. I've rented land from farmers who have retired, and when you talk to them, they have a pretty clear idea of what you're up to.

I've rented a lot of land over the years around Santa Clara, Monterey, San Benito, and Santa Cruz County, and one of the problems that I've gotten accustomed to, if you're renting land from people who have bought it as an investment property, is they really don't know what you're doing. They don't know what the market is like. Some of them have estate fantasies and want you to spend a lot of *your* money tricking out their property so that it looks like an estate, because their notion of what the land ought to look like or be—it doesn't have production values to it. It has these consumer values. You have to watch out for that. I'm pretty careful about that, but I do have friends who have gotten lease contracts— My business partner, Stephen Pederson—he was renting land from somebody in Corralitos, and they really loved to see the deer in their yard, and they could understand how he didn't want to have deer in the fields eating his crops, but they, with a straight face, proposed that he build a series of fences that formed a cross so the deer could walk completely across the property. Never mind the fact that this costs—to put a deer fence in the form of a cross across a forty-acre property—I mean, this is fantastically expensive. This is the stupidest idea I've heard of all month! And yet they could seriously entertain this and not

back down. He eventually left that arrangement because they're not touching down and realizing what you're up to. You're not making that much money off of this. You can't afford to engage in Mickey Mouse like that. So that's one of the problems.

Water and Drainage Issues

Rabkin: Tell me about water on your farm.

Griffin: We're farming in the upper reaches of the Pajaro River, an area they call the Bolsa. Down here in the lower part of the Pajaro Valley there's a lot of saltwater intrusion problems with a lot of overdraft. In the upper reaches, it's a very, very different story. In fact, right now, while we're having this big drought in California— Somebody from the state called me up, from *Capital Press* [agriculture newspaper] or whoever. They were looking for farmers to essentially give them—it was one of these deals where they basically pitch you the story they want you to tell them, confirm their suspicions so they can put some names down. Their story is all about the drought and the effect that the drought is having on farmers. I am absolutely certain that a lot of farmers are negatively impacted by the drought that we're having. But not us, because the Bolsa, from the first rains in October all the way through into mid-May—all those wells are artesian. The water is pouring out of the ground. If we have a problem, it's poor drainage because the water table is so high. We punch a button and we get 1,200 gallons a minute from here until the end of time. It's just a vast pool. And if you look from space, you can look down and see that big granite rock quarry out there by Aromas. They're chipping the very tip off this immense underground granite beam which lays across the aquifer of the Pajaro. During the

summertime, from that granite rock quarry to the ocean, the Pajaro River is dry, and yet from that granite rock quarry all the way back to where we're at, there's standing water. It's just that simple. So water is not a problem.

Rabkin: Wow.

Griffin: It's a problem, in the sense sometimes that we have to figure out: How are we going to use that much water? We don't have a blowback mechanism in our well. When we push the button, we get all the water. If you have the water choked down and you're only putting a certain amount out, you can blow your main line under the ground apart. You don't want to do that, so you got to put the water out. That calls upon us to manage our land in a certain way. We actually do put a lot of our crops on drip. There's a lot of problems that comes with too much water. And I want to minimize the amount of power I'm using because, of course, the money—to pump the water is power, and that's not cheap. But we don't have a water problem.

Rabkin: You must be the envy of a lot of farmers in the region.

Griffin: I don't know. All the farmers in the region have the same problem. In fact, out there almost all the walnut orchards have died because they walnut trees are getting sick from root funguses. The water table is not going down. It's going up because they brought the water in from over on the other [side of Hecker Pass] The blue-valve water—they brought it from over in San Luis Reservoir, and they started doing all this row cropping, and that water piles up down there, and now all the walnut orchards are dropping dead, so they're bulldozing them out of the way. All the farmers in our area have the same issue.

It's not isolated at my farm; it's that whole region. There's actually a lot of undeveloped land sitting there, not being farmed. And I'm waiting—one of these days, some of these guys over on the west side, who have gotten their federal water cut back to almost nothing, are going to start to come over the hill and farm over there if they want to stay in business. We haven't seen that yet, but I imagine it's going to come.

Variations in the Soil

Rabkin: What's the soil like, and what kind of amendments are you using?

