Juan Pablo (J.P.) Perez

Photo by Gerry McIntyre

J & P Organics

Juan Pablo "J.P." Perez founded his J & P Organics Community Supported Agriculture program in 2006, while he was a college student, with a subscriber cohort of five friends and advertisements on Craigslist and a campus electronic marketplace. Today, Perez employs his parents and siblings in his expanding farm enterprise, which serves about 300 (and growing) CSA subscribers in towns as geographically and economically disparate as Prunedale, Pacific Grove, and Palo Alto.

J & P Organics offers an unusually generous roster of subscriber options, including home delivery for all customers and a choice of pay-as-you-go weekly, alternate-weeks, or monthly orders. Customers who grow their own vegetables can opt to receive boxes only during the months when their gardens lie fallow. Perez's CSA boxes contain a colorful variety of fruits and vegetables, plus optional fresh eggs and flowers—and he has plans to include more exotic

variety in future shares. He also delivers to restaurants and sells at farmers' markets, where he creates eye-catching displays to attract customers.

In his mid-twenties, Perez is one of the youngest organic farmers to run such a burgeoning enterprise. His success testifies not only to his dedication, skills, and entrepreneurial savvy, but also to the effectiveness of the program that mentored him and his father in organic farming: the Agriculture & Land-Based Training Association (ALBA). The son of Mexican-born parents, J.P. was born in Salinas, California, in 1983. When the young Perez was a teenager, his father, who was growing raspberries and cut flowers on five acres of leased land in Watsonville, offered him the choice of working full time with him in the fields, or concentrating on school. Fully aware of the hard work and low pay he could expect as a farmer, J.P. opted for school and opportunities for alternative employment.

As it turned out, Perez's academic career took him full circle. After trying a variety of majors at California State University, Monterey Bay (CSUMB), he gravitated toward earth systems science and policy. This field of study led him into two internships with ALBA and another at Serendipity Farms in Carmel Valley. Eventually, J.P. persuaded his father, Pablo (the "P" in "J & P") to enroll with him in ALBA's Programa Educativa para Pequeños Agricultores *(PEPA), which trains small farmers in organic production methods and marketing techniques.*

Pablo and his wife, Florencia, now oversee most of the farming operation on acreage that the family leases from ALBA, while J.P. takes primary responsibility for sales and marketing. The family hopes to buy its own farmland, where they aim to raise livestock and orchards as well as row crops.

Sarah Rabkin interviewed J. P. Perez on June 22nd, 2009, at Rabkin's home in Soquel, California.

Additional Resources

J & P Organics: http://www.jporganics.com/

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

Matt Hickman, "Forty Farmers Under 40," Mother Nature Network. http://www.mnn.com/food/farms-gardens/stories/40-farmers-under-40-readers-choice

Anna Stern, Kim Nochi, "New Crop of Farmers: Juan "JP" Perez," *YES! Magazine*, Spring 2009, http://www.yesmagazine.org/issues/food-for-everyone/new-crop-of-farmers-4

Beginnings

Rabkin: Today is Monday, June 22, 2009. We're in Soquel, California, and this is Sarah Rabkin. I'm with Juan "J. P." Perez. Can you tell me a little bit about your family background, J. P.? Where are your parents from?

Perez: Sure. My dad is from Jalisco [Mexico]. He's from Tecolotlán, from Jalisco. And my mother is from Guanajuato. But we usually go down to Baja. Both sides, my dad and my mom's parents—they moved to Baja. They migrated to Baja, and then there's where they met. They met in Baja, Baja California. Baja California Sur, Ciudad Constitución. So usually there's where we go and see our grandparents. When we go on vacation, we go to Baja, and we go visit my dad's side and my mom's side. They live in the same little town.

Rabkin: So were you born in Baja?

Perez: No. I was born here, in Salinas, California. That was in '83.

Rabkin: And how did your family learn farming skills and end up being farmers?

Perez: Back when they were young, they used to work in the cotton fields. My mom used to work in the cotton fields. My dad used to work also in the cotton field, or just farming, taking care of cattle and stuff like that. So they got really involved into farming and the whole farm aspect, how to grow. Corn. They used to do a lot of corn, too. My dad always was close to my grandpa, who used to run the cattle and do all the farming and irrigating. He started learning more and more and more about farming. He had wanted to be a farmer since he was a little boy. And now he *is* a farmer. [laughs]

Rabkin: And when did they come to California?

Perez: They came in 1982.

Rabkin: Not long before you were born.

Perez: Yes.

Rabkin: So you were born in 1983.

Perez: September 6th, 1983.

Rabkin: And where?

Perez: Salinas, California, Salinas Memorial Hospital.

Rabkin: And tell me about *your* experiences with farming when you were growing up.

Perez: [laughs] It was kind of funny, because back in '97, '98, '99 my dad used to lease five acres of land.[1] We were growing raspberries and flowers, cut flowers.

Rabkin: And where were those five acres?

Perez: In Watsonville, around Las Lomas in Watsonville. My dad used to bring me to work after school, on summer break, on weekends. It was hard. It was hard work being out there on the summer, your whole summer, just working out there. It was, like: I don't think I want something like that for me. That's why I decided to stick with school.

One day my dad came up to me, and he said, "J. P., what do you think? Do you want to come work with me at the farm and be a farmer like me, or would you like to go to school?" I said, "Well, I'll go to school." Because farming is pretty hard. I wanted a better paying job. So I went to middle school, I graduated high school, graduated—

Rabkin: Where did you go to middle school and high school?

Perez: Middle school was Pajaro Middle School. And two years I went to Watsonville High, and the other two years—when I graduated from high school it was North County, North Monterey County High School in Castroville. I decided to go to school, try to get a better job. When I was applying to colleges, I didn't know what I wanted to do. So I applied to Chico State, Fresno, Sacramento and Monterey, four colleges. It was, like, Let's see what's going to happen. Let's give it a try and see.

I went to California State University, Monterey Bay. I tried liberal studies, for teachers. It wasn't for me. I tried business. It wasn't for me. I tried computer science. It wasn't for me. Computers just drove me crazy. And then I tried an

earth systems science and policy course, and I really liked it. I liked the science. Well, why not take science? I wanted something easy [chuckles], something easy. But I ended up taking the hardest major there.

Rabkin: [Laughs.] Because it was interesting to you?

Perez: It was interesting. I kind of liked it. There was a lot of science and more hands-on activities. I'm a hands-on person. I like to be out there in the field and learn from it, instead of being in a classroom and just writing it down with a pen. I'm a visual and hands-on learner. I stuck with it. And then I found about the internship program the science department had there.

Agriculture & Land-Based Training Association [ALBA]

And that is where I found out about ALBA, the Agricultural and Land-Based Training Association.[2] I did two internships with them. One internship was in the summer of 2004. I was helping the farmers there, doing some research on organic fertilizers, pest controls, and forming a little library, helping them out in their fields, learning from them on organic production. My second internship was helping Patrick [Troy] teach the PEPA [*Programa Educativo Para Agricultores*] class, and helping out the new farmers, and learning more about organic farming and what regulations, permits, certificates and all of that you need. I liked the program. Because it was a Spanish course, I presented the opportunity to my dad: "Dad, I know you like farming. What do you think of coming and taking that class and doing it organically?" Because back then when we had our farm, in '97, '98, '99, a problem came up. The pump [for] the water well broke down, and

we lost a lot. So we sold everything, all the equipment. My dad got a regular day job; my mom did too. And I went to school. My brother went to school, too.

Rabkin: So they actually had to stop farming at that point because of the water pump problem.

Perez: Yes. And that time was the third time the pump broke.

Rabkin: Wow.

Perez: It was a lot of money to be fixing it. We lost a lot. My dad didn't give up. He just was just like "You know what? Let's take a break. I don't want to have to go through this again." So we just left the farm there. We lost a bit. But now that we're doing it again, we're going back [to] what we were doing before.

Rabkin: So your dad left farming around the time that you went to college?

Perez: Yes. High school and college.

Rabkin: So both your parents did day jobs instead, for that period.

Perez: Yes, they worked for the same company. It's called Monterey Bay Nursery in Watsonville. They used to work there. We used to grow plants for gardens and decorations for gardens. Pretty cool plants. Yeah. Then [at California State University, Monterey Bay] I learned about the science department and about the internships, and then I told my dad, "Dad, do you want to give it a try?" He was, like, "Sure, I'll do it with you. Let's do it together." And we did. We did it together. We went through the whole course, six months.

Rabkin: So *you* had had an internship where you were actually helping kind of run this PEPA program.

Perez: Yes.

Rabkin: And then you invited your dad to actually go through the training with you.

Perez: Go through the training. And before I started the whole small business, I had two internships with ALBA, and then another internship was mostly marketing.

Rabkin: That was the one with Serendipity?

Perez: Serendipity Farms.

Rabkin: Tell me about that.

Perez: Yes. So two with ALBA and one with Serendipity. Serendipity was more like farmers' markets, CSA [Community Supported Agriculture], wholesaling and packaging and all that stuff, more interaction with customer service people—going to the markets and stuff like that. So I got the whole idea, the whole system—how a farm sells and everything works—before I started running our own business. When I decided to do the business, I already had an idea. I was kind of smart on taking the internships, learning from them, and then using those ideas I learned from the internships into my own little operation.

Rabkin: What would you say were some of the key points that you picked up from doing those internships and having all that hands-on education?

