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Dale Coke: Coke Farm

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Dale Coke



Photo by Benjamin J. Myers. 2009.

Coke Farm

Dale Coke grew up on an apricot orchard in California's Santa Clara Valley. In 1976 he bought ten acres of farmland near Watsonville in Santa Cruz County but continued to work repairing fuel injection systems rather than farming at his new home. In 1981, a struggle with cancer inspired him to rethink his life and become an organic farmer. His neighbor, who had grown strawberries using pesticides and chemical fertilizers, asserted that strawberries could not be grown organically. Coke set out to prove him wrong. He sold his first organic strawberries at Community Foods, a local natural foods store, and began marketing berries, baby zucchini and "exotic" lettuces to Alice Waters' Chez Panisse Restaurant in Berkeley, and later other high-end restaurants across the country. Coke can be credited with the invention of the spring salad mix, an assortment of baby lettuce greens, now

one of the most lucrative products sold by the organic industry. He originally rinsed his greens in an old washing machine cleverly set up to run only on the spin cycle. Coke Farms grew as salad mix caught on and began to be distributed beyond upscale restaurants and into supermarkets across the country. Today the company grows over fifty crops, including braising mix, Meyer lemons, shallots, and watermelon radishes. They also run a cold storage/shipping facility and contract with several other certified organic growers to sell and ship their produce across the country. The Organic Farming Research Foundation sent Coke to Washington, D.C. to testify at a hearing on the Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement on July 29, 2009.

Dale Coke was a pioneering member of California Certified Organic Farmers and received a Stewards of Sustainable Agriculture (Sustie) Award in 2009, along with his wife, Christine Coke. Coke shares his recollections of that organization's early history, as well as the development of his farm. Ellen Farmer interviewed Dale Coke on March 21, 2007, at Coke Farm in Watsonville, California.

Additional Resources

Coke Farm: <http://www.cokefarm.com/>

In July 2009, the Organic Farmers Action Network (a project of the Organic Farming Research Foundation) sent Dale Coke and three other farmers to Washington, D.C. to speak to congressmembers and administrators at the USDA about the leafy greens agreement and other issues in sustainable agriculture (the occasion at which the photo above was taken). Dale Coke's speech before the House subcommittee session on food safety and leafy greens is available at <http://ofrf.org/action/action.html>

Early Influences

Farmer: It's Wednesday, March 21st, 2007, and I'm here with Dale Coke of Coke Farm. So let's start with where were you born, and where did you grow up?

Coke: I was born in San Jose, California, and I grew up there and in Los Gatos, in the Santa Clara Valley.

Farmer: And was your family ever involved in farming?

Coke: We were on an acre of apricot orchard that wasn't really in Los Gatos. It was outside the town, but in Santa Clara County. At the time it seemed like a farm. We picked the 'cots and pruned, did that part along with a pretty big garden.

Farmer: And was your family in farming, or was that just the property you lived on?

Coke: My family wasn't in farming, but my family *has* been in farming for— I mean, my grandfather and great-grandfather and great-great grandfather were all involved in agriculture. My father also, even though at the time we were growing up he worked for San Jose State College as a teacher, a professor. He got into farming after he retired. So aside from the impetus he gave me, or the interest he might have given me with the apricots, and the acre we had around the house—

Farmer: I see. Can you describe your education and formative experiences?

Coke: Well, I went through high school there in Los Gatos, and on to San Jose State. I think I have slightly short of a few units to graduate. I, part way through,

got involved with a woman, and ended up having a child, and at twenty-three, twenty-four had my first daughter. It changed my focus away from completing school. During part of that time I'd taken a break and traveled into Mexico and Central America. Then I came back and I got a job working for a diesel fuel injection company. That was what I was doing to put myself through school. I continued to do that, looked for a property to buy, which was this property, the ten acres that we're on here in Watsonville, in 1976.

Starting Coke Farm

I worked for that company managing the shop for them, for the fuel injection repair business, which apparently I had some aptitude with, and then in Salinas also, worked there in a branch of the same company. [I] ended up having a tumor when I was twenty-eight that turned out to change my life, made me rethink my life. In doing so, I found that I'd like to do something with farming. And the neighbor, who had been a conventional strawberry farmer, told me that you couldn't grow strawberries organically. I was a non-believer, so I started by trying to grow some strawberries organically. I planted them in 1980.

Farmer: That was here on this property?

Coke: That was here on this property. I ended up quitting the job that I had. I had been on the property since 1978. We built the house little by little, built a little shed, and then built the house little by little, as we could afford it. Then once I decided to change careers, there was the property here that had been cover

cropped, but I had never really had any time to grow any crops on it since I'd had it. I started with about a quarter-acre of strawberries.

Farmer: Had this been a farm before?

Coke: It had been. When I had purchased it, it had been a strawberry farm for, I think, maybe since the 1950s, according to the old-timers. A company had come in from Florida and grown on it and then let it go, and then somebody else picked it up. Then it was subdivided into ten-acre lots here. Someone had purchased one, and they weren't growing anything on it. They just held it for speculation and then put it up for sale. We bought it at that time.

Farmer: So when your neighbor said you couldn't grow strawberries organically, did he mean you have to have chemical fertilizers and that sort of thing?