Griffin: The soil is variable. That's the one thing about the Bolsa region, is that until the recent history it was all wetlands. It's hard to generalize about what the soil is because there are patches of it that are solid clay out along Frazier Lake Road, where it's pretty hard to farm because the clay is so thick. If you're near—like, we're farming land that borders along Pacheco Creek, and it's a silty loam; it's beautiful soil. The further away you get from the creek, the heavier the clay becomes. There are areas out in the Bolsa that I used to farm, at the junction of, Frazier Lake Road and Shore Road, where—they had a turf farm out there, and, of course, turf is just simply mining the soil. They just roll it up and take it away. They exposed the tops of these ancient sand dunes that had been built up by wind blowing off of some ancient bay. Sand dune soil is light, but if you looked at it from above, it would be like a tiger stripe. In between the sand dune sort of soil, the tips of these ancient dunes, you had this clay soil, and that was full of salt. So you get these ribbing patterns across the field, where the soil is just crap. The soil is not flat and even like Salinas, where you get the whole field all one kind of soil. It's not like that.

Rabkin: So you're having to work different areas of the farm differently?

Griffin: Yes. We manage it a little bit. Our management is pretty crude, but in the wintertime we typically move the production up closer to the edge of the creek, where there's better drainage. In the summertime we're able to farm further away, where there's less drainage. We can't really afford a lot of compost any longer. We put down cover crops. Some of the soil we treat with gypsum to lighten the soil up. But we have pretty good soil on the farm.

Geese

Rabkin: What kinds of pest or disease problems do you have to deal with?

Griffin: That depends on the time of the year. One of the most obnoxious pests are definitely geese. We'll get overflights of Canada geese come in there. You can have a fairly substantial stand of some sort of chicory. You go out there in the morning time, there's nothing but puddles of goose shit. They came in—they saw, they ate, and they shit all over you and left. And that's really tough to deal with.

Rabkin: What *do* you do?

Griffin: There's not much you can do.

Rabkin: Do you ever use noise mechanisms?

Griffin: No, because it's a neighborhood. Our landlords would flip out. They think the geese are pretty. And it requires—there's too much management. I just

take the loss and move on. I can't solve every problem. Some problems just go unsolved.

The Politics and History of Organic Certification

Rabkin: Are you certified organic?

Griffin: Not anymore. We stopped being certified a little after the federal law went into effect. What I realized at that time—first of all, at that time we were almost broke, and it was a question of paying CCOF money that I didn't have. I was cross with CCOF, because CCOF, the California Certified Organic Farmers, which had been our certifier basically as long as I'd been farming, was always both a lobbying organization and a certifying organization. And I really feel, still feel, that they took money from the small farms that built the organic farming movement and then created rules that fast-lined, streamlined the introduction in the market of the very biggest, corporate farms. I don't dismiss the idea of having really large farms in the organic marketplace, but I would have never spent *my* money on that particular lobbying effort at all. I felt badly served by that whole effort. I didn't think that they did anything to look out for the needs and interests of small farmers. I saw my economic interests were much more in being a small farmer than in being a certified organic farmer, especially with the capture of the organic marketplace by not only the large, corporate farms like Natural Selections, but the absorption of the retail organic market by a handful of really large organic chains. Having certification didn't do shit for you.

When we started out, certification was important because people didn't believe you could farm organically. The certification was a seal that you really were

farming organically. People don't doubt that you can farm organically now. Somebody may doubt that you *are* farming organically, but nobody doubts that you *can*. And so when you go to try and get your product and sell it through the regular channels, into a Whole Foods— I mean, there used to be—there was Bread and Circus. That got bought up by Whole Foods. There were all these different stores that got bought up by Whole Foods. So you're really talking about dealing with very, very few players in the market. And what matters is not your certification. What matters are other connections that are much more difficult to define.

So I thought, well, I'm not being served by this. This is money down a rat hole. I don't have the money, and I'm not going to do it. And the writer in me was already looking at the story, having been involved in this from when I was eighteen, and remembering very clearly how people simply dismissed us as liars and crackpots and stoners, to the point where the very largest corporations were involved in organic production. When we sold Riverside, I realized the story was no longer organic versus conventional. Once you've got Vegetable Growers Express becoming the largest organic farm in the salad business, once you've got these really large corporate connections inside the organic network, it's not organic versus conventional; it's big versus small.

