

# STANDING OUT

## in Their Field

BY BETH ROESSNER

Produce, dairy, eggs, beef—oh, my! Eight men and women share some of the highs (K–12 foodservice partnerships!) and lows (destructive pests!) of life as an American farmer.



### “American farm.”

What images come to mind when you hear those words? Do you picture a modest white house, somewhere in the Midwest, with a few outbuildings fronting acres of fields owned by the great-great-grandchild of the man who first tilled the land? Or do you imagine a sprawl of buildings, plentiful parking for numerous employees, corporate logos emblazoned on equipment and vehicles and a private rail spur?

Both of these images could be right, as the American farming industry is incredibly diverse, and some of the largest agriculture operations still keep it all in the family. Whether a small-scale vegetable farm with fewer than five acres to an extensive business that cultivates hundreds of acres to a newly planted “food forest,” each is operated by a farmer doing his or her part to further American agriculture. In this article, eight American farmers—hailing from all across the nation, from the Green Mountain State to the Golden State—share their unique stories and their common passion: to feed American communities and bring greater awareness to the industry.

# Bob Knight

## OLD GROVE ORANGE, CALIFORNIA

An engineer by training and trade, Bob Knight was working in Saudi Arabia when he realized his nomadic career would not sustain his young family over the long term. He craved something more stable and returned to his grandparents' 2-acre citrus grove in Southern California.

Since entering the agriculture industry in 2005, Knight has carved himself quite the niche in the K-12 foodservice sector, now working *exclusively* with schools and eschewing the global citrus conglomerates with which he originally did business. Staying small is key to his success, he explains. Knight and other local farmers formed a collective—Farmers' Alliance—and together sell to 16 school districts in southern California. "We plant, we grow, we pick, we pack, we deliver directly to the school districts," recites Knight.

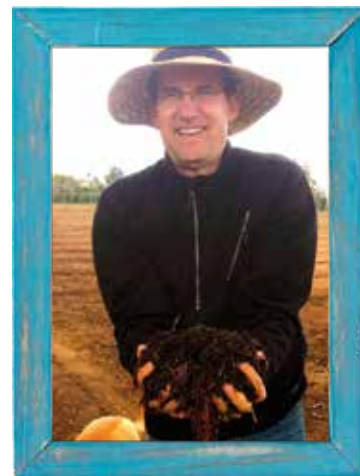
Featuring citrus varieties ranging from navel oranges to tangelos, Knight's grove now covers 87 acres and boasts trees that are more than 100 years old, several of which were planted by his great-grandparents. What he loves most about this profession is "witnessing the miracle of planting seeds and seeing them grow into something that's healthy and wonderful to eat."

Working with K-12 school nutrition operations has provided Knight with stability—after all, school districts are *always* in need of fruit. Prices are agreed upon early in the season, and he doesn't have to negotiate contracts, which enables him to forecast the future more easily. "It takes the terror out of farming," Knight notes.

But Knight's slice of paradise may be threatened—not only by climate change-exacerbated weather extremes, but also by an invasive pest. The *citrus psyllid* feeds on citrus leaves and infects trees with its bacteria, and the unwanted bug has wreaked havoc on groves in Florida in recent years. Although it has not been spotted in Old Grove Orange as yet, an infestation has been recorded a mere five miles away.

As Knight believes the pest's arrival is "imminent," he's being proactive and protecting his business by adding more variety in his crops. In particular, he's focusing on items that require minimal steps for cafeteria teams to clean, process and serve. Lettuce, although a staple for salads, requires too much time-consuming prep, in his opinion, which is why Knight has started growing blackberries and figs—and he appreciates his loyal school customers willingness to experiment with these new crops. If the psyllid *does* show up, "at least we have a head start on Plan B," explains Knight.

Knight is eager see what happens in the agriculture industry in the years to come. He's witnessed farmers take one of two directions: Either they become really, really big and supply year-round to top-name grocery chains, or they stay small, cut out the middleman and get to know the customer directly. "Agriculture is changing super-fast," he observes. "People think of agriculture as an old-tech, stable industry, but it's really being revolutionized all the time. One of those revolutions today is *growing small*." And small is where Knight wants to stay.