Perez: Yes, there was many: Certification, CCOF [California Certified Organic Farmers]. You have to play by the rules and by the book. What type of materials to use, that you have to be certified. What type of seeds. You have to use a cover crop, and it's good because it gives nutrients to the soil. Crop rotation. Use flowers to bring in beneficial insects instead of using any type of organic material to control your pests. What not to plant in the summer but plant in the winter, because there's less pests in the winter than in the summer. So through the years, we've been learning a lot.

Serendipity was more about marketing—farmers' markets, how to set up a booth, put a banner, have your certificate [up], make everything look really nice so you can attract people into the booth and buy some stuff, have samples. "Here, you want to try a strawberry? You want to try a raspberry?" They get hooked. They like it, you know? Those little key points helped me take from one step to the other.

Why Organic Farming?

Rabkin: Yes. So one thing we haven't really touched on yet is, when your family had those five acres, was that a conventional situation?

Perez: Correct. That was conventional farming.

Rabkin: And how did you get interested in going toward organic?

Perez: Through my courses at California State University, Monterey Bay, I was reading about water law, ethics, about all these chemicals going into conventional farming, draining out into the ditches and then into the Monterey

Bay, killing birds, killing fish. People are being affected by the pest[icides] the companies use in their crops. Women who are pregnant, they get a little bit of the effects and stuff like that. And it was like: Let's try something more natural, more healthy, that people are going to enjoy and we're not going to put our health at risk. It was, like: Let's give it a try. We did it conventionally, and of course we used pesticides because I didn't know at that age. I was probably, like, thirteen years old, so I didn't know anything about organics, organic farming. My dad used to use pesticides. Not a lot, not a lot, but he used to spray Round-Up for the weeds, and use conventional fertilizers, and stuff like that. But nowadays, where we're at right now, it's good. We're learning more and more.

Rabkin: How did your dad react to the idea of doing it organically this time around?

Perez: He didn't know about organic. "What's organic?" "It's more natural." "But isn't it more problems?" He was used to using Round-Up to kill the weeds, and it's [organic] more work and all that stuff. "And how about the pests? How are we going to control the pests?" Well, we started reading, doing more research. ALBA offered pest advisers that came into our farm, and they looked at what kind of problem we had in our strawberries or in our product. They said, "Oh, use this, and use this, and this will help." Okay, we got advice. Now he likes it. He's all into it.

Rabkin: Did you or anyone in your family see negative effects of using pesticides or conventional products back when you were doing it that way?

Perez: At this point, no, because it was just us. We didn't have any employees or anything like that. It was just basically a small family operation. That was basically it. And when my dad used to spray, he didn't take us to the farm. We stayed home. Or he just told us, "Stay away from here. Don't come in here because I just applied something."

Rabkin: Good. So the PEPA program: you talked about some of the things you learned there. Tell me, in general, in what ways ALBA has been helpful to you as an emerging farmer.

Perez: Well, we can lease the tractors from them. That's a big help. The rent, I think, is pretty reasonable. The water bill—I think it's really cheap, too. We know what the real price is out there for land. It's really expensive.

Rabkin: So they're subsidizing your land rent as well as water costs?

Perez: Yes, it's cheaper. It's cheaper than the real market out there. That's one way they've been helping us. We're leasing from them.

Starting J & P Organics

Rabkin: Say more about how ALBA helped you launch. So you have this company now. It's called J & P Organics.

Perez: Correct.

Rabkin: Is that for your name and your dad's name?

Perez: J is for me, Juan, and P is for my dad, Pablo. And my full name is Juan Pablo.

Rabkin: So you're also J. P.

Perez: I'm also J. P. I got my name from my grandfather and my dad.

Rabkin: So you graduated from the program, and you originally leased an acre from ALBA? Is that correct?

Perez: We started with an acre. Half and half. I got half, because usually for each graduate they offer you a half-acre.

Rabkin: I see, so you got a half-acre and your dad—were they adjacent?

Perez: Yes, correct. They were together.

Rabkin: And tell me about the work you had to do to start up this new farm and new business.

Perez: [Chuckles] We were used to growing just flowers and raspberries. It was kind of funny because here we were growing carrots; we were growing strawberries. We were growing cucumbers, zucchini, beets, chard—as an experiment, basil. It was only one acre, about twenty or thirty rows. So we tried to do it as diverse as we could, a row of each type of thing, because at the beginning, when we started, we didn't have any marketing. Where to sell our product. That was one of the problems we had, to start up: Where are we going to sell our product? We didn't have any farmers' markets. We didn't have any CSAs. ALBA was buying only a little bit of our stuff. So that's where I decided to

start my own CSA. I started with friends in college. Because I was still in college in Monterey when I started the business.

Rabkin: You hadn't even graduated from college yet.

Perez: No, not yet.

Rabkin: Wow.

Perez: So I started with friends. I started with five friends, and I put an advertisement on Craigslist, [chuckles], and that helped, too. I was putting advertising on the school's website, [a] marketplace they have there if you want to sell your books and stuff like that. I put a posting. "If you want to have veggie boxes, if you're interested, please give us a call." And then from there—boom, boom, boom, we started growing.

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)

Rabkin: So this is why you decided to do such a diversified farm, because you decided from the beginning you wanted to have a CSA?

Perez: Yes. Well, I wanted to move our product. I didn't want it to go bad. Because yes, we knew how to grow it, but where to sell it? Now, at the point we are: we have the wholesaling; we have the CSAs; we've got the farmers' market; we've got the cut flowers. We've got the whole system going on.

Rabkin: Great!

Perez: [Laughs.]

Rabkin: So you started with Craigslist, the CSUMB [California State University, Monterey Bay] marketplace website—

Perez: Marketplace website, yes.

Rabkin: and five friends—

Perez: And five friends—

Rabkin: —who said they would buy shares in your CSA.

Perez: —who would buy shares. They liked the box. It was really cool, really fresh, really good tasting. Because, of course, it was from the farm, harvested, put in a little box and take it to them. The best part of it is I delivered to them. I didn't have any pickup spots. I didn't have any pickup spots. At this point, I don't have any pickup spots. We do home deliveries to all our customers.

Rabkin: Is that fairly unusual for CSAs in this area, home delivery?

Perez: Usually, a lot of CSAs, they have pickup spots where people come and pick up their boxes. We try to do it a little bit different from them. We do home deliveries. Service is what really counts a lot.

Rabkin: Yes. Do you feel like that gives you an edge over some of the other CSAs?

Perez: I think so. We have customers that can't drive. They don't have a car. Or they're so busy at work that they don't have time to go to the farmers' market or

to the grocery store. When they come home, they see the box on the doorstep. They pick it up, and there it is.

Rabkin: And that's a weekly share, a weekly box?

Perez: They can choose to have it weekly, every other week, or even once a month. There's no contracts. No contracts, no obligations. Give it a try for one week. If you like it, keep going. If not, we can stop there. Pay as you go. [Laughs.]

Rabkin: And how many members do you have right now?

Perez: Right now we have a total of 300 and counting

Rabkin: Wow! And you've grown from your five friends to that in how long?

Perez: Two years. Well, we started the business in 2006. This is our fourth year. So in about three, about three and a half years to four. And growing.

Rabkin: And how far afield do you deliver? How far away do you go from your farm?

Perez: We do mostly all Monterey County area. [but] we [also] go all the way to Oakland. We deliver to San Jose State University, Stanford University. The farthest we go is Oakland, because we have a farmers' market there on Saturdays. So customers or members order a box. It's already packed, prepared and everything. They just come to the market, they pick it up, and they pay there. And we're killing, like, two birds with one stone there. We have the booth, and we have the boxes there for them.

Rabkin: And how did you develop your memberships at the San Jose State spot and the Stanford spot? Did you advertise on university websites?

Farmers' Markets

Perez: No. ALBA told me they wanted to start a farmers' market up there in Oakland. And they did an announcement, I think it was in the monthly meetings that we have at ALBA, if anybody was interested in doing a farmers' market in Oakland. I said, "Yes, I'll do one." I said, "I'll do it." And then we got together. I talked to Jason, the manager there. I turned in all my paperwork, and they said, "Okay, you're ready to go."

Rabkin: So were you plugging in to an existing farmers' market with a booth, or were they starting a whole new market?

Perez: A whole new market.

Rabkin: And where is this one located?

Perez: It's in Oakland. It's on MacArthur Street. It's called Oakland Food Connection.[3] It's only a really small little market. They're just starting it up. We started going on October of 2008, last year. And it's all year round, rain or shine.

Rabkin: And is it just farmers connected with ALBA, or are there other folks selling there as well?

Perez: There are other folks selling there. They have a vendor who sells biscottis. They're really good! I'm hooked on them.

Rabkin: That sounds dangerous.

Perez: Yes! [Laughs.] There's another farmer who has honey. There's another who has flowers. And there's the Purple Lawn Café, where they cut up food, and it's really good. They buy our product—like the kale, the carrots, the zucchini and onions—and they do a nice plate. It was really good this past Saturday. They had beans, they got rice; they had bell peppers, zucchini, kale sauté and salad. They do pretty good food there.

Rabkin: So they buy your produce direct from you, and then they cook it up and serve it prepared.

Perez: And serve it, exactly. There you go. That's how they do it, yes.

Rabkin: Nice. So you started with that one acre. Have you expanded since then?