I decided that not only was I being poorly served by the CCOF in terms of the focus of their lobbying efforts, but actually I was serving myself poorly. Because in terms of self-promotion, if somebody challenged me on why I was not certified organic, that was my button to go off on a total rant about how I was being poorly served by the powers that be. And this is a powerful appetite that

the public has, too, is to believe in the little guy against the big guy. If they see your certification, they just let it go at that. If they challenge you on it and you get in their face and you raise a big rumpus, now they know who you are. They may not like you, but now they know who you are. Chances are, they'll talk about that. It's another way to get press. And it worked. I was right. The story *did* change from organic versus conventional, to big versus small. Now the story has changed again. Not is it just big versus small, but now there's really a renewed focus on what "local" is all about. People ask themselves, Where is my money best spent, [is it] in supporting a certified organic grower? Is it in supporting a small grower, or is it in supporting a grower which is actually contributing to the local community, a place that I feel some connection to?

It was our foresight to focus on small and local twelve years ago, before that was a very sexy thing to talk about. So we're well oiled in being small and local, and we've got relationships that are hard to break. It's not about price. If people feel like they know you, if they've been to your house, if they've been to your fields, if you have fulfilled their needs and answered their questions for a decade, they're not going to be swayed by a different, cheaper price from someplace else. So that is, in the end, the most sustainable business pattern for us *here*. It may not be the same if you're farming grains in the North Dakota plains, but for us here, now, it's clearly the best way for someone of my means to try and market stuff.

Rabkin: Do your customers still care about the notion that you aren't using synthetic fertilizers and pesticides on your land?

Griffin: Oh, yes, absolutely. We haven't changed our farming pattern. Just because I wasn't certified by CCOF didn't mean [that] I said, okay, now you get to go out and buy a sack of Triple 20. It's not like that. It's just that once the organic farming business was taken over by large, corporate interests, most of the profit that came from the specialty nature of organic disappeared. I believe in organic, in the sense that I really have always believed this is how you grow stuff. You don't need to use these other things. You can move around those problems. So I don't need to grow things in an inorganic way. It's not that. There's no benefit that comes from that.

But as a promotional tool, touting the organic nature of stuff isn't necessarily the best marketing tool. We *know* who our customers are now. Our customers all assume, baseline, that we're growing this stuff organically. But people who are really worked up about the politics of organic—it turns out these aren't party people; they're not eating a whole lot. Just in a marketing sense, the activists who are on the forefront of these issues and making a big political statement—they're not the ones who are buying the most food. Moms with kids are the ones who are buying the most food. And they don't want to hear about all this stuff. This just brings them down. What they want to hear about—they want some recipes. They want to be able to cook this stuff. They want it to be good. They want it to be pretty quick. Not too fussy. They want to know that their kids are eating clean, healthy food. They appreciate the ability to take the kids out to the farm once a year, if they can get them in the van in time, because then they can show them where their food came from. The kids run around in the dirt. They appreciate that. They bring their friends. That's what works for them, not a

whole lot of information about the Organic Materials Research Institute readout on kelp meals.

Rabkin: [Chuckles.]

Griffin: They don't want to hear about that. [laughs]

Inviting CSA Members to Two Small Farms

Rabkin: Yes. Do you have an event where you invite your customers out to the farm on a particular day of the year, or is that an open invitation that you proffer?

Griffin: We have numerous events. Between High Ground Organics and Mariquita Farms, we trade off. They'll do a strawberry U-pick; we'll do a series of tomato U-picks. We always do open houses. We try and have a mix of different events that will invite different slices of the people that we're dealing with, so they feel comfortable and they're happy.

For example, it doesn't bring very many people out, but when we have a nice crop of fava beans, we'll have a fava bean U-pick. Now, granted, maybe twenty people come, but those twenty people really dig it the most, because they know there ain't another fava bean U-pick they're ever going to go to in their life. It's just not out there. Nobody does that. So you get a mix of people for something like that. You get some people who are really high on being Portuguese, and it's time to take the kid out and show the kid how to get the fava bean. You get gay party boys who are going to have the most delightful sort of tempura thing, and they need the little tiny, tender fava beans that don't have a bean in them yet,

and nobody will ever pick that for them because it's too fussy, and so they can go out there and pick all they want, and they're stoked because they're getting something they can't get someplace else. You'll get people who didn't read the newsletter very well and thought it was green beans.

