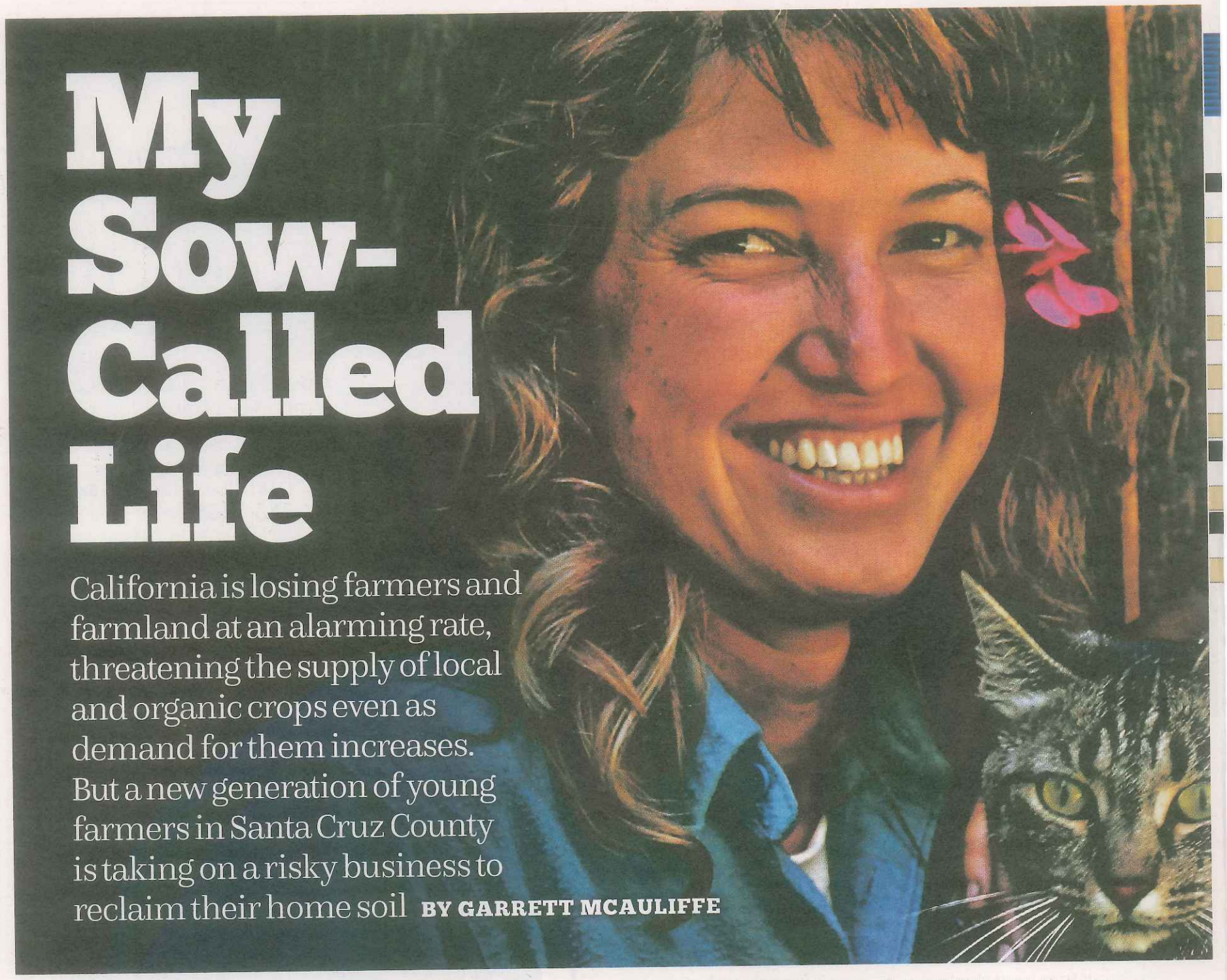
My Sow-Called Life



California is losing farmers and farmland at an alarming rate, threatening the supply of local and organic crops even as demand for them increases. But a new generation of young farmers in Santa Cruz County is taking on a risky business to reclaim their home soil **BY GARRETT MCAULIFFE**

Sarah Wood has been traveling the country for the past two years, volunteering at urban homesteads and organic farms in exchange for fresh food and a place to stay. Along the way, the 24-year-old has gathered knowledge and skills she hopes will one day translate to having a farm of her own.