Coke: Yes, he was a conventional grower. There's a mindset, I think, when you grow up with it, that if you didn't have methyl bromide, and you couldn't fumigate, and you didn't have all the miticides and herbicides, that somehow you wouldn't be able to pull off a crop. He just didn't know. And there's also a misconception about what organic is. A lot of people don't know if they don't look into it that there are materials that you can use that are acceptable. He thought it would be too daunting a task to be able to actually have them survive. He fervently thought that if you didn't fumigate with methyl bromide that you would have a really slim chance of getting a crop.

Farmer: And was your experience wildly successful in terms of strawberries?

Coke: I didn't know anything, so I made a lot of mistakes, and I found that we could grow strawberries, and the best part about it was that the market accepted them. There was the interest. We sold our first berries in Santa Cruz at Community Foods. It was, "These are organic?" "Yes!" "They taste good." That was unexpected part of it, that people noted a flavor difference. "These taste better than those things we've been getting." I think the early years weren't very good yield-wise. It was a learning curve. At the same time I started the farm, I started a diesel fuel injection business to keep going in the one trade that I knew. Then I took a part-time job teaching at San Jose City College training people for that same thing, in the nights. So it was a busy time. But it took having something I could generate money at to be able to pay for the farm part, because it wasn't profitable for the first few years. Even though there was a demand, and there was interest in it, there was a learning curve.

Farmer: Did you just have one crop?

Coke: Well, the first year we started out with [strawberries], and I think we also did some snow peas that we ended up selling locally to restaurants, to Chinese restaurants, and kind of going around peddling, figuring out how we were going to pack them, where we'd get boxes, and what kind of label we'd have on there. That was probably the fall. Then I think we went on and tried some zucchini squash.

Right about that same time, the subsequent spring, we planted more berries. We increased the acreage and changed the varieties. We connected via a babysitting co-op that was going on at the time. One of the parents had a son who was working for Chez Panisse in Berkeley as a bus boy. We'd connected with Gayle's Bakery in Soquel, because they were looking for berries that had flavor. I can remember taking the berries on the way to San Jose to teach, and dropping them off to Joe Ortiz [at Gayle's Bakery] at 12 o'clock at night or whatever it was. The transport up to Chez Panisse was a little difficult. We didn't drive. We put it on the bus, and that was okay for a little bit, but one of the women that was in the kitchen came down [to the farm] on her way to Tassajara [Zen Mountain Center] one day and saw the zucchini [growing] and said, "Oh, we'll take those at this size, finger size. We don't want the big ones. But that would be a specialty. And by the way could you grow these different lettuces? And have you ever tried this?" So that started our foray into specialty crop growing. We continued with the strawberries, but incrementally we started doing a lot more growing for restaurants.

Farmer: And that would be mostly baby vegetable-type things, for the freshness?

Coke: Baby vegetables. We did a lot of different lettuces from Italy and France, seed varieties. At the time, red leaf and green leaf were kind of exotic. Iceberg was the queen of lettuce. That *was* lettuce. Butter lettuce, and red and green and romaine were the exotics. So we figured out all the different other varieties there were and started offering them. We had a pretty good market for a few years. We grew them as a baby lettuce, and then incorporated other greens, Asian greens.

Radicchio wasn't grown at the time. Frisée. The different chicories met with greater or lesser success. We did a whole different range of crops that were mostly geared toward the restaurant trade, because that's where there seemed to be a demand. They weren't looking for them for organic. They were just looking for something special. It was the beginning of California cuisine, Chez Panisse in the early days.

Farmer: I remember that being quite the thing.

Coke: Yes. So we ended up selling to the West Coast—San Francisco, L.A. Then the chefs moved around, and so we'd be air-freighting stuff to New York and Boston, Atlanta, completely skipping the middle of the country, or anyplace like Watsonville. We couldn't sell in Watsonville. (laughter) Or San Jose, hardly. There just wasn't anything developed.

Farmer: They wanted iceberg.

Developing Spring Green Salad Mix

Coke: Yes, basically. But in the course of that we ended up having things like red mustard, and tatsoi and mizuna. You'd plant a row of it, but then you'd end up picking half of it [at] a four-inch size that they'd want for a plate decoration, or for something. But you couldn't sell it retail, because there was no market, and the restaurant trade wasn't as developed. We didn't have that many places we could sell it to.

Farmer: So one row.

Coke: Yes, we'd have one row. So we'd have all these partial rows, and a little bit of lettuce that was either too small, or misshapen, or something that wouldn't make a nice head. We started thinking about how to use this. And we came up with the spring mix. Okay, what are we going to do? We're going to cut it at this size loose, and then we'll put it in a fiberglass tub and kind of mix it all together. And then we'll scoop it out with a wire basket. I had crafted an old washing machine that I set up to just run on spin cycle. I cut out the sides of the drum, and made some wire baskets that would fit the product. And we'd put that in, and then turn it on, and then turn it off, and it would spin dry it. And then we'd dump it out into— The box that we had been packing the lettuce into was about the size of a squash box. L.A. Lug. It happened to fit three pounds of this mix. So that's how we ended up deciding that was the right amount to pack in there, in a bag. Yes, that caught on. That turned out to be well received by the restaurants, and we grew the business quite a bit through that time.

Farmer: So did you end up selling the three-pound bags to stores like Staff of Life or Community Foods?