Rabkin: [Chuckles.]

Griffin: You get all different kinds of people, but they go away and they're happy with what they got a chance to do. We did a Padrón pepper U-pick. This brings out the crowd that likes to linger late into the night in Spanish restaurants, sipping sherry and hopping from bar to bar, eating tapas. That's another group that doesn't get served very often by a farm. So if we get fifteen of these people down there and we invite them to bring their own little Bunsen burners and cook the Padrón peppers up by the side of the field in their own olive oil, they're high on that. They think that's great.

Jean and Stephen do a Bug Bingo. They get all these families out there, the kids, and they go through the field and they do Bug Bingo.

Rabkin: [Laughs.]

Griffin: Whoever wins, you know, gets X many bugs, the right kind of bug on the bingo card or whatever—

Rabkin: So they have to collect a leaf hopper and—

Griffin: Yes, yes.

Rabkin: —they have to get a ladybug and— [laughs]

Griffin: They have to go out and find these bugs. I can't face Bug Bingo, because that to me just seems like too much little-kid energy.

Rabkin: [Laughs.]

Griffin: But it works for a certain slice of the people. We do these tomato U-picks. We do that in the summertime, and all different kinds of people come down. One thing we've noticed over the years is that because we're so close to the Santa Clara Valley, and because our CSA has all kinds of people in it, we'll get East Indian families that come down. A lot of these people—they're on the computers, but they grew up in rural India, and they want to show their kids what a farm is like. They come out there, and they might pick one or two tomatoes, but they just want to show the kids the farm. I've had some pretty funny encounters there, where you get these women out there who—they're used to a situation in India where the farmer, he's the peon, and they can just point, and I better get my ass over there and pick the bell pepper or whatever for them. It can be real culture shock. But they come out in a big tribe of twenty people, and they go home, and they have not had a chance to do that in California.

People like to be invited. They don't necessarily all come, but if you give them a lot of different options, maybe the next year they don't come, but if that's their farm—they went down there. They saw all these eggplants. They picked the eggplant. They went home. They're stoked. You don't need to give them a seal. They've been there. And if you do that on all different kinds of levels, then you get all different kinds of people who buy in.

Rabkin: Do you combine those events at all with any cultural entertainment: music or—

Griffin: Oh, no, no, no, no, no.

Rabkin: You don't do that stuff.

Griffin: I can't handle that. I applaud people who may want to do that [chuckles], but my whole point is I want to show people what a farm is like. I don't want farming to be—I'm not trying to put on a pony ride for anybody. We never listen to bluegrass on the farm. It would be the stupidest thing on earth to bring a bunch of people down and have a bluegrass band. I just can't cope with that.

Rabkin: Or norteño music either?

Griffin: [Chuckles.] Or whatever. They're all into the sort of banda—you know, bum, bum, bum, bum, bum—with all the techno-beat, and they've got this Mexi-gangster rap about the drug lords in Sinaloa. I just don't want to take that sort of agro-tainment. Other people do, and if it works for them, that's fine. Everybody's got to pick their own targets. And mine—I'm not an entertainer.

Combining Farming and Family Life

Rabkin: You mentioned little-kid energy. Of course, you have a couple of kids yourself. I'm wondering what the challenges and/or pleasures are for you of combining farming with family life.

Griffin: The challenges? There are plenty of challenges, because school systems and kids' expectations—nothing is set up to accommodate farming. It's an anomaly. It doesn't fit in well. Farming does not fit in well with having a modern life anymore. In fact, if you talk to my peers, you'll find that—when I think about it—a hell of a lot of them are divorced, maybe most of them.

Rabkin: Your fellow farmers.