This year, she's joined the family at Green Oaks Creek, a 63-acre organic spread not too far north of Santa Cruz, up Highway 1. She plans to work through the end of the growing season.

"I've been feeling the need to live a certain way," Wood says, as she chops up beets and greens for lunch after a morning of harvesting carrots and cauliflower. "It's true of many folks I meet. You have this big boom of people looking for origin, tradition, roots, connection to the earth and to food. It's as though there's nostalgia for a life we've never experienced. We're going out to see if that's possible."

Wood is one is one of a new breed of young farmers, many of whom grew up in cities and suburbs with little or no experience working the land. Stephanie Jennings and her husband, Paul Pfluke, who own and run Green Oaks Creek Farm, had the benefit of an inheritance to get them started. For others who want to make a life of it, finding a path from working on a farm to having one's own operation can be incredibly daunting.

But with nearly half of all American farmers likely to retire in the next 10 to 20 years, according to the Center for Rural Affairs, cultivating a new generation of food producers seems more critical than ever.

Generation Gap

The organization Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms, or WWOOF, has been expanding to countries around the world since the 1970s. Sarah Potenza and a group of friends she met while apprenticing at the UC Santa Cruz Farm & Garden launched the American version in 2001, first in California, before quickly

THRESH PRINCES *Zoe Hitchner (left), David Evershed and Sky DeMuro lease land on Everett Family Farm in Soquel.*

expanding to the rest of the country.

"There's a big disconnect in the last few decades," says Potenza, the current director of WWOOF-USA. "The older generation has not been passing land and knowledge on to the younger generation."

Considering the rapid decline of the nation's farms and farmland over the past century, these are legitimate concerns. California alone lost 2,500 farms and 6.2 million acres of farmland in the last 20 years.

"If a farmer wants to cash out, they are generally going to make a lot more money selling to a developer," says Eric Winders, a regional coordinator for California FarmLink. "We need more farmers, and we need them pretty desperately if we want to maintain our strong local food system."

The independent family farmers that long dominated American agriculture have become an increasing rarity over the past half century. Unlike many areas of the country, smaller farms can still be profitable here, and agricultural zoning protects farmland in Santa Cruz County to an extent. Nonetheless, pressures to develop land are a constant and could lead to more than just the loss of a way of life.

More and more of our food production is outsourced to countries like China, Mexico and Chile due to a pressing consumer demand for cheaper food, regardless of quality or safety. If we continue to lose farmland, that reliance on imported food will only increase.

"Do we really want to see more frozen strawberries from China?" asks Bill Ringe, president of the educational non-profit Agri-Culture. Still, Ringe, who is also a licensed realtor, thinks that the value of farmland could eventually surpass that of developed land, and that the new wave of young farmers can overcome the bleak outlook for transitioning farmland.

Potenza believes the growing enthusiasm for organic and small-scale farming will help them do so. The number of WWOOFers in the U.S., who pay a $30 annual fee to access a

→ 12

network of organic, host farms, has skyrocketed in the last four years, from 3,000 members to more than 20,000 today.

"Many farmers are natural teachers. Our organization provides a good first step to learning sustainable agriculture," she says.

The average size for a farm in Santa Cruz County is 47 acres, a mere one-tenth of the national average. For WWOOFers, that means a plethora of smaller farms to choose from.

But learning to farm is a far cry from starting a farming business. Buying land is extraordinarily risky for young farmers, especially for those with no financial parachute in case the business goes under.

Field of Dreams

David Evershed, Sky DeMuro and Zoe Hitchner are well aware of the challenges. On a recent weekday afternoon, the three friends are walking the squash line of the Everett Family Farm in Soquel, where they lease seven acres.

"This is the first time we've been in charge," says DeMuro, a down-to-earth 34-year-old who apprenticed for two years at Pie Ranch, which sits on the San Mateo coastline next to Green Oaks Creek Farm. "It can drive you nuts—the amount of hours we work for the money we make. We're still trying to figure out how this could work in the future when we have families and bad backs." Twelve- to 15-hour days are common during the summer growing season.