Coke: Three-pound bags in boxes. Not to stores. At this time it wasn't a store item. It was a high-end, white-tablecloth restaurant thing. It wasn't until that had been saturated [that we] had the Safeways, and Sysco and Kraft. It started out as just Chez Panisse, the sought-after restaurants on both coasts. As that got out and people realized what a deal it was, or how interesting it was as something to put

on a plate, then it filtered down to the other higher-end restaurants in larger cities. So it went to the food service distributors for that. A lot of them went to terminal markets. Sysco and Marcon are regional buyers for these large food service distributors regionally throughout the country. They couldn't get enough of it at the time. Nobody else was doing it. It set them apart and gave something special for them. That was one of the rare times when there was consistently more demand than there was supply. That was great.

Farmer: You can make some money in a time like that.

Coke: You can make some money, and you don't spend your time trying to sell, or work on contracts, or figure out how you're going to sell. Now it's changed. But it was kind of a heady time. It was like, oh boy. We've got to grow some more! You just couldn't grow enough. Now it's like, "No, we don't want any more of that." Now we restrict what we grow quite a bit, because there's a lot more competition.

Farmer: And if you flood the market the price goes down.

Coke: We can't flood the market now. We're too small a player for that. At that time, we had more than the market wanted, because it hadn't been developed at first. And as it developed, we couldn't keep up. And that's when companies like Earthbound [Farms]—¹they used to come and buy from us. I think they went through a variety of packaging, but their idea was they wanted to have it in a bag that somebody could just buy at a store in a four- or a six-ounce quantity.

Farmer: Almost like one salad at a time.

Coke: Yes, that's where they started. Now it seems like clamshells are the way that things are packed. TKO was another company. That was Todd Koons, who used to be a busboy at Chez Panisse, I think. He started his company, and grew it pretty quickly. Earthbound was doing their stuff too. They had connections into New York. They grew some of their own, and they also started contracting with growers to grow it. Then I think right about that time Riverside Farms, Greg Beccio came on, and Andy Griffin. They built up a head of steam and started doing that too, and kind of spun off.² Who knows how many different salad-growing entities now that were— I think at the time in Salinas, I think concurrently, I don't know the history of Fresh Express, but I know that they were having a hard time getting iceberg to not turn pink inside a bag when they shredded it. So there were modified atmosphere films that they developed, and they had some successes with that. But the European style, or the spring mix, or mesclun, still hadn't really made entrée into the retail at that time.

Farmer: When you had people like that around that were in the same area code, basically, you could talk to each other. Were people doing that, or were they competing with each other?

Coke: With Drew and Myra [Goodman] from Earthbound, we talked. I actually met my wife through them, because I was looking for a wife at the time. And they knew a sweet woman who was living in the house. [But generally there was] not too much helping out, and I suppose competition— I started to realize

that we were somehow successful at that and it was catching. The early 1980s was Reagan, and it was not a very good time farm-wise. In general there were a lot of farms going out of business. It was tough to do it. And here we were chugging along, and we couldn't keep up with the demand. We had people that wanted to do that. They wouldn't come to you directly. If somebody came, I would probably try to answer their questions to a degree, but if they would be so bold as to ask, "Well, where do you sell your product?" I probably wouldn't give that all up to someone. Because, you know, you work hard to try to develop those relationships. People can find out. When they are in the industry, if they talk to the people who are doing the buying, you can find out who is doing what to some degree.

But if someone asks about, "Well, I'm having a problem with certain pests," then I don't have a problem sharing whatever we found works. Or maybe fertility inputs, the right place to get compost, or how you get the best price on gypsum, or where you get seed of certain crops. But not necessarily, "Well, what are you selling to so-and-so, or how much do they pay for it?" That kind of stuff is not as much —

Everyone seems to find their own niche, and they'll develop that niche. Sometimes you'll run into someone who tries to just basically copy the same crop mix you have, and do that. It depends. You'll lose customers. As you go through the years, the customers don't always stay the same. There are a few that have stayed the same, but there are a lot that have come on, and then dropped off, or

ones that we never had that we have just started to work with. It's dynamic. It continues to change.

Marketing and Distribution

Farmer: So these are people that have bought from you wholesale?

Coke: Yes.

Farmer: Have you ever done farmers' markets, or CSA's, anything like that?

Coke: We have never done a CSA. We were exploring that last year. We never got anyplace with it. Early on we sold at the Monterey and Santa Cruz markets, and then I let that go. My parents sell at those markets now. Then they were getting out of the downtown Santa Cruz market and we took that on for a little bit. Probably fifteen years ago, maybe now, twelve, we started up at Palo Alto. We kind of got going with that one. So we still do that one. But that's the only farmers' market we do now.

Farmer: Is that once a week?

Coke: Yes, every Saturday, from May through November.

Farmer: So it's an all-day venture.

Coke: We start at eight. You get up at four, and drive to be up there by six. You set up for a couple of hours. It opens at eight, and then you sell until twelve, break down, usually have some lunch, and then come back. So yes, it's pretty much, the day, most of it's gone by the time—

Farmer: And is that a place where you would talk to other farmers? Or are you too busy with customers?

Coke: I would occasionally. Full Belly [Farm] is right next to us, and it's always a joy to catch up with them. But during the market, it's busy. You're just doing stuff. The place that I would talk with farmers would either be someone coming to the office or the cooler, specifically. Or more likely, annually at Eco-Farm [conference].³

Farmer: If they come to the cooler, would they be delivering stuff?