A Family Operation

Perez: Yes, we have a total of five now. It's small, but for three of us, four of us, it's good.

Rabkin: Four of you is you and your dad, and who else?

Perez: My mom. And one of my uncles is helping us at this point. My sister helps out, too, doing the veggie boxes when we have to pack them. And my brother—he has a regular day job, but he's a mechanic. He graduated from UTI [Universal Technical Institute], so he's going to be the one fixing the tractors and the trucks. So I have the whole circle. My dad is the grower and he waters, he fertilizes and everything. He does the weeding. My mom is the packer. She harvests and

makes sure everything is really good. I'm the salesman person, doing the CSA, farmers' markets, and promoting J & P Organics. My sister is mostly helping us do the veggie boxes and also doing a little bit of the paperwork, and my brother is a mechanic. So we have the whole circle, connecting.

Rabkin: It's a total family operation.

Perez: Yes, a total family operation.

Rabkin: Do you have any other employees who are not members of your family?

Perez: No, just us.

Rabkin: How do you like that?

Perez: It's good. It's good because all the income, all the capital is staying with us. It's not going away. We have to pay the mortgage payment. We have to pay our bills. We pay our salary. So it's good because it's staying with us.

Leasing Land from ALBA

Rabkin: And the five acres that you have now—is that all still being leased from ALBA?

Perez: Yes, from ALBA.

Rabkin: And is that arrangement something you can do indefinitely, or do you have to change the relationship?

Perez: Well, they have a time period. I don't know if it's by the fifth year or sixth or seventh year, I think they start pushing you [to] move on and look for your own farm. Those are the plans for us for next year. Hopefully, everything turns out good this year, and we have a nice crop planned for next year. Hopefully, we can apply, or start looking for a small farm, because my goal is to have the whole system. What I mean by the whole system is I want to have the chickens for the eggs, have orchard trees, have the cows for the milk, have the pigs for the meat, and everything, the whole operation, the whole system, have it as J & P Organics and Small Farm, where we can have the farm open to the public, and they can come by, pick their strawberries or raspberries, whatever we have available there, and have U-Picks, and have the whole operation, so we can have more stuff to offer to our members.

Rabkin: Are you hoping to stay in the Central Coast area?

Perez: Yes. I like the Salinas area. Watsonville is too cold. When we used to grow there, it was too cold. We like the Salinas area a lot because we know that you can grow almost anything there. The weather is perfect. From Castroville to Salinas is a totally different weather. It could be raining in Castroville, and it could be really sunny in Salinas.

Rabkin: This is why we have artichokes in Castroville and not Salinas.

Perez: Yes. [Laughs.] So I think Salinas. I like Hollister, too. Hollister. It's nice and warm there. So I don't know. We're still— We saw a couple of farms last year in Hollister, and then we saw another one in Watsonville. But we want to

make sure. Because if we make a decision, it's going to be permanent: Yes, this is the one.

Rabkin: Are you looking for land that's already been transitioned to organic?

Perez: Yes. [But] if not, we can transition it. We can put the three-year period that CCOF asks for that we have to put it, but meanwhile we'll stay with ALBA, maybe lease two to three acres and just work out there, and wait until the land gets transitioned to organic.

Rabkin: And looking around at land prices, does it seem doable?

Perez: As the numbers we've seen in what we're selling and ourselves, I think so, yes.

Rabkin: Great.

Perez: But last year it was really bad. It was really bad to see. Well, I guess everybody got affected. We did, too, and it was hard for us. We were going through a rough time.

Rabkin: Because of the economy?

Perez: Yes. The sales dropped. Less cars out there. But nowadays it seems like at this point it's picking up—

Rabkin: Interesting.

Perez: —and it's growing. We have work all year round. Thank God that we have a job. We're busy Monday through Saturday, even sometimes Sunday, so it's good.

Rabkin: It sounds like a big part of what makes that possible is your diversified marketing strategy.

Perez: Yes.

Rabkin: So let's go back to talking about that. We talked about your CSA, pretty much. One thing I didn't ask you about the CSA yet is about the socioeconomic characterization of your client base. Is it varied? Could you describe the average customer?

Perez: It varies. Our product is really affordable to anybody. Even though it's organic, it doesn't have to be a higher price. We prefer to sell it instead of [the vegetables] going bad. Our prices are affordable. They're not too high; they're not too low. They're in the middle, because we want the people to have access to it.

Rabkin: So what people are paying you for a CSA share is comparable to what they would pay for conventional produce in the supermarket if they bought their stuff there, do you think?

Perez: Our boxes are twenty-three dollars a box. The delivery is included. If they get the box, they're saving money. If they do the math, they're saving money. They're saving their time. They're saving their gas. So the box comes to them. Of

course, conventional is cheaper. But you're not going to have the same product. Organic, conventional—it's totally different.

What's in the Box?

Rabkin: So what crops are you growing now?

Perez: We have a lot. We have strawberries. We have the raspberries. We have cucumbers. We have about ten different types of zucchini. We have the bell peppers growing. We have the heirloom tomatoes, the cherry tomatoes, the grape tomatoes. We have cilantro. We have basil. We have herbs—epazote [de zorrillo—*Chenopodium anthelmintium*; common ragweed]. Have you heard about epazote? It's a Mexican herb that Aztecs used to drink in a tea, and it's really good for you. A lot of people put them in their beans to take the gas out of the beans.

Rabkin: Oh, interesting.

Perez: You just drop the little leaves in there, and it's really good. And the tea is really good. It's good for you. We do have carrots. Did I mention beets?

Rabkin: No.

Perez: No. Beets. We do have beets. We're growing pumpkins, too, for Halloween. We have a lot of cut flowers, a lot of flowers out there. Artichokes. We have artichokes.

Rabkin: Other greens?

Perez: Yes, lettuce, broccoli, green beans, peas. We have a lot! [Laughs.] We grow about twenty to thirty different crops during the year. Chard, rainbow chard, kale.

Rabkin: Are you doing cut flowers, too, did you say?

Perez: Cut flowers.

Rabkin: Are those included in CSA boxes?

Perez: They can be included in a CSA box. We have the sunflowers, we have statice, we've got the dahlias, the sweet williams, strawflower, cornflower. What other? Pompom, which is a really nice flower. Daisies. Yes, we have quite a bit. And that's what sells, too. The cut flowers are doing good, too. Yarrow. We have native yarrow. My dad is getting calls every day, "Bring me a hundred. Bring me a hundred. Bring me a hundred."

Rabkin: What do people use all that yarrow for?

Perez: For bouquets. I don't know if they dry them out, because you can dry them out, but I don't know. They call my dad, and he delivers to them. You know, "Bring me a hundred of this and that." Okay. Or even sometimes we have customers that come to the farm and they pick them up there.

Rabkin: Can people in your CSA customize their boxes at all?

Perez: Yes, they can. I have customers that are allergic to some of the stuff, or they don't eat that stuff, or they don't know how to prepare it, or they don't like it. Either one. Like Brussels sprouts. Some people hate them; some people love

them. I have a customer who's allergic to onions and can't eat any type of onions, so we have to take them out. But they let me know in the e-mail when I let them know what's coming in the veggie box. They let me know, "J. P., can you please substitute the onions for more strawberries?" or more fruit or more kale, more spinach and all that stuff. We totally do that for them. Make them happy. If they're happy, we're happy.

Rabkin: And you talked about people sometimes not knowing how to prepare something.

Perez: Yes.

Rabkin: Do you provide recipes or newsletters or something?

Perez: At this point, we don't print any newsletters because we don't want to waste paper. We don't want to stick paper in there. I've been trying to update the website for the past year, and I can't get to it. Even though I have a friend of mine who's a computer science technology major from Monterey, who's designing our website, I just don't have that time to give him all that information. The website you see right now, we kind of did it in a hurry two years, three years ago. You know, "Put something out there. Do a subscription form so they can fill it out, I'll get it, and then we can start doing the CSAs." But, yes, we're going to have recipes. I have a bunch of recipes already saved in my computer. They're going to go up there. We're going to have all the lists of the products that we have available. Other stuff also that I want to include in there: organic stuff. Like, for example, organic coconuts, organic mangoes, fair trade bananas, fair trade coffee.

Rabkin: Where are you going to source all that from?

Perez: I have a little bit of connections that I can get all that stuff.

Rabkin: How exciting!

Perez: [Laughs.] And usually I trade our produce with some other stuff. And the fair trade—they're organic, they're stamped, and you can see the seal and everything. Even though we can't grow them here, it's a fruit and it's good for you. Coconuts—I love the water of the coconut. It's really, really fresh. Stuff like that, we're going to include in our website. Have a little more information: what markets are we going to and how our CSA programs work (no contracts, no obligations, all that stuff.) So people get familiar. Have our address of our farm. If they want to come and visit our farm on a weekday, they can come and all that stuff.

Rabkin: You are cool with people coming to the farm any day of the week?

Perez: Yes, yes! Any day of the week. As long as we're out there, they can come and harvest the berries, whatever they want, and they're there.

Rabkin: And you actually have the time to interact with the visitors?

