

Sierra Morse: My name is Sierra Morse and I am a student at Dominican University. Today's date is October 14, 2008. I am here with Albert Straus at Straus Family Creamery in Marshall, California. Albert grew up on Straus Family Creamery and is now its president. This interview is one of a series of interviews in a project called "*Growing the Future: Leaders in Agriculture.*" So, Albert, what are your earliest memories about growing up on the farm?

Albert Straus: Let's see, growing up on the farm. Well, I grew up on the dairy. We didn't have a creamery at the time. On the dairy, when I was young, I was driving vehicles around; I was feeding cows, feeding chickens, cleaning calves, cows and chickens. So some of the earlier memories are working around the farm and being with my family on the farm.

Sierra Morse: What did you do for entertainment, apart from working on the farm?

Albert Straus: Well, when we were little, I was in 4H. I remember swimming classes. There were some religious classes. For fun, when I was able to drive, we went to the movies. Most of the activities were around the farm, though.

Sierra Morse: Could you tell a little more about 4H?

Albert Straus: 4H? I had my own cow and I also had a pony that I showed, and then I did the electrical projects, and then when I was, I think 12 or so, I actually taught electrical classes with our ex-partner, who was the leader, the 4H leader. And later on, when I came back from college, I did one computer class for 4Hers, I think, as well. But I was in 4H until high school. I also remember showing in Petaluma, I think maybe [in] Santa Rosa once, and then the ponies. I was in Fairfax and there was a place to show animals, as well.

Sierra Morse: What years were you in 4H, approximately?

Albert Straus: Years in 4H. I was probably [in 4H] in the '60's.

Sierra Morse: O.K. And this cow that you raised, how long did you have that cow?

Albert Straus: Well, that was when I became a vegetarian <laughs>. They decided to butcher our cow and we ate our own meat, and they did it without asking me. I wasn't going to eat my own cow, so I became a vegetarian at age 11 for a year and a half.

Sierra Morse: Understandable. Was there a name for this cow?

Albert Straus: That's a good question. I don't remember the name. It was a registered cow, though.

Sierra Morse: Sarah, this is an example of follow-up questions, so I hope you don't mind. So this cow, what did you learn from that cow? Is there something that you carried forward in terms of your learning and raising this cow, as your first cow?

Albert Straus: Well, it was a cow that I raised and that we milked, and I think the milkers and the people milking thought that 4H animals were a pain because they were tame, they were stubborn, and they weren't doing anything that, you know, it was very hard to milk them. And it was a purebred, and I never really made any money off of a purebred. You know, it was kind of a recordkeeping and a type of agriculture that I didn't really take on as a way of dairy farming.

Sierra Morse: Was it a Jersey cow?

Albert Straus: It was a Holstein. Back in the '60s, we-- my father started with Jersey cows and then in the '60s, there was a cholesterol scare and the people that were selling their milk to us had to change to Holsteins because of less fat. So for many years, we had only Holsteins and then I've been cross breeding with Jerseys again because I want the cream and the components in the milk.

Sierra Morse: So in a pre-interview, you told me that your father was from Germany and your mother was from Holland. Could you tell me a little more about them, and how they moved to America?

Albert Straus: It goes back a ways. My father's mother actually was born in San Luis Obispo in the 1850s, I think; I can't remember what year she was born. But her father had the general store in San Luis Obispo. They came from Germany in the 1850s. And at that time, San Luis Obispo was bigger in Los Angeles and it was a main city. So there were three brothers that came to San Luis Obispo, one had a bank, one had the store, and I don't know what the third one had. But when farmers couldn't pay with money, they

paid with little pieces of land. And they were there until the 1890's, and then I think there was a big drought, there was a depression, and there were some other issues, that they decided to move back to Germany. But they always hoped there would be oil. And so my father, we're Jewish, my father was born in Germany in Hamburg, and went through high school in Hamburg, but the last three years they were there was when Hitler was in power. My father had training in Agriculture-- oh, I should back up a little bit <laughs>. My father used to tell the story quite a bit, but my father's father died when my father was 4 on the way back from World War I, of pneumonia, and he had a PhD in Agriculture in Germany, which was very unusual for a Jewish person to have an agricultural background, and he actually had managed estates in Germany. So my father-- growing up there, he was raised by his mother and his grandfather-- had training in agriculture to go to Israel to work on the Kibbutz, and they left in '36 from Germany, went to Palestine, it was before the state, [and] he brought his mother with them. The mother settled in Jerusalem. They were there six months and my father got a telegram to come to California right away, they were drilling for oil. So he came to California, there was no oil, but he liked it here and ended up going to Berkeley and Davis in Agriculture. And then finding the farm... well, he did a bunch of internships around the area, and then found a place that he felt was like the weather in Germany, which I don't know how he got to that, but anyway, it's a cooler climate, it doesn't snow, and he bought the initial farm, the 166-acres, in 1941, and started the dairy there.

Sierra Morse: When you say "there", where?

Albert Straus: Well, actually in Blakes Landing Farms. Blakes Landing was a railroad stop, and Blake, he bought the farm that was built by the Blakes. It was one of the original Spanish land grants and the house was finished in 1865, I think. So it was more of a New Hampshire style house because that's where the Blakes were from. And the railroad was gone; it was pulled out in 1930. But he started the farm then and continued on all his life.

