

# *edible* MARIN & WINE COUNTRY

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CELEBRATING THE HARVEST *of* MARIN, NAPA *and* SONOMA COUNTIES, SEASON *by* SEASON



NATURAL WELLNESS | AGAVE SPIRITS | FARMER CO-OP

MEMBER OF EDIBLE COMMUNITIES

BY CAREY SWEET

# FEED'S LOCAL FOOD REVOLUTION

A FARMER CO-OP TAKES CHARGE

PHOTOGRAPH BY KELSEY JOY

# G

ood luck trying to sell a small apple to a major grocery store. Surprising as it sounds, that's one of the things Brooke Hazen has learned over his 25 years running his Gold Ridge Organic Farms in Sebastopol. With 88 glorious acres of pastureland and orchards abundant with more than 75 prized

heirloom varieties of apples, plus citrus, pears and olives, he needs to find a lot of customers to savor his boutique fruit.

And heaven forbid an apple, crunchy delicious though it is, be the tiniest bit undersize or misshapen.

"Generally, large grocery stores like to get only the largest, perfect apples at the lowest price they can get," he says. "Most people don't realize this, but large apples let the stores cut labor costs to stack them. And then they can also get more sales per unit, more money per apple."

So while Hazen does sell to some high-end local groceries, more and more he is focusing on another client: FEED, which stands for Farmers Exchange of Earthly Delights. The Petaluma-based farmer- and employee-owned cooperative operates as an innovative network of some 80 North Bay producers, in a food system that empowers family-owned farms by offering more straightforward paths to distribution and better income.

"The traditional wholesale model for independent small and mid-sized farms is really not financially feasible, because we're lumped in with huge-scale growers across the world who can sell mass products cheap," Hazen says. "Our cooperative brings together many diverse growers from one region, so we've got strength in numbers, plus such high-quality produce that's fresh daily, not shipped in. People are willing to pay a little bit more for that, if they know about it. And that little bit more is the difference between losing money and breaking even, or even making a little profit."

It's hard to believe that this fruit might not be immediately snatched up by everyone. Hazen's

Honeycrisps are things of dreams. Bite into the cream-colored flesh and the large parenchyma cells explode with juice in your mouth, delivering a sweet-tart, slightly acidic and mildly floral flavor. Savvy customers do flock to his property for luxurious tastings through multiple varieties of apples, summer U-Pick events and to grab farm-shop goodies like barrel-aged apple cider vinegars and syrups.

But typical small farmers don't have such luxury, with their limited manpower and facilities.

Besides selling to top restaurants, resorts, caterers and higher-end gourmet stores like Oliver's Markets of Sonoma County and Good Earth Grocery of Marin County, FEED works with valuable clients such as school districts and corporate campuses such as Salesforce in San Francisco. Their teams can work with such clients, whereas a small farmer likely wouldn't know where to start.

And that's where God's little apples come in.

"A lot of our local stores and vendors are OK with them, because we find most people actually prefer a mid-sized apple, since they don't want it to be their entire lunch," Hazen says. "And school kids really want small apples."

## FUELING FARMERS' MARKETS

The partnership has been a blessing for New Family Farm of Sebastopol, which has worked with FEED since the company's inception. Formed by Ryan Power and Adam Davidoff in 2010 with 10 acres, New Family used to rely on time- and labor-intensive farmers' markets for sales, with no guarantee that what they picked would find a dining table.

"FEED is an amazing service," says Power, who provides cilantro, beets, parsley, cabbage, Little Gem lettuce, fennel, chard and cauliflower, among many other items. "Their system allows us to pick-to-order, so there is no waste. And the customers end up getting the freshest product available, because it is often delivered the same day we picked it."

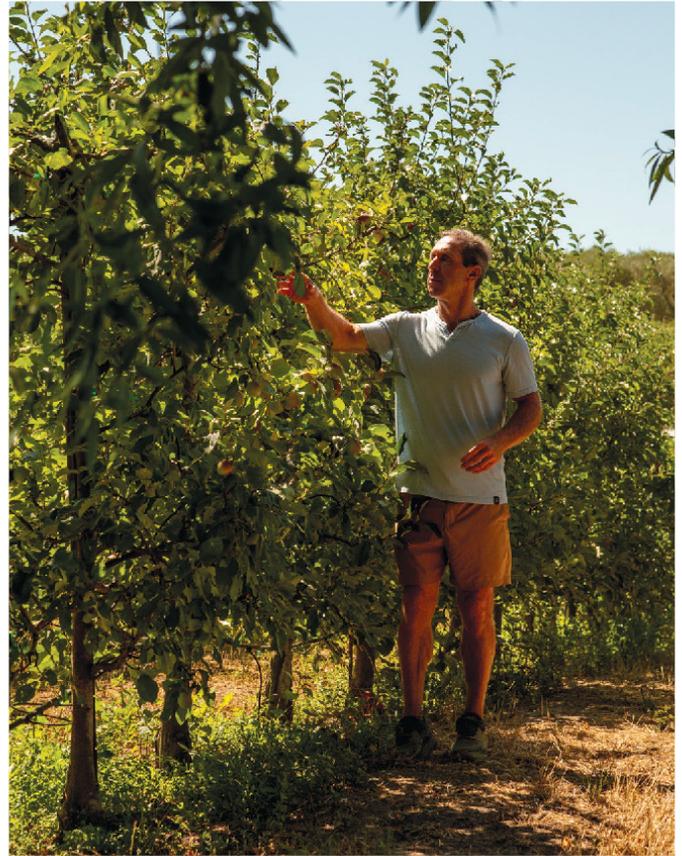
It's like having his own sales and management team, he added.