Perez: Yes, yes. Because my parents are out there. They do all the interactions. But usually I get the phone calls, and I let my parents [know], "Oh, Dad, there's somebody coming down there. They want to get some flowers," or, "they want to get some berries." And it's, like, "Okay, I'll be here." They're always out there. I'm the guy who's doing all the deliveries. I deliver to 300 CSA members, but

some want every week; others, every other week; and some, once a month. So by the week, it depends how many deliveries I do. Roughly—[on] average, I'm delivering 150 to 160, 170 boxes a week to the doors. Most of my time is just driving, delivering to farmers' markets, paperwork at night.

Basically, a typical day of mine will be getting up in the morning maybe around six or seven, getting all the boxes ready, getting all the produce, bringing it back, packing the veggie boxes, delivering in the afternoon, be done around, hopefully, if I'm lucky, six, seven or eight, get home, eat dinner, go back to my computer to look for the orders that come in, e-mails that come in, and then do the same thing every day.

Rabkin: Long days.

Perez: It's a long day.

Rabkin: What time are you going to bed?

Perez: Whew! It depends. Sometimes one, sometimes two. It's worked, and I'm proud of it. I like it. I doing it. So it's my job. It's work.

Rabkin: And it's paying the bills at this point.

Perez: And it's paying the bills at this point. That's the best part of it, because I know that we're doing something good, and we have something going on here.

Rabkin: Yes.

Perez: Hopefully it takes us a long way.

Rabkin: Does your CSA go year round?

Perez: Yes. Actually that's the best part. Our members, they love that. We have crops growing all year round. We have stuff growing for the spring, summer and winter. So they taste that cycle.

Rabkin: Mm-hm.

Perez: Because nowadays you go to the grocery store, and you can find anything at all times of the year. I say, "Where is it coming from?" See what I mean?

Rabkin: Yes.

Perez: [Laughs.]

Rabkin: Okay. You talked about the farmers' market in Oakland.

More on Farmers' Markets

Perez: We have a total of three farmers' markets.

Rabkin: Tell me about them.

Perez: We have one in Greenfield we just started three weeks ago, now we're in Greenfield. And we have one in Oakland. And we're going to start another one tomorrow in Oakland, too. That's called Children's Hospital and Research Center, Oakland. We're going to be in the hospital there, selling our stuff there. It's brand new. They just got all the permits in and everything, and we're starting tomorrow, actually. So we're going to go up there. On Tuesday we deliver to San

Jose State University and to Stanford. And from Stanford we're going to go to Oakland. So it's a whole, full day.

Rabkin: And the hospital farmers' market—the people who are going to that one—are they hospital employees mostly?

Perez: It's for anybody.

Rabkin: But it's just in the neighborhood.

Perez: It's for employees, for doctors, for people who will be coming in and out from the hospital. Yes, for everybody.

Rabkin: And tell me a little about the one in Greenfield. I don't know about that one.

Perez: Yes, the Greenfield one is really good. We sell mostly flowers there. It's good. We started going there last year. We had our veggies and all that stuff, and now we incorporated more flowers into our booth. So we have the flower section and we have the produce section. So we have a little bit of both there. It's doing good. Mostly Latino people.

Rabkin: Who manages that one?

Perez: Grace. Grace [Dominguez] from Everyone's Harvest, the farmers' market there. It's her first year doing it.

Rabkin: Is she managing markets in other towns as well?

Perez: I think she used to manage the one in Marina, with Iris Peppard. They have a website. It's Everyone's Harvest.[4] She's managing the Pacific Grove market and the Marina market, and now they're doing the Greenfield market, so they have a total of three at this point, I think. They might have more.

Rabkin: Great. So what makes for a successful farmers' market booth?

Perez: Have a little bit of everything. Have color. Be like a magnet. If people are walking by, try to make them turn and look at least at your booth, and they're going to be, like, "Hmm, what's that?" Try to bring them in.

Rabkin: So how do you do that? How do you set up the booth so that it's eye catching?

Perez: Eye catching? We set it up pretty nice, I think. I even have a picture of it. We have three tables, a total of three tables.

Rabkin: Can you e-mail me that picture?

Perez: Yes, yes. I have more pictures. Actually, I have a picture of all the stuff that we have. I've been taking [pictures] at the market.

Rabkin: [Sharp intake of breath as she sees photos he presents.] I'm looking at a beautiful array of photographs of produce.

Perez: This is the market at Oakland.

Rabkin: So you have three tables set up in a U shape.

Perez: Yes.

Rabkin: And there are baskets of all different kinds and colors of produce sitting out there.

Perez: Zucchini and artichokes. We try to have all the zucchini on one side. We have the carrots and onions and kale and chard and lettuce on one side. And then we have the berries, the strawberries and the raspberries on one side. And a little bit of broccoli, on the other side. Try to make it colorful. This is our first logo that we had, but we're changing it. That's our banner.

Rabkin: It's a sun with sunglasses and a big smile.

Perez: [Laughs.] Yes.

Rabkin: It's beautiful. Why are you changing it?

Perez: I have a business card with a new logo. We want to print our wax boxes and our shirts and stuff. If that's going to be the permanent [logo], we want to stick to it.

Rabkin: It says, "J & P Organics," and it's got a little logo of a sunrise.

Perez: And then, we have the golden raspberries, and we have the red raspberries.

Rabkin: So you have baskets mixed with the two colors so they're very eye catching.

Perez: Yes, people like that. We have also samples. Here's another [picture]. That's the artichokes, and people like the artichokes.

Rabkin: So you pay a lot of attention to how things are laid out and presented.

Perez: Yes, yes. Zucchini, the yellow zucchini. The yellow zucchini is a really good seller at the market because people are kind of curious: Does it have the same taste? It's zucchini. It tastes almost the same. The only difference is the color, and it gives the plate the color.

Rabkin: So the novelty helps.

Perez: Novelty. Eight-ball zucchini. A lot of people haven't seen those: How do you cook that? It's regular zucchini. What I like doing about these is open them, taking all the seeds out, stuff them with rice and beans and just make them, and then just fill them out with the spoon, and people like that.

Rabkin: Eight-ball zucchini. Nice.

Perez: And Patty Pans. A lot of people love Sunburst, the yellow one. And onions, colorful—

Rabkin: So you've got red and white onions put together.

Perez: Put together in a nice bunch. Carrots are colorful, too. And chard.

Rabkin: Rainbow chard, kale.

Perez: Kale, dino kale, and the green kale. And the lettuce. That's me with the lettuce.

Rabkin: Are you on your own at the booths? Is anybody there selling with you?

Perez: Usually we have turns. Not at this point, because we have two markets on Saturdays. My dad and my uncle go to the one in Greenfield, and my mom and me go to the one in Oakland. Sometimes we have to go alone, because we have U-Picks on Saturdays, too. So my dad stays at the farm, my mom goes to Greenfield, and I go to the Oakland one. So we're doing three things in one day.

Rabkin: Wow. You have U-Picks of different crops, or just berries, or how does that work?

Perez: We have whatever is available out there, whatever we have ready for them. We have the strawberries; we have the raspberries. We've got the cut flowers. We've got the cucumbers; we have the zucchini and we have the potatoes and all that stuff. So they come; they bring their kids. Families come to the farm and they bring their kids, and they want to teach them where stuff grows, how it grows, out of the dirt—you need soil so you can grow produce. Get a shovel and dig all the potatoes and pick them out. They like that. They like getting dirty.

Speaking in Schools

Rabkin: Yes. So do you see yourself, in part, as serving an educational function?

Perez: Yes. I've been working with CAFF: [Community] Alliance with Family Farmers. They've been inviting me to go to classes and talk to kids in elementary and middle school and high school. I go out there and I tell them: "This is what I do. This is what I grow on the farm." I remember going to Watsonville High School at a farm class or agriculture class, something like that. They're just

listening to me. And then when I told them about the numbers agriculture in the Salinas Valley produces. I told them, "Ag business is really good, agriculture, because it produces about $3 billion a year, and so there's a lot of good jobs out there, and farming is good." The kids in elementary and middle school, they like it. We do activities. They give them a piece of paper where [they ask]: Who's the farmer's name? What's the company's name? What they grow, and how they grow it, and this and that. So kids are really into it.

And I take samples of stuff. At the beginning of this year I went to Castroville Elementary School, and I had a sample of a bunch of chard and kale. And we made the kids draw the leaf on a piece of paper. It was really good because they got all into it. They did the whole stem, the whole leaf, the little veins that are going across, the shape, the texture. They got to touch it and all that stuff. So that was pretty cool.

Rabkin: So you're finding time to do these little volunteer teaching stints on top of everything else.

Perez: Yes, yes, yes.

Rabkin: I met some Watsonville High students at the Watsonville farmers' market, and I don't know if they're from the same class that you went and visited.

Perez: Yes. I think so.

Rabkin: They grow their own stuff, and then they haul it over from the high school in a cart to their booth at the Watsonville farmers' market.

Perez: Nice.

Rabkin: They were rightfully very proud of—

Perez: Yes, I helped them out. I helped them out after school. On Mondays I used to go. I was there probably for I think a month, helping them set up strawberries. I told them, "We need to move the soil. We need to disk it. We need to do the rows. We need to put compost, get nutrients in the soil." I haven't had time, actually, to go out there and check it out, but I think they're doing okay.

Rabkin: So you're actually really helping with their training.

Perez: Yes.

Rabkin: Helping them learn how to grow things.