Sierra Morse: And the drilling for oil, when your father came back to California because they were drilling for oil, where were they drilling?

Albert Straus: The little piece of land or around San Luis Obispo County.

Sierra Morse: The same property that...

Albert Straus: It wasn't a property, it was little pieces of land that the farmers had given in exchange for merchandise. And they were spread around San Luis Obispo. After my

father died, I found some old tax documents that looked like it was about 640-acres, total. After San Luis Obispo, my great-grandfather had gone on the way back from German, the family went back to German, but he went to El Salvador and started a coffee business there. So part of the family was in Salvador. So, you know, there were different interests in that whole part.

Sierra Morse: So what about your mother?

Albert Straus: My mother grew up in Amsterdam. Her family was in the diamond business. They had diamond cutting and diamond brokering, and she was on one of the last boats out of Europe before Holland was invaded, I think it was either the last or second to last boat out of Italy. And they stayed in New York City. Me and my father went to see her in New York, and the first time he went, she was in Holland, it must have been 1949 or something like that, so he couldn't wait, he came back because the cows had to be milked, and then he went back, it must have been a few months later, and she wasn't there again, but he waited that time and she came, and they were. I think they were married within three months, and they moved to California. They were both city kids. My father, I don't think, was ever very mechanical, but he was willing to try different ways to be a farmer. We had partners at that time that were also a family that had hidden after the war, and the wife was a distant relative, and her husband was German, as well. Anyway, so they came back and my parents worked very hard to try to keep the farm and agriculture, keep it viable. Both my parents over the years had been on environmental organizations, started environmental organizations, and tried to keep the communication between farmers and environmentalists strong, and government, actually, and tried to work very hard to keep the land as a viable agricultural entity. We were one of the only families that supported the agricultural zoning in Marin County, the A60 zoning at the time, which was one house for 60 acres. In the '60s, there was a plan in West Marin to put 100,000 homes and it was going to be a four-lane freeway-- it wasn't 100,000 homes, it was 100,000 people, but it was all going to be subdivided. And in 1972, with a change of Board of Supervisors, Gary Giacomini pretty much leading the way, my parents were very much instrumental in getting that zoning, the plan and the zoning, changed to agricultural zoning. And then also the Williamson Act came into play, which was the farmland was assessed on, rather than the highest and best uses, it was assessed on the agricultural value. So that helped save a lot of property taxes. And then the Coastal Act came in play, which was in '72, I think, as well. So everything came together to try to preserve this land. My mother and Phyllis Faber actually started Marin Agricultural Land Trust as the first agricultural land trust in the nation. It was because the zoning could be changed on a vote of the Board of Supervisors and overturned, and a land trust would keep those development rights in perpetuity and keep that land open.

Sierra Morse: So MALT is the first land trust...

Albert Straus: Agricultural land trust.

Sierra Morse: ...in the nation?

Albert Straus: In the nation, yeah. So that was in 1980. And I came-- well, I don't know how you want to move on from there, but...

Sierra Morse: What do you remember about your mom's activeness in MALT when you were growing up?

Albert Straus: Well, I remember she became very active and she was in meetings constantly. And I remember being at the dinner table or something and the phone would ring, and my father would say, "Oh, it's the environment calling," or, you know, there was always something. She was very active and very driven to do this. And when she was diagnosed with a brain tumor, she says, "I can't die now, I have to raise \$60 million for MALT." So she was very dedicated, very much had a vision of what she felt the community should look like, and what agriculture in this county could be. She also was helpful in getting Marin Organic going, which was a sport organic production in the county. When I came back from school, from college, I had friends who were making mushroom logs, shitake mushroom logs, and she was growing them in the barn at our dairy until I think she broke her arm or something, so she couldn't do it anymore.

Sierra Morse: What is a mushroom log?

Albert Straus: It was compressed like-- compressed shavings and different types of nutrients to keep-- instead of having a tree that you cut and bore holes and put the spore in, you did it with a log, and that grew, and you had humidifiers and different things. And she grew the shitake mushrooms and sold them off to restaurants and farmer's markets. And we did an organic vegetable garden, as well. That was back in the-- I think it was the late '80s, early '90s. And that was kind of a precursor to me going organic for the farm.

Sierra Morse: Do you still grow mushrooms and vegetables?

Albert Straus: No, we gave up on that.

Sierra Morse: How would you describe your family dinner table when you were growing up? What would be a typical family dinner table?

Albert Straus: What's a typical family dinner table? You mean what kind of food? Or what kind of...

Sierra Morse: Just like the atmosphere, how your family was, maybe the food.

Albert Straus: Well, actually, the breakfasts I remember a lot more. I mean, we had birthdays and it was always the birthday breakfast. The aspects were the good dishes; there was smoked salmon and usually some kind of bread, and scrambled eggs. But it was like this whole kind of thing, and a lot of times, if it was during the week, we kind of hurried before you had to go to school. Of course, my mother made chocolate spread. It was on toast or something like that, it was something that always was a very Dutch thing, so I remember that part. When we were little, we used to get chocolate letters from Holland that were part of gifts. So it was kind of a festive thing, the birthdays. My father was very German in the sense that he liked things to be pretty, just so. He was a meat and potatoes person, mostly. But in later years, they actually ate a lot of vegetables. He couldn't have salt and my mother couldn't have sugar. <laughs> And so it was kind of creative food.

