

# UC Santa Cruz

## Cultivating A Movement

### Title

Barney Bricmont, Founder, California Certified Organic Farmers

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## Barney Bricmont



### Founder, California Certified Organic Farmers

*The first oral history we conducted for this project was with Bernard “Barney” Bricmont. On March 7, 2007, Ellen Farmer set up her recording equipment on the very same kitchen table where, in 1973, six organic farmers founded the California Certified Organic Farmers (CCOF). An earlier, one-year effort by Rodale to create a certification program for organic farmers had floundered, and Bricmont called farmers together to form a statewide organization. However, most of the farmers were too busy to take on this task and Bricmont decided to administer CCOF from his Santa Cruz home. He served as founding vice president the first two years, and then became president of the organization from 1975 to 1985. Many of our narrators acknowledged the critical contribution of Bricmont’s generous volunteer work in the founding of the organic movement on the Central Coast of California.*

*Barney Bricmont was born in 1938 in San Jose, California, long before the valley turned from growing fruit to becoming a center for high technology. He learned to farm from his aunt, who owned an apple orchard in Saratoga and was “a Rodale Press, Prevention Magazine enthusiast.” Forty years ago, Bricmont and his wife bought two acres of land in Live Oak, California (an*

unincorporated community in Santa Cruz County, adjacent to Santa Cruz). They grew plant starts in 3000 square feet of greenhouse space and organic salad greens for the actress Carol Channing. Bricmont has worked as an independent irrigation contractor since 1975.

Bricmont helped start the very first (post WWI) farmers' market in the Central Coast, at Live Oak Elementary School in 1975. His position on the school board of the Live Oak school district offered an advantage in securing the support for the farmers' market, as well the first Life Lab school garden, a project that has blossomed into national prominence and is well documented elsewhere in this oral history series. He worked closely with California State Assemblymember Sam Farr on the California Organic Foods Act of 1979.

Bricmont's dedicated career as a community organizer spans organizations as diverse as the Santa Cruz Democratic Central Committee, the California School Boards Association, the Friends of the Library, and the Cultural Council of Santa Cruz County.

#### Additional Resources

History of California Certified Organic Farmers (CCOF): [http://www.ccof.org/history\\_mr.php](http://www.ccof.org/history_mr.php)

**Farmer:** Today is Wednesday, March 7, 2007, and I'm interviewing Barney Bricmont for the Regional History Project on sustainable agriculture.

**Bricmont:** Welcome.

**Farmer:** Thank you. Let's start with basic questions, like where were you born and where did you grow up?

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## Early Influences

**Bricmont:** San Jose, California. I was born there in 1938. Raised in San Jose until senior year in high school. Then we moved to Campbell. I lived in San Jose for a while when I got married, but then moved over here [to Santa Cruz] forty years ago, and have been here ever since.

**Farmer:** And this is your property?

**Bricmont:** This is my property.

**Farmer:** How big is it?

**Bricmont:** It's a two-acre parcel. I'm fortunate to have bought when I did, a long time ago. Homes in this area now are just outrageous. Fell in love with Santa Cruz, and got involved with it, and stayed.

**Farmer:** And was your family ever involved in farming?

**Bricmont:** None that I had personal contact with. My father was born on a ranch in Campbell. But he was a young man, or a young boy that was transplanted back to Europe at that point. My grandfather had ten acres of grapes over in Campbell, and left because of Prohibition. He got upset with the country so he sold the ranch, packed the whole family and went back to Europe, Belgium, and then finally settled in Bordeaux, France.

**Farmer:** Oh. So your father grew up there.

**Bricmont:** My father was sixteen years old when he arrived over there, and he moved back here with his wife, and pregnant with me sixteen years later. They moved back to the United States in '38 just prior to the invasion of France from Germany.

**Farmer:** So then how did you get into farming?

**Bricmont:** Well, probably some of the influence was during our teenage years in San Jose. It was an agricultural valley. There were trees, orchards all over. As kids we picked 'cots and prunes, and cut 'cots. So we were on ranches. We were city kids, my brother and I, but we went out and did these kinds of jobs during the summer. Got a little taste of the openness. Of course the valley was pretty open in those days and we had a lot of roaming space.

Then, somewhere in the very early sixties, my aunt bought a parcel up in Saratoga, a piece of land up there that had an existing apple orchard on it that was pretty well run down. It hadn't been maintained for years. I went up with her, and she was the one who was really a Rodale Press, *Prevention Magazine* enthusiast. That's where I started my organic base of knowledge: maintaining an orchard, finding out how to take care of it, spray it, during the dormant sprays, in the mountains up there, and took care of those. That gave me my connection to organic farming.

I've never really been a farmer, other than I've had three thousand square feet of greenhouse here, and a big garden. But I've never been an actual production farmer. I've just been an organizer all my life.

**Farmer:** I see. So the apple orchard, did you bring it back to health in organic ways?

**Bricmont:** We got it to produce again. Both the orchard and I were learning at the same time. So it was a slow process. But it did improve, and we did get crops off of it. That lasted a few years, and then I had to move on to work for life, and there were some other things that got in the way.

**Farmer:** Did your aunt continue on with it for a long time?

**Bricmont:** She had the property for a while longer, yes, and then moved on to some other property.

**Farmer:** All right. So generally, what does sustainable agriculture mean to you?

**Bricmont:** Well, personally, what it has meant to me is that we are stewards of the soil, of the earth, and that we leave it in better condition than we took it. And that we feed ourselves with that land, but not mine it, continue improving it, developing it as a resource. I just caught that whole thing and wanted to keep doing it. And got involved with CCOF, but also later on I was on the school board, and talked about developing a program in the schools, and Life Lab<sup>1</sup> came out of that. That's still around. Classrooms have growing gardens, and it's spread all over the country, and it's actually got a write-up in a magazine from Russia, one class from there, a school over there took it up. So just educating people where their food comes from, got involved in that whole process.