Perez: How to grow things. They're pretty smart. They're driving the tractors. They're cultivating. They're harvesting. They're watering it. You know, "Don't water the strawberries with the hose because you might get the strawberries to rot." You want to do it on a drip tape. I told them to cover them up. I told them, "You need to get a pack of hay or plastic bag or something, just to cover it up so the fruit won't touch the soil or the dirt because it's going to go bad; it's going to rot." Key points like that work for them.

The Challenges of Farming

Rabkin: So back when you were younger, you had this conversation with your father you told me about, where he basically gave you the option. He said, "Look, do you want to farm with me, or do you want to pursue the school thing

more?" At that point, you had seen enough of farming that you realized it was pretty hard work and didn't pay all that well, and you went the school route. And then, what do you know, you came full circle, back to farming.

Perez: Yes.

Rabkin: And it still *is* hard work.

Perez: It still is hard work, a lot of hours, a lot of time-consuming—

Rabkin: Tell me about that change of perspective.

Perez: It's funny because I went to school to get a better job, better-paid job. And it brought me back into farming again, but now doing it as your own boss, not working for somebody else. You're the boss now. You make decisions now. That's what we like about it too, you know. We're not working for anybody. We're working for ourselves. I guess—I don't know if it's destiny or it runs in my veins or something, but it brought me back into farming. But now that I'm doing it, I like it, and I'm happy.

Rabkin: Being your own boss has satisfactions that you've alluded to. It probably also carries with it a lot of responsibility.

Perez: Yes.

Rabkin: Are there aspects of this work that keep you awake at night? Or are you too tired? [Laughs.]

Perez: I'm too tired. Honestly, I'm too tired. I just lie in my bed and—[snaps fingers and makes a sound] knock out. And then when I open my eyes again, it's oh, it's time to get up. I think it's a lot of responsibility because I depend on a lot of families, a lot of members on the CSA. Right now, some of them don't go to the grocery store no more. They wait for the veggie box to come to their house. I have customers that say, "Your produce is really fresh, and it lasts really long" compared to the stuff they buy at the store. You know why? Because it's fresh. It's fresh. It's from the field to the box to your house. That's it. No cooler, no refrigeration, no hundred miles, wherever it's coming from. From your own back yard type of thing.

Rabkin: So now those people don't want to go back to the grocery store. They're depending on you.

Perez: Exactly, yes. So when the order comes in, I have to prepare the box, deliver it to them. Because they plan on it. They see the e-mail list. "Okay, this is what's coming. Okay, well, I'm going to go with the broccoli, the cauliflower and carrots together." They plan for it. They plan with the box what they want to have for a meal, for dinner. And the box—it's kind of decent. It can feed two to three people. It depends. I have customer that by the third day it's gone, because they finish it all. It's good. (laughter)

Rabkin: So are there other aspects of the work that are stress-producing?

Perez: Yes. It's just a lot of work. You have to be on top of it, on top of everything. Doing all the paperwork. That's the other thing that drives me crazy, too, the bookkeeping, keeping track of all the receipts, all the sales, all the

numbers, paying the bills, paying the car payment, the van payment (because we've got a van to move our products), paying the cell phone because that's basically how I communicate, paying the Internet because without an Internet I don't have a business. I depend a lot on the Internet. A bunch of little things. Making sure we have fertilizer. Every two weeks we apply fertilizer. Make sure I buy the seeds. If a crop is going on, make sure to have the other one on top of it. By the time this one is done and we disk it, we have the other plant ready to plant on that same day. It's a coordination type of thing that we have to keep it going.

Rabkin: And are you managing all of that, the accounting, the ordering?

Perez: Yes, I'm doing all the seeds, talking to companies, looking for new companies, looking for the best prices out there, talking to customers. My dad helps out, too. He's involved with the cut flowers. He's doing the flowers, because that would be another workload on my plate. But I'm doing all the calls, talking to or e-mailing CSA members, our members, trying to get into restaurants, if they want to buy some stuff. That's our next step, too, I think, restaurants. You know, just doing phone and Internet and e-mail. Make sure we get all the orders in, make sure to harvest forty, fifty bunches of carrots for our boxes for tomorrow or whenever, so—yes.

Rabkin: So it's just really demanding.

Perez: Yes.

Rabkin: And it doesn't let up.

Perez: No. No. We're thinking of by the end of the year, taking a good, good, good break. [Laughs.] Taking a vacation type of thing.

Rabkin: Is there a period in the winter when you can actually take a vacation?

Perez: There's not because we depend on the farm. If we don't work, we don't get any capital, right? So we have to work. But what we're trying to do is save a little bit in the summer so we can cover up for the winter, because we know that winter is really hard. But we need to take a break. Life is too short, so we need to have a little break, take a vacation, have a little bit of fun.

Rabkin: Yes, that does seem essential.

Perez: [Laughs.]

Rabkin: We have other outlets, marketing, to talk about.

Perez: Sure.

An Experiment with a Farm Stand on Highway One

Rabkin: You have a farm stand, is that right?

Perez: We used to. Yes, I'll talk about that. We used to have a farm stand on Highway 1. That was in 2007, August of 2007 when I bought it from this guy. I took over. I had organic produce, a little bit of conventional but mostly organic. I gave it a try. I gave it a try to see how it worked. I got the feeling of how to run a fruit stand. I had to pay rent. I had to pay liability insurance, workers' comp. The

produce—I was [paying for] other produce, pineapples, coconuts and artichokes and all that stuff, stuff that I didn't have. To have coffee, drinks, all that stuff.

Rabkin: Wow. So a combination of your own produce and then stuff that you wholesaled from other places.

Perez: Exactly, yes, to have it going. I started because I had a little bit of money saved up. It took all my money out. It started okay. But I started seeing the numbers going down, down, down, down, down, and I decided to pull the plug on it. I didn't lose a lot, but I did see that it wasn't working out for me at this point, so I decided to pull the plug and just focus on the CSA, focus on the farmers' markets and the wholesaling and the cut flowers, and that'll do. Because I remember that for the full year, I didn't have any days off. I was working almost 24/7. I had to be on top of the fruit stand and make sure everything was good, taking all the bad produce out, getting more produce in, doing all the coordination. Plus I was doing the CSA, plus I was doing the deliveries, plus I was doing the farmers' market.

I wasn't eating right. I was getting tired. I was getting burned out pretty fast. I just said, you know what? What am I doing? I stopped. This is not the time to do this at this point. I was young. I was, what, twenty-four, twenty-three when I started. I'm only twenty-five [now]. So it was like, what am I doing? I'm killing myself here. I decided to pull the plug. I sold back the store to the same owner. That was the agreement, the contract we had, that if I ever wanted to sell it, I'd sell it back to him. And I did that. Now that I stopped with the store, I feel relief.

I have Sundays off and take a little break. But yes, I tried to do mostly organics, tried to be different from the other fruit stands on Highway 1.

Rabkin: Where on Highway 1 were you?

Perez: In Moss Landing. I don't know if you've seen it. It was the white barn with the artichoke, Jay Leno [Laughs.]. His face looked like Jay Leno, trying to push an artichoke inside of a little car, a little Metro—one of those little tiny cars for two people. And the guy with a tractor pulling a giant artichoke. If you go on Highway 1 going towards Monterey, it's going to be on your left-hand side. It's a little past the cemeteries there. Yes, that was J & P. Yes, I just pulled the plug, and I'm happy now, and less stressed [chuckles].

Rabkin: Those kind of business decisions— It takes some kind of good intuition and maybe also some training to know when to decide to do something like that. Did you get some training in that through ALBA, or through school, or did you have to make it up as you went along?

Perez: I kind of went how a farmer's market did, but it was totally different because it was a fruit stand. You can have anything there. I saw other fruit stands, what stuff they did have. They had honey, they had jellies. They had artichokes, they had chips, they had drinks, they had all this stuff. I kind of saw that, saw them, and saw what people were looking for.

Rabkin: Mm-hm, so you looked around at other fruit stands to see how they were doing it.

Perez: Yes. Before I bought this one, I was going to buy another one, or I was going to try another one, but that one was huge. That was huge. That was big, big, big. But good thing it didn't happen because I was in pretty deep, and I don't want to be there. I saw that they had milk, they had eggs, they had a bunch of fruit, they had nuts. They have a bunch of stuff, so, like: I can do a little bit what they have in a smaller space, have more stuff for the customer that came in there.

Rabkin: And when you decided to pull the plug eventually, it was basically your intuition said: This isn't going in the right direction.

Perez: This is not right. I was losing a lot. I had the produce, but people weren't coming in. So I was losing because the produce was going bad. See what I mean?

Rabkin: Yes.

Perez: That is the balance.

Rabkin: Yes.

Perez: I had everything in there. But the produce was going bad. And now with my CSAs and the farmers' market. The CSAs, it's direct sales. It's orders already sold, and I know I'm going to get something.

More on Marketing

Rabkin: What about wholesale? You mentioned that you sell some of your stuff wholesale.

Perez: Wholesale. We sell to ALBA Organics. At this point, whatever they want— Like, we have a lot of raspberries, so he gets—first we take care of our customers, and whatever is left, they go to them. So nothing is being stayed behind. Nothing goes bad.

Rabkin: And they're willing to take a fluctuating amount.

Perez: Yes. They take one box up to thirty, forty, fifty boxes. It depends what it is. Or if they get an order in, "Can you bring me two boxes of chard?" "Can you bring me fifteen boxes of carrots?" or whatever we have. I'm like, sure, you know? But first we take care of [our customers]. They know I'm the only farmer at ALBA that has the CSA. I say, "First thing, let me take care of my customers, and then whatever is left, you get." "Okay. Good."