Sierra Morse: The chocolate spread sounds really good.

Albert Straus: Yeah, it was good.

Sierra Morse: Is it like a hazelnut chocolate spread or...

Albert Straus: It varied. It was good. And, of course, the cakes.

Sierra Morse: Did you have a significant role model when you were growing up?

Albert Straus: Significant role model. Not that I can think of. I mean, I think that when I was growing up, we had the partnership that broke up, and it was more like a divorce because we had grown up right next door to the family, the Engrises, and they split up and he got part of the land, and proposed to put a big development in there. It was a very difficult time and it split the whole community, pretty much.

Sierra Morse: And what year was that?

Albert Straus: '69. And it lasted for about ten years through the hearings at the county and it was in the newspapers. It was everywhere. And so even to this day there are people that wouldn't talk to us, that we had known all our lives.

Sierra Morse: Because?

Albert Straus: Because we had taken a stand against a development that we thought would impact. I talked over a lot of the things with both my parents. We worked. I mean, it was difficult because I was in partnership with my father when I came back from school, and also we were living within a mile of each other, so it was a very difficult balance to have independence, and yet work so closely with them. So I think there were a lot of positive things and a lot of difficult things, as well.

Sierra Morse: So had you always wanted to take over the family business?

Albert Straus: Actually, out of high school I took a year off and went to Israel and milked cows. <laughs> There was a time I considered going into like electrical engineering, or doing something, but I made the decision to go to Cal Poly in Dairy Science because I felt I liked the outdoors, I liked to be my own boss, you know, I liked animals, and I liked the challenges. So I decided I didn't want to work in an office, which I'm doing more and more of now. <laughs>

Sierra Morse: So how is your family today involved in the business?

Albert Straus: Well, my parents died in 2002 and middle of 2003. They were partners with me on the farm. And when I started the creamery in 1994, my brother helped me for about five years in marketing and sales, and then my sister did, also, until about four years ago, in marketing and sales. My brother has his own marketing and PR company now in Berkeley, right now, for organic firms and events, and things like that. My sister is an actress who was living in L.A. until a month ago, and now she is trying out Petaluma. But she is writing and doing something...

Sierra Morse: Scripts? Or...

Albert Straus: She's writing plays and writing books. And so she's doing something a little different. My other sister never was part of the farm. She lives in Upstate New York, or mid-state New York, and has her own family. She's probably the one that wanted to be on the farm the most; she was a high school Ag teacher, and now she's doing high school science, I think. This business, the creamery, which is a separate business from the farm, I started, as I said, in 1994. And it's a partnership-- well, it's not a partnership-- it's a business that my wife and myself own. I have a son who is 13 and I'm keeping it open; you know, it's a possibility that if he wants to look at this as a way of life, and a way of work that he wants to be involved in, then he can.

Sierra Morse: So what made you decide to go organic?

Albert Straus: Well, going back to my parents, we always had a tendency to do things environmentally friendly. We had environmental tendencies. We had used some herbicides early on for thistles when I was right in college, and I came home and we did some, but in '74, we stopped using herbicides, it just wasn't doing anything. Thistles come back every year and it's more harmful, I think, to the people using it than it is to the plants. And the only synthetic fertilizers we used were for fields that were far away, and we stopped that in the early '80s. So the land was all certifiable as organic, which means that there's no herbicides, pesticides, or synthetic fertilizers used for at least three years. And someone approached me in the 1990s about doing organic milk for ice-cream, and my weakness and my education was actually at Cal Poly, I took a lot of manufacturing courses-- ice-cream making, butter making, I was on a dairy project judging team, and won third place in the regional contest in Portland, Oregon. And [for] my senior thesis, I put together a raw milk processing plant at that time. So someone approached me in 1990 about doing organic milk for ice cream, as I said. They gave up on the idea. I kept looking into what it meant to be organic. I called my professors at Cal Poly and they had no clue what organic was. It was a new law in California. It was something that I kind of had to figure out what it meant for the land, but the animals had to be on all organic feeds. You know, where would I find them? How do I treat the cows without antibiotics and hormones? Once the land is certified organic, the cows have to be on organic feeds. They can't be treated with antibiotics or hormones. It's a one-year transition. So I had to find out how to not treat animals with antibiotics and hormones, which there are a lot of them. Well, the antibiotics are used routinely on conventional dairies, so we kind of had to experiment. I heard of something called homeopathy for treating animals, there were only two veterinarians in the country who used them, one in Wisconsin and one in Pennsylvania, and the one in Pennsylvania came to California and did a workshop I went to, and figured out what it was, and it's more like a vaccine. The more you dilute it, the stronger it is.

Sierra Morse: And homeopathy methods are sort of building up resistance to disease?

Albert Straus: It helps. It's not a resistance, but it helps enable the animal to... I'm trying to think how...