## Starting Certified Farmers' Markets in the 1970s

**Farmer:** Didn't you say something about starting a farmers' market, also?<sup>2</sup>

**Bricmont:** Oh, that was another project, yes. Several of us started working on the idea of a farmers' market. And because I was on the school board at Live Oak, I got the board to agree to hold the market at Live Oak School, the elementary school in Live Oak. We ran into the difficulty of the state laws. State laws would not allow farmers to sell off their property. They could only have fruit stands on their property to sell their product. But they couldn't go off their land and sell their products directly to the consumer. They had to go to wholesalers through the big markets.

**Farmer:** Do you think that was a food safety issue, or what was that about?

**Bricmont:** I don't know why it originally came about that way. All I know is that we had to get some legislation. And that's why you have a certified farmers' market now. The state came in, and certifies that the products are certified by the state that they're grown by this person. They want control over who sells at a market. Which is fine, that only growers are at the farmers' markets.

So what happened is we got that cleared up. Then we opened up a market in Salinas. At that point I was growing in my greenhouse, houseplants. I was selling start-up plants, tomato plants, beginning plants, selling them in Live Oak and then selling them down in Salinas. There would be a Saturday market in Live Oak, and a Sunday market in Salinas. We used to drive down to Salinas every Sunday morning and set up shop down there.

## Cooperative Food Distribution

And at the same time the wife and I did a little a cooperative food distribution out of here. One of the producers in the organization was a farmer in Watsonville that grew lettuce and shipped it only during the summertime, because during the winter it was flooded. Carol Channing was one of his customers, the actress comedian, and he couldn't manage to get any winter crops for her. So through some negotiations and correspondence and so forth, I built my first greenhouse, she funded my first greenhouse, to build it so that we could grow lettuces in there to produce during the winter for her during the off season. We used to ship to her every week, lettuce, all over the states. If she was out of the country we'd ship it to Hollywood and her person down there would pick it up and re-ship it to wherever she was.

**Farmer:** So this is when she was doing stage plays.

**Bricmont:** Stage plays and whatever. It would just follow her around. Then one of the other growers, one of the other people involved, was a dairy goat [farmer]. Well, in those days there was no raw goat's milk on the market and there was no process to get into it, so we used to sell the bottled milk in the stores as pet food so that we could get around the antiquated laws about getting raw goat's milk to consumers. It was just different kinds of activities. I always liked organizing people, getting things going, things happening. That was one of the little forays we had.

**Farmer:** Was the demand, say from Carol Channing and so forth, for natural foods really important to you?



**Bricmont:** It was important to her. I was already organic at that point, and could fit in her needs. She needed a certain product, and she needed it organically grown. We were already organic and we were part of the group. So that request went out to the group. Nobody else wanted it and nobody else wanted to do it. So we decided we'd take it on. Just little things that happened here and there that kept us in the industry and kept us involved.

### **Working with Sam Farr on the California Organic Foods Bill (1990)**

When we finally got to the point where we were organized at this level, here, locally, then I took, with a couple other people, but mainly myself and Sam Farr<sup>3</sup>, who was assemblyman in those days, went to Sacramento and wrote the first organic food bill, which took a couple of years of commuting to Sacramento. It seems like I'm still doing that for education now. It's kind of a habit. I've been going up there for a long time. (laughter)

**Farmer:** They recognize you.

**Bricmont:** (laugh) Yes.

**Farmer:** So the organic foods bill was important. Why?

**Bricmont:** Mainly because there was no line in the sand. Originally we went on our own code of ethics. But we had no way to control the industry. Anybody could just slap a label "organic," because organic meant nothing, there was no legal definition. At that point we were running across people who were just chemically growing, and labeling the food organic and selling it. We knew we had to clean up the industry. We knew what we were doing as a group. But then

the outside world was not cooperating. So we decided we needed to draw a line in the sand that said: on this side of the line you're organic; on the other side you're not. That's why we ended up doing it. It became a survival thing. The fact is that we couldn't compete with the chemical growers, price-wise or anything else. Those were the days when organic produce really [cost more than] regular produce. Now it's more competitive. But in those days, it was not competitive and the product didn't look that good. We had a lot of inside education to produce crops that were clean and looked good. That was part of educating ourselves, and also getting out there and protecting ourselves.

### **California Certified Organic Farmers [CCOF]**

**Farmer:** So part of the education process among yourselves is why there was a trade association, or a group that started meeting?

**Bricmont:** Right. The reason why we started meeting originally was with Rodale Press coming in and helping us start a state organization. That fell apart. It was just too big for one individual to operate. The reason why we started meeting around here, around this very same table [where the interview was taking place], is that we wanted to develop some standards. We wanted it to mean something. So we decided we would just keep it going, but just locally. And then FOG [Farmers Organic Group of Sonoma County], which was the first organic food group up in Sebastopol, was meeting and doing their thing too, about marketing. They heard about us doing certification. They contacted us. We went up. We started working together. And eventually we developed a process of developing chapters. That was the second chapter. The first chapter was here. The second

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chapter was there. Then it grew from there. It was just a bunch of us getting together wanting to protect what we felt was the proper way to produce food that would sustain the planet, sustain the earth, the earth that we work in and the earth we live in.

**Farmer:** And that was around the beginning of Earth Day and the environmental [movement]. So this was a parallel process?

**Bricmont:** Yes. Well, there was probably some crossover with ideologies and so forth. Most of the people that I worked with and who worked together were farmers. I just somehow decided that that was what I wanted to take on as a cause. So I went in that direction, spent all my time there.<sup>4</sup> I did some other activities, but I wasn't organizing or working with any of the other—I'd show up at activities and things like that. I was a participant but not a leader in the other areas. I had the school board and this going, and then working for a living. Just a small detail, that I had to maintain some sort of livelihood (laughter). So that was as much as I could encompass then.