Rabkin: And how about stores? Are you selling to retail stores?

Perez: I was. I was selling to stores, but I stopped because I didn't have time to deliver to them, because I'm doing all the CSA. I could probably sell to them and drop it off on my way to them. But the wholesaling is doing good, basically. But when I started, at the beginning, I did go to four or five different fruit stands, and they were buying a little bit, not that much, a little bit of our stuff.

Rabkin: So you've dropped that as well.

Perez: I dropped it right now, yes.

Rabkin: Yes. And you mentioned hoping to develop some restaurant customers. Is that happening yet?

Perez: We have a customer in Oakland that buys artichokes, that buys strawberries, potatoes, what we have in our farmers' market stand. Whatever we don't sell, he takes. It's an Italian restaurant. He's a really, really good chef and a really good person. And we've been getting calls from [other] restaurants if we have stuff available: "Send me a list of stuff." But that's the other thing. It's, like, I need another helper type of thing. Because right now I just have everything coming in: duh, duh, duh, duh, duh. And—

Rabkin: Do you foresee actually eventually hiring some more help with the marketing?

Perez: Yes. Or— My dad doesn't know [chuckles softly], but this is what I want to do, is maybe in a couple of years I want to get more vans, hire more people and make them go to the farmers' market, and maybe have fifteen markets or so.

Rabkin: Wow.

Perez: And having, like, small cargo vans, pack them up with produce. You [one driver would] go to this market; you go to this market; you go to this market, you go to this market. You know, the whole thing. Plus the CSA, having other drivers doing the CSA too. You know, the whole operation system. So that's my focus and my goal for the next five years.

Rabkin: Anything else about your future vision for expanding the marketing?

Perez: Just expand. We're expanding as we can. We don't want to take a big step. Taking baby steps as we grow, as customers want us to grow. As how many customers we can handle, we're growing.

Rabkin: Yes. And how do you get the word out about your CSA? Is it all from your website?

Perez: We have a radio advertisement. It's on AM 1240, KNRY. It's called "Health Talk with Gina Renee." She's a really good friend of mine, and she promotes me a lot. She's a nutritionist. There's three nutritionists that are members of ours, and they just love the stuff, and they do classes, and they promote me: "Oh, you should try J & P." They have my box that I take to them. They take it to their class, and they show people, "Look, this is what I get from J & P Organics." And they see it, and it's, like, "Whoa! Really? For how much?" "And it gets delivered to you and everything, and it's good for you. It's organic. It's nutrition. It's good. You know, you get the whole thing." Like, "Whoa!"

Rabkin: You've gotten customers from them.

Perez: Yes, a lot.

Rabkin: That's great. And how did you connect with the nutritionists?

Perez: Our website, yes. Because when you Google "J & P Organics," it's going to pop up, the website. Gina contacted me, and she said, "J. P., I was reading about your website, and you grow organic produce, and I want to interview you." I've done two TV programs with her and two radio shows with her, and I'm out there on the radio, telling people, "This is what I do. This is what we have growing, and we do the veggie boxes and it's delivered to you. We do farmers' markets in this area." The best advertising we can get at this point right now: word to mouth. I think that's the best advertising we're getting. People will try

our box, they tell their friends, their friends tell their friends. "Yes, a friend of mine'll who gets your veggie boxes just—and I saw their box, and can I sign up with you?" It's like, "Sure!" Just get their information, put it in the e-mail list, and then there we go. And, yes, they love it. They love it.

Rabkin: You said Monterey County mainly, and then some to Oakland with your farmers' market.

Perez: Some to Oakland, yes.

Rabkin: And then San Jose State, Stanford—

Perez: Stanford University, the Monterey Bay Aquarium. We do deliver to the Monterey Bay Aquarium.

Rabkin: Oh!

Perez: We deliver to the Dominican Hospital in Santa Cruz, too.

Rabkin: Do you have other Santa Cruz County deliveries?

Perez: Soquel. We do Soquel. We do Aptos. We do Mission Street, we do by the Boardwalk—there's a street over there by the Boardwalk we deliver to. Where else? We do Carmel Valley, Pebble Beach, Pacific Grove, Monterey, Seaside, Ryan Ranch, CSUMB, Fort Ord, Marina, Watsonville, Santa Cruz, Las Lomas, Prunedale.

Rabkin: You must know the area really well.

Perez: Yes, I'm getting to know it pretty good. I know where—

Rabkin: [Laughs.] You've got a map in your brain.

Perez: Yes. So we do all those areas. And we split them up. I'm delivering Tuesday through Friday. Tuesday goes to San Jose State and Stanford. And on Wednesday I do part of it, and then on Thursday I do the other part, and then on Friday I do the other part. So we have them in blocks at this point. When I started small, I did it in one day, the whole thing. But now that we're growing little by little, I have to split it, and more days. Eventually, right now, we might need to get another driver because it's getting to the point that the daylight—it's not enough for me, and I'm getting there really late, and like, "Oh, sorry, I just had a lot of deliveries," and I don't like that. I don't want to be there too late.

Rabkin: Yes. So at some point, you have to make a decision about a capital outlay for another vehicle—

Perez: Yes.

Rabkin: —other drivers.

Perez: Right now, we have the capital. We're looking for a mini-cargo box van with a cooler. I bought my van last year a couple of years ago, a cargo van, but now we need another one. We have a truck, a quarter-ton truck, but it's not the same as a van or a little cargo mini truck box van.

Rabkin: Just in terms of keeping the produce fresh while you go driving around.

Perez: Fresh. Exactly. Because right now it's getting warmer and warmer, and even though I have the AC at all times, it's not enough. We need to keep it real cool.

Rabkin: Do you have a substantial Spanish-speaking clientele?

Perez: Yes. In the markets, you mean?

Rabkin: Or with your CSA?

Perez: The CSA? We have a lot in the CSA, too, but mostly—I think it's maybe eighty percent white.

Rabkin: Really?

Perez: Yes. And the other percent are mixed.

Rabkin: Just as you rattled off the names of all those communities you deliver to, it did strike me that it's quite a diversity of kinds of communities—from Pebble Beach to Prunedale, for example.

Perez: Prunedale. Yes, there is. We're open to anybody. And we can take more members. That's why we want to grow.

Rabkin: Yes. Okay, let's jump to another topic.

Perez: Sure.

The Slow Food Conference at Terra Madre, Italy

Rabkin: I know that you attended Terra Madre, the international meeting of food communities that's hosted by the Slow Food International. And you went to Turin, Italy. Tell me about—how did that come about?

Perez: I was pretty excited. It was pretty cool, because I never had been out of the U.S. It was a scholarship. ALBA had the applications, and I applied for it. And I got it. Two ALBA farmers got it. It was me and this other girl. I got really excited. I was happy, because I get to fly over there and see Italy. And the event was really good. There were people from Brazil, Chile, Cuba, Africa, Argentina, España, all over the world.

Rabkin: Asia also?

Perez: Everything. It was really good.

Rabkin: And the scholarship paid all your expenses for this?

Perez: Yes, yes. The flight, the hotel, the food. It was just totally different from here.

Rabkin: Yes.

Perez: The way they eat, the food, the cars, the people—everything. Everything was totally different. The climate, the weather.

Rabkin: My notes here say that you went with actually a specific delegation that had to do with Community Alliance with Family Farmers (CAFF)—the California Ethnic Minority Farmers delegation from CAFF.

Perez: Yes.

Rabkin: And how many of you were there in that delegation?

Perez: Thirteen, thirteen from all of California.

Rabkin: And what were the highlights of that experience for you, or what events or discoveries stand out most for you?

Perez: They had workshops. There were workshops on cattle, on nutrients in soil, raising chicken, raising pigs, marketing strategies. I have a [conference program]. There was a just a lot of workshops. Water quality, stuff from all over the globe, how they grew it, how they raised it, where to sell it. That was really good because I was getting ideas. I was getting ideas to bring back home and incorporate in our operation. So I got all those ideas, taking notes, and I got to meet people from España and their chocolates, how they get the cacao and then put them in and all that stuff. It was just really good.

There was this guy from Cuba who did this really cool project where he used recycled material that he used as a valve, just using a water bottle and some bent wire and stuff like that. He had a timer on it with batteries. It was pretty cool. That really surprised me. I took pictures of it. He patented it. And it was just meeting the people and—it was just—it was amazing. I—

Rabkin: What language were the workshops conducted in?

Perez: Many. Many. English, Spanish. There was just many. I think Japanese. There was just many. France, Français. Yes. They had translators, and they had the little things going on.

Rabkin: Little earplug things?

Perez: Earplugs and the little channels type of thing. There was probably, like, ten different translators at the time there.

Rabkin: Simultaneously translating for you.

Perez: Yes. You had a different channel every time, whatever they were saying: Channel 1, Spanish; Channel 2, English; Channel 3, French; Channel 3, whatever. You know, they had that. But, yes, it was a lot of people. I don't remember what was the number, but it was just big. And it was, I think, so important that the president of Italy was there.

Rabkin: Wow.

Perez: Yes. I saw him there. So it's huge, yes.

Rabkin: What year was this that you went?

Perez: 2007.

Rabkin: Any particular ideas you can remember that you have actually applied, that you brought back from Terra Madre or that you're hoping to apply?