# Angie Tauer

## TAUER DAIRY, MINNESOTA

Angie Tauer believes the coolest part of her dairy farm is its internship program. Acting as a training facility for the University of Minnesota, Tauer Dairy teaches aspiring farmers from around the world, including two current interns from Uganda and India. "We teach them about American agriculture and the skills they need to go back and do cool things in their countries," says Tauer.

The internship program is just one of many education initiatives at the dairy. Students of all ages can learn on the dairy farm, which encompasses 220 Holstein cows and 400 acres of oats, rye, corn and alfalfa. Tauer believes programs like these are valuable in raising awareness about agriculture in general, and dairy in specific.

"I love running a business that has such a big impact on the community that we live in," states Tauer. She and her husband are third-generation owners, and Tauer herself grew up on a hog and beef farm—so her love of farming runs deep.

Cows produce, on average, 85 pounds of milk each day. Once sent to the creamery for processing, Tauer Dairy milk is converted into shredded cheese and shipped to Midwest schools, as well as dehydrated into powdered milk and exported to China.

Along with other Minnesota dairy farmers, Tauer has worked hard to champion inclusion of milk in school meals and to find innovative ways to improve children's access to the nutritious beverage. These range from a newly developed strawberry-flavored



milk with less sugar, strategies to help schools procure better coolers to keep milk chilled for optimal taste and expanded use of automated milk dispensers—like soda machines—in schools. All these tactics are designed to help cut costs and waste. "If we make it taste good, the kids will want it and ask for it at school," she asserts. "Then, they'll be lifelong milk drinkers."

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A former teacher and now a children's librarian (in addition to co-running her dairy farm), Tauer worked with partners in her county on a program to purchase nearly 60 children's books on agriculture and donate these to schools and public libraries. "It's our hope that kids will go to the libraries and check them out. And they'll learn farms are really cool, farms are really well run and this is what they grow," Tauer says. "It's all about making that connection."

When children fully understand where their meals come from, they not only appreciate the food but also the farmers who produced it. That's why, she says, more farmers should reach out and develop K-12 partnerships. "It's an easy way to be visible. It's an easy way to be known and an easy way to get people to relate to your product," explains Tauer. "Sometimes, just going into a school and explaining that you're a farmer and this is what you do, goes a



long way." Maybe one day, after reading an agriculture book and visiting a dairy farm, that child will become an intern at Tauer Dairy.



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# Ben McConnell



operation, allowing cattle to graze throughout the rest of the property. With the aid of one part-time worker and one or two full-time volunteers, he's growing carrots, beets, salad greens, lettuce, radishes, tomatoes and a variety of herbs. In the last two years, he also planted close to 400 trees—a mix of shade, fruit and nut trees. McConnell started selling his bounty to two Texas school systems, Florence Independent School District and Temple Independent School District, over a year ago.

"It makes sense to me because, one, you're feeding kids and feeding the future of this community," explains McConnell. "Also, from an economic standpoint, restaurants go out of business. They change their menus. They run into financial strife. School districts are very reliable and make great partners." They always need food, he notes.

All it takes is one conversation to start a partnership, suggests McConnell. "I just emailed some people from those districts and that's how I got in! It's hard for any school nutrition director to turn down a free sample." These partnerships have furthered McConnell's aspirations for farming. He loves knowing that his produce not only feeds children but acts as a teaching tool to help them understand where it comes from. "The kids seem to be genuinely excited about that," he reports.



## BOULDIN FOOD FOREST, TEXAS

Ben McConnell created a thriving ecosystem when he founded Bouldin Food Forest. The farm doesn't just produce organic fruits, vegetables and herbs; it's been designed as a holistic ecosystem that supports the surrounding soils, local water table and wildlife. He wants to leave the land in better

shape than when he started farming on it two years ago. "Permaculture is about taking really good care of the land, so it can produce a much better return in the long run," explains McConnell.

