

The Philo Apple Farm

Story and photos by Margi Gomez

A visit to the Apple Farm, in the rolling hills of Philo, is a treat for the senses. Traveling west on Greenwood Ridge [Philo-Greenwood Road] from Highway 128 just before Hendy Woods State Park, the Apple Farm beckons. The scent of fat apples ripening in the warm autumn sun wafts through the air, and a feeling of harmony and sense of place abounds.

The idyllic farmstead property has been home to three generations of the Bates-Schmitt family for over twenty years. Karen and Tim Bates first fell in love with the Anderson Valley [in the mid seventies when they were driving through with Karen's brother John.] In the mid eighties [with the help of] Karen's parents Sally and Don Schmitt, then proprietors of the acclaimed eatery, The French Laundry, in Yountville, [they purchased the property] what would become the Apple Farm, and were drawn into what would become an all-absorbing life adventure. Each in their own unique way is determined to support the land that supports them.

"The health of the whole farm is always our primary goal," says the matriarch of the tribe, Sally Schmitt. "We contribute to the farm in various ways, but we all share the same philosophy." She explains that over the years the focus has evolved beyond growing apples and teaching cooking classes to teaching sustainable living. "We do orchard walks with our workshops. Nowadays they seem to include a little more preaching about organics and sustainability. It's become a key part of what we do."

"We all have our areas of expertise," continues Sally, who with help from daughter Karen Bates teaches popular weekend culinary workshops from February until Thanksgiving every year. The Apple Farm also offers half-day classes on Thursdays, which, she says, are geared more towards local residents. "I hold down the kitchen. My husband Don deals with the big picture and does [select project] bookwork, Karen takes care of the garden, and Tim is the farmer. We're also seeing a deeper commitment in the second and third generations." Karen and Tim have raised four children on the farm—Joe, Sophia, Polly, and Rita—all of whom involve themselves in activities at the farm.

"Joe's our oldest," Karen explains. "He lives in Berkeley now, but still helps out in a number of ways, including sales at the Farmers Market in San Francisco, and pitching in with various construction projects that come up. Sophia's in and out—she's got the travel bug, but always seems to be here for the harvest. Polly and Rita are still in school, so they don't have a lot of time, but they do help out on weekends. They've become more and more handy as the years have gone by."

The old-fashioned farm stand is stocked with bushels of apples with names like Arkansas Black, Splendour, and Northern Spy. Tim Bates takes a break from his tractor to talk apples. "Several of the older varieties were being grown by our neighbors, the Gowans, when we first came to the valley. I brought some of the more unusual ones to Berkeley, and folks there were really interested. That was the beginning." He adds, "People often ask about the meaning of the word 'heirloom' as it applies to apples. We go with the dictionary definition, which has to do with something precious that is to be handed down. We feel that we have something here that really deserves to be passed on."

Juice, cider, and apple syrup are among a number of "value added" farm products available at the farm stand. Jams, jellies, chutneys, vinegars, and even kindling from apple prunings give the farm stand a nostalgic appeal. The sign exhorts the visitors to help themselves, and farm-stand customers are provided with a knife and a sample apple at each bushel to encourage tasting. All purchases are made on the honor system, and neighbors mingle with cooking students and visitors to the valley.

Fruits for all the jams and chutneys from the Apple Farm are hand-chopped and subjected to a short cooking time to ensure the best flavors, Sally explains. "Processing is quick and hot, and we do everything in small eight-

jar batches.” She goes on, “Our recipes are not fancy. Our goal is for people to go home and eat well. Every day I tell people, ‘You could just eat the tomatoes. You don’t really need the can of tomato sauce.’”

Weekend workshops are ongoing from February through October. Menus are put together seasonally with a mind towards the knowledge and experience of each group’s members.

“Cheap food is not really cheap in the long run,” Sally stresses. “We need to consider the cost of illness and obesity. There’s a big price tag for packaging, for transportation, for the distribution, the whole system. Eating locally can avoid a lot of that”.

The Apple Farm kitchen, where the cooking workshops take place, was the original home on the property. It is beautifully furnished with colorful handmade ceramics, and many family treasures that have made the transition from the Bateses’ and Schmitts’ former lives and businesses. Mission-style archways are decorated with garlic braids from the extensive gardens, and the cozy dining room is graced with large cheerful paintings that are, according to Sally, “out of an old rathskeller in San Francisco,” and have been in the family for years.

The Apple Farm kitchen’s “absolute right hand” is Maria Cruz Alvarado, known to the Apple Farm regulars as simply “Cruz.” Her calm demeanor and competence in the sunny, Mediterranean-feeling kitchen wins high praise from both Sally and Karen. “At this point, we couldn’t do what we do without her. She’s very precise and knows just what’s needed,” Karen enthuses.

Wandering past the kitchen, a hand-built earth oven dominates the back courtyard. Beyond this area is a lovely archway designed by Karen using twisted rebar and mulberry tree plantings. It shelters another intimate dining area, providing shade and refreshing breezes for summertime meals.

An archway of hops now frames the entrance to the vegetable garden, which bursts with late summer produce, such as tomatoes, tomatillos, and squash, as well as flowers such as miniature sunflowers and cosmos. Another garden area is filled with roses, and yet another is devoted to culinary herbs. “We all love the gardens,” Sally says. “Gardens give such pleasure—there’s always something to do and enjoy.”

