

Evolution of Organic

A Companion Web Book to
the Film by Mark Kitchell

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Changing the Way America Eats

A farm worker dies in a field after passing out from pesticide fumes and getting “disked” by a tractor. Organic farmers are branded “hippie,” “witch doctor” and “Communist conspirator.” Vietnam vets-turned-farmers reject chemicals after being sprayed in the jungle themselves. Back-to-the-land youth nurture a “foodshed,” mirroring a regional watershed, to grow, protect, and distribute local organic produce. A Berkeley restaurateur transforms the national food palate, beginning with organic baby lettuce. A farmer behind a horse-drawn plow in the 21st century exults in advancing the “gift and beauty of creation.”

Such poignant, amusing, and enlightening stories fill the pages of *Evolution of Organic*, a companion web book that illuminates the rise and persistence of organic agriculture by those who transformed the movement from fringe alternative farming, to changing the way the nation eats and grows food.

This web book is a companion to the film by Mark Kitchell, the creator of the films *Berkeley in the Sixties* and *A Fierce Green Fire*, the latter of which captured the history of environmental movements worldwide.

Here are full narratives of many of those interviewed in Kitchell's film in chapters that elaborate on their life stories and their experiences with and analyses of the history, challenges, and promise of organics, past and future. The web book examines the different roots of the movement among activists, back-to-landers, philosophers, scientists, and conventional farmers. The narrators' stories recount how a band of pioneers converted new generations of farmers, and how their techniques and ideas were developed and refined over time.



The vision of the original organic farmers, some once seen as rural lowlifes, eventually took hold in mainstream markets. Some of these speakers became activists, responding to dire warnings of the impact of pollutants in the air, water, and foods, especially for vulnerable farm workers in the fields. Others became growers, drawn by the allure

of higher profits for organic produce or by breaking the monopoly of corporate food distributors. Yet others in the organic movement have sought to improve the larger ecology of food production and to create justice in the realm of food politics.

In these chapters, the speakers reveal the complex tensions that result from growing a small movement into a big industry. They discuss cutting edge farming methods that make organic agriculture ever more appealing to young people showing up on small farms across the world. Finally, the stories gleaned from these interviews launch us into the future as ecologically minded farmers and scientists today focus attention on developing sustainable agriculture that can regenerate the soil and capture carbon in the face of perilous climate change.

Creating These Essays

As the author of *The Heyday of Malcolm Margolin: The Damn Good Times of a Fiercely Independent Publisher* (Heyday, 2014), I edited interviews from Malcolm and many others who witnessed and participated in the development of his influential publishing company (and now cultural institution).

In a similar way *Evolution of Organic* the companion web book transforms the interview transcripts as captured by Mark Kitchell and his film making team. To create these personal essays, I reshaped the transcripts, preserving the spoken voice of those interviewed so that in reading these chapters, you will feel you're sitting with the speakers as they share their life stories.



Topics Discussed in the Interviews

- 1) The history of how interest in organic farming originated from a variety of perspectives, such as the influence of Alan Chadwick on students at U.C. Santa Cruz or organics as an alternative to the pesticides used in conventional farming (about which Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring* greatly informed the public in 1962), affecting demand for organics from consumers and a desire to grow organically by farmers themselves.
- 2) How "organic" became defined by farmers (the Certified Organic Farmers), by legislation (such as the Organic Food Act of 1980), and by regulations (such as those controlling the use of pesticides in farming).
- 3) The growth of an industry "from farm to fork" with the support of new organizations (such as the U.C. Davis Co-op Extension or the Ecological Farming Conference), ultimately taking organic far beyond small farmers and natural food stores to the development of big farms and the use of large distribution networks serving a wide urban market.
- 4) The connections between organic farmers, nutritionists, and restaurateurs, whose commitment to locally grown and organic food helped fuel the organic movement.
- 5) The science of organic farming as it combats impacts of pollutants to soil, water, and air, and as organic farmers respond to climate change, developing a sustainable, ecological approach to agriculture through innovative research and methods.