No longer inspired by his consulting job, McConnell chose to dive headfirst into permaculture farming; his only previous experience was as a "casual gardener." He freely admits he didn't really know what he was doing in the beginning. "I was at a point in my life where I wanted to be more grounded, literally," he recounts.

Since then, farming has become something of an obsession. "You're taking care of something that doesn't get put on pause," McConnell explains. "If you leave an office building for a week, month or year, nothing really happens to it. But if you leave the land for a few days or a week, so much of it will change."

Right now, McConnell is farming only a single acre of his 150-acre





# Andy Jones



workers are not being paid appropriate wages or that the item is of poor quality. "The schools are hamstrung, and they don't have the funds to buy the best produce all the time," Jones observes, calling out the social justice links. "There are so many factors working against success that it is pretty daunting," he laments.

It's these types of challenges in farming and education that help fuel Jones' passion for agriculture and for the CSA model. Despite growing up in urban Seattle and having zero farming experience, he's been at ICF since the early 1990s, explaining that he loves being outdoors, enjoys addressing the constant challenges the farm provides and believes in ICF's community-driven mission. "If we were just

## INTERVALE COMMUNITY FARM, VERMONT

In Burlington, Vermont, Intervale Community Farm (ICF) distributes most of its harvests via community supported agriculture (CSA) shares that are "purchased" by 300+ member-owners. In a CSA system, members "subscribe" to a farm's harvests, paying in advance and receiving in-season goods on a recurring (often weekly) basis. This cooperative model has been on the rise in the U.S. since the late 1980s.

ICF tends 25 acres of certified organic produce, growing everything from arugula to zucchini. While the farm has been in operation since 1990, a farm-to-school relationship blossomed about 15 years ago. "It was born out of interest from one of our Board members," recounts Andy Jones, farm manager, conceding that early efforts with Burlington School District involved a bit of "experimentation."

Initially, he says, "Our role was providing some items in larger quantities to see what would work and what wouldn't. We wanted to foster that experimentation...with free produce." That's right—the CSA opted to provide harvests to the school nutrition operation *free of charge*. This is right in line

with the farm's mission, explains Jones. The focus was putting high-quality produce into school cafeterias and letting that be an initial "catalyst," so the school nutrition team could discover what worked for them before moving on to procure from other local growers who were in the wholesale market and able to supply the larger volumes needed to support the entire district.

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Jones is growing his own awareness of the struggles schools have to get quality fresh produce at a budget-friendly price. Although many American farms are able to sell produce at low prices, a "bargain" sometimes can be a red flag, he says. If an item is significantly cheaper than its competition, it could mean field

growing crops and sticking them on a truck to ship them out, that would be less appealing to me," Jones notes, commending the farm's relationship with the school district. "This is how a community business *should* operate. You want to be invested in humanity."



# Lisa Poncia



## STEMPLE CREEK RANCH, CALIFORNIA

When Lisa Poncia and her husband took over the family ranch in 2005, they gave the business model a complete facelift. As fourth-generation farmers, they chose to establish “their own business,” moving away from commodity selling and into direct-to-customer sales.

“It was a slow but a big transition,” explains Poncia. They purchased cattle and implemented new grazing techniques to provide grass-finished beef (meat from cows that graze freely on grass for their entire lives). “If we were going to make a living in this part of agriculture, then we were really going to have to find a niche market. We did not want to be a commodity,” she asserts. After a four-year transition period, they created a consumer-facing website, changed their name to Stemple Creek Ranch and “hoped that we would have customers.”

That was nearly 15 years ago. Now, Stemple Creek Ranch manages more than 1,000 cattle on 3,000 acres, partners with locally owned grocery stores and butcher shops, ships meat all over the country and has partnered with school districts in Northern California. “Every year, it’s been a little bit of growth and a little of change from the year before,” notes Poncia, who also

owns her own law practice.