"They are very supportive of small-scale local





Left: Paul's Produce farm worker, André, harvesting celery. Below: Gold Ridge Organic Farms' farmer/owner Brooke Hazen in one of his Sebastopol apple orchards. Bottom: Paul Wirtz in his Sonoma farm shop.



farms, and we work together so that everyone gets a fair share of the food dollar," he says. "They are able to sell to many accounts because they conglomerate all the local farms. If I called a restaurant, their order might be below \$100, and that would not be worth my time to get it there."

### THE ROOTS AND THE GROWTH

Founded in 2011 by former financier Tim Page, FEED was inspired by his lack of happiness in the corporate world, plus a dream to get food from Sonoma County farms onto local dining tables, and support the farmers.

So he built a simple walk-in cooler in his garage, bought a box truck for pickup and delivery, and set out to help change the world, one tomato at a time. His effort was successful enough that within a few



PHOTOGRAPHS: KELSEY JOY (DAVID'S PRODUCE)  
NICOLA PARISI (GOLD RIDGE ORGANIC FARMS)



years he rented a small warehouse in a quiet corner of the Barlow in downtown Sebastopol.

At the time, Page, who now serves as “worker-director-navigator,” was distressed that according to a report from the Natural Resources Defense Council of New York, some 30% of produce doesn’t even make it off farms, due to fruit and vegetables being imperfect looking, or farmers being simply too busy farming to act as their own marketing agents.

One of his first clients was the four Oliver’s Markets in Sonoma County, drawn in by access to top-notch, iconic producers like Paul’s Produce of Sonoma. Farmer Paul Wirtz served on the original committee that formed FEED as a co-op, and today sells about 50% of his crops to the group.

“FEED is committed to finding buyers to support us, no matter what our crops are,” he says, of the two dozen or so products he nurtures each season. “They also work with growers to make adjustments to better meet what customers are looking for. Matching what we grow with an eventual buyer cuts food waste.”

His 10 acres in the Sonoma Valley are lush year-round with lovingly hand-coddled specialties like winter-spring’s leeks, carrots, parsnips, rutabaga, arugula, beets and onions.

“Clientele is solid,” he says. “My rented land is secure and affordable. Things have gotten easier for me since I started growing in the early 2000s.”

In 2018, FEED moved to a 14,000-square-foot warehouse in Petaluma, now employs 25 staff members (many of them farmers

themselves) and has trucks on the road six days a week. Growth has been so dynamic that FEED is looking for a larger warehouse, up to about 20,000 square feet on up to 25 acres.

### A WIN-WIN

FEED supports the community by providing access to fresh food produced with ecologically sustainable practices, but sold at nearly wholesale prices. Customers know exactly where their local produce comes from, predominately Sonoma and Marin. No mass-batched Sysco fruits and vegetables from factory operations, here—farms generally are either California Certified Organic Farmers accredited or cultivating with organic methods, with the owners themselves working the dirt.

Households can sign up for a FEED Bin program, a freshly harvested box stocked with fruit, vegetables and delicacies like Mycopia mushrooms from Sebastopol, Persian Bearss limes from Seven Moons Farm in Sonoma and yellow heirloom popcorn from Kibo Farm in Santa Rosa.

“Signing up for a weekly FEED Bin subscription is the best way to support us as a customer, not only because it means guaranteed sales but also because those subscription numbers directly inform how we plan with our farmers what to grow each year,” says FEED Bin Coordinator Arabelle Schoenberg. 🍌

*FEED Sonoma Cooperative, 5400 Old Redwood Highway, Petaluma; [feedsonoma.com](http://feedsonoma.com)*



**Far left: Farmworkers harvesting head lettuce at Paul's Produce in Sonoma. Left: The farm crew at New Family Farm near Sebastopol.**



### HUNGRY FOR FUNDING

Currently, FEED is working to re-establish strong tie-in with local food assistance nonprofits and food banks for low-income and food-insecure people in Sonoma County. Government funding changes and shutdowns have made that very difficult, says Schoenberg.

“Sadly, we don’t have an active partnership with Farm to Pantry [Sonoma’s food rescue and gleaning program] anymore, although we absolutely love them and love their work,” she says. “The contract we had with them ran out of funding in February 2025, and we went from packing 1,200 boxes a month to zero. A coalition of small-farm and anti-hunger advocates are trying to re-create the program at the state level, but it’s clear that we cannot depend on the government anymore for financial support for these beneficial programs, and so we must pivot to philanthropy and grant funding if we want to continue to feed people who need it.”

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**Middle left: Vince and Jenny Trotter of Kibo Family Farm on Sonoma Mountain. Left: Rebecca Bozzelli of Seven Moons Farm in Sonoma’s Valley of the Moon.**