There was a point where I also expanded into a group called Riptide or USA [United Services Agency], which was an umbrella corporation in Santa Cruz that developed a recycling center, the Women's Health Collective, the General Feed and Seed—all of the cooperatives, a lot of them started under the umbrella of Riptide, which was incorporated as a nonprofit, but it was an organization that allowed people to do a startup and have a legitimate umbrella to hang under. Then when they were strong enough, and organized enough, they would develop their own organization.

**Farmer:** So like an incubator.

**Bricmont:** Yes. It was producing these little tiny groups, and eventually the Ecology Center turned into quite an organization on its own.

**Farmer:** Ecology Action?

**Bricmont:** Yes. I can't remember the whole list of [organizations]. General Feed and Seed was part of that.

**Farmer:** Was CCOF?

**Bricmont:** No. CCOF was not a worker organization, not a business. It was basically a farmer organization. Everybody was independent.

**Farmer:** And it was all-volunteer at that time.

**Bricmont:** Yes, it was all-volunteer. In those days I was the volunteer staff. That was it. There was no one else.

**Farmer:** And this was your spare time when you weren't taking care of your plants and—

**Bricmont:** Well, I wasn't taking care of the stuff here. I worked in San Jose. I commuted over the hill for quite a while.

**Farmer:** Whew! That's a lot.

**Bricmont:** It did take up a lot of my time, yes. But I'm proud of that footprint that I left, and it's still going strong and looks good.

## Farming in Live Oak

**Farmer:** So do you know the history of this particular piece of land here?

**Bricmont:** No, the people we bought it from lived in Petaluma. It was a rental for them. I don't know if they were the ones that built it. I never got that story. It was pretty much slum landlord. From what I understand, before my wife and I saw it they had to clean eighteen cars off the property. It was just a junk pile.

**Farmer:** Oh. So when you had the greenhouses it didn't have anything to do with the soil in the ground. Or did you create soil for your starts?

**Bricmont:** We rehabilitated the soil and brought it to life. There're some boxes that I have in my garden now that we started thirty-five years ago. The boxes have been rebuilt, because all of my garden is raised beds and boxes with wire underneath. I have one acre of riparian corridor which is a condo for gophers. They just keep wanting to come in all the time, so we have to keep them out of it. The greenhouse we grew on the ground, although later on we grew above the ground, and benches for plants. But yes, it was a rehabilitation. It was a project. We were living in San Jose and we found this place and it was well within in our price range. It took a lot of work. We put a lot of sweat equity into it, because it was just— It took seventeen loads to the dump just to get into the house.

**Farmer:** Oof!

**Bricmont:** So we put a lot of sweat equity into it, and now I have a million dollars worth of property, but in those days it was a dump so we were able to get it and work our way up.

**Farmer:** Will you pass this onto your children or someone else?

**Bricmont:** Well, I have a daughter who is trying to put some time into gardening and stuff. The organizing part, the activist part—she's been exposed to it all of her life. I haven't seen it with her, although she does some volunteer work. I can only hope that it will pass on. Nobody in particular that I can lay the responsibility to. It seems like a lot of groups have taken over some of the areas and have done well with them. It's just that we had just the one daughter, so there's not a whole group of people to— There're not a lot of resources other than her. But she's been well aware of what her father's been doing.

**Farmer:** Yes. So it sounds to me that the activism part is much more what you think of as the legacy, rather than the land itself here and this property.

**Bricmont:** Well, the property itself— We'll never leave the property. She lives only a half a block away. She does not want this property sold either. She was born and raised here. She's going to keep the property, yes. The activism part? Maybe when she gets better established and is through playing.

**Farmer:** How old is she now?

**Bricmont:** She's thirty-two.

**Farmer:** So did you hire labor to work with your plants when you were actively growing plant starts?

**Bricmont:** No, I did it all myself.

**Farmer:** And now you are renting it to somebody?

**Bricmont:** I'm renting the greenhouses out. I lease those out and some other additional space in the back to a landscaper. It's too much for me. I have a hard enough time keeping up with the garden. I'm still on the school board, and I run a nonprofit also. There's a bunch of other things I'm doing. I feel as long as I'm active in the community, that's more important than spending all my time in the garden.

**Farmer:** But I do see the organic farm sign out by the driveway.

**Bricmont:** It's still there.

**Farmer:** And that's promoting organics, I would say.

**Bricmont:** Oh, yes. Yes. The sign is still there. It's been up there for a long time. As a matter of fact, I was just looking at it. I think we need to do a little touch up on it, and clean the surface up and re-seal it. But yes, that sign will be there for a while yet. I'm sure my daughter will leave it up after I'm gone. It's just part of the history of this area.

**Farmer:** Yes. You can add "established in" on the sign.

**Bricmont:** (laughter)

### **More on CCOF**

**Farmer:** (laughter) So, could we go back to the beginnings of CCOF and talk a little bit about the atmosphere, like how people got along?

**Bricmont:** Sure.

**Farmer:** And the personal relations, how much time people had to devote to the organization, and so forth.

**Bricmont:** Well, it was a pretty small group, what is now the big group. It started off as six people around this table. We worked together pretty well. We all had the same goal in mind. It was a congenial group. We got together a few times socially. We would just meet here, start deciding how we would do it, and hashing out all of the processes. It's the hard part, and you can only do that with a small group of dedicated people. Because any organization starting, it's all the background organizational stuff that is a real pain for most people. And trying to put that together, how you would get tested, how you were going to check on people— Because we were doing that before the law. We were checking the growers. We had to have a way of inspecting. All those things took meeting after meeting to [decide]. And everybody was ready to put the effort into it. There're a few others still around, like Jerry Thomas.<sup>5</sup> There're just a few around left from that group. I think some of them moved on in the area, and then some of them died. So there's a whole mix of reasons why we don't get together any more.

