

## THE DREAM: MAKE A LIVING OFF THE LAND

On the coast south of San Francisco, a small band of farmers thrives with berries, goats, and innovation

# THE SWEET LIFE

The coast around Pescadero, California, can change from fog-wrapped to sun-warmed in August. In the shadow of eucalyptus trees, farmers make cheese from goat's milk and grow berries and corn. Considering Pescadero's proximity to major urban areas—San Francisco an hour north, the Silicon Valley just east across the hills—agriculture's continued presence here seems not just unlikely but magical too. Rising land costs, competition from big growers elsewhere: These forces make farming a challenge. And yet a small band of farmers is thriving, thanks to goats, pies, and a willingness to dream big and work hard.



BY MATT VILLANO PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVID FENTON

Herding the goats  
at Harley Farms.



MEET THE FARMER

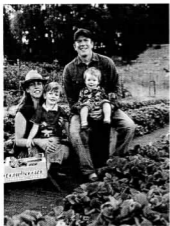
## Dee Harley

**THE BUSINESS OF FARMING** "No matter how much you idealize this job, it's still a business. It doesn't matter that there are animals involved. Someone has to be up at 5 a.m. Someone has to tidy up. Someone has to do bookwork and balance the bank statements. It's not this 'woo woo' life."

**WHY SHE LOVES GOATS** "About 7:30 a.m., when I'm sitting in the kitchen having my breakfast, I can watch the goats go out to pasture. They're so happy, skipping along and head-butting and having a fabulous time. For me, it never gets old."

**ON DOING WHAT'S BEST FOR THE FARM** "Don't kid yourself—this job is a seven-days-a-week operation. Also, in any business that involves animals, it's important to know that you'll have to face pretty major decisions concerning the animals. Sometimes those decisions can be tough. But you always must do what's best for the farm."

**TO VISIT** [harleyfarms.com](http://harleyfarms.com)



MEET THE FARMERS

## Jered Lawson & Nancy Vail

**COPING WITH WEATHER** "I knew weather was unpredictable and that we would be at its whim," Lawson says, "but I never knew that I would be waking up daily wondering if it's finally warm enough to sow, or going to be dry enough or wet enough to work the soil."

**HARDEST PART OF THE DAY** "Harvesting strawberries. After hours of bending to pick the sweet, swollen, red, vitamin C-filled berries, my back screams at me."

**BEST PART OF THE DAY** "Eating the pie, of course."

**WHAT THEIR FAMILY & FRIENDS THINK ABOUT THEIR LIFE** "They love to visit, applaud the effort, and think that our children, Lucas and Rosa, are lucky to be raised in such an environment. Of course, when they leave, our loved ones also are happy not to have to hike up to use the composting toilet every day."

**THE FUTURE OF FARMING** "The next generation of farmers will survive by their relationships with the people who eat directly from their farm. While the last 50 years have been a move to large industrial farms, the next 50 will be about small-scale diversified farms that feed local municipalities."

FOR MORE [pietorch.org](http://pietorch.org)

A field of sunflowers in full bloom at Pie Ranch.



"THE FACT THAT I CAN LIVE OUT HERE AND GROW THING FOR THE LOCAL COMMUNITY—IT NEVER

"I grew up as a city kid in Los Angeles," says Jered Lawson, explaining his path to Pescadero. "But I felt a whole lot better in the mountains. When I was 19, I visited a friend who was apprenticing on a farm. I was hooked."

Five years ago, Lawson and his wife, Nancy Vail, purchased 14 acres of Pescadero farmland. Today they share a 30-foot canvas yurt with their two children, Lucas, 3, and Rosa, 1. Every morning, Lawson and Vail hit the fields to cultivate strawberries for the pies that give their Pie Ranch its name.

Not far down the road is England-born Dee Harley. "When I was 18," she recalls, "I traveled down the West Coast and ended up in Pescadero, where I fell in love. My husband and I lived on this derelict cow dairy farm, and I thought, How great it would be to make it a dairy farm again. I bought six goats and got things started."

But in 2008, getting a small farm started and keeping it going is anything but easy. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the total number of American farms declined 5 percent between 1997 and 2007, with California, Oregon, and Washington each losing 1,000 farms between 2006 and 2007.

Pescadero's farmers have succeeded by being uniquely innovative.



## EVERYTHING I NEED AND GROW EVERY- CEASES TO AMAZE ME<sup>27</sup> —JERED LAWSON

Lawson and Vail sell their pies right at Pie Ranch's farmstand and at Mission Pie, a cafe/bakery in San Francisco's Mission District. Because one of Pie Ranch's goals is to teach agriculture to urban kids, San Francisco high school students come down once a month to work on the farm; they also help staff the bakery.

As for Dee Harley, she has 203 American Alpine goats that supply her with milk for cheese and goat's-milk soap. But she supplements this business with organic produce, farm tours, and catered dinners in the farm's 100-year-old barn.

At the nearby Blue House Farm, growers Ryan Casey and Ned Conwell have embraced Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), a program through which they deliver boxes of fresh veggies to 90 local customers every week. "Could they get a lot of this stuff from the farmers' market?" Casey asks. "Of course. But becoming a part of what we're doing, for them, is worth something more."

Says Jered Lawson, "The fact that I can live out here and grow everything I need and grow everything for the local community—it never ceases to amaze me." Or as Dee Harley says, "When you are passionate about what you do, you do what you can to make it last." ■



MEET THE FARMERS

## Ryan Casey & Ned Conwell

**NOW THEY STARTED** "When I was in high school in San Diego, I was lucky enough to spend summers at camp and became a nature nut early on," Casey says. "After college, I took an internship on a farm. I began working on farms in New Zealand, Rhode Island, and California, and eventually dove into organics. I started Blue House Farm with Ned Conwell three years ago."

**HARDEST PART OF THE DAY** "Finishing the to-do list. There's always so much to do; sometimes we have to purposely misplace my list just to feel we've accomplished everything."

**BEST PART OF THE DAY** "Morning. The crops are especially vibrant after a cool night, before the warm sun hits them. You can walk the long rows of vegetables, sipping coffee."

**ADVICE FOR WOULD-BE FARMERS** "Before starting your own farm, spend as much time as possible on other farms. Make sure it's a life you enjoy. Finally, choose a type of farming that you deeply believe in. It's way too much work for something you do not feel passionate about."

FOR MORE [bluehousefarm.org](http://bluehousefarm.org)