Sierra Morse: Their immune system to naturally deal with it better?

Albert Straus: It kind of boosts up. It's not [the] immune system, but I think it's its own defenses, but it also was that, well, the way you diagnosed an animal was if it was cold on one side, or if it was different favoritism-- it wasn't very objective, it was subjective-- and so I had to kind of experiment with how to standardize it for modern diseases, you know. For a certain type of Mastitis, it's cholemastitis, this is what you give, and it mostly was tablets at that time, so you couldn't put tablets on their tongue three times a day, so I developed a way to inject it under their skin in dilution, and it worked for certain cases. But what I found out over time was it's mostly prevention; if the bedding is clean and dry, if they get some problem with their feet that you dress it right away, and our herd health is actually better than it's ever been. When I came back from Cal Poly and came to the farm, the biggest thing I tried to address was our feed cost, which usually runs between 40-60 percent of your income on a farm, so I started looking through Yellow Pages as a conventional dairy, and calling up different processors and seeing what waste products they had. Over the years I had used tofu waste and sake waste, and orange pulp, and lettuce waste, and cabbage, cocoa bean hulls, and tried a lot of them, so I was used to scrambling to find feeds. So when I was looking at organic, I looked at the growers list that were certified organic, and called them up to find the organic feeds, and developed a system. Still, to this day, it's kind of a Catch 22-- they are always waiting for there to be more market, and we are always waiting for there to be more feed. But I was able to bring in grains from the Midwest and Canada by rail car, and I put in our own mill to grind them; to get an organic mill in place was going to be-- no one was doing organic, so there were no mills that could be certified, and it was going to be very expensive, so we did it ourselves.

Sierra Morse: Here on this property?

Albert Straus: On the dairy. I wanted to do my own processing, so I put in plans to the county for a processing plant to be built. I got approval, but to finance it, the SBA, as supportive as they're supposed to be, when it gets down to it, they don't like new business <laughs> and so they wanted 150 percent of the collateral that we were looking for, so they were looking at tying up all my parents' land, my sister's house. It made it totally impractical. So I ended up finding this site, which was the drug and alcohol rehab that turned into a cult, so they were serving 1,000 to 2,000 people out of this facility.

Sierra Morse: Just for the record, when you're saying "this," you mean the creamery where you work today?

Albert Straus: Yes, the creamery where we are today. At the time, we were leasing a few buildings on this ranch. So we were able to get started here with leases and loans for equipment. Well, leases mainly for equipment, and loans from family and friends that loaned money and they were ten-year loans for ten percent. I was able to get going on February 7, 1994. We were under-capitalized, but we got it going, and now we've grown double digits every year for the last 15 years.

Sierra Morse: How do you account for such a large success?

Albert Straus: Well, the people want organic products because they're concerned with the food supply and with their eating, and so what our mission has been is to come up with something that's certified organic, which has the guarantees of what's not in the product. [We use] a re-usable packaging, or environmentally friendly packaging, as much as we can. At least, that's our mission. We do not mill any processed products, as well as no additives, or as few additives as we have to, to make a viable product. So I think we have a product that consumers look at, and taste the quality, and value the mission that we have and, you know, a sustainability model that we're still developing and improving on, from energy self-sufficiency to feed self-sufficiency, to reusable packaging, to just looking at everything we do: people, land. It's a kind of a model of people, planet and profit that we're working on to measure and to come up with sustainability models that will ensure that we're trying to reach a certain goal.

Sierra Morse: Why do you feel that being sustainable is important?

Albert Straus: Sustainable in our sense of the word is something that is a balance between minimally impacting the land and environment we're living in, and supporting the people. And the profit has to be there; otherwise you can't do the other two. So I think it is important to us because if you didn't do that, I don't think we'll be here long term. I don't think it's a model that would work. I mean, a lot of companies grow and they want to be dominant, and they want to grow far and wide; we think that if we make something sustainable like there used to be small dairies in every region or community that had the local market, like there used to be Berkeley Farms, was a local processor. Clover was up in North Bay, and there was Crystal in Sacramento. So every place had its own processor and supporting the dairies around it, and got the milk from around there. With the energy crisis, and with everything getting more and more expensive, and is pointing that we need to go back to the places where we are localized and supporting the communities that we live in.

Sierra Morse: How does being organic change your perspective on the food you consume, on a personal level?

Albert Straus: Well, it makes me look at how far food comes from, how it's grown. When I started, it was four days after they approved the growth hormone for cows, and for a good 10-12 years, I was trying to figure out how we could test and make sure that we were free of it. A little over two years ago, I found a test so we could test for fumos which are genetically modified organisms that are taking genes from different species and putting them in the same plant, like human genes and psoriasis, rat genes and potatoes, and flounder genes in tomatoes, which is strictly prohibited by federal law for organic production. We started testing our corn, soybeans, and alfalfa, and found that a quarter to a third of our certified organic corn was contaminated with GMOs, so we started our own certification program to test and verify our feeds. In my mind, it's really important that we keep the integrity of what organic is. 77 percent of our food in this country has genetically modified organisms in it, so in my mind, when I look at the food supply I'm trying to support a sustainable food system, which I don't think GMOs have any part in. You can take it even further. The whole energy policy that is taking corn and soybeans and putting them into fuel is totally unsustainable. It's taking a quarter of our corn and contributing to shortages worldwide of food. I think that's a policy that is absurd.