**Farmer:** That was the late sixties, early seventies?

**Bricmont:** CCOF started in 1973, basically. So it was in that period of time that we started that whole process. There were a few of us that knew each other before then that were kind of a loose-knit group of people that got together.

**Farmer:** And you were contacted by Rodale?



**Bricmont:** Well, you know I've got a vague memory of that. That was really strange. We were already— I'm not sure. I really don't remember. I remember the first meeting in San Luis Obispo that Rodale Press was there. And our first state meeting was in Fresno, and our first election to start the organization. Then that lasted for a year, until we just could not handle, on a volunteer basis, the whole state.

**Farmer:** Without a computer.

**Bricmont:** (laughter) Yes. So that's when it collapsed. Rodale just got involved in one year, gave us some seed money to get started. Farmers are a very independent group. Getting them organized was a strain, and getting them to do things besides farming— It's pretty much a full time, or more than that, 120 percent of their time in farming. So it was hard to get them to do things like I do, which is organizing. So what happened is that the state[wide organization] literally folded. I said, "No, it's moving here," kept it going. I called in people from the north, central, and south, and brought them in here. We had a meeting right around this table and said, "All right. You in the central, you go back and start an organization in the mid-state, and then start one in the north and south." They promptly went home and did nothing. They all agreed to do it, but—

**Farmer:** Easier said than done.

**Bricmont:** It wasn't that they weren't willing or didn't want something to go. It was just too much for them to be an organizer. It wasn't the right group. So I just kept it going here. Once Sebastopol got in, then we went to the Davis area. Then it started developing as an organization.

**Farmer:** Would you say that the people who got involved in all those different parts of the state had mid- to small-sized farms, so they were doing a lot of the work themselves?

**Bricmont:** Yes.

**Farmer:** And do you think a lot of them hired labor at that time, or was it that they tried to do it themselves?

**Bricmont:** A lot of them tried to do it themselves. Some of them had hired labor. I'm trying to remember. This is going back in the archives here. A lot of them had communes. That was not unusual, a group of people working together on a ranch.

**Farmer:** A collective.

**Bricmont:** A collective, or whatever you want to call it. Some of the bigger ones had established commercial farms that were doing partly organic. They did hire laborers. They did have big operations.

**Farmer:** They had their foot in both worlds.

**Bricmont:** Yes. The Lundbergs. Rice growers. Big operation. Particularly compared with the rest of us at the beginning. They were the biggest in the group, size-wise.

**Farmer:** But they had an interest in maintaining the organic standards and so forth.

**Bricmont:** Yes.

**Farmer:** Then what were you saying about part of the reason for starting CCOF was to make sure the market stayed clean. You mentioned the big competition coming in.

**Bricmont:** Well, it wasn't as much the big corporations. They weren't interested. They were doing their thing and doing it fine. But there were some larger growers, what we would consider mid-sized growers, who saw an opportunity to pick up some extra money, and would encroach, label their stuff wrong as far as we were concerned. In those days it was not illegal.

**Farmer:** But that's what you made it: illegal.

### More on the First Organic Foods Bill

**Bricmont:** Yes. One of the things you can compare it to was when in the first year of writing the law we spent a tremendous amount of time on defining what *organic* meant, and we included the word *natural* as part of the group of names that you could label it that would fit into that description. Del Monte Corporation had in a lawyer there all the time covering their backside, so that they refused to let any bill— They wanted to keep the label *natural* out of the picture. They wanted to save that. And they did. We finally had to agree to leave it out of the description, and pass the bill the second year. You can see that label all over the country now and it means *nothing*.

**Farmer:** Natural means nothing. Isn't that too bad. (laughs)

**Bricmont:** Yes. We tried. But they were protective of that, because they saw the marketing of it. They saw it. I mean, that was back in those days, they saw it. They covered their backside, and they wanted it to be used for *them*. I can understand why they did it. We just didn't have enough power in those days to— We were a pretty small group. We were specialized in the area, and when we did testimony in Sacramento, I mean, here I am, just an ordinary working guy, up there presenting this package, and I've got suits presenting the opposition who are being paid hundreds of dollars an hour to sit there and present the case. They are pretty skilled compared to me. We still struggled, and still pushed, and did succeed. But we weren't a hundred percent successful.

**Farmer:** Well, but I do think that it says something about the marketing that you were able to do, that people were interested in buying organic.

**Bricmont:** Oh, yes.

**Farmer:** How did you do that? How did the group get more customers?

### Food Distribution

**Bricmont:** Well, a lot of us were already marketing on our own. A lot of the growers were delivering to stores like, what was it, Mountain Community Store?  
6[ Some of the stores aren't around any more.

**Farmer:** Community Foods.<sup>7</sup>

**Bricmont:** Community Foods. Shopper's Corner. I can only relate to the fact that at one time there was a grower down in Carmel Valley, the Wolters<sup>8</sup>, that wanted

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to sell to Safeway. They just wanted to deliver to Safeway, right to their local store. They had to ship it to Oakland and then get it shipped back. That was the old days standard. Now Safeway, we could go right to the store now.

**Farmer:** Really?

**Bricmont:** Yes. Each manager has the option now. But in those days, no. Everything had to go to the central and go back out. The uniformity. See, that's what happens when you've got this large conglomerate. They want the consumer to see the same thing no matter where they go. It's the presentation. This is what you get when you walk into any Safeway.

**Farmer:** So it's about the Safeway marketing as much as it's about the actual farmer that creates the pepper, or whatever it is.