It’s the partnership with Stemple Creek Ranch that reinvigorated menus at Novato Unified School District—a partnership that formed less than a year ago—by reintroducing beef into school meals. Once the meat is prepared at a USDA processing plant, it is delivered directly to the schools.

Having the appropriate business model is a huge challenge for ranchers who may want to serve schools but have no experience in how a live

animal becomes a processed menu item, states Poncia. It’s a steep learning curve, but once mastered, a school partnership can be formed with a simple knock on the door.

Looking back at the ranch’s growth, Poncia is incredibly proud of what her family has accomplished and how they are setting up the fifth generation—for success, should *they* opt to take up the tradition. “We have created a healthier product for those who eat the meat, whether at their dinner table or at school,” explains Poncia. “It’s very rewarding.”



# Tyler Wegmeyer

## WEGMEYER FARMS, VIRGINIA/WEST VIRGINIA

Tyler Wegmeyer has long been obsessed with strawberries. He grew up on a Michigan dairy farm, but when, at the tender age of 7, his mother took him to a strawberry field, he fell in love with the jewel-like fruit. “I unsuccessfully tried to convince my dad to grow strawberries,” he recounts. “So, I told myself that I was going to grow up and be a strawberry farmer.”

It’s interesting to note, then, that Wegmeyer Farms, based in Loudoun County, Va., *didn’t* start out growing







strawberries when he went into business in 2002. He began with pumpkins. It took another five years before he added strawberry fields to his operation. "I did not have any strawberry experience," Wegmeyer admits. "I'm a fourth-generation farmer, but I'm a first-generation *strawberry* farmer." Today, the 2016 Virginia Farmer of the Year has eight acres of strawberries in three Old Dominion locations, as well as pumpkin patches in both Virginia and West Virginia.

Most of the berry business is a "you-pick" operation, in which families visit and gather their own harvest, but Wegmeyer does make weekly deliveries to Loudoun County Public Schools, where he feels like a celebrity among the students. "They know me as 'Mr. Weg-

meyer Who Grows the Strawberries,'" he reports. "There is great satisfaction in that."

This school-based partnership started with a simple conversation with a member of the school nutrition department. In addition to local sourcing of berries for school meals, the alliance has led to farm field trips, presentations to students and participation in Loudoun's renowned farmer trading card promotion. Yes, that's right—Wegmeyer's face is printed onto a collectible card and distributed in school cafeterias. "I knew I had arrived when my son had traded my card for a Tom Brady card," he laughs.

Because of his early exposure to berries courtesy of his mother, Wegmeyer loves providing farm expe-

riences to students, as well as to local families with children. It's a responsibility he does not take lightly. It's not just about raising awareness about agriculture and farming, it's about making the farm relevant again, and inspiring the next generation of potential farmers. "You never know what idea a little boy or girl may grab on to. Maybe they'll want to grow their own strawberries one day," Wegmeyer says. "Although I'm a small farmer and just feed my local community, I'm proud of that. I'm proud that the kids in the local schools know who I am and know about my farm."



## Sharman Hickman

### HICKMAN'S FAMILY FARMS, ARIZONA

While a traditional wedding gift from a spouse might be a token of silver jewelry, new cufflinks or a handwritten letter to cherish for years, Bill Hickman, Sr., surprised his new bride Gertie with 500 baby chicks to build upon her pre-existing porch flock. That was the start of Hickman's Family Farms.

Still family-owned and -operated, each generation that has taken over farm operations since has implemented its own business practices and values. Still, the mission of the company—providing quality eggs to Southwestern states—remains the same.

In the last 75 years, the farm has

expanded—by acreage, flock and technology—and as the farm has gotten bigger, it's gotten better, explains Bill and Gertie's daughter, Sharman Hickman, community outreach manager. "The third generation is now handing it over to the fourth generation," she says. "We've been able to improve, because [the next generation has] a new fresh look at what the consumer wants."