Coke: They could be. We are, and have been for a few years, cooling and shipping product for other growers. It's a service that we couldn't seem to get done by someone else.

Farmer: So you started a cooler, and then you can sell that space to people?

Coke: We don't sell the space to it but we take— In conventional farming coolers are set up so that they charge a fee for cooling, and then they will ship product. They'll bring it in and pre-cool it, and hold it, and then they will either sell it, or

some coolers would allow the grower to sell it, if the grower would want to. Most growers don't. Most of the time the growers don't do both.

Farmer: They just want to take it somewhere.

Coke: Yes. The conventional model is that the grower is contracted with a cooler or a sales organization, and the sales organization is the one that tells the grower what to grow, what time to grow it, and where to deliver it to get it cooled. And then they sell it, and take a percentage and remit the bulk of it to the grower. With us, honestly, we didn't really know what we were going to do. We started, and first it was delivery local, and selling it to restaurants. But we're not in a very good area for that, without going further [away]. Santa Cruz is okay. Monterey is fair. San Francisco is better. But then that's a whole other job to get involved in trucking it up there and delivering it. So we ended up, we would use trucks and take it down to the local dock to ship it in the early days. And it would go down to, I think it was Georgia and Philips Trucking in Watsonville. And then it got bought out by the Tut Brothers, who called it Paul Trucking. I don't know that it's still there now, but it was right downtown off of Walker Street, or off of East Lake Avenue, the dock that anybody could bring their produce to. They would haul it to either the South City Market, or the San Francisco, or Oakland Market.

Farmer: So they bought it?

Coke: They didn't buy it. You would specify which wholesaler you wanted it to go up to. They would haul it up there, and the wholesaler would normally pay

for the freight for the truck to get it up there. Then they would sell the produce on the terminal market, where people come in the wee hours of the morning to buy. If I remember this correctly, each market had a different percentage that they sold it for, ranging from maybe eighteen percent to thirty percent of what they sold it for. Then they would remit the balance to the grower. If you are lucky and hit a hot market you could do okay. But if your product wasn't good, or the market was bad, there would be times— I remember a zucchini grower getting a bill back for the freight and a dump charge because they just couldn't sell it, and they didn't want it. We didn't do it that way. We started early on being on the phone and actually doing sales, because no one wanted us, basically. (laughter)

Farmer: You were too small?

Coke: We were too small. The one place that was selling organic was Capurro, and it was under the Down to Earth label, I think. Russel Wolter⁴ was their guy that did that. When I went to them, I think it was Bud Capurro, he said, "Well, are you certified?" "No." "Well, we can't do anything—" So I certified, and I went to him and said, "I'm certified!" And he said, "Okay." (laughter)

Farmer: So he was the one that cared. And was that with CCOF [California Certified Organic Farmers]?

Coke: The growers were certified. They were just selling his label, Russel Wolter's label. They had worked out a box, but he wasn't interested in

complicating his life by selling anybody else's stuff, even though he suggested I get certified (laughter). So we ended up selling our own, because, well, I mean, you have to do something. (laughs)

Farmer: You were motivated. Is that how you got with Community Foods?

Coke: Community Foods. We shopped there. So we went there and opened up the trunk of the car and said, "Look. We've got these berries." They tried them and, "Oh, yes!" And [they] kind of helped us figure out how to pack it. That's how we did that. I think the other restaurants that we supplied a little bit around, we just [brought] it in and said, "Look. We have these. What will you pay me for it?" Then as we got into supplying the restaurant trade in the city, or in Berkeley, they had better price points. They paid a little more. And plus, it was special. It was in short supply. It was good that way. Actually, we wouldn't have grown the same way if it hadn't been for the specialty end of it.

California Certified Organic Farmers [CCOF]

Farmer: So you were saying something earlier about getting certified in the early 1980s with CCOF, and being part of the development of that organization.

Coke: Yes, early in 1981, I think, we got set up with CCOF. At the time, it was a volunteer organization, and so you'd meet monthly at what used to be the Ag Extension Office on Freedom Boulevard in Watsonville. They have a little meeting room there, and you would meet there, and the idea was that there

would be some kind of educational component to it. I don't remember if we brought snack things. But at least annually we had a potluck dinner that everybody would participate in.

We took turns. There was the chapter president, and the secretary, and the treasurer. I don't remember the treasury part. I don't think there was much money involved. You would coordinate to do each other's inspections. So you were always either inspecting somebody, or getting inspected each year by one of the other growers. In that way we worked together. You got a chance to go out and see what other people were doing. You filled out the form. We thought it was okay. In hindsight, I'm not sure if it's— Well, it's not really like the fox watching the hen house, because it's your competitors, and you're all working together. Not all of them are competitors. There might be an apple grower, and a strawberry grower. But you hope to maintain the integrity of organic, of the idea. That's why you were growing it. I think it worked okay. Now they want to have independent inspectors that are separate. The state office was in Santa Cruz, and Barney Bricmont⁵ was integral. I remember being on the committee with Warren Weber⁶ and someone else, selecting, I forget who else. It was in downtown Santa Cruz, the CCOF offices at the time. We must have had somebody on staff on the state level, some crew. But there weren't a lot of people. And we ended up hiring Bob Scowcroft⁷, and then it became more legitimized, I guess. We realized it was growing, and we needed someone who was more of an executive-director type than a grower that probably had too many things going on anyway.