**Bricmont:** Yes. They wanted to make sure everybody had an equal share and everything else. Because we were working with individual stores, that was what we were able to sell, that way.

**Farmer:** And so did you work that out as a group, or did each farmer just have their individual relationships?

**Bricmont:** Each farmer had his own relationship. We were not a marketing group. We were a certification group. We were certifying that this product was grown according to *our* standards.

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## Marketing

The ones that were marketing as a group was FOG, up in Sebastapol. They were a marketing group. And they decided they wanted to join us because we had already set up the certification process, and they didn't want to go through it again.

**Farmer:** So they just wanted to accept yours?

**Bricmont:** Yes. So we worked together and built up by-laws. We designed a system of developing chapters, because at that point we were only a single chapter. We were the state organization. And so, how do we get them organized? How do we do this? That process took a little while. But then they started. They got going. Then we had a product that could be duplicated, and then chapters started.

**Farmer:** So it was a self-regulating group that turned into lobbying for a state law.

**Bricmont:** Yes. Eventually we got big enough that we could say, "Look, we've got enough people involved in this. We have enough standing in the community that we can ask for a certain level of quality."

**Farmer:** Yes. And also you got paid attention to in a certain way in Sacramento.

**Bricmont:** Yes. We were fortunate to have a very forward-thinking assemblyman, Sam Farr. That helped immensely. He and I have had this relationship going on for a long time. He's our congressman now.

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## The Future of Sustainable Agriculture, Energy Independence, Water Issues

**Farmer:** So what is your vision for the future of sustainable agriculture in this region?

**Bricmont:** (sigh) Well, one of the things that I'd like to see is the whole community, the community of California, look at the fact of where we are using petroleum products. We need to reduce our demand of petroleum products now. I think we've come to the realization that we are hooked on this drug. How can we sustain a viable agricultural state without having to go outside for energy or chemicals to keep it going? It's a whole environmental issue, but it's also an energy issue, where we get all this stuff. I went into the store the other day and bought grapes from Chile. The amount of energy that's used to get the grapes here is just unbelievable. We can't grow grapes here during the winter. If you want those selections you've got to pay [for] it. But I'd like to have us as a state not have to use more energy than necessary. I think it could be part of the whole solar, photovoltaics, wind, energy consumption reduction process in the state. One of the areas where we use a lot is non-food production, although strawberries are considered food. But we dump a lot of chemicals in our ground with them. And the water resources have got to pass through that system. So we contaminate the water. That whole awareness of our state to becom[ing] green is where I'd like to see [agriculture] go, too. I'd like to see [green values] be really standard for all of agriculture, not just for the organic movement.

**Farmer:** So energy independence. That's a whole other tack to take in going organic.

**Bricmont:** Yes, that is another tack to take. And, you know, our next big war, or our next big issue, is water. It's not oil. We will come up with a solution for oil. But we can't come up with a solution for water.

I think with proper planning and cooperation we can have the organic food movement here in this area forever. Very European attitude of farm around a village, provide food. In France they went through two world wars, where my family, the other half of my family lives. They maintain farmland around every community now, because they were used to getting a lot of stuff from Africa. And then when the wars came about they had no source. They realized they have to support their farming industry around the villages so that they can have food close at hand.

**Farmer:** There's a food security movement now. Are you familiar with that?

**Bricmont:** I'm not familiar with that, no.

**Farmer:** It's new to my ear. It's a similar idea, I think, the ability to feed yourselves locally. So do you see that as a matter of public concern, preserving farmland?

**Bricmont:** I believe it will get stronger.

**Farmer:** And this has to do with the water, too.



**Bricmont:** It has to do with the water. But it also has to do with fresh food being available. I think the energy crisis will start slowing down the ability to move food from all over the world, particularly fresh food. I understand grains can get shipped pretty cheaply. But when you're talking grapes, or strawberries, or berries—those things have got to be moved fast.

**Farmer:** Do you think there's any opportunity for, say, using greenhouses in other kinds of climates, like up north in Canada and places where it gets really cold, for them to grow their own local, fresh food?

**Bricmont:** Well, one of the things that I've always been frustrated with—I've always followed energy, and been involved in that alternative situation—is we have a power plant at Moss Landing. We pump the waste heat out into the bay and that's how we get rid of it. Perfectly good farmland around it. It would be very similar to what you see in Holland, and in France and Belgium. They have the power plant, and right next to it are greenhouses. They use the waste heat to go through the greenhouse.

**Farmer:** And there's nothing toxic in that? It's just heat.

**Bricmont:** It's just heat. We've got these towers with the vapors going up there. That's steam. They're trying to vent some— And then the other heat they can't do that way, they just pump fresh seawater in and pump warm water out, to use it as cooling. I don't understand why all of that is not used within the community. It's an energy source that's just being dissipated. It could be in the greenhouses, and used to produce crops year round in a controlled environment, without having to spend a lot of money for energy. So I see more of what they

call cogeneration or cooperative work with these in the future. I hope to see more of that. I think we might mature enough to do that.

**Farmer:** Do you have ideas for water?

**Bricmont:** Well, we're playing with a couple of ideas, and they've had an article in the paper. A friend of mine was involved with it. But we've been playing around with an old system that we don't do anymore, and that's cisterns. Catching all of the rainwater off our roofs, and putting it into storage, and then using that water for the summertime, it could be easily done. It's not cheap. I do drainage work for homes as a professional. It can be done. Every backyard could have a tank underground. The whole idea is you don't have much footprint anymore. So what you do is you put it underground. You store it. As a community, do we let the water run off into the bay, or do we capture it? That's a question we may have to answer. They're trying to address it in a manner that they try to get it to percolate back underground. The issue is that you've got all this paving, and now you have grease traps in all the parking lots now. They want it to go into the ground if they can. They want surfaces that are permeable, in other words, walkways where the rainwater will go through and drop down into the soil. But we [need] a lot of cleanup of that product before we can get into the ground, because that gutter water is really dirty because it's got so much oil in it. Oil dripping on the road. There's got to be a way of using that water again, keeping it within the system, and storing it. Generally what you can do is if you capture the roof water and put that in a holding tank, that just puts that much less out in the street. And then it means less of a project for the city to handle the rest of it.