Griffin: Yes, because some of them are workaholics and take the work too seriously, and some of them—you know, the rhythm of it is just different. A lot of people, they want a very stable, secure type situation, which is not what farming gives you. And so it's hard on—I have a friend who's a farmer, and he and his wife are *not* divorced, at all. They're very happily married. They started the farm together. It was as much her vision as his. But she jettisoned out a long time ago because it was just too much. It's easy to have all these sorts of ideas, but working together and living together is not necessarily a party. Farming is not a very sane way to live in modern California. It's not sustainable in many cases. And one of the first things that you see is lots and lots of people having divorces.

Rabkin: How are you and Julia and your kids making it work?

Griffin: Because the farming is pretty much my deal. Julia runs the business part of it. She does the same thing she did when she first started. She does it a lot better than when she first started, because she's learned a whole lot. She's created a business model that works for *her*, but she's not involved in the day-to-day running of the farm. She goes to the farm events with less frequency than the

public does. I mean, she doesn't go to the farm. She's at home all the time. We have a farm at home with my critters and whatnot, but she's not out there milking the goat or pulling the weeds. She's all cyber. [laughs]

Rabkin: And that division of labor actually helps, you think?

Griffin: Well, I can't conceive of it another way, just dealing with her, for example, because I don't have the skills. Maybe I could learn that stuff if that's all I did, but it certainly took *her* a long time to learn it, and she applied herself. I take it seriously, what she's done. It's a business. It's a small business, but it's a steady business, and managing the business part of it is a full-time job. I wouldn't do that very well. I never did do it very well. I mean, I never *did* it, actually. When I was farming with Greg at Riverside and at Happy Boy, we had a bookkeeper, and we had an accountant and paid other people to do this sort of stuff. Julia and I have an accountant and a bookkeeper, but—the business stuff is alien. I mean, she grew up in L.A., in Venice Beach. She does not want to go out there and wax the beet or pick up the weed. It's not part of her—she never signed on to be a farm wife. It's not like I ever expected her to.

Rabkin: What do your kids like and not like about being a farmer's kids?

Griffin: [Pause.] I don't know. My son is thirteen; my daughter is eleven. I think when you're an eleven-year-old girl, everything your parents do is embarrassing. I don't know that you would get a different answer if I was an optometrist or whatever. She finds it horribly embarrassing that some of her friends' mothers think that what we do is cool, because she *knows* that it's not. She doesn't go out to the farm at all, period. If she never went to the farm again, it would be too

soon, as far as she's concerned, in terms of the vegetable stuff. The animals in the yard? That would be a farm according to some people. I got sixty goats. I got fifteen sheep. I got all kinds of animals. Some people might look at that and say, "That's a farm." That part of the farm just distresses her because they're all very cute, and then pretty soon I'm killin' 'em. So I'm a savage monster, an impenetrable, dull-witted, savage monster.

My son? I think he finds the animals around the house to be interesting, and he'll help me if I ask him, but he has no curiosity about farming. It's not distant enough to have any romance to it. It's there all the time. I would be shocked if either one of them ended up in farming. I don't need them to go into farming. I think [chuckles] the cycle is wearing itself out here. I think I'm the last one.

Writing about Farming

Rabkin: Let's talk about your writing. You were featured in a *New York Times* article about farmers who write. What motivates you as a writer?

Griffin: I think what motivates me as a writer has been, from the get-go—economic. When we had no money and we were struggling with our CSA and we needed people to sign up, Julia put me on to writing the newsletter, because—I couldn't type or anything. She was going to have to type it up, and she was going to have to figure out how to format it, and how to send it and all this sort of stuff, so the least I could do would be to write it. So I wrote it, and what we perceived was that it drew attention and got us more sign-ups. I have, from the beginning, looked at writing as a marketing effort.

Another thing that occurred to me pretty early on was that I was really ripping myself off if I wrote something and all I succeeded in doing was confirming for these people what they thought farming was all about, because there are plenty of hacks that do that. What you need to do if you're going to try and attract attention is give them a story they haven't heard before. It was lucky for me that I was writing about farming, and not baseball or politics or golf, or something like that. I didn't have any skill or practice as a writer, and I needed people to bring interest to it that I couldn't provide to them.

It was clear, from the very first things that I wrote, that people were really interested in something about farming. I gag when I look at an advertisement for salad mix that shows a beautiful little blue-eyed white girl in a little garden. I know that this stuff came off of a 1,000-acre square in the Coachella Valley, what Michael Pollan has called "a supermarket pastoral" or whatever. That was a very clever coinage that he came up with. I realized I didn't want to write something that people were expecting. And, in fact, when I wrote something that they weren't expecting, I got positive feedback, which turned into more sales for our vegetables.