Sierra Morse: What would you say to the argument that is out there for GMO's that because of the expanding global population and the shortage of arable land to grow food, we may have no choice but to turn to genetically modified food, what do you think of that argument?

Albert Straus: I think it's ludicrous, I don't think there's any scientific data that shows that there's more long term productivity or health from GMO products and actually I think it's contrary to that. The only people that make out from GMO's are not consumers, not farmers, it's the pharmaceutical companies that make the money and it's been devastating around the world. I mean India's been devastated by GMO's, farmers committed suicide because they don't have control of their own destiny, essentially. It's a huge problem.

<crew talk>

Sierra Morse: The University of Michigan just finished this big study on organic producing in developed countries and trying to determine whether or not the myth of that organic methods cannot produce the yields, the crop yields and what their study showed was that in developed countries, organic practices can actually yield up to three times

that of conventional methods of farming. So it seems that the studies are now showing kind of taking the myth out of organic, do you?

Albert Straus: Well there's also my old professor from Cal Poly which I just saw again after 31 years is now CEO of Rodale Institute and they're the one in organic gardening and they do all these publications, back east, and they have a farm.

Sierra Morse: And what's the name of this?

Albert Straus: Rodale and they have determined that for every acre of organic farming you're sequestering somewhere like four tons of carbon by composting and by the farming methods and that you're actually taking carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere whereas, you know, everything else we're doing is kind of just trying to minimize how much we're putting in. So I think there's a lot of good information starting to come out.

Sierra Morse: What sort of action have you taken against GMO's and the cloning of animals?

Albert Straus: We were one of the only companies in California to be in favor of labeling cloned meat and milk products. Using cloned animals or cloned animal offspring is against organic law; there're a few hundred cloned animals or probably more now, before they were approved there was a bunch of cloned animals on the market. I think consumers have the right to have a choice whether they're going to consume cloned animals and that is contrary to most of the popular, [or] at least agricultural, industry. And then as far as GMO's, as I said we started in January, we have a verification program that it's not in our products from everything from the feeds we get has to have testing and certificate analysis on every load. The ingredients here at the creamery have to have the same thing; they have to have a verification that they're not GMO. Like chocolate chips have soy listed in them, so soy has to make sure it's organic and it's a non GMO source and so we're starting to label and starting to explain what our self certification actually is. There is a bigger movement, the non GMO project that's based out of Berkley, California that has retailers and distributors and farmers from North America that are working on the same separate program but they have too many big players in it, so what happens is the timeline gets further and further out. So I wanted to get it going before there was no organic left essentially. So I'm showing them how to do it. Actually the Europeans, the EU, Japan and Korea have for years required testing on foods and feeds that go into those countries and so they kind of set the-- they led the way and so it wasn't as hard for me to get a program going. It took me a year to get one of the feed mills to figure out that they could do it and they wanted to be the first.

Sierra Morse: Are there other people who are following your model for testing GMO's?

Albert Straus: Well nationally they're working on the program and we're still involved in it, so we'll join them once they catch up to us.

Sierra Morse: Have you inspired other local farmers to convert to organic practices in anyway?

Albert Straus: Over the years there have been-- for many years I was the only certified organic dairy in Marin County and well California. We were the first certified organic dairy and creamery west of the Mississippi River in '94. In '96 I bought on the Tresh family in Two Rock as a second certified organic dairy in California. There are now a quarter of the dairies in Marin County are certified organic and so I think that we've kind of shown people. When I started, people thought I was crazy, you know, and farmers a lot of them are looking at doing organic or having that option or they're not in business. So we lose 5% of our farms every year in this country so I think at least what I've tried to do is show that organic dairy farming is an alternative and make it a system that's profitable and sustainable.

Sierra Morse: What would you say is the biggest issue plaguing small family farms today?

Albert Straus: Well it's financial mainly, I mean it's not being able to sell a product for what it costs to produce it and always being in this mode of having to get bigger and bigger to be able to survive and it doesn't work, it's a thankless task. I mean that's another reason I wanted to do organic is so we could set our own pricing, we wouldn't have to get bigger and bigger because it's not sustainable for our land and I think that's, I mean I'm going to back up a little bit. The state of California has an organic law but the California Department of Food and Ag Dairy Division at Milk Pooling doesn't recognize organic milk. I petitioned the state to recognize organic milk about maybe five or six years ago and then Horizon joined me and sued them in federal court. We lost but in the 2007 annual report from the California Department of Food and Ag, they said that hope for north coast dairies in California was to go organic and they started tracking organic milk sales in California. So even though they don't recognize it, they are starting to see that it's a bigger and bigger part of the market.

Sierra Morse: Do you think you've kind of helped create a new market with your products that consumers sort of followed this option that you've provided?

Albert Straus: I think I'm part of it, I think it's a movement that's definitely grown over the years. I mean I don't think we're a niche anymore, we're part of what the food supply and more and more people are trying it and using organic products every year and understanding what it is. So I think we're part of it yeah.