**Farmer:** So you divide it up.

**Bricmont:** Yes. I worked on a house, and it was not below the grade. The house was on a hillside. They had a shortage of water in the well. They had a large property. They wanted to irrigate it, but their well ran dry every year and they used to have to truck water up all the time. I think he put up three tanks finally. But he just ran all the roof water, all of it into tanks during the winter, and was able to do almost all the gardening water all year without running the well dry.

We're going to do all kinds of things of things to keep water going. We presently only have the source within our county. We don't pipe water in. I used to work for San Jose Waterworks in San Jose. And their water came in from the Sierras, the American River, and into reservoirs and into filter plants, and then also into percolation ponds and put it back in the soil. Now, there's a story that goes back to the farming days. They used to pump the water out. When my father was a kid, there was an artesian well on the property in Campbell. The water table went from zero, to some parts of the valley were down six hundred feet.

**Farmer:** Wow.

**Bricmont:** It had dropped that much. They had a sign that that was happening, and they were starting to worry about it, so they developed a water conservation district and water import. They brought water in from the American River. That was a big project. Piped it in. But because it went from agricultural to residential, the demand for water dropped. Because agriculture in those days when we were kids—flood irrigation. There were lakes all over. They were just pumping it up like there was no tomorrow. When you go to residential it drops down

considerably and you can do a lot more control. They've been pumping water in the ground for years now, with the percolation ponds. The water table now is at six feet.

**Farmer:** So it can change. It can improve.

**Bricmont:** It can improve, with good management. But we are relying on the water from somewhere else to bring it in, because we were using so much of it.

**Farmer:** And the snowpack becomes important.

**Bricmont:** The snowpack becomes *very* important. If it's a light snowfall, then we really have problems. We could possibly have a drought. Look what we did with the Colorado River. There's not a drop that ends up in Mexico. We've soaked it up. The Owens Valley.<sup>9</sup> California can grow things that nobody else can. I doubt seriously that if Kansas wanted to right now, could grow strawberries, or anything else in their marketplace year-round. When they are talking about ice storms, there is no food being produced. So they have to rely on the southern parts of the country or California to ship it in. That will always be there, because the environment doesn't allow Chicago to grow a whole lot during the winter. Not the city of Chicago, but Michigan and all that. They are pretty dormant during the winter. We're not. In the southern part of California, Arizona, Nevada, New Mexico—we're producing during the winter, and shipping. There're just a lot of people out there that need a lot of food. You're not going to buy your milk for the whole population from your local dairy. It's going to be trucked in from the valley. It's got to be. Well, California now is the number one

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dairy state in the union, instead of Wisconsin, which used to be. That program here has worked. They've developed the skills.

**Farmer:** I guess I think about that in terms of sustainability, going back to your energy ideas.

**Bricmont:** It's a hurdle that we have to overcome. We can't move everybody out here to feed them. They can't just abandon the Midwest. It grows a lot of crops during the summer. Maybe not the right crops, but they grow the crops. But they could grow other crops that would produce more energy than consume it, and be productive in the energy area. They're doing ethanol now, trying to change corn into ethanol. Well, that's not a good way to go. I mean, it's good right now. It's available to growers who know how to grow corn, and they do that. But it's not the best way to get ethanol. So we've got to come up with another crop that's low demand, poorer land quality. It just happens to be a crop that we don't think we should grow. Which is hemp. So we have got a lot of work to do on all of that.

But if you read the article in the *[San Jose] Mercury* on transportation, they did a whole thing on trains. *[The Mercury News* argued that] this is an old-fashioned mode of transportation. We don't want that anymore. Aptos is talking about that they don't want that train through their neighborhood. Well, it turns out to be the relief system for the transportation needs in California right now. The traffic is so bad that they've had to rely on trains to get the equipment, the merchandise, from the ports to the source to where it needs to be. They're running train after train after train.

**Farmer:** And I suppose that they can use sustainable fuels in trains more and more.

**Bricmont:** Well, all it is diesel engines, all they are is just generators. They generate electricity. [What t]hey have to do is like they do in Europe. They have got to go to electricity directly, have solar panels in the Mojave desert, and on every roof in the country other than mine. I'm totally covered with a tree. So I can't do it. I would want it, to look into investing in a solar. But covering rooftops, the amount of rooftops we have in California, if we solarized them all, the need for additional power plants would be eliminated and the grid would be more balanced because it would be sourced at the site instead of at the plant. The plant would be the backup. The system is there. The web is there. The wiring. The high power lines. And they could be all produced locally. It takes a lot of government willingness to give credits and keep it going.

**Farmer:** I can see that big businesses stand to lose something if they're not in on it.

**Bricmont:** Not any more. They're into it. A Japanese firm just bought a big plant, a warehouse in San Jose. They're going to produce flexible solar panels. It's a flexible sheet. For a million homes a year. They have shingles now that can be solar collectors.

It's the weather that we have to play with. Mother Nature has that control. We have to improve the shipping methods. I think, eventually, because of the energy needs, we will have to look at revitalizing the rail system. It was an old way of getting things done, but it was a good way of doing it, and it still can move a lot

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of merchandise for a lot less energy. Now, what you have is the specialty crops that won't ever see that, because they want to move their product from here to there in an hour. They want to ship it. They ship cut flowers from Chile by airplane. They don't boat them up or anything else. But grain you could move by ship real cheap. There is even some conversation with some people about freight sea-going vessels with sails, a combination of sail and engine.