Farmer: Yes, it seems like a hard organization to keep going on a volunteer basis because people are so busy.

Coke: It was. The first few years I was pretty active in the local chapter. I think I was selected to be the one that went down to see— The Santa Barbara chapter hadn't been started, and I went to confirm that they existed, and did the inspections on Michael Ableman's, and Steve Sprinkle, and I think Peter Risley, at the time there. We took a couple of days, and went through what they had. It was fairly rudimentary to enter that chapter into the state organization.

Farmer: Now, did CCOF become a lobbying organization at that point to try to get state standards? Or was it not at that point yet?

Coke: I think the first one [establishment of California organic standards] was, I want to say 1979. That was before I was involved. Then there was the 1990 Organic Foods Act. But I thought there was something in between that, and I don't remember what it was. It was a hard fight to get the state to recognize organic, but we thought it was important. That one carrot scandal had happened.⁸ There was the impetus to try to show that we had actual state regulations that someone had to adhere to.

Farmer: They were getting a premium and they were selling conventional carrots as organic.

Coke: Right. They were conventional. Somebody caught them dumping conventional carrots. They caught them on camera, I think, down in LA. I forget who it was exactly, and what the story was. They were just transferring. It was a big deal at the time.

Farmer: Do you remember the farmers at that time being more interested in the environmental aspects of organic farming, rather than the healthiness of the food?

Coke: You know, I think it was more the idea that you weren't using pesticides and herbicides. I think there has always been an interest environmentally, but I don't know that that is more exaggerated with organic farmers than it is with conventional farmers. I don't know. There are some conventional farmers that have a great appreciation of the environment, and some who are pretty active in doing things that are positive, environmental. In the organic, I think more of the impetus was thinking that the food that you ate, you didn't want any extra residues and things in your food, and that that would be good environmentally also. But I think that the impetus wasn't specifically: I'm going to help the environment by doing this. It's [farming in general is] not a natural process. You are always tearing up the soil. It's difficult. Some of the permaculture folks [say with] that you can get closer to a more natural [set of practices]. But these things cycle through with forests too. They get to maturity, and you need to burn, or have something go through to start it over again. We just turn it over all the time. You try to do it with not applying things that kill organisms that could be

beneficial. I don't know. We are trying to manipulate the natural world for our purposes of growing food, predominantly.

Labor Issues

Farmer: Well, let's talk about labor. Who have been your workers? Where did they come from? Have you had labor shortages, or challenges with labor over time?

Coke: The first labor— I think I imposed on my folks to help me plant those strawberries. And then we had one family from New Mexico and they had some farm experience. I don't know how we connected with them, but they lived down below in a trailer and worked with us on the farm. Then I think it expanded. I don't remember what happened with [those workers]. Then we had a couple of students from, not UC Santa Cruz, but Cabrillo [College], that came and worked on the farm. We had a sharecrop arrangement, where it was fifty-fifty. We had put the berries in and grown them, and they got half of whatever we sold them for. That worked okay on that limited scale of a quarter, or half an acre of strawberries. We could generally keep up with it. Sometimes it was hard to.

I know early on I realized that I could do [the labor], but at the same time I needed to be working on the fuel injection stuff, because as a mechanic I could make more money. I could more easily train somebody to pick the strawberries, rather than to work on the equipment. And so we ended up with a kid— We

used to have people walk up all the time just looking for jobs. Just randomly they would come walking up the hill. The first real employee I had was named Joaquin and he probably was eighteen. He said he was eighteen. No English. He was just a kid who needed a place to stay. At that time we didn't have much of a house. We had just finished the rudimentary part of the house, and I had two kids and a wife living there. So there was a little greenhouse that he slept in down below. Things were very busy, and I guess I wasn't thinking about all the things that one needs to think about. But he didn't have a car, and so he would walk down the store to get food. And after a few days he was— He'd been living on raw eggs and chocolate milk, or something. He was looking green. I hadn't put two and two together. When I realized what he was eating, we said, "Well, that's not going to work. You're going to come eat with us." So he slept down there. We were on a macrobiotic diet at the time. That was right after I had had the cancer, and it was inconclusive as far as where it might have gone to. So that was the choice I made as far as treatment to deal with it. And he, man, you could see it worked!

Farmer: There was physical change.

Coke: Yes. He was the first. And then I got a woman that came afterwards that would help doing the packing. This was probably as we were branching into doing more than just growing strawberries. Then her husband wanted to come work. He seemed to have had a little more experience, and was able to run a crew, actually. Then it kind of grew from her and him and Joaquin. I can't remember everybody, but we had this group. It was a time that we were

expanding and there was a lot of stuff was going on. We had a series of people that just showed up. That was the way things happened. They just either heard about it, or they showed up.

Farmer: Word of mouth.

Coke: Yes. We were doing okay, and we always paid better than minimum wage, and tried to take care of the employees. Early on, or within the first few years, we wanted to offer health care and we did. I still remember that it was kind of a shock that it wasn't received well. I don't know what it added to the per hourly wage. But most of them were young, and they didn't understand why they'd want to have that. They'd just rather have the extra sixty-five cents an hour, or whatever it was. So it took a few years, but we changed it back, and just paid them the difference. There didn't seem to be any interest even though it was offered. They were mostly young guys in their early twenties, and they just don't think about that.