Interviewee Essays



1) Warren Weber

A pioneer of organic farming, Warren built Star Route Farms in Bolinas on the Marin coast north of San Francisco. (A note: The farm has recently been sold to USF and he is finally retiring.) Warren’s story recounts the experiences of early back-to-landers who found opportunities in the 1960s to exchange urban conventions for rural challenges. Warren found an unexpected opportunity in helping chef Alice Waters create the new baby lettuce craze in Bay Area restaurants. We easily share in Warren’s delight in the long distance he has come from his early farming experiences, and we gain much from his insights into learning to be good farmers, taking good care of the soil.



2) Bu Nygrens and Mary Jane Evans of Veritable Vegetable

Since the early 1970s, Bu and Mary Jane helped build the vegetable distribution business called Veritable Vegetable, which developed out of a collective vision. The company’s goal continues to focus on getting nutritious, organic produce into natural food stores, as well as into urban “food deserts,” so everyone has access to healthy food. The company is also a certified B corporation, meaning that Veritable Vegetable has proven to have socially and environmentally conscious values throughout their performance. Their interview is a testament to their vision and humor.



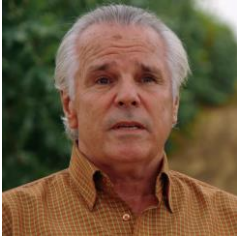
3) Paul Muller

Since 1984, Paul Muller and his wife Dru Rivers and partners have built Full Belly Farm in the Capay Valley. Their story captures a model of farming that embraces a full ecology: insuring year-round employment for farm workers; diversifying the kinds of products the farm generates; and maintaining practices in line with the newest thinking about sustainability. Paul’s experiences range from growing up on a farm, to learning from the emerging organic movement in the 1980s, to serving on the Working Group of the California Agricultural Vision. Dru also served as the director of the Ecological Farming Association. Their vision goes deep and wide. All of us – urban dwellers and rural farmers – can learn from Paul’s ruminations on the love and science of organic farming, creating a “happier and healthier” way of life.



4) Izzy Martin

Currently the Director of the Sierra Fund, located in Nevada City, California, Izzy has traveled all the roads important to organics in the last thirty years. Through the California Agrarian Action Project in Davis in the 1970s, she fought the detrimental use of pesticides harming farmworkers and rural families in the Central Valley. Izzy also helped build support for organic farmers and develop popular consumer interest in organic foods through such organizations as the Ecological Farming Conference. Izzy’s feisty attitude is evident in her discussions of how she confronted apathy toward poisoned rural communities and how she encouraged democratic participation in creating a path for the organic movement through public policy and legislation.



5) Steve Pavich

Delano grape growers, the Paviches were among the first to take organic to commercial scale with over 1000 acres in production in Central California and in Arizona. Steve opens his tale with one of the more frightening reasons to become an organic farmer: pesticide poisoning. Steve attended C.S.U. Fresno from 1967-71, at the height of anti-establishment struggles. His curious mind and his commitment to good health led him into his organic farming journey, taking his family along with him. Their huge commercial endeavor was unique in scaling up organic farming at the time, and as he relates, the Paviches helped set the standard for many years.



6) Tom Pavich

Tom represents the commitment of a kid growing up on a conventional farm who returns to the family business after venturing into college and corporate America. He applied his business degrees to help the family farm rebrand itself. Tom relates the history of the Pavich family business, from their great success to their crash when Mother Nature dragged them through harsh challenges. His love for his “babies,” the vines in his fields, carries him through the troubles, along with a belief in the long-term benefits for all gleaned from organic farming.



7) Tonya Antle

Tonya is an organic marketer par excellence who pursued a vision of bringing affordable organic foods to all people. Her journey begins growing up in a farm family, then intertwines with the Pavich brothers, marketing their organic produce. “Organic 911” became her name because there was “such an urgency.” She and Tom and Steve are the first to sell to supermarkets, then lead commercialization through the go-go years after the Alar Crisis in 1989. At the peak of their success in ’98, she splits from Tom and goes to work for Earthbound Farm. There she does it again, only bigger, as the head of marketing of the biggest grower-packer-shipper of the time.



8) Julie Guthman

The author of *Agrarian Dreams: The Paradox of Organic Farming in California* (2000, 2014, University of California Press), Julie has been a professor in the Community Studies program at U.C. Santa Cruz since 2003. She brings an analysis of organic that’s original and perceptive, deep and wide.

Enjoy!

Kim