**Farmer:** Interesting. But there is the refrigeration aspect of the fresh produce.

**Bricmont:** That's a whole other— The fresh stuff is refrigeration. Hot crops like strawberries have to be delivered immediately, otherwise— Blackberries, what I was just eating this morning. I used to take them from the fields to the distributor and they would rot by the time we got them on the deck. They're what you call a hot crop. They've got to be moved and refrigerated real quick.

**Farmer:** And refrigeration has its own environmental challenges.

**Bricmont:** Oh, yes. It used to be that the way the farmer survived was through canning and the grower. And a gardener can save some of their crops by processing them internally. Instead of having Del Monte do it, they could do it themselves at home. We used to do that here even, at our house. Now I'm a single person, so that doesn't make sense. You'd spend as much energy as anybody else. But that was a process that's could be brought back to life. I think that would be one way of moving food into the community, keeping it within the community.

**Farmer:** Yes. It just seems like the lifestyle that it takes to live here, the amount of money you need to make just to make a mortgage payment is so high because of the property values, that both people in a couple have to work, and there's not somebody home to do that stuff. So that's maybe one of the reasons why it isn't happening the way it used to.

**Bricmont:** We want instant gratification, immediate gratification. That's a lifestyle and it's caused us to use a lot of energy.

### The Strengths and Weaknesses of the Organic Movement

**Farmer:** What do you see as the strengths and weaknesses of the current organic system?

**Bricmont:** (pause) Well, I think one of the things that is really going to affect our industry is the big boys are getting into it. And it's going to be harder on the little farmer, the family farmer, than it is anybody. I think marketing is probably going to be the way we can survive the transition. Brand identification. It's always been that. There will be that again.

**Farmer:** That organic is special and different.

**Bricmont:** Yes. And California Certified is different than O Organics in Safeway. How do you choose between O Organics at Safeway and Sam's Strawberries? I don't know. How does the consumer decide which one of the two? It's not: non-organic and organic. It's organic to organic now. And it will grow. That's going to grow. That area is going to get bigger and bigger and bigger.



**Farmer:** You mean the major supermarkets having [organic] brands.

**Bricmont:** Yes. Safeway is advertising baby food. This is the firm that would hardly take our lettuce back in the old days. So, I mean, it's changed. And that's why it's so hard to think of what the future's going to be like. I had no idea that we were going to be this influential in the market. I had no idea when we started. We just knew what we wanted. It wasn't that we wanted to change the world. It's amazing that we *have*.

**Farmer:** That's interesting! Because you look back and you assume, that's why they started CCOF, was to change the world.

**Bricmont:** No. We had a way that we wanted to grow things. We wanted to get it to the consumer. We wanted to guarantee that they were getting what we were saying, and let the consumer choose. Well, that was all right for us small growers. You start moving all your produce. But then you weren't competing against anybody, because few people were looking for organics. Now more people are looking for it, so the grower is looking for that market. So you've got more and more competition.

**Farmer:** So do you see that the price being driven down is what's going to put the small farmers out of business, maybe?

**Bricmont:** No, I think they have to go for the fresh market. That's where they can compete the most.

**Farmer:** You mean the farmers' markets?

**Bricmont:** The farmers' market. Direct to consumers. For the small grower. The specialty contacts. Direct relationships. To market directly to the consumer, if possible. I've always argued the fact that the grower needs to put as much value added to his product as he can. So instead of selling a grain of rice, or a grain of wheat at so much a pound, that he would sell the flour, adding another value to it. Instead of shipping out the grain that he grows at the lowest possible price, shipping it out as flour. Or shipping it out as bread. Adding more value to the crop that he has, or she has, at the farming stage. Move it up as far as he can up the line so that he, he or she, can have as much of the profit as possible to retain on the farm. And that's as simple as growing corn to feed cattle. Instead of selling the corn to a have a cattle grower raise the cattle, you have some livestock that you feed, since you don't have to sell it to buy your meat, but then your excess you sell off. To do the circle as small as possible.

**Farmer:** That also is good for the diversity of what you are using your land for. Crop diversity.

**Bricmont:** Yes. It does build the soil rather than deteriorate the soil, if you close that circle and keep it going within.

**Farmer:** So do you see any advantage for the world that there *are* these big supermarket demands for organic? Do you believe it can stay pure?

**Bricmont:** I believe it can stay pure, if properly supervised, like anything else, like our government right now. I think it would be good for the planet if we were all organic. Period. Just as a philosophy. We were that way before. I think it's imbalanced the whole environment. If we go around the world and teach them

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how to grow their crops locally and provide their needs food-wise, and have a little excess to sell off, they would be better off than growing crops that they could sell totally, and not have any food to eat. They have some cash and they've got to go buy something, instead of having it within the community that they're living in. They would be better off. And it would lift them up.

**Farmer:** Do you think that the federal standards have benefited organics?

**Bricmont:** I've been on the periphery of that. I think it's made it more uniform. I don't agree with some of the process. I think they've made some mistakes at the federal level in the laws. I can't nail it down to you specifically because I haven't been involved in it. But I've heard some of the arguments and some of the things that they talk about, how they want to limit, or allow things in that shouldn't really be allowed. The feds have not overcome that. We could do it locally at the state level because we were closer to it.

The biggest problem with the federal laws is that they are farther away from the local grower, producer, whatever, and they have more control by the marketer. So it's harder there than it is statewide. But the idea that we would have something uniform, something so that certification in Nevada would mean the same as certification in California, I think would benefit everybody. But it's a growth process. I know how difficult it was to get California started. I'm sure that the feds are going to go through several evolutions before they come up with the right solution. But I think it will be of benefit eventually. Because then the consumer, which we are all serving, will have a better knowledge and understanding that wherever they go that's what it means.