"Leasing this land's not preparing us financially," DeMuro says, "but we're honing our farming skills. There's really no way to make money while learning."

Like Potenza and the other founders of WWOOF-USA, the three met at UCSC while taking part in the six-month apprenticeship program in ecological horticulture. After dedicating years to learning the trade, they have finally begun looking for land to settle and work together as a partnership.

Starting a successful farm requires a vast array of skills from growing food and driving tractors to running a small business. On the Central Coast, where the cost of land can be astronomical, pooling resources is a great option for many. "There's no way any of us could do it alone," DeMuro says. "A partnership really makes sense around here."

Rich Everett, who owns the property that David, Sky and Zoe lease, has been inviting young farmers to manage part of his farm for the past 10 years. The unique arrangement provides novice farmers with ready-made avenues for selling produce—to restaurants, grocery stores and farmers' markets—under the Everett Family Farm name. Establishing such a reliable customer base can be one of the most difficult tasks for beginning farmers, especially in this area.

"I think it's safe to say this is the most competitive local food market in the country," says Darryl Wong, who has co-owned Freewheelin' Farm with Kirstin Yogg and Amy Courtney for the past six years.

With strong local awareness around issues of food and farming, Wong believes the organic market will continue to grow. But he says traditional channels, like farmers' markets and CSAs—a weekly share of seasonal produce often sent directly to customers—have become saturated. "We have such well-established, high quality organic farms here. It's tough if you're new on the scene."

Everett agrees. "We've been around for more than 10 years, and we still can't get into some of the farmers' markets we'd like to." He believes it may be financially easier to get a toehold in other areas of the country, but nowhere is it simple. "Farming is not for the faint of heart," he says. "You have to have that love for it or else you're going to burn out."

"Here you really have to get creative," DeMuro says. She's seen friends on the East Coast who were among the first organic farmers in their communities. "They have much more freedom to grow what they want."

DeMuro and her partners plan to stay one more year at the Everett farm, while continuing their quest for a viable chunk of land. "We see more year-to-year leases and single-acre plots. It's really hard to find anything the right size with housing available."

They are hoping a combination of loans, borrowing from friends and

family, and an online Kickstarter campaign will be enough to get them up and running.

"We still have enough faith and insanity that this will work out in the end," DeMuro says. "It's a ridiculous amount of work, but I wouldn't want to be doing anything else."

More and more of our food production is outsourced to countries like China, Mexico and Chile due to a pressing consumer demand for cheaper food, regardless of quality or safety. If we continue to lose farmland, that reliance on imported food will only increase. "Do we really want to see more frozen strawberries from China?" asks Bill Ringe.

Lost in Transition

The majority of the nation's 2.1 million farmers don't have transition plans to pass their land and business on to the next generation, according to a number of regional surveys. But in coming decades this could represent one of the single largest transfers of real estate and related wealth in history.

"A generation has been skipped," says Lindsey Lusher Shute, director of the National Young Farmers' Coalition. Shute and her husband leased land from a retiring dairy farmer in the Hudson Valley of New York years ago. "He had four children, but had made it a priority telling them not to farm. He was shocked that we wanted to," she says with a laugh.

Retiring farmers are often unable to ensure their land will remain in cultivation, as high property values make purchasing farmland beyond the reach of most beginning farmers, yet easily obtainable for corporate developers.

"To have so many farmers ready to sell land at the same time, it's a real deciding point in our nation's history," Shute says. "Who's going to own that land? Who will have access to it? Will it be speculators, corporate farms or young farmers? We need enough young people to take over and policy that allows them to succeed."

New Life

At Green Oaks Creek, Sarah Wood speaks of farming with a similar reverence. The well-supported, vibrant young-farmer movement established here has eased concerns on the Central Coast. Few involved in agriculture, whether advocates or farmers themselves, are willing to predict what the aging farmer population might mean in the coming years.

For now, DeMuro and her partners are determined to make it work. "It's like a community service, keeping a farm alive," she says, as she stoops and dives into the row for another sunburst squash. "That drives me."