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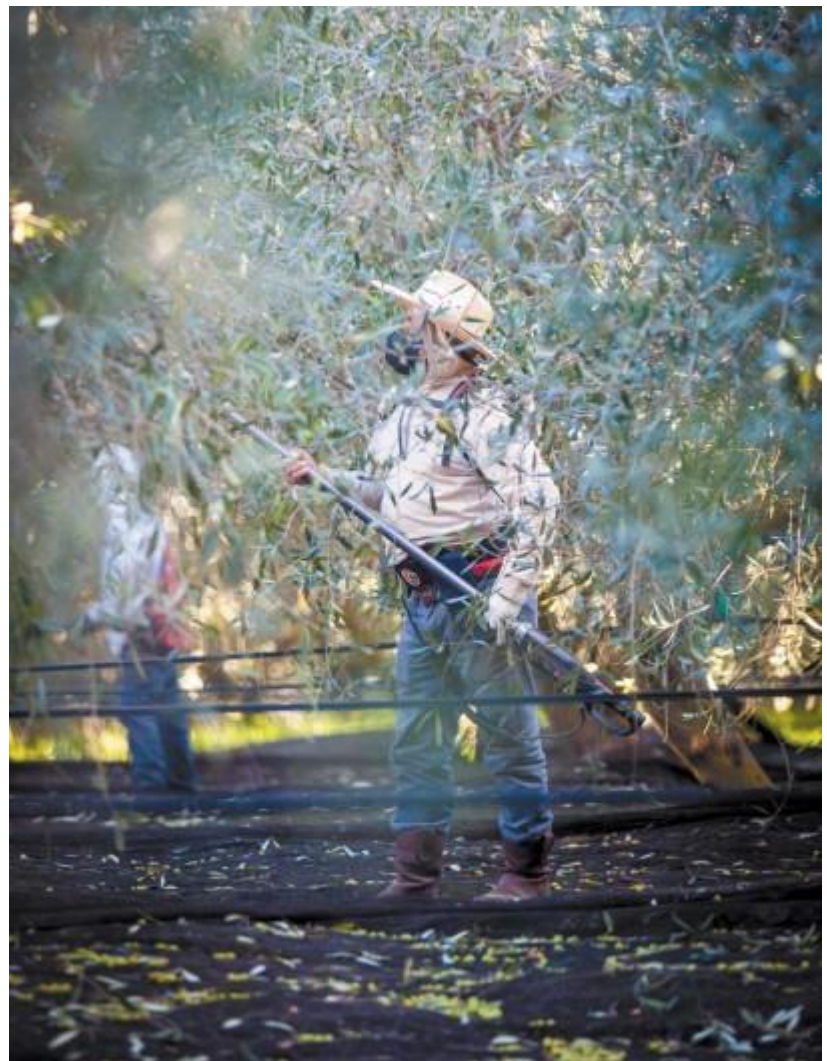
Gold Ridge Organic Farms

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It's a windy summer afternoon in Sonoma County as I follow Brooke Hazen, farmer and proprietor of Gold Ridge Organic Farms, down a dusty fire road. We are winding our way through his olive and apple orchards, a patchwork blanket of varying shades of green spread across 88 acres of coastal foothills south of the town of Sebastopol. When we stop to admire the 360° view of rural and coastal West Sonoma, Hazen tells me that famed botanist and horticulturist Luther Burbank farmed and experimented nearby.

“Luther Burbank believed this was the best place in the world to grow,” says Hazen. “You see the color and texture of our fruits—the notes are fully expressed.”



It was just five miles north of here on West Sonoma's Gold Ridge that in 1885 Burbank purchased his 15-acre Gold Ridge Experiment Farm to grow and develop hybrids and crossbreeds, including apples, plums and many other fruits and vegetables. Hazen recognizes, as did Burbank, that there is something meteorologically unique about this small agricultural strip of the planet, and that when the native soils are cultivated thoughtfully, the land offers up gifts of particularly robust and nuanced fruits. On this dry summer day, as we follow the fire road through olive groves, Hazen is on a mission: He and I are headed toward a particular stand of Frantoio olive trees he'd like to show me, several rows that, in his words, "are the cream of the crop." I realize as we pass row after row of densely planted, carefully tended trees—in total 21 different Spanish, Italian and French cultivars—that Hazen's connection to the 13,000 olive trees and 12,000 apple trees on his property is anything but ordinary. He gestures to specific rows of trees as we pass them by, describing the general characteristic of each cultivar and, more specifically, what he sees in the way the trees grow and fruit, their relative form and sturdiness. He seems to know every stand, maybe every tree, on this former cattle ranch that he began cultivating in 2001. Yes, Hazen can speak to the details of his agricultural practices, from soil science to pruning and harvesting, but it is the feeling he has about his trees and this land that seems to matter most.

We trot down to the bottom of a hill, where Hazen stops. "Here we are," he says, pointing me toward a path into the leafy tunnel between the rows of Frantoio he says are his favorites. "You need to go in to really understand what I am talking about," he urges. As we meander through the dappled light beneath his cherished trees, Hazen calls attention to the girth and twists of the trunks. He sees the Frantoio as a graceful, feminine tree, more curved and elegant than the upright Leccino across the way, but he is not exactly sure why these Frantoios have done so well in this particular location. He believes the overall success of Gold Ridge's organic orchards has to do with the weather. When he and his family bought the farm property two decades ago, he knew the region hosted many successful apple orchards but he was not sure how olive trees would fare. He took an educated gamble, planting thousands of trees. As it turns out, he was right: All 16 acres of heirloom apples and 70 acres of olives, as well as an assortment of other fruit trees, including Meyer Lemon, Blood Orange, Mandarin-Kumquat and European and Asian Pear, have thrived.