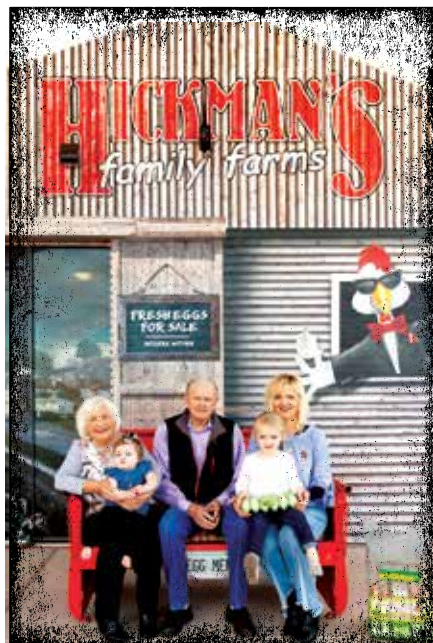
New advances include use of plastic egg cartons made entirely from recycled water bottles, cites Hickman. "We are consumer-driven, with science applied," she explains, adding that it was consumer demand that took their chickens out of cages into open spaces



and now eating a vegetarian diet.

Hickman Farms boasts six locations—three sites in Arizona, two in Colorado and one in California—with an accumulated 10 million laying hens. The eggs are sold in stores across the Southwest, Hawaii and parts of Alaska.

Although Hickman herself focuses on getting the family's eggs into large



retail stores and furthering brand recognition, she leads a team passionate about community outreach and partnerships, which extend to participating in classroom activities and getting their product into school cafeterias. "Our mom has always been instrumental in giving back to the school districts," Hickman explains. She's incredibly proud that their family's eggs have been sourced into schools across the country through state-approved vendors since the 1980s.

Hickman wants to do even more within the K-12 market, such as helping to expand breakfast in the classroom menu options to include more egg-based meals. She recognizes that school nutrition departments face strict standards but believes the key to getting more freshly made meals to students is by "coming together for solutions-based capacity." She wants more farmers to partner with K-12 schools, and together, they'll be able to give more children access to quality food.

This is why Hickman is enthusiastic—not only about the future of her family farm but also for more partnerships that benefit the community. For example, earlier this spring, the operation donated 303,000 eggs to food banks. "When we see our fully loaded trucks rolling into a gifting event," she says, "it means families will be able to eat nutritiously."



## Lois Kim

### PPC FARMS, TEXAS

It was a book that inspired Lois Kim—and her family—to farm life. Soon after reading Michael Pollan's "The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals," they seized upon an opportunity to relocate from California to Texas and start an exciting new chapter at PPC Farms.

PPC Farms was originally established in 1972; when under new management in 2009, it transitioned toward organic growing practices. This was right around the time Kim's family decided to invest in the farm, and thus began their personal agricultural journey. Overcoming major challenges associated with conventional farming practices is what fuels Kim to deliver high-quality produce to the community.

"The conventional food system model encourages farmers to overproduce so that the price can be held low and stable," Kim explains. "[But] what I see as the No. 1 problem is farm subsidies in the form of crop insurance, which mainly supports grains, sugar cane and corn... where is the incentive for *vegetable* farmers?" Other challenges include import prices and increases in labor costs.

While these issues concern commercial enterprises, there are plenty of challenges associated with basic horticulture. To best understand and appreciate these, Kim believes everyone should try their hand at growing their own food just once. "If they are successful, that



is great! They will enjoy tremendous satisfaction of growing and actually consuming the fruits of their toil," she explains. "If they are not so successful, at least they will gain appreciation for the farmers who produce the food they take for granted. When I first tried growing vegetables in my backyard, that is when I realized the price I pay at the supermarket is ridiculously low!"

Although PPC Farms does not have the logistical capability to partner directly with school districts, it works through a distributor that gets its produce into several Texas school districts. "As an organic grower, I would like to see our best products go to our children in our own region and state," remarks Kim. "I wish more school districts demanded local products from their suppliers." She urges school nutrition departments to "promote the

fact [when] the products [they serve] are from a local farm." **SN**



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