I've never been the kind of starving writer in the garret who's trying to write the Great American Novel. This is all about, okay, I'm trying to sell produce here. I'm trying to develop a group of people who will support our farm. I'm going to try and tell them what the farm is really like. That way, I'm insulating myself, to a degree, from any kind of disillusionment when they find out that it wasn't picked by a little blue-eyed girl in a garden. Just get that crap out of the way and cede all of that to all the other writers who want to do that.

Rabkin: Do you have any models as a writer?

Griffin: [Pause.] Not really. I'm not well read on the subject because when I get done with work, I don't want to read about farming. I want to escape from *my* little world. I don't want to read Wendell Berry or whatever. I've heard Wendell Berry's stuff read on the air, and some of it I enjoy, although I couldn't do that stuff because I don't have that sort of patience or spiritual attitude. I'm an impatient, amped-up, aggro kind of guy. I'm not very Zen about all this stuff. He's a grain farmer. He can think slow. You know? [laughs]

Rabkin: [Laughs.]

Griffin: He's got all year. He's got long winters.

Rabkin: He does it with mules, too.

Griffin: Yes, exactly. It's wonderful. I mean, I love donkeys. I love mules. But he's not really participating in the same world I'm in. There aren't that many people writing about farming. I read the journals. One that cracks me up is—I get some sort of industry rag. There's always a cover, and I could tell you the story before I've even opened it up. It's always going to be about a third-generation, Central Valley or Salinas Valley or Santa Maria farmer. The son has picked up where the father has left off. The grandfather started it during the war. This guy is their PCA [pest control advisor]. They really have had a lot of luck with Round-Up, et cetera, et cetera. I can write the whole story, you know? So, yes, maybe that's been an influence, in the fact that I want to react to that.

When I think about stories that I've written that I have enjoyed writing and that have later proven themselves over time to be worth reading a year later or whatever, almost inevitably the formula that I've got going on there is perhaps some specific irritation on my part about some image that I think needs a pin poked in it. That's what animates me, is to poke a pin in a balloon. If I can do that without becoming mean-spirited, if I can educate my public about this product that I'm selling them in a way that doesn't seem like an advertisement or a lecture, then I feel like I've succeeded. Those are the standards that I'm trying to set for myself. When they're done with the article, hopefully they learn something without realizing it, hopefully they laughed about it, and hopefully they have a little bit clearer idea of what we are up to, so that they feel a little bit closer to what we're doing. It's been proven many times, the more people invest their time into what you're—if they take time to read an article, they've really bought into your program that much more. So that's what I set myself out to do.

Rabkin: Has your writing ever gotten you in trouble?

Griffin: I'm able to edit myself. I have by no means published everything I've written, and I always edit the stuff several times. I like to write it one day, and I like to look at it another day and edit it. Has it gotten me into trouble? No, it's not gotten me into trouble. Sure, there have been, occasionally, people pissed off, but that's *their* problem. I'm not writing stuff that is research-based. We're not going to sit down and have an argument about whether my science is right. I'm trying to write something that's basically based on experience. Now, you can tell me that I just simply read that situation wrong, or you can tell me that that just didn't happen, or whatever. But that doesn't matter to me a whole lot.

I used to write for papers sometimes, at different times. Right now, the only one I'm really writing for is *Edible San Francisco*. But I got started out, and somebody in the CSA sent the stuff to the [Watsonville Register] *Pajaronian*, so some of the stuff was in the *Pajaronian*, and then some of the stuff was in the [Santa Cruz] *Sentinel*, and I wrote stuff for Rodale Press for a while. And it's almost inevitable that whatever the essay was that raised the ire or the hairline of the editor was precisely the one that generated me the most positive feedback, without exception. So I learned not to take the editors very seriously. I believe in editing. I don't think that writing should be a self-indulgent sort of spasm. I'm not a Jack Kerouac of the farming movement or something, where I just let it all spill out, at all. But [editors] are motivated by very different issues than me. What newspapers and magazines are doing, and it's their business, is to get you to write in their voice. And, frankly, they don't know anything about what we're doing, and they feel most comfortable when we confirm their suspicions rather than when we challenge their assumptions. They don't want to lose any readers. Obviously, their business is going down the toilet bowl, so I think that their business model is a failure.