Perez: Apply? Raising my own animals: cattle, free-range chickens, pig. I really got a lot of notes on that I want to do. I'm leasing. I don't have a place. I want to

do it once I get the place. And just the marketing strategies that I'm incorporating already into the farmers' market: talking to restaurants, talking to customers. How to be a better sales person, or how to present your produce, present yourself.

Rabkin: Did you make any friendship or colleague kind of connections there that you still keep up?

Perez: When I was there, yes, from España. And then the delegates from California who went to—they're in Fresno, and they have their own farming, too. But at this point, no, I don't have any.

More Connections through ALBA

Rabkin: Talking about those kinds of relationships in general, obviously ALBA has been an enormously important connection for you.

Perez: That's true.

Rabkin: And I'm wondering if there are specific individuals in ALBA or other organizations or individuals who have been especially important in providing support or information for you as you've developed your business.

Perez: Yes. ALBA is well known, and they know what ALBA is doing and the farmers there. ALBA has put me out there. Like CAFF, "Buy Fresh Buy Local" guide. They helped us to be in the guide. That connection with CAFF, the connection with FarmLink, their connection with Cal[ifornia] Coastal Rural

Development [Corporation], their small lending business. They can lend you money. FarmLink—they can help me find the farm land to buy or to lease.

And schools that come by. That's how we got Stanford. A group of students came to the farm, and they talked to my dad and we told them, "Oh, we have a CSA." It was, like, "Oh, we want to start a CSA there, in our school." "Sure." And then they talked to me. So I think ALBA has really brought us out to the public.

Also the advertisement they did with the Steps to a Healthier Salinas. Have you heard we did a commercial?

Rabkin: No.

Perez: We did a commercial on Steps to a Healthier Salinas, where I talked about what I do, the farming and growing their own backyard produce, and just talking about health.

Rabkin: This was broadcast? Television, radio?

Perez: Television, English, Spanish, radio, all over the place. So it was big. It was big.

Rabkin: Who paid for that campaign?

Perez: It was through the Monterey County Health Department. I think they had, like, $3 million to do this big advertisement in Salinas. For everybody eating more healthy. Instead of getting a bag of chips, why not get an apple? Why not

get an orange? It wasn't talking organic or anything, but just fruits and vegetables: eat more healthy.

Rabkin: So this connection with Stanford was interesting because it sounds like it worked both ways: first, ALBA got you connected with the Stanford students who were interested in seeing your farm?

Perez: They came to the farm. They came to ALBA.

Rabkin: They came to ALBA. ALBA said—

Perez: Yes. And then—

Rabkin: —"Go to J & P."

Perez: No, they got a tour from the farm, and they [said], "Oh, we have a farmer here, we have farmer here, and we have J & P here, and we have another farmer here and here and here."

Rabkin: Oh, okay.

Perez: And then they stopped at our farm. Because first they [ALBA staff] ask the farmers, "Do you have time for a group of students? They want to learn from you." Some farmers don't have time for that. We always have time for them. We stop what we're doing, and we tell them, "Yes, sure. Why not?" We're open like that. I think that has helped us to get those more connections, because we take a little bit of our time to tell them, "Okay, this is what we're growing. This is how we harvest it. This is how we pack it." And they ask us, "How long have you

been doing this? Where do you sell?" and stuff like that. So there is where you got the word, CSA, out, and they got the Stanford students involved.

Rabkin: Great. So you ended up having an outlet for your CSA.

Perez: Yes, yes. At Stanford we have roughly a hundred members.

Rabkin: Great. Yes, that's a chunk of your total membership.

Perez: That's a chunk, yes, a chunk. And then at San Jose State, we have another seventy-five and eighty at this point, and it's growing.

FarmLink

Rabkin: Yes. Great. So you mentioned FarmLink. Are you working with them?

Perez: Yes. FarmLink has an IDA [individual development account] program. It's a three-to-one match program. This is my second year. I think a total of $10,000—$9,600. For two years, I had to put a hundred dollars a month, and then at the end of the two years, they gave me a check. It was like a saving plan, a check to buy a hard asset like a tractor. I'm going to use that money to buy another van so I can keep it going. So FarmLink has helped us a lot. Actually when I went to see the farms, Reggie Knox has been going with us and checking out the farm, and he's been asking questions and this and that.[5] We want to get good advice from him, because he's a person who knows a lot about spaces and farms.

Rabkin: So he can advise you both on choosing a piece of land and then also on the financing?

Perez: On the financing too.

Rabkin: Great. So FarmLink, you mentioned, and there was another one—

Perez: Cal Coastal?

Rabkin: Yes, tell me about that.

Perez: Cal Coastal. They're a really, really good, a small lending company. Last year, they lent us $38,000 to buy equipment. We bought two tractors. We bought another truck for the produce. We bought material, equipment and all that stuff for the farm, just for the farm. And also I got a computer, a printer and all that stuff, just for the business, to keep it going. So equipment and stuff like that, we bought. Yes, they let us borrow it, and we're just paying it back. They're really good, really good, yes.

Rabkin: And the full name is Cal Coastal—

Perez: It's California Coastal Rural Development Corporation.

Rabkin: So at the beginning, you mentioned being able to lease equipment from ALBA. It sounds like you're moving gradually toward owning more of your own equipment.

Perez: Right. At this point, we have two tractors, with equipment, but sometimes we lease from ALBA. Whatever equipment that we don't have, we lease from them. And it's really cheap. It's not bad. It's like, forty to fifty bucks for a couple of hours.

Rabkin: Yes. So those are organizations you have important relationships with. Are there individual farmers also that you have especially important support relationships with?

Perez: Yes. I work with ALBA farmers and also the Triple M farmers. You know the Triple M Ranch?

Rabkin: No, tell me about Triple M.

Perez: It's also known as ALBA, on a different farm. I kind of trade produce with them as well, to provide our CSA with more stuff. I talk to them and we work together.

Rabkin: They grow things that you don't grow?

Perez: Exactly. Yes, like, we don't grow fennel. Another firm has fennel. Or if I ran out of beets or if I don't have enough beets, I'll ask my neighbor, "Neighbor, can I get some beets from you or trade you some beets for your market?" or whatever, you know. Or berries. Sometimes we don't have enough strawberries, so we need to look for more strawberries in the ALBA, the Rural Development Center there, to get enough berries for our boxes.

Young Farmers

Rabkin: Yes. That sounds great. I want to move into bigger-picture stuff. I'm thinking about the fact that you are probably somewhat unusual in how young you are—

Perez: Yes.

Rabkin: —and that you are Mexican-American—

Perez: Correct.

Rabkin: —of this generation, making a go of it in owning your own farm business.

Perez: Yes.

Rabkin: And I'm curious about whether you know other Mexican-American farmers of your generation who are doing that.

Perez: Mmm, it's really hard—at my time or age, it's really hard. Good thing you brought that [up]. I got interviewed by Channel 46, KION, about students or people not wanting to be farmers no more. I guess that age or new generations—they're not interested in agriculture. I think they interviewed twenty elementary school students: "What do you want to be when you grow up?" "I want to be a policeman, lawyer, doctor, fireman, a businessman, a teacher." But none of them mentioned farmer. I don't know if we're losing the farm interest in this new generation that's come in.

Rabkin: So you're a rare bird in that way.

Perez: There's another farmer in ALBA, I just remembered. His name is Rigoberto. And he's around my age, too. I think he has an acre or a half-acre. He graduated from the program this past year. And he's farming, too, yes. But other than that, all of them are—yes, they're just regular farmers.

Rabkin: In that informal survey you were talking about, where they interviewed all the kids, do you know whether—were those kids whose parents do farm work?

Perez: Yes, some of them, yes.

Rabkin: So—

Perez: I guess their parents are telling their kids, "Go to school. I don't want you to come to the fields because it's hard work. I'm doing this because I need to bring some capital in or I need to get some money to pay for food or for rent," something like that. "This is only stuff I can do"—or the only thing they can do, you know, work out there, and so, "I don't want you to go through what I'm going [through] right now, so just go to school and be somebody else."

Rabkin: Yes.

Perez: Even though they're playing an important role as hard-working and all that stuff.

Rabkin: So if you were to meet, say, a high school student in Watsonville who thought they might be interested in doing what you're doing, what advice would you give them?

Perez: Hmm, that's a good question. [Chuckles.] Farming—it's hard work. If you have something in mind or a goal that you want to accomplish, you have to work hard for it. Just stick with it. Try your best. Get some help. And just go forward. Farming is hard. It's really hard. You're out there in the field, harvesting and all

that stuff, and selling. Agriculture is basically like a coin, a flip, a coin in there. If you hit it, you hit it. If you don't— Because we depend on it. For example, if we have a bad crop this year, where are we going to get our capital?

Rabkin: Yes.

Perez: See what I mean?

Rabkin: Yes.

Perez: So it's like a coin in the air. It's like a gamble type of thing.

Rabkin: Right.

Perez: If you're playing your cards and you play them good, and if you hit it, okay, you're good. But if you lose or anything like that, like, Uh-oh, now what? You know?

Rabkin: So you have to be someone who's willing to work really hard—

Perez: Yes.

Rabkin: —and you also have to be someone who has a certain tolerance for risk.

Perez: Yes, there's a lot of risk there, too. Because not a lot of banks will lend you money for ag. They want a crop plan. Where are you going to sell your product? They want a backup plan just in case something backfires, or something goes wrong. You have to [have] Plan B. Okay, this didn't go good, go to Plan B and make it work.