Farmer: Did they seem to live around here, or did they seem to be coming from Mexico and going back? Or did you have a sense of that?

Coke: That's hard to tell. Some were established around here. They mostly lived in Watsonville. Some would be seasonal. That's still the case now. It seems like there's a seasonal component, less so this last year than in previous years. But there always seem to be more people in the spring, and fewer people in the fall and winter. You lose people in the fall and winter. Sometimes they say they're

going to go to Mexico, but I don't know if they move on to other jobs in other parts of the state, or if they have family that's— It's hard to tell.

Farmer: They're not telling you their life stories? (laughs)

Coke: They're not. At one point I probably knew more, because I'd have more day-to-day contact with the pickers. But as the company grew, there became a division of labor, and now there's a foreman that handles the overall responsibility of things. He has three different crews that he oversees as far as the harvest and packing. Then there's another foreman who's [in] charge of the production part. He would take care of the tractor drivers and irrigators, the mechanic, and whatever is involved with repairing things, or doing planting, fertilizing, irrigating, or general preparation.

Farmer: Do you have all your own equipment?

Coke: Yes.

Farmer: And how many employees would you say there are now?

Coke: Somewhere in the order of fifty or so, I would say.

Farmer: Wow! That's big. That's a lot of jobs you're providing.

Coke: Yes. It was bigger. By the early 1990s, we were probably up at seventy or more people, and maybe about five hundred acres. Then we cut back in 1999, stopped doing the salad mix. We had set up the cooler, and moved onto a bigger ranch in San Juan [Bautista] and were selling other people's product, and doing the salad mix, and had a couple of office trailers there. We had maybe six people in the office: three people doing sales and accounting and payroll. We just weren't making any [money]. It was a really tough year. We could barely cover our expenses. There was overhead. The prices of the salad mix had gone down, down, down, as more and more people had gotten into it. Then they got to the larger, full-bed cutting. We still harvested by hand. That's more labor intensive. And the market didn't appreciate that there was any difference in the quality of the product, so we stopped doing that, and closed down the cooler, and got rid of half the ground, and started having other companies cool and ship for us. And cut back quite a bit, too.

Farmer: So like you said, it's dynamic.

Coke: It's dynamic. I took off three years at that time. My wife and sister had been working and doing sales, alternating sales, and they kept doing that. I basically quit, went back to school, took some sculpture classes, and art, and goofed around for three years, basically, until my sister said she didn't want to work anymore, and she was going to quit. (laughter) Then it was either me buy her out, or have to do something to satisfy my wife. So that got me back in it, and (pause) it's been okay. Yes, it does change.

Rewards and Challenges of Farming

Farmer: So what are your greatest rewards and greatest challenges in all of this?

Coke: I guess there are different levels, but, now we have guys that have been with us for quite a few years, that have families and houses, and they're certainly a big part of keeping it going, and keeping our interest in keeping it going. Yes, it's the people, probably. I mean, it's always satisfying to grow a good crop and have it received in the market. There's a certain satisfaction in a job well done, but you don't always do that. There are different years. Everything's got its own challenge. There's the core crew that has been on for several years. And then there are changes. There's a group that's pretty steady and then, you know, in any number of people they all have stuff going on in their lives. You've got new ones coming and going also. That core group seems to work pretty well.

I guess the challenges are keeping it profitable so that you can try to take care of them, you know, to be able to pay them as much as you can. That's always a challenge, because you don't know what you're selling it for until after it's sold. Keeping that balance is— We seem to be doing it, but I never take it for granted. I'm glad that we can, but it's not that far away from not working. (laughs)

Farmer: Yes, well, people are so price-conscious in this society. They say that people don't pay the real value of food because they're accustomed to being able to get it cheap.

Coke: I don't know. I think that there are enough people out there growing it, that there must be enough competition to keep it — And still, it fluctuates. Just keeping in business, you have to have the perspective. You just have to have faith, pretty much, because there's a lot of stuff going on at any one time, with regulations, or just the vagaries of growing. You can't control that part. And also, as far as oversight of the government, or if this food-safety thing starts getting its own wind, with the *E. coli*, who knows where that's going to go?

Farmer: It could affect the way you are going to farm. Is that what you mean?

Coke: Well, yes. A lot more testing, and if you have to have too much oversight by too many—I don't mean it unkindly, but bureaucrats—or people whose job it is to regulate, and who don't have a lot of appreciation of what it takes to put it together to get the whole thing to grow, and get the whole thing to work, then it definitely puts a damper on whatever that spirit is that keeps you going. Because it's like, okay, well, all right, we'll try to comply with that, but we have to comply with this over here, and now you want us to make sure that we've sterilized or pasteurized our compost before we put it out. Each profession has its own challenges. That can be a big one sometimes.

Farmer: Well, I guess eating everyday, people really have a stake in what farmers have to go through.

Coke: Yes. (laughter)

Farmer: And I know there're sometimes when I feel this sort of panic of what if everybody stopped farming because it was too difficult? What would we do?

Coke: (laughter) Import it from China.

Farmer: Oh, great. It only takes what, eight days, to get it across the water.

