



Shifts in Sonoma County's small scale food production

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Sarah Jessee

Matos cheese wheels

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Sonoma County is a big part of the Bay Area's local food scene.

Iconic stores like [Berkeley Bowl, source produce, milk, meat, and eggs from over 270 vendors in the North Bay.](#) And Sonoma is also known for its food *production*, like tortillas, handmade cheese, and organic frozen foods.

Over the past few months, several small-scale food producers in the county have either closed operations, or moved their headquarters out of state.

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Story Transcript:

REPORTER: In late January, a small group of admirers crowded into [Joe Matos Cheese Factory on the outskirts of Santa Rosa](#).

SALLY PARKS: Shall I describe this place for you? I'm looking down at this aisle of rounds and rounds of cheeses..."

REPORTER: Sally Parks has been driving over from Healdsburg for years. She says nothing else tastes like the cheese they make here...

SALLY: Creamy, rich, sweet...and it's my turn!

REPORTER: For Mindy Chace, this place is a part of the origin story of her marriage:

MINDY CHACE: My boyfriend took me on one of our first dates here...yeah, we're married now...

REPORTER: And Terry Strain sums up what a *lot* of people who love this place feel:

TERRY STRAIN: It just jumped out at me: it's better than a lot of the cheese that you find at the store.



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Matos cheese shavings

REPORTER: He watches as his wedges of the piquant, [Portuguese-style cheese](#) are wrapped for the last time...

SYLVIA TUCKER: Mom and Dad basically were the very first artisan cheese. Back then: it wasn't even called artisan cheese. We didn't know what artisan cheese was.

REPORTER: That's Sylvia Tucker, the daughter of Joe and Mary Matos, and the current owner of the Joe Matos Cheese Factory.

SYLVIA: They thought it was just going to be the Portuguese community that would come and buy the cheese ...

REPORTER: ...but lots of people ended up loving the cheese. And [they became a part of Sonoma County's food ecosystem.](#)

REPORTER: Here's one example. Their neighbors, [Wildbrine](#), made fermented foods like [sauerkraut and kimchi](#), and regularly "donated" some of their extra cabbage to the cows at Joe Matos Cheese.

SYLVIA: They brought a few bins over, the animals went CRAZY for it ...

REPORTER: And Sylvia says, that brought down their feed costs.



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Chore Time!

SYLVIA: We were getting bins and bins and BINS of it. Got to the point that that was the main roughage of food that our animals were eating.

REPORTER: That food network boosted their business, too: [Sue Conley—of Cowgirl Creamery fame](#)—tasted something special. So she helped them gain wider distribution.

SYLVIA: Before you know it we had people coming here to see how we were situated, and then they went and opened up their own little factories...// Mom and Dad were always willing to help others get started, but // they never gave up their own recipe.

REPORTER: But the Joe Matos Cheese Factory—however beloved—[has now closed](#).

SYLVIA: But... Things were just getting really tight. Financially we couldn't stay above.

"The community is there. They want to keep you going; they want to see you thrive."

- Sylvia Tucker, Joe Matos Cheese Factory

REPORTER: The economic hits were big *and* small. She says the state defined their dairy and cheese factory as two separate businesses.... with all the requirements and regulations of *doing* business in California. *And...* when [Wildbrine shut down their fermentation facility in Santa Rosa](#)...the Cheese Factory lost all that free cabbage. Just one more thing that made it harder to stay open.

REPORTER: They decided they had to close. And that's hard for fans like Terry.

TERRY STRAIN: It's history now. Most history we deal with is before our time. This is during our time.

"[Sonoma stands for] Artisanal products. Something that started small, with a lot of care, is focused on quality...and is not necessarily looking for a mass market audience.

- Don Buder, Food and Beverage Attorney

REPORTER: [Don Buder is a Bay Area-based attorney working to support food manufacturers](#). He says that "Made in Sonoma" has come to mean something to customers.



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Gold Ridge Farm Shop

REPORTER: But Joe Matos Cheese Factory isn't the only local food producer that's shuttered lately. Wildbrine moved out of state; [La Tortilla Factory to the Midwest](#). [Bohemian Creamery in Sebastopol shut down this past winter](#). // And vegetarian frozen food juggernaut [Amy's laid off over 300 local workers](#) —nearly 15% of its workforce— this past fall.

REPORTER: So why IS it so challenging for food manufacturers to keep making products in Sonoma County? The first reason probably isn't surprising. It's the cost of doing business in California.

DON BUDER: And we see this in tech, where tech is exiting to Austin, Texas and Boise, Idaho...and other markets where the cost of living is lower and where their employees can buy a home.

REPORTER: But there's another pressure on artisan food producers that's a little less obvious. Since the pandemic—especially—grocery stores got *smart*. They started making their own “premium artisan” foods...at a much lower price point.

DON: When a consumer goes to the grocery store shelf, and sees an artisanal food in a category...and a private label in the same category, at a much lower price point: they're gravitating toward the lower price point.

REPORTER: To stay competitive, small food brands often feel pressure to bring in outside investors. This can create additional pressure to sell the company to make those investors happy.

DON: There's an opportunity...but some of those artisanal brands lose their...flavor, I'll call it? ...Or culture, when they get acquired by those larger food companies. And that happens all the time.

REPORTER: Locally-based companies—when they *stay* local—provide more than tasty products. Let's look at La Tortilla Factory: [they provided jobs, of course, but also: scholarships for kids and families of community members, and they contributed funds to a local transitional center for youth](#). So when companies like *that* leave...the Bay Area loses more than just good food.

MERILEE OLSEN: There's a movement afoot to create a Sonoma County food hub...

REPORTER: That's [Merilee Olsen—who's worked with farmers for decades to create “value added” products](#)—things that can be bottled, jarred, or packaged to sell.

MERILEE: I could go on and on about our food systems, because that's what we're trying to do: we're trying to preserve a local food system.

REPORTER: She thinks: yes, there's a reason to feel positive about the state of Sonoma County food...but she's frustrated by the financial model that benefits SUPER-scale food producers. They get additional discounts on things like the glass jars foods are packaged in.

MERILEE: So the game is rigged, and that drives up the prices of this food. And it makes it more precious than it should be.

REPORTER: These days, Merilee is working at a company that's trying lots of things to survive as a small-scale food producer: [olive grower Gold Ridge Organic Farms. It produces olive oil in Sonoma County, as well as jams, jellies and other pantry items.](#)



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Gold Ridge Bench

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Tour of Gold Ridge Farm

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Gold Ridge award winning oils

Sarah Jessee

REPORTER: When it became clear that wholesale distribution wasn't enough to keep things afloat, they expanded their offering to tastings...

REPORTER: [They also started running classes and workshops. They manage an olive mill that other local producers can use to process their own oil. And their tasting room features products from around the county.](#)

REPORTER: These projects help the company stay afloat, and bolster the interconnected web of Sonoma County food producers.

REPORTER: What can customers do? Merilee insists it's time to dust off an old adage:

MERILEE: So I would just say: buy local. That admonition has been around for a long time...it really matters. Really matters.



[Sarah Jessee](#)

I'm a strategist and storyteller who's loved audio — and radio specifically — as long as I can remember. After studying radio documentary at the Salt Institute, I contributed to Snap Judgment and WVTF News before bringing my storytelling skills to the marketing world. I'm happy to be back where I feel I belong: the public radio community.