Rabkin: So "have a Plan B" is another piece of advice.

Perez: I think Plan B, just in case. Like, for us, as a small farmer, we don't want to plant all of our five acres [in] corn, right? What happens if something goes bad because we're depending on the corn? So that's why we have a little bit of everything. If the kale got infected with pests, okay we have the carrots, the roots, so we can depend on the carrots, and we disk the kale. Or if the beets went bad and we have the strawberries, we have the strawberries to back on. See what I mean?

Rabkin: Yes. What about education and training? You went the college route. Do you think that's important these days if you want to be a successful small farmer?

Perez: Yes.

Rabkin: Why?

Perez: I learned a lot through my internship. When I was in college, Monterey didn't have any agriculture classes. They didn't have any. I wanted to do something with agriculture, but they didn't have any. So all my knowledge, all my information, everything, I got from my internships, those three internships, three summers that I attended. Going to an agriculture school like Cal Poly or UC Davis, Fresno State, all that, big in ag, I think you would do really good. I think so. I wanted to go. I wanted to go to Fresno, check out the farming there, but I don't know if I'm going to be able to go back because I don't know if I have time.

Rabkin: Yes.

Perez: Right now, what I'm doing—I like it. I think I'm doing okay, and it's something that I like to do.

Rabkin: So you would tell this young person from Watsonville High School to get a college education.

Perez: Get a college education, because I have my degree in my back pocket just in case something goes wrong. I can rely on it. I can pull it out: Here, I have it.

Rabkin: So the degree, itself, is a kind of Plan B, in a way.

Perez: Exactly, yes. That's the way I see it. And also when I started into farming, I wanted to do something that my parents and my family were involved. I want them to be proud of something that we're doing together. And that was my other plan that I had, farming. My dad knows how to farm. My mom knows how to farm. They know how to grow. They know how to harvest. And I can drive it. I can do all the paperwork. I can do all the talking, like a sales person offering our product and all that stuff. So that was the other reason I decided to start a small farming operation.

More on ALBA

Rabkin: Yes. In what other ways has ALBA been important to your success?

Perez: The connections. They have connected us with CAFF, with FarmLink, with Cal Coastal, the Slow Food Nation, the Steps to a Healthier Salinas campaign, the farmers' market that's coming up. The other farmers' market that we're going to attend tomorrow, we got connected through ALBA. They said,

"Oh, there's another farmers' market in Oakland. Oh, let's call J & P." They called me, and they said, "Oh, there's a farmers' market if you're interested." That market was also mentioned not only to me, but to all the farmers there at the monthly meeting. It was mentioned there, if anybody was interested in doing a farmers' market on Tuesdays in Oakland, and I was like, "Well, I have the CSA delivery over there in San Jose, and Stanford, so I think I can do it." So I applied and, yes, I got in. So in those ways, ALBA has played an important role.

Rabkin: So they make sure that you get connected with all the opportunities and all the support that's available to you.

Perez: Correct.

Rabkin: Yes, yes, great.

Perez: And also ALBA Organics is part of ALBA. They buy our product. So they're supporting us too, there. They're buying some of our stuff, not all of it, but some of it, and that's good because we don't want to depend on ALBA Organics. We have our own customers. That's another outlet for our product.

Rabkin: So it sounds like that organization really has made it possible for small farmers like you to get a start in business.

Perez: Yes. It's like the little kick start.

Visions for the Future

Rabkin: My last question was going to be about hopes and plans for the future of your farm, and you've already actually talked a good bit about the ways that you're thinking of expanding.

Perez: Yes.

Rabkin: Is there anything about that that we haven't touched on, anything you want to add to your visions and hopes?

Perez: My goal and vision is to have the whole operation—have my cooler, have my office, have chickens for the eggs, cows for the milk, the pigs for the meat, orchards, orchard trees. I want apples, pears, nectarines, plums, cherries, apricots—the whole thing. I want the farm to be open to the public. They can come whenever they want, in season. They can go to the trees and pick them themselves, have a little basket, put it in there, you know? Pick your own strawberries. And have the whole thing to offer to our members and to the public, to the farmers' markets. You know, have the whole thing going up.

Rabkin: Wow. Have you seen any other farms that look to you like a model of what you want to do?

Perez: Honestly, I haven't.

Rabkin: With that much diversity, with all the orchard crops and the animals and the row crops and—

Perez: Yes. I know that Gizdich Ranch—they have something similar.[6] You know, they do berries, and they do pies, I think, or something like that?

Rabkin: Yes, apples too.

Perez: Apples too.

Rabkin: And they have a U-Pick.

Perez: And the U-Picks. Honestly, I haven't been to their farm, so I don't know how they have it, but I've heard about it. But that's something that I want to do in the next five, ten years.

Rabkin: Great. J. P., is there anything we haven't talked about that you'd like to touch on, aspects of your farm or your business that I haven't asked you about that would be worth saying something about?

Perez: We talked about the CSA, the farmers' markets, the wholesale, the cut flowers, delivery to farmers' markets, office work.

Other Organic Farming Methods

Rabkin: Oh, I know. There's a couple of things that I really didn't ask you at all about in terms of more technical stuff on the farm, like whether you have particular serious pest problems that are a continuing challenge.

Perez: Yes. I kind of mentioned it a little bit with the flowers. Like, what not to plant in the summer and plant in the winter. We have a lot of trouble right now with the aphids. They love the broccoli, they love the kale, they love the cabbage—you know, anything you do—[makes sound]—they just attack it. And what we noticed through the years is that broccoli, kale, cabbage—you can grow them all year round, so we like to put them in the winter because they're not

tolerant to the cold weather—the aphids, the bug, is not tolerant to cold weather. So we can grow really good stuff in the winter. Right now, we have kale and we have chard and all that stuff, and right now, it's infested with the pest. We're going to disk it and put something else there because it's really bad.

The flowers—we use them to attract the beneficials—the ladybugs into the flowers, and also use them as cut flowers for sale. They help a lot.

Also, a little bit of the problem we have is gophers.

Rabkin: Ohh! How do you deal with those?

Perez: We trap them. We have traps, with those little hooks and put them in there.

Rabkin: And have you been able to keep them pretty well in control with the traps?

Perez: Yes. My dad—he's really good at catching them. He catches them all the time. And he feeds the birds, whatever are out there. He just throws it out in the road, and an owl or an eagle or a hawk can come by and eat it.

Rabkin: Great. You've talked about growing flowers as a way to bring in beneficial insects. Do you have other systems that you use for controlling pests like that? Do you use hedgerows or something like that?

Perez: Hedgerows? We do have hedgerows. We have windbreaks, too. The farm has windbreaks. The hedgerows work pretty good. We try not to use a lot of water. We probably water every other day or even twice a week because we

don't want a lot of weeds growing. And we don't use any sprinklers, due to the runoff. And we save a lot of water using drip tape. What else? Yes, we try to rotate—the crop-rotation type of thing, just in case something's bad there, this other crop can take care of it.

Rabkin: What do you use for inputs? Are you using compost?

Perez: Oh, yes, we're using cover crops and compost. This past winter we used ten tons of compost in one acre. It gives good results. The more nutrients you put in the soil, the best production you get. We use cover crops for the winter. Sometimes we have an acre or two empty, so we use a cover crop, and when it's ready we just prepare it.

Rabkin: Where are you getting your compost?

Perez: Compost? Called Comgro, in Spreckels. It's certified organic, and it's good. The cover crop is seeds. We just throw the seeds out in the field, and they grow. We water it.

Rabkin: And you're using a mix?

Perez: Mix. I think it's fava beans—it's just a mixture of a bunch of stuff that—really good nutrients for the soil, yes.

Rabkin: So you have some legumes and some grass-type things?

Perez: Legumes, grass types, yes.

Rabkin: And do you use any organic-certified pesticide applications?

Perez: We try to use this soap, but it seems like it's not working. [Chuckles.] You can find it at OSH [Orchard Supply]. It's a Safer soap. I don't know if you heard of it, Safer soap. It's approved by the organic program, OMRI [Organic Materials Research Institute.] We tried it, but it seemed like there's too much pests, too much infested. But we try not to use any materials at all. We try to keep it as more natural. We use organic fertilizer, fish. That's also certified by the organic program. That works pretty good. We try to apply it every two weeks. That one is good, too. But rather than that, we try not to use any materials in our crops. We try to keep it as mostly natural as we can. And if it's really bad and we can't control it, before it jumps to another crop we just disk it, just go through with the tractor and we're done.

Rabkin: Yes. Cut your losses.

Perez: Exactly. [Laughs.]

Rabkin: Yes. Great. Okay. Anything else, J. P.?

Perez: No, I think we got everything.

Rabkin: Great. Well, thank you so much.

Perez: Thank you.

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[1]Perez confirmed with the editors that he was laughing because his dad has come full circle, but now with his son running the farm.
[2]See the oral histories with Maria Inés Catalan, Maria Luz Reyes and Florentino Collazo, and Rebecca Thistlethwaite for more on the Agriculture & Land-Based Training Association.
[3]See http://www.foodcommunityculture.org/
[4] See http://www.everyonesharvest.org/
[5] See the oral history with Reggie Knox in this series.
[6] See http://www.gizdich-ranch.com/index.php