"Yes, I believe it is the soil, the terroir, but mainly, it is the climate that makes our products so successful," says Hazen. "Here we get the Petaluma Gap wind off the Pacific Ocean, which is just 10 miles away. This keeps the average temperature down and means a slow ripening of the fruit. This can mean lower yield, but adds layers of flavor.



Our olive oil comes out robust and has a very high polyphenol count.” It is widely—accepted that olive oil is good for our health—Hazen himself drinks a tablespoon each night—and it is the polyphenols that give the oil its high medicinal value in the form of antioxidant, anti-inflammatory and anti-viral properties.

Hazen is equally proud of the fruits of his organic apple orchards, consisting of classic crowd-pleasers like Honeycrisp and Fuji, as well as 75 heirloom varieties such as Hudson’s Golden Gem, Ashmead’s Kernel, Cox Orange Pippin, Hoople’s Antique Gold, Red Gravensteins and others.

From left: Marketing and Sales Manager Naomi Ansbergs, proprietor Brooke Hazen and Business Operations Manager Andrea Lederle

“I would rather take quality over quantity,” he says. “In our apples you see the flavor fully expressed because the trees are challenged by the wind.”

According to Hazen, Gold Ridge Organic Farms is one of the few commercial growers in North America to harvest tree-ripened fruit, which means apples are harvested and taken directly to market rather than stored in a refrigerator to finish ripening. Hazen also planted early-fruiting strains of Fuji and Honeycrisp varieties, which means the team is harvesting by mid-July, about two weeks before other commercial growers get those favorite apples on market shelves.

Making our way back up the fire road toward the farm’s expansive Tuscan-style olive mill, farm shop and tasting room, Hazen recalls being in his 20s, just years out of college and somewhat directionless. It was then that he spent time at the Green Gulch Zen Center near Muir Beach, learning to farm. While there he discovered



that working the land fed his soul, he says.

When he left Green Gulch he bought a small parcel in Sonoma, and for several years grew and sold his own produce. Hazen is not sure why, but he felt especially passionate about both apple and olive trees, and eventually, with the help of family, he was able to purchase the Gold Ridge acreage. He planted the first olive and apple orchards himself with the help of just one other person.

Now Hazen has a large team of 14 farm employees, including Master Olive Miller Guillermo Rojas. From October to December, the farm's impressive Italian-made Rapanelli press and the Gold Ridge team not only mill and bottle Gold Ridge olives, but are available by appointment for custom olive oil milling and bottling for conventional and organic growers with a minimum of 50 pounds to process. Business Operations Manager Andrea Lederle, who brought to Gold Ridge her experience in the wine industry, is, among other things, expanding the brand partnerships and direct-to-consumer side of the operation to keep pace with the output of the farm.

Gold Ridge organic apples, including the Gold Ridge Heirloom Apple Blend bag containing six antique apple varieties (try the very

strawberry-y Strawberry Parfait apple!) are sold in area markets, as well as at Whole Foods markets in Northern California and in the Reno-Tahoe area. Their four olive oil blends— Tuscan Blend and Minerva Blend (both made with Italian cultivars), Picholine Blend (French cultivars) and Arbequina Blend (Spanish cultivars), as well as specialty Meyer Lemon and Mandarin-Kumquat olive oils, are sold in the farm shop and tasting room on site. Each is certified extra virgin annually by the California Olive Oil Council (COOC).



Year by year, through the sale of apples, olive oil and specialty items made from these, along with the opening of the farm shop and tasting room, Lederle says the public face of Gold Ridge Organic Farms has increased, as have partnerships with other local growers and artisan producers. In the farm shop and tasting room (open Thursday through Saturday and by appointment for private tours and olive oil tastings) visitors will find baked goods from Wild Flour Bread in nearby Freestone, dark chocolate with olive oil and candied Meyer Lemon made in partnership with local Sebastopol chocolatier VOLO and there's talk of making shrubs with the help of neighboring producer Little Apple Treats. The shop also features Gold Ridge apple cider vinegar, heirloom apple snacks, Honeycrisp-Fuji apple cider syrup and a variety of olive oil—based soaps infused with herbs and lavender also grown on the property (all items are also offered for sale on the farm's website).

By the time Hazen and I make our way back to the top of the hill, the tasting room is full of customers, including a private group preparing to sample a full flight of olive oils. There is a buzz in the room and Lederle tells me that this is becoming more and more common as “food tourists” discover the farm and surrounding region.



“We’ve got the Monte-Bellaria di California lavender farm nearby—very popular for photographs—and Duckworth U-pick blueberry farm and Boring raspberry farm just up Canfield Road,” she says. “Adding a stop at our tasting room makes a perfect day trip, and all in this area.”

According to Hazen and Lederle, the excitement level peaks in the late summer and early fall with apple and olive harvests. On September 17 of this year Gold Ridge Organic Farms will host their annual Heirloom Apple Celebration at the farm's apple barn. This is Hazen's favorite event to host each year, he says, the culmination of his many years of effort, honoring the beauty and history of the heirloom apples.

Hazen's Gold Ridge predecessor, Luther Burbank, would most definitely approve. "I get so much joy out of the heirlooms—the textures and flavors," says Hazen, standing outside the bustling tasting room, overlooking the rolling silver waves of olive leaves and bright popping green of apple, pear and citrus foliage. "I started farming because I wanted to be in nature and see the fruits of my labor. I wanted to see what my hands could produce directly. I ended up feeding the population nutritious food. What could be better?"

GoldRidgeOrganicFarms.com