Soon after initiating the cooking workshops, the family realized they would need to provide lodging for participants in their popular workshops. They decided to incorporate small but attractive cottages into their master plan. They are built with pole frame structures, which “float” above the orchard itself. The cluster of cottages forms a village of sorts, and the “rustic chic” décor, with hand-painted ceramic tile, wrought-iron bed frames, and claw-foot tubs, give the immaculate cottages a homey feel. “We designed the cottages so they don’t interrupt the flow of the orchard,” explains Sally, who also acts as head innkeeper at the Apple Farm. “They’re working out very well.”

About half of the Apple Farm’s thirty-plus acres are under cultivation, and the rolling hills along the upper Navarro River are busy with the apple harvest. Apple season starts in late July and is typically over by late November.

The Apple Farm was a long-time member of the California Certified Organic Farmers, and has now embraced visionary Rudolf Steiner’s biodynamic farming principles. Tim credits his biodynamic composting methods with the great strides in soil improvement that the farm has seen over the years. “The idea behind biodynamics is to look at your farm as a closed system, a system that you’re an integral part of. You try to find the answers to the problems you’re having on the farm within the farm itself.” For instance, he says, certain herbs are added to their compost, along with a lot of manure and even bones from farm animals. “Both the animals and the herbs grow right here. I don’t exactly understand why it works, but it’s the best compost you’ve ever seen.”

The Apple Farm’s eighteen hundred trees, some as old as ninety years, produce over sixty varieties of heirloom apples. The Navarro River bottom soil provides abundant nourishment, and frequent morning fog coupled with typically hot summer afternoons produce the tender-skinned and deliciously aromatic fruit. At the peak of the season, the farm employs around eight people; otherwise a staff of three to four people works the farm, along

with the Bates-and-Schmitt clan. "You gotta like hard work," smiles Tim, noting, "This is the time of year you have to do it all. Getting in the crop, sales, distribution, you name it. Fortunately we have one wholesaler who brings a truck here to pick up apples and take them out to a wholesale market. We also have our own routes in Napa Valley and Berkeley, selling to markets and restaurants." The Apple Farm also sells at the Ferry Plaza Farmers Market in San Francisco.

Last year Tim and Karen participated in a major international conference on Slow Food held in Turin, Italy. Slow Food is a grass roots movement that extols the virtues of local, organic, sustainable farming practices, along with high quality food preparation. Tim recalls, "Many of the speakers were really inspiring. The best part for me was being in the same room with five thousand committed people. It was great. I'm hoping that at some point some of the Italians that organized the event will visit here."

The organics sector is growing fast both nationwide and in Mendocino County. In particular, a number of purveyors of organic and specialty foods have joined the Apple Farm in providing locally grown, high quality food. "The search for good ingredients for our classes is much easier now," Sally says. "The growth of the organic food movement has been simply astronomical."

All is not perfect, though, stresses Tim, who cites increasing encroachment by large corporations in the organics movement. "It's kind of a rubber band effect. It goes one way and then the other. Small local organic growers have made a lot of inroads into the market, and then the big companies come along and scoop up that portion of the market. It can be frustrating."

Tim is also a volunteer programmer for KZYX & Z radio [90.7FM Philo] where he makes his opinions known, networking and sharing experiences with other growers in Mendocino County, which has led the way in organic and local food movements in recent years. He is one of a team of programmers who host the "Farm and Garden Show," on Mondays from 1:00 p.m. to 2:00 p.m. [Tim and his cohort host the show on the third Monday of the month.]

Karen also has a new enterprise. Along with a partner, Sandy Maillaird who hails from an old Anderson Valley ranch family, she is unpacking boxes and stocking shelves for their new Boonville store, Bates & Maillaird Mercantile. "We offer general merchandise and house wares, along with Apple Farm products. It's been very well received." Karen says she's particularly fond of their location, which is in a building which used to house an old dry goods store going back a hundred years, known as J.M. Farrar Mercantile. The building still has a turn-of-the-century air, and needed surprisingly little renovation. Karen and Sandy were able to use much of the original shelving, and the floor still shows the marks of hobnail boots worn by the loggers who frequented the store all those years ago. "We wanted to keep it a mercantile," says Karen, noting that, "We do get a number of visitors coming in on weekends, but our focus has been on having things that work for local people."

An atmosphere of inspired hard work is evident everywhere at the Apple Farm. A recent "Letter from the Farm," posted on the Apple Farm Website, sums up the hospitality that has become a hallmark of the Apple Farm: "Come visit. Our orchards are looking wonderful, the garden is always evolving, and our gate remains open."

The Philo Apple Farm is located at 18501 Greenwood Road, between Highway 128 and Hendy Woods State Park. The new Bates & Maillaird Mercantile is now open in downtown Boonville from 11:00 a.m. until 5:00 p.m. Thursdays through Mondays; closed Tuesdays and Wednesdays. Call Karen Bates for general farm information at 895-2333. You can reach Sally about cooking workshops and cottage rentals at 895-2461. Check out their Website at www.philoapplefarm.com.

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