Sierra Morse: Your organic vanilla yogurt, the whole milk yogurt is to die for. If everybody tasted that yogurt you can't go back to any other brand, I can't get enough of the Straus Vanilla Yogurt, I think I'm addicted to it actually, I don't know how you do that.

Albert Straus: I'm sure we do something in there.

Sierra Morse: There's something about it, maybe it's just because it's the higher content of cream that you go for, you were saying with your cows but whatever it is, you created your own market with that product alone.

Albert Straus: Well I think that's what I'm saying, is it's not only organic but it's also quality that we're trying to produce. I think it reflects the quality of the milk that we get and so I'm hoping, you know, we do have, you know, some of the best selling products in the natural foods market, our whole milk yogurt's the best selling yogurt in the west, in California, Nevada and Arizona. Our vanilla ice-cream is the best selling ice-cream in the natural sweets groceries. So we've made some products that have done very well, all our products are in the top ten I think. So I think we've done the job that we set out to do and now it's just trying to figure out with this environment how to with costs going sky high, we have an 80% increase in feed costs since the beginning of the year and how do you transfer that to consumers and not lose sales and so that's where we're trying to balance all the time with is, you know, we have the ability to pass on along costs but if we do, you know, we don't want to lose market and as a small producer our costs are a lot higher than some of them that's, you know, ten times bigger and that's like Clover or hundred times bigger than us like Organic Bell and Horizon. So we're definitely the smaller player and that's why I think it's important to stay closer to home, which we're trying to do.

Sierra Morse: What would you say is the biggest achievement of the farming community in Marin to date?

Albert Straus: Surviving. I mean, you know, I think for decades people are saying agriculture is dead in this county, there's no future and we've proved them wrong, you know, agriculture's still here, there's still many hurdles, there always are going to be but we've survived and prospered. I think there's a growing small fruit and vegetable

growers organic farmer's markets, beef and dairy and all the forms of agriculture that are in the products are available here that weren't available here a few years ago. So you know, we're succeeding.

Sierra Morse: Where do you hope to see it when let's say your son is your age, where do you hope to see Marin agriculture?

Albert Straus: I'm hoping that it keeps going in the vein of being able to do, you know, have more local products that are available. There's more and more on farm processing like cheese making and pretty much I think we're kind of the hub in this country if not further that we have a lot of on farm processing. There's some goat cheese makers, there's sheep's cheese, there's going to be one right next door. The Frankies are putting in a cheese plant, so there's a lot of different farms that are putting in processing and hopefully we can keep going with that kind of and hopefully we can bring some of these communities that used to be farming communities back to farming, you know, Point Reyes used to be farming until the park took out the last farm. I think that changed the nature of that community quite a bit. It's now a tourist attraction and not really much grounded in agriculture other than a farmer's market and I'm hoping that we can strengthen the infrastructure and the attraction to agriculture.

Sierra Morse: Where do you hope to see Straus Family Creameries in 30 years say, 20 years?

Albert Straus: You're really looking at long term planning. Well the processing will be moving into the 101 corridor just because of transportation and closeness to employees, so I see us having a new facility. One of the ideas that we've been looking at is having a demonstration farm, processing and retail including maybe farmer's market that's all kind of in the same location. We've been trying to work with the Marin Farmer's Market to see if we can do something with them. So we're looking at how we can strengthen our ties, you know, in the community and increase our support of the farms that are supplying us.

Sierra Morse: If you did that, moved to the 101 corridor, say San Rafael, would you go back to home delivery of milk?

Albert Straus: We do have home delivery of milk, there's one guy. Well actually my initial business plan was to do the home delivery, but it was a lot to pull off at one time. So we kind of said we'll do the dairy, we'll do the processing and then we'll have distribution. There are a couple of home delivery people, I mean there's one that's actually like the old home delivery stuff, he has Stouffers and Berkley Farms but there're

also more internet type delivery, maybe. I don't think we'll rule it out. Most of our product, we are probably 90% into retail right now and we're looking at increasing our food service type of business in the next year. We have a whole product line that's meant for food service, we're just developing a soft serve non fat frozen yogurt mix and so, you know, for the machines that there's a big demand for that. We have ice cream mix that Fairfax Scoop uses and Buy Right in San Francisco and a bunch of different places use our ice cream base. So we're looking at expanding that, you know, home delivery would be a way for us to go more directly to our consumer. And Alta Dena at the time had, well actually probably still does has the biggest home deliveries service in the country even though they're not owned. Well, they have independent home delivery people but Alta Dena is owned now by Dean Foods.

Sierra Morse: It's just a romantic thing.

Albert Straus: Still have glass bottles. I probably should tell you more about the glass bottles.