Coke: Hopefully not. Our public policy for food security of the nation hopefully is— That's a whole other topic, though.

Local Food Movement

Farmer: Well, the Buy Fresh, Buy Local thing is so great in this particular region because we can grow so much so much of the time. There must be ways for that same concept to work in places like Minnesota.

Coke: It does.

Farmer: What do you know about that?

Coke: I know about it indirectly, because I haven't been to Minnesota. But I know that summertime is the hardest time to sell product now. We're not selling most of our product locally. Most of it goes out of the area, more than 150 miles or a two-hour drive, or whatever it is, a leisurely day's drive. If it goes back East, in the summertime now it's very hard to sell into a lot of areas where the local

growers are doing a great job. They are growing everything we grow. It used to be that there would be some kind of niche—heirloom tomatoes, or something would be pretty cool. But more and more it's [grown locally]. Which is what it should be for sustainability, but when you take advantage of that niche, and then you don't have it, you kind of go, well, what am I going to do now?

But in the bigger picture, it's important to spread the organic growing practices further and further. I think that was one of the impetuses to get into organic farming, that there were other organic alternatives to buy from, so when I went into the store I didn't have to buy that crap that was in there. I still think that that's worthwhile.

I start to worry about the National Organic Program being co-opted by the large processors mostly, not the growers so much. So that if it gets eroded in the opinion of the public, if you get too many exemptions for what products you can put on—your processed Twinkies, or whatever it is— I mean, that's not the point. I didn't grow organically so that we could have organic Twinkies or Coca Cola, right?

Farmer: Yes.

Coke: I think that's a whole other thing that's not worthwhile. So with some trepidation I look at this national organic [industry] and how it will morph politically as people who have the money to get their will, will get their will.

Family Farming

Farmer: Well, let me ask you, as far as this piece of land goes, are you hoping to pass this on to your family? Are you thinking of this as a family farm and a legacy kind of thing?

Coke: Yes! I would hope that there would be some interest in keeping it going, or keep some part of it going. The kids have expressed a fondness for the house they grew up in. Lorraine was born here, and Simone was here since she was knee high. Between us we have six kids, but none of them have really stepped up and said that they have any interest in farming. I don't know. They're still only in their twenties, most of them. And one teenager. So they're young, in a way. But I don't know. You know, you'd like to— It also is something that I did, and so they may not have that same— You feel fondly towards where your parents lived, or where you grew up, but you may not want to make it your life. There were a lot of years of long days and a lot of work.

Farmer: And they saw that.

Coke: They saw that, and I don't know— Other things look better.

Farmer: Yes. Do you feel like suburbanization or urban sprawl is affecting your farm at all?

Coke: They put a couple of lights in on the road, I noticed, traffic lights that didn't used to be here. But right here, not too much. We are in the coastal zone for Monterey County. There are some houses, but if you look around there's not a lot of development.

Farmer: You don't get offers for the land from developers?

Coke: I don't know. I don't look for those. Occasionally you get realtors trying to chum you to see if you're interested. I'm sure the prices have gone up a lot. But in Monterey County there are issues with overdraft of water. So I don't think they're really pushing that. And even on the ranch in San Benito County, I don't see much going on. In certain areas, but not where we are directly. I think there's more traffic on the road, but that's also seasonal with school and vacation. There's more commuting, it seems, down Highway 101. I'm sure the prices have all gone up. But it's not like some [places]. Like, I was in Bakersfield and I got off on this one little road, just half a mile from I-5, it started. There was just one development after the other. And these were large. They've got little cities that move in, with the office structure to set up all the streets. I mean, these are miles.

Farmer: This is like Los Angeles sprawl.

Coke: Maybe. But I think LA must have slowed down. This is the new one. I haven't seen that level of— We have a farm that we lease over in Hollister. There's a block of houses and we kind of go around it. It's slated for development. They have to get a sewer hook-up, and they have to rebuild the

waste treatment plant before they can do that. So it will be a few more years. But when we got it, we knew. The landlord said that she was just holding onto it for development. It's kind of slated.

Farmer: Is there plenty of other land for the farming that you want to do? Or would that actually impact your ability to farm?

Coke: That will impact it.

Farmer: What percentage of land do you lease, and what do you own?

Coke: About half and half, I guess. Maybe a little more owned. Two-thirds owned now, and one-third leased. It didn't used to always be that way. The leases are a lot easier to get into, because you don't have to make the commitment to buy the farm. But they're not always easy to find. And then the transitional part is difficult. There are some. The one that's slated for development was organic when we got it because it had been abandoned for a certain amount of time.

California Agricultural Leadership Program

Farmer: You were part of the California Ag Leadership program. Maybe we could finish up with you talking about that.

Coke: Yes. It ended last year. It was a two-year program that tries to train people to be spokespersons for agriculture in California. There are about thirty people that meet once a month, from October to June, in different venues around the state, predominantly UC Davis, or Cal Poly Pomona, San Luis Obispo, or Fresno. You'd cover a range of social and political issues. Not much in the way of farming, but something that would help farmers who don't get much of a chance to get out and see what else is going on in the rest of the world, and try to help bridge the gap between what experiences or knowledge you might have about farming, to putting it into public policy. So there are workshops, and assignments, and travel that you do in conjunction with that to get entrée to meet different people in the government that have some control over those aspects that you deal with. And also US AID and the health department.