Rabkin: [Chuckles.]

Griffin: But no trouble. It hasn't gotten me into trouble.

Rabkin: Tell me about the journal *Root* that you published for a while. How did that get started?¹¹

Griffin: That got started because we had stuff that I could write, and we had a friend, Michelle Russell, who could help us. She could do the artwork and do all

of the work that goes into any kind of publishing effort. There's just so much stuff to do, and she could do all that. That was what she did professionally, and she was interested in doing that. So we formed that as a partnership to see if we could make it fly. We couldn't make it fly, for two reasons. We made our money back. We didn't lose any money on it, which in publishing I think is probably not a bad thing. We had the misfortune of each mailer that we sent out to promote it, each press release, each mailer that we sent out coincided with an anthrax attack after 9/11.

Rabkin: [Laughs.] Oh, no!

Griffin: I mean, every single one. We couldn't get any traction. If we had started that at a different time, we might have done better with it. What happened by the end of the first year was—Michelle was pregnant, and even though she did not at first realize how much effort it was going to be to have a kid, we disabused her of that notion pretty quick. We were also beginning to be aware that we could do a whole lot more without the paper, on the Internet, and get it further, because once she had a kid, she didn't have any time to do all of the stuff that she'd been doing. So we let it slide. But we did it for one season, and it was fun. It was a good, corrective experience. It gave me an appreciation for what publishers do. Up to that point, mostly what I was aware of what they did was squash stories that might be interesting. So that gave was a corrective experience. It gave me a sense of what they actually *have* to do.

Future Paradigms

Rabkin: At the last interview, you talked about the importance of getting out ahead of the story, whatever the sort of current paradigm is. And you've talked today, too, about the idea of organic versus conventional giving way to the idea of big versus small, local versus national. I'm wondering if you are beginning to look ahead to what might be the limitations to *this* as a defining narrative about farming and food production, if you're having any glimmers of what might be the next story.

Griffin: We're getting closer and closer to a crisis, in the sense that we need to have a legal labor force when we need it. The government is coming up with these plans, and every time they come up with something, there's something profoundly half-assed about it. For example, they're making a renewed effort for a guest worker program, but this guest worker program, they can only be here for eight months out of the year. Well, what about a business that doesn't shut down? I mean, they are still locked in a migrant mindset. It's political toxin to suggest that Americans won't step up and do this work. You can't say that. I don't want workers for eight months out of the year. I want workers all the time. And I don't want hippies who aren't going to show up three days in a row. Maybe you can do that in Santa Cruz, but in Hollister we don't have hippies. They're not there, and they're not going to go there, either. It's not what they do. All these years and there's still never been a drumming circle in Hollister.

Rabkin: [Chuckles.]

Griffin: It just doesn't happen. So I'm concerned about that. When I was in high school I was in the FFA [Future Farmers of America], raised livestock and whatnot. I know a fair amount about the livestock business compared to, say, the average person on the street, and I know that if people are repelled by some of the news they've heard about livestock, they haven't even gotten to the good stuff yet. So I'm looking down the road, and I'm thinking, what kind of business could I have with a much reduced labor force? Well, I could do livestock, because I can do almost all that myself and still have probably a sustainable small business if I do all direct marketing to the endpoint consumer and do an end run around all the horseshit that stands between the consumer and the producer. And maybe I can take advantage of my proximity to the Bay Area, my ability to speak directly to customers, and my awareness of what the market is like.

So, on the one hand, all I'm doing now [with livestock] is a hobby. On the other hand, what I'm doing is I'm getting all the infrastructure in place, so that if I have to I can make a radical switch, and all of a sudden I can be a goat farmer, and not milk but slaughter them. It's not a business plan yet. It's just an idea. What I've learned over the years is that you don't make your moves when you need to. You make your moves when things are good. It's when things are good that they're going to fall apart later on. So you got to make your changes when things are good. That way, when things are bad, you've already made your changes. Yes, you might have a lot of challenges, but you don't have to rethink the wheel all of a sudden.