Sierra Morse: <inaudible>

Albert Straus: When we started I wanted to do something that was sustainable in the way of packaging and quality and glass bottles were something I felt that meant what organic meant as well. So we are probably the biggest producers of glass bottled milk on the West Coast, pints, quarts and half gallons. You get six to eight uses out of a bottle, over 80% of them come back, they get a deposit put on them from here through to the distributor, to the retailer, to the consumer, and the consumer brings them back and they get the deposit back all the way. It's worked out well for us. It's just a reminder that when dealing with distributors and stores, a lot of them don't understand the whole system and so we're just starting to have to put a lot of labor to sorting bottles and to make sure we're not giving credit for something that's not in good shape coming back. So the appeal of going directly to consumers is that we have more control over that as well. So the glass bottles have been a good point of difference for us, it's been a good quality for us. We do minimum processing; we pasteurize but we don't homogenize it, so the cream still comes to the top, we don't add Vitamin D because it's not required by federal law, but we add Vitamin A to the low fats, the non-fat milks, and so it's been our signature product.

Sierra Morse: That's a wonderful branding because you don't <inaudible> see any other brand in a glass bottle. I notice that the lids, because I've been buying Straus milk, my kids were younger for wanting organic milk, but I've noticed the lid has gotten easier to take off, I don't know.

Albert Straus: Is that good or bad?

Sierra Morse: It's just however you changed in the last few years how the lids work, I also like a lot better, it's just easier for me.

Albert Straus: We get them from the same manufacturer that comes out of Canada; there's only one main manufacturer in North America and they're out in Canada and so they make the caps as well. We've looked at alternatives, but they're still the best. In the beginning the types of plastic they used and everything was and then having to have a tool, an opener, that we sent to some people because it was difficult, especially people with arthritis.

Sierra Morse: Yeah now it's very easy.

Albert Straus: Oh good, that's good to hear. So our butter we make that's some of the highest butter fats in the world and lowest moisture because it's all batch churned. We make as much butter in a week as most butter plants make in an hour, but we use an old '50s type churn so it's a big old churn, like a washing machine almost and where most of the processes are they extrude it through holes, they pump it by pressure and extrude it, make butter that way and I think there's six or seven butter plants in California that make all the butter in the state. So we only make our own butter, we don't add any moisture back. In the United States you can call butter, butter if it's 80% butter fat or higher, in Europe it's 82% and ours is consistently 85 to 87% and so it cooks differently, it doesn't burn as easily, so it's been a very high quality. It's been named as one of the best butters in the country. So it's done well and then the yogurts; most of them incubate, they heat the milk, add the culture and put it into a plastic cup and incubated in the cup at close to 110 degrees for six to eight hours. We have stainless steel vats that we put the culture in and incubate it in the stainless steel vat and then cool it before we put it into the cup. We're looking at alternative type packaging that's not plastic. Well 12 years ago Cargill/Dow came to me about the corn polymer but they said that Greenpeace in England was supportive of it as a green product and I called up the Lord, I forgot who, Balfour and he said "As long as GMO corn, they would never be a green thing." So I ended up saying no to them but it also I found out that the corn plastic, unless it's at the right humidity and the right temperature, it doesn't biodegrade, it acts like plastic and so it's not truly an environmental. You can't just throw it into a landfill and have it decompose.

Sierra Morse: It needs to be cooked down probably.

Albert Straus: It has to be in the right composting facility and so we've been looking for many years for an alternative. We've found something that we're leaning towards is a calcium carbonate based packaging and so we're working on that and then also going more glass. I mean my ideas of the ideals that reusable glass is the ideal packaging and if it can't get there, how close can you get to it, so we're looking at if we go into individual servings of yogurt, it would be in a glass with a heat seal on it and so we're looking at that method right now and so we're looking at how we can do things differently. And then of course the ice-cream, well actually in our yogurt there's only milk in cultures and it wasn't in the vanilla. We have either some organic sugars and vanilla extract and the maple has maple extract and maple syrup <inaudible>. And then ice-creams we just do with egg yolk as a stabilizer, there's no other stabilizers, so it's Haagen-Dazs style ice-cream but it's all organic and it's done real well.

Sierra Morse: Your butter's going back to the real roots of dairymen in Marin, which was the cornerstone product out of Marin in the early days before there was refrigeration was yeah the Point Reyes butter was.

Albert Straus: There were cheese plants also but I think part of ours went to butter, I mean there was a cheese plant in Tamales and the butter in Point Reyes and I think when my father first started it went to those two facilities in cans. Our butter, yeah I think that we have a quality of butter out here that our milk, our cream makes a quality butter that I think is fantastic. I know that the milk in the North Bay has been always preferred by processors in at least Northern California, if not all of California. So yeah I think it's what we do best.

Sierra Morse: Is there anything else that you'd like to talk about that I haven't brought up?