Farmer: You mean in terms of providing food to foreign countries that need assistance, and that kind of thing?

Coke: Yes, you get an overview of national policy issues, and maybe a little bit more familiarity with the political process, lobbying, and what you might need to do to try to get what you wanted to get through, in case you wanted a policy change.

Farmer: So how long has that been in existence?

Coke: The program has been going for thirty-seven years now. It was started by the Boswell Company. They were the main contributors to it. They get a lot of

money from the people that have been the alumni now. It's something for the people that are involved, so that you can have better representation. Because agriculture is only two percent or so of the population, and the same issues that were not an issue before, with water use in an arid climate like ours, or labor, environmental things, are different. There are different perspectives that people have from an urban perspective, or from a fisherman's perspective, than it is from a farming perspective. You have to be able to try to make your point. You hope it's a public good that you are doing in some way, feeding people. I mean, aside from business, you hope that it's still viewed as something important.

Well, one of the things during the course of that was finding out that there is a fairly strong contingent at the federal level that is not adverse to the idea of food coming from wherever the cheapest source is, regardless of whether it is from the confines of America, or from someplace else. I find that disconcerting. It may be a fine policy, but I think it's worrisome too, to think that you would be dependent on something for people to eat so far away, and the transportation to get it there, and whatever the rest of it. It may be fine now that you have the money and you can pay, and everyone is eager to sell you something. But if things change, it seems like it's prudent to have your bread basket next to you rather than half a world away. I don't know. I mean, even with the other things like your technological advances, you'd hope you're turning out enough people that you can keep up with the level of innovation in technology that we have. Sometimes I wonder if we are doing that. With manufacturing, we offshore it to places where they don't have the same kind of pollution controls and that are cheaper to do it. It's good for the companies. They can buy it cheaper. But I don't know if it's

good overall, as you see it change to become a more service-oriented economy, and not so much a manufacturing [one]. I'd rather see us environmentally trying to get industries cleaner, and keep them on shore. That stuff is important if we are going to have our own sources of steel and raw materials.

I think what is heartening is this local [food movement]: People can tell the difference, and I think particularly the further food travels, the more the difference is between the local fresh—here it is right out of the garden. That's a real hopeful sign. There's an awareness. I think that's a good step. I think that will keep going as long as people support it. Because it has to. That's part of the market. If nobody likes it they're not going to come and buy it. I see that as positive and continuing.

Our policies for wheat and corn and cotton, commodities are changing. This new farm bill will be changing those things, I think. And depending on how they change— It's complex. I'm not sure if having cheap corn is necessarily a good thing overall for all the things we turn it into: high fructose corn syrup that we include in all the drinks, and then the diabetes, and the obesity that we've got in the country. I don't know that cheap corn causes those directly, but a lot of those things make some difference, or it encourages meat to be fed grain, or maybe encourages people to eat too much meat even though they like it. I don't know. There are complex issues to try to fathom what a change would do, and how that would affect things. I think the level of importance of things has shifted.

At the time I started farming, the organic part was the most important part—to be able to do it, to show that it was possible, because it was like, so many nay-sayers. Now I think that it's pretty firmly established. It's continuing to grow. It's not in fear of floundering. More important, and yet I don't know how to deal with it, is this mass unawareness that we have as consumers. How do you get people to be aware of what they're eating? It's killing them. It's causing these maladies. They talk about that our children's generation being the first that will have a lower life expectancy than their parents. I'm all for having freedom to bring to market whatever you want, but I don't know.

Farmer: What does sustainable agriculture mean to you?

Coke: Sustainable agriculture, from my perspective, is a form of growing crops that will allow you to continue to grow them with as few off-farm inputs as possible, something that would be kind of self-sustaining. I'm not sure how many examples of that we have nowadays.

Farmer: So there is a reason for the sustainable agriculture world to continue to explain itself.

Coke: Yes, and hopefully be able to explain it in a manner that people will understand that just because you can make a high fructose corn-sweetened Twinkie that's organic, that doesn't mean that that's good for you. Yes, it's grown in a better fashion, maybe, because it didn't pollute the environment as much. I agree with the health people that say if you can't buy organic, then there

is a health benefit to having produce, fresh produce, rather than something that's processed. The shift towards organic is firmly established and will continue. I don't know where it will end up being twenty or fifty years from now. That's good. But then I see the other problem is still there. I hope people don't think, oh yes, because I can get my organic chocolate that somehow: "I'm good. I can just —"

Farmer: Eat as much as you want. (laughs) Well, thank you, Dale.

¹ See the oral history with Drew Goodman in this series.

² See the oral history with Andy Griffin in this series.

³ The Ecological Farming Association organizes an annual conference at Asilomar, California. See the oral histories with Amigo Bob Cantisano and Zea Sonnabend in this series for more about Eco-Farm.

⁴ See the oral history with Russel and Karen Wolter in this series.

⁵ See the oral history with Barney Bricmont in this series.

⁶ See the oral history with Andy Griffin in this series for more about Warren Weber.

⁷ See the oral history with Bob Scowcroft in this series.

⁸ Mitchel Benson, "Carrot Crisis Organic Veggie Scam Alleged," May 11, 1988, Page 1A, *San Jose Mercury News*.