I simply don't trust the public and the government to put together a cohesive labor policy about agriculture. Already you see this all over the place. They're bulldozing down stone fruit orchards all around Fresno because they can't pick them anymore. The kind of model that we've had for a long time is caving in, but people don't understand it yet. With the economic problems out there and the rising jobless, everybody is saying, well, these people should all go work on farms. Well, hey, we're a long way away. They're not gonna relocate to Hollister, give up their auto dealership job to drive a tractor. It ain't gonna happen like that.

I think where we're at with the row-crop farming— I mean, I've kind of hit the end of the trail. This is what I'm going to do, and I can see doing this until I retire, because I think that the latent potential is still huge in terms of customer base that we can appeal to and reach out to. It's still huge. So I don't feel like I have to change a whole lot anymore. We might change the crops we do. We might change some of the ways we market the crops, but basically what we're dealing with is what— But I can see not being able to, not because of a natural disaster but because of the bureaucratic disaster.

Rabkin: Well, Andy, thank you very much.

Griffin: You're welcome.

¹"Hastings is a Biological Field Station of the University of California, Museum of Vertebrate Zoology and Natural Reserve System. We provide the wildlands and facilities to conduct university and graduate level studies of natural systems in the Santa Lucia mountain range in Monterey County, California. A representative ecosystem of about 2,500 acres, Hastings was established in 1937 to be managed with minimal disturbance for research and education."
<http://www.hastingsreserve.org/>

² Social Security originally protected only workers in industry and commerce. On September 1, 1954 the Social Security Act was amended to extend old-age and survivors insurance coverage to self-employed farmers, and additional farm employees, among several other classes of workers.

³ See the interview with Wendy Krupnick in this series.

⁴ See the interview with Dale Coke in this series.

⁵ See the oral history with Drew Goodman of Earthbound Farms in this series.

⁶ "A watershed event in the consumer food safety crisis was the release of *Intolerable Risk: Pesticides in our Children's Food* by the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) (Sewell *et al.*, 1989). The report attacked procedures used by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to estimate health risks from pesticide residues and the time taken to discontinue a pesticide's use once it is found harmful. At issue was a breakdown product of the growth regulator daminozide (trade name: Alar), which is sprayed on apples to prevent preharvest fruit drop and to delay fruit maturity and internal decay. Studies have shown that a component and degradation product of Alar, (unsymmetrical) 1,1-dimethyl- hydrazine (UDMH), may be carcinogenic. By NRDC estimates, Alar posed a particular risk to infants and children, who because of their low body weights absorb disproportionate amounts of residues from apples and apple products. A *60 Minutes* broadcast and other media coverage about the report created nationwide panic.

Numerous school systems banned the sale of apples, parents poured apple juice down the drain and super-markets began independent testing of their produce for pesticide residues (Aidala, 1989). A new special interest group, 'Mothers and Others for Pesticide Limits', was launched to arouse citizen action for legislative reforms and increased availability of organically grown produce. Farmers were unable to meet supermarket demands for pesticide-free fruits and vegetables, while apple growers lost more than \$100 million in reduced sales and prices.

Although government and other scientific experts refuted NRDC's charges, public outrage eventually resulted in Alar's voluntary removal from the domestic market by Uniroyal Chemical Company." M. Elaine Auld, "Food Risk Communication: Lessons from the Alar Controversy," *Health Education Research* Volume 5, No. 4, 1990. pp. 535-543.

⁷ See the oral history with Melody Meyer in this series for more about Coast Produce.

⁸ See the oral history with Scott Roseman of New Leaf Market in this series.

⁹ See the oral history with Dick Peixoto in this series.

¹⁰ High Ground Organics is a forty-acre farm operated by owners Stephen Pedersen and Jeanne Byrne just outside of Watsonville, California. About eighteen acres is available for production. The other half of the farm is under a conservation easement to protect wildlife habitat and prevent erosion into Harkins Slough. Stephen originally farmed together with his uncle and aunt at Thomas Farm (see the oral history with Jerry and Jean Thomas that is part of this series).

¹¹ See *Root: A Seasonal Journal from Mariquita Farm*. The UCSC Library owns several volumes of this journal.