Albert Straus: Well of course there is. In 1980 I was going to have the second methane digester in the county after Ralph Grassi and the funding ran out. I have parts of it. In the late '90s they were going to put in a methane digester for, it was going to be out in the park and there was some hurdles they went through and they came to me and asked me if I would want to do it. So at that time it was for converting, well, it was for potential pollutant reduction. It was an EPA grant and they wanted to make it discharge quality water, which we couldn't do by law anyway. So [we] downscaled the project to converting two of our ponds, one into an anaerobic, which is without air. The bacteria digests the manures and then the overflow then goes into the next one which would have an aerator which is aerobic, and through those two ponds-- that was the initial grant-- we're getting over 99% reduction of fecal coliform, which is a concern for water quality and an 80% reduction in BOD's, which is biological oxygen demand. But I wanted to put

a cover on it to capture the gas, so I was able with that funding to put the cover on it and then in 2004 through the 2001 energy crisis there was a State Energy Commission Grants, 50% grants and I was able to start generating electricity and we produced 90% of our own electricity from the waste from the cows and probably 70 to 80% of our hot water needs for the dairy. And I have a fully electric car that we charge off of it that I have put about 85,000 miles in the last six years on. We have an electric golf cart that we feed the calves with, and I'm designing a fully electric truck; a full scale truck that will feed the cows. So it'll be a closed loop so the cows will be powering the truck that feeds them and so I'm working on that. There's a lot of different things I'm working on as far as energy efficiencies, reducing green house gases as the same time and so that's one thing I wanted to talk about.

Sierra Morse: My observation of that would be that's just the continuation of a long line of innovation and the ability to inherently recycle that's what agro farmers and ranchers have always done, they never throw anything away, they use it until it disappears.

Albert Straus: Well the waste products are all fertilizer, I mean for organic, manures and composts are the fertilizer, and so that all goes back on the fields as fertilizer.

Sierra Morse: I'm talking about your equipment as well.

Albert Straus: It's all rusted pieces.

Sierra Morse: You're just using 21st century technology.

Albert Straus: And you're right, there are a lot of things that we did in the early '80s. No till planting without herbicides, we fenced off our creeks to keep the animals out of the creeks. There were a lot of improvements, I mean people that stayed in the dairy business needed to improve or they weren't going to survive. I think the water quality issues were probably one of the main things that drove people out as well as improved them as well but it was expensive and we've put in barns and ponds and handling equipment for manures that were very expensive. But if we didn't we wouldn't be in business.

Sierra Morse: How much of the natural grasses that grow in this area support your dairy cows?

Albert Straus: We figure about 50% of our feeds would grow, you know, in the pasture or silages and so we buy some silage from a farm nearby, we also buy grains and hays, alfalfa hay we buy, the grains are flax mill or flax screenings and corn and barley and wheat and I had a contractor with growers in the central valley to grow Triticale which is wheat and rye hybrid as a grain replacement for foreign and other grains and so I'm trying to put together more of that kind of model where we get local production of the different commodities that we need as well.

Sierra Morse: And you make up your own feed, the supplemental feed that when you can't rely on the pasture land, you've created your own mix that it's not like the predetermined industrial feeds that the larger farms buy right?

Albert Straus: Well I think since getting out of school I've started to put together our own rations and buying in bulk and a lot of the farms are not set up to do that, they buy through a mill and so they buy a packaged feed grain that's 12, 14% protein and they add some corn and barley and the pellet that has some minerals in the proteins in it. So I'm more versatile in the sense that I'm able to buy commodities and mill it and feed it that way.

Sierra Morse: How is like the weather and climate changes effected the farm?

Albert Straus: Climate has been, I mean we've seen extremes, I think it's hard to say if there's anything that can be attributed to it or at least right now, I mean '82, '83 storms were huge and we got cut off. We used to have rains always in September and then have the heavy rains start in October and it changed for like a decade or two, now it seems to be coming back to that kind of pattern. We've had droughts, you know and I think we have a lot of them. I think we'll probably see more extremes happening but I mean this year we had one year less of pasture because it stopped raining in February. So I think we'll see more and more of the extremes either wet or dry or but it's not quite as evident right now. We always kind of go with the flow the best we can.

Sierra Morse: I just have one more question about A60 to follow up thirty years later, a little over thirty years later. Did A60 do it's job and will it be able to continue to do that?

Albert Straus: A60, I think, did a huge stop gap along with the coastal act, I guess.

Sierra Morse: Coastal Commission <inaudible>.

Albert Straus: Yeah, Coastal Commission I think it stopped a lot of the speculation that was happening and malt, I mean the danger I see with all this is that people are buying farms as estates and not using them as productive farms and either have them just sit empty or not have them value. I think they've protected against urban sprawl but I think it hasn't necessarily helped promote productive agriculture and I don't know if that's what it's purpose is but I think that that's the next challenge is to make productive agriculture and I think organic is a way that people see that they can see themselves going for the longer term. I think we're always going to have pressures of urbanization and people that have enough wealth to acquire the land and so it's just, I mean in Europe they've made it so that unless you have an agricultural background and education that you can't buy a farm.

Sierra Morse: That's zoned for agricultural?

Albert Straus: That's zoned for agricultural so I don't know if we'll ever get to that but I think a year or two ago was the first year in a hundred years that we were actually a net importer of agriculture products or is next quarter. It probably changed because the dollar is so weak, which is a huge change and I think that producing food is going to be very important.

Sierra Morse: So for an average consumer like me, you're an innovator in the field, what can an average consumer like me do to make a difference?

Albert Straus: I think consumers can make wise decisions as to buying, supporting local, supporting qualities, I mean I know it's very difficult at times too, with foods costing so much, but I think that long term it's very important. Maybe we need to look at different systems to be able to support more local production and buying and discourage food being shipped all the way around the world. I don't think it's sustainable and I think the stronger we are locally, the stronger we are socially.

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