**Farmer:** And if it's got the word *organic* on it, it means something.

**Bricmont:** It means something.

**Farmer:** I think probably when you started this, when you were holding CCOF together at the beginning you were pretty young, right?

**Bricmont:** (laughter) Yes. That was a couple of days ago. I was a young person in those days. It seems to be more difficult to get young people involved today. They're distracted. They're having a good time. I don't know what it is. I've made a conscientious effort this last year to try to get a younger age bracket into the Democratic Central Committee. I think we've dropped the average age thirty years this last year, knowing that we need to leave this on to other hands. So we need to get people— See, what happens is you get used to having the same people running something. And they get older. And everybody says, "Well, they'll take care of it, they'll take care of it." Well, we've got to make that effort of cultivating the youth to get involved at the beginning so that they can carry on, because we're not going to be around all the time. We're not here perpetually. We pass through. And we've got to cultivate the desire to keep things going in the younger generation. Every generation has to do that. Otherwise we will not survive as a society.

**Farmer:** I guess there is something about it always being a fight, like you said. It might seem really hard to some people. Others might take up that challenge.

**Bricmont:** There are some that pick it up right away. We can only hope, and we always have the desire, that it doesn't take that much work. But it does.

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Whenever I speak somewhere and talk about whatever project it is, I wish that everybody in the crowd would understand it, or everybody that I'm talking to in the group. It would be instantaneous and that would be all that I would have to do. But it isn't. (laughs) It's one stone at a time to build that wall. It's just one brick at a time. That's it.

**Farmer:** It does seem that that's how the organic standards got put together.

**Bricmont:** Oh, yes. It will never cease. You can only want it to grow. And the growing process of growing a plant or anything else, it's not you put the seed in and you walk away. You've got to nurture it. You've got to keep it clean. You've got to keep it healthy, and you've got to keep it going up and watered and all that, so it's a constant battle throughout its whole lifespan. And then you've got to sell it when you grow it.

I think I can relate farmers to artists. Most artists don't know how to sell their product and most farmers don't know how to sell their product. And that's where they've got to move into that value-added and more involved. Because growing is a fun thing. It's really an emotional thing. You put something in the ground, and you get it to grow, and it looks great, and you're really happy. But then you've got to switch gears and sell it, no matter what it is. And so, I don't care if it's a grain of wheat, or a flower, or a tomato, once you've got it, you've got to sell it. And that's the hardest transition. That's the hardest transition I had with most of the organization, from the process of growing it, and then deciding to sell it. They just want to find a market to take it and buy it off of them, and

then they want to go back to growing. Well, they've got to get deeper into the selling part.

**Farmer:** Yes, and it seems to me that this growing movement for farmers' markets and CSAs and so forth is saying that. The customers who want this stuff want that personal contact too.

**Bricmont:** Right. The farmers' market. I still do a political booth at a farmers' market. The last three years it seems like there's always been an election or something going on. So I'm always in the market. I'm always there. I set it up. I can't get hardly anybody to substitute for me, to market freedom and market political things in the market where we sell food. It takes some persistence. You've got to show up every week. People know me because I've been there for years. If I got discouraged easily, you wouldn't be talking to me.

**Farmer:** Yes. (laughter)

**Bricmont:** Because I would be in my shell, and the hell with the rest of the world. I see too much of that. It's hard for people to get their nose out of the furrow, as I like to put it. They've got their nose in that ditch, or that activity that they're doing. It isn't just farmers. Everybody is surviving, working. Why would you work at something else, when you're working forty hours a week at something else, or more?

**Farmer:** Would you like to add anything that I haven't asked you about, that you think is important about the history?

**Bricmont:** Well, as I'm still doing grassroots work, which is what that was in those days, getting people organized locally, I think we cannot underestimate the power of a group of people getting together and doing things. I can just tell you that it's worth the effort. It's frustrating, difficult at times. But when you look back and see what gets accomplished, and it wouldn't have gotten accomplished without you getting involved, it's worth a fight. And it *is* a fight. You battle everywhere. No matter if it's over organic, or if it's other things, public— I've been standing on a soapbox about school libraries and public libraries for years. And eventually we'll get it. I may not see it, but we will fund that instead of a bomb. Okay? I mean, we've got to change the whole system. But you can't change it from the top. You can only change it from the bottom. If you get enough of us from the bottom doing it, the top then realizes—

I'm working on another project with kids writing books. That's a grassroots thing, and it's starting to take off. Just small ideas. I think we need to incubate those. We need to have the society and the support system that will allow those to happen. We have a long ways to go yet to learn how to live on this planet.

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<sup>1</sup>See the oral histories in this series with Robbie Jaffe, Amy Katzenstein-Escobar, Gail Harlamoff, and Erika Perloff for more on Life Lab.

<sup>2</sup>See the oral history in this series with Robbie Jaffe for more on the early history of the farmers' market in Live Oak.

<sup>3</sup>See the oral history with Congressman Sam Farr in this series.

<sup>4</sup>Bricmont was the founding vice-president of CCOF from 1973-74 and served as president of the organization from 1975-1985.

<sup>5</sup>See the oral history with Jerry and Jean Thomas in this series.

<sup>6</sup>The Mountain Community Store was located in Felton, California.

<sup>7</sup>See the oral histories with Heidi Skolnik, Ken Kimes, and Melody Meyer in this series for more on Community Foods.

<sup>8</sup>See the oral history with Russel and Karen Wolter in this series.

<sup>9</sup>Bricmont is referring to the diversion of water to Los Angeles from streams that originally fed the Owens Valley on the eastern side of the Sierra Nevada.