

People & Places

Making cheese, preserving farmland

Sue Conley, Peggy Smith help region's dairies thrive

By JULIA HOLLISTER For the Capital Press

PETALUMA, Calif. — Sue Conley and Peggy Smith, founders of the successful Cowgirl Creamery on the Northern California coast, didn't grow up on farms, but the lure of food and fascination with that environment grabbed hold early.

"Peggy's family lived in the Northern Virginia suburbs and I grew up in Washington, D.C.," Conley said. "Both of us attended the University of Tennessee, where we worked in restaurants on campus in between classes."

They enjoyed the work and the camaraderie and moved to San Francisco in 1976, working in restaurants.

Smith was hired as a line cook at Alice Waters' iconic Chez Panisse in Berkeley in 1979 and worked there for 17 years in leadership roles, Conley said.

"I attended City College Hotel and Restaurant School in San Francisco and in 1983 opened Bette's Oceanview Diner in Berkeley with two friends," she said.

Six years later Conley moved to Point Reyes Station and met the Straus family, which was converting its dairy to certified organic and planned on bottling milk at a neighboring farm.

"They needed help in marketing and selling the milk, so I sold my shares in Bette's Diner and started working with Albert Straus," she said.

This led to the idea of making cheese with Straus Family Creamery milk.

"I called my old friend, Peggy, to see if she was in-



Peggy Smith, left, and Sue Conley, owners of Cowgirl Creamery in Northern California, say farmland preservation inspires them to continue to develop their artisan cheese-making company. It also allows dairymen to earn additional revenue.



Western Innovator

Sue Conley and Peggy Smith
Hometown: Petaluma, Calif.

Occupation: Owners and founders, Cowgirl Creamery

Quote: "Saving the land was the first step in creating an artisan cheese industry in our milk shed."

terested in partnering on a cheese-making venture and she happily made the move from chef to business owner," Conley said. said.

Eighty percent of the milk for their high-end cheeses —

Mt. Tam, Wagon Wheel and all of the fresh cheeses — comes from the Straus' dairy and each of the other cheeses is made with milk from a local designated farm.

The Red Hawk cheese is made with Holstein milk from Bivalve Farm in Point Reyes, and seasonal cheeses are made with Jersey milk from Chileno Valley Dairy near Petaluma.

Conley and Smith agree that challenges confront California's small cheese-makers, including food safety compliance, access to capital and opportunities to improve skills.

"Unlike Wisconsin and Vermont (the other two states with clusters of artisan cheese makers), we have limited higher education courses in artisan cheese-making and small farm dairying," Conley said. "We would like to see efforts in developing these programs at (University of California-Davis) or Chico State because

these are the campuses closest to our cluster of cheese-makers in Northern California."

Conley said they are fortunate to live in California, where their customers appreciate locally made goods and are willing to pay a little more for local cheese.

"We created a company with 100 employees that produces great cheese and provides sales, marketing and distribution support for artisan and farmstead cheese-makers," Conley said.

They also have some advice for young people wanting to embark in cheese-making.

She said the world of cheese is vast and diverse and there are many ways to build a career in the industry. The best way to explore the field is to work in a good cheese shop and meet all of the players that support this growing sector of the cheese industry.

But there's more to it than making cheese — preserving

farmland, she said.

"Farmland preservation is an area that inspired us to develop our business," Conley said. "Ellen Straus and Phyllis Faber founded the Marin Agricultural Land Trust in the 1980s to fight the development pressures on Marin County farmland."

Smith and Conley continue to assist in this effort both as individuals and as a company.

"The founders encouraged us to make cheese because they knew that even if the land was saved for agriculture, unless the ranchers were making more revenue on the farm, they would not be able to survive," Conley said. "Cheese was an obvious product for our skilled dairy ranchers to make so that they could earn additional revenue on the farm."

Today, there are 29 cheese-makers in Sonoma and Marin counties and most of them are operating on their family dairy.

New Oregon Sheep Growers Association president sets agenda

By JAN JACKSON For the Capital Press

Armed with a lifetime of on-the-ground sheep production experience, a degree in animal science and years of research at Kansas State and Oregon State universities, Tom Nichols was the perfect choice for president of the Oregon Sheep Growers Association.

Installed at the OSGA annual convention in Sunriver, Ore., Nichols is focusing on OSGA's mission — representing the interests of OSGA sheep producers, industry-related businesses and sheep industry products.

"Everything is taking a hit now days, but if Oregon sheep growers can stay united I think we can remain strong," Nichols said. "My immediate goals are to strengthen OSGA's annual convention, develop a digital communication system with members and the public and to promote our Make It With Wool program to a larger audience.

"I believe in conventions, I think they are important and I always learn a lot by getting together and rubbing elbows with the other people," he said. "However, to steal fellow producer Mac Stewart's phrase, one of the first things we need is to 'right-size' them



Jan Jackson/For the Capital Press Tom Nichols is president of the Oregon Sheep Growers Association.

and hold them here in the (Willamette) Valley, where most of the producers that attend live and work."

He also said developing efficient digital communi-

cations will help get animal health and other information to members.

Born and raised in Ashland, Ore., Nichols is a fifth-generation Oregonian.

Online

www.sheeporegon.com

Tom Nichols can be reached at nicholslivestock@gmail.com

His father raised cattle, sheep and timber, and his mother taught school. He attended Linn Benton Community College for two years. He then joined a brother in Kansas and ended up getting a degree in animal science from Kansas State University, where he lived and worked at the beef and sheep research centers.

Back in Oregon, Nichols worked as a forage technician, ran sheep on valley grass fields for Tony Wahl and managed the Sheep Research Center for OSU.

Today, Nichols lives in Lebanon with his wife, Karen, and 14-year-old daughter, Anne.

"Karen is a sheep grower in her own right and was assistant shepherd at the OSU Sheep Center when I met her," Nichols said. "She raises horned Dorsets, some Polled Dorsets and Suffolks while Anne, who is very active in 4-H, raises and shows Romanneys. In addition to pasturing sheep for other growers, I'm the fence builder, truck driver and anything else that needs to be done."

Reed Anderson, sheep

grower, lamb processor and owner of Anderson Family Ranches in Brownsville, Ore., spoke highly of Nichols in his role as OSGA president.

"Tom has been raising and producing sheep his whole life, has extensive experience working with OSU and is well known with other state and national industry associations," Anderson said. "He is the most knowledgeable and well-rounded person I know and I look forward to seeing what his leadership brings to OSGA."

The OSGA board of directors for 2016-2017: president, Tom Nichols, Lebanon; first vice president, Mac Stewart, Salem; treasurer, Brian Dietrich, Silverton; past president, Paul Lewis, Bonanza.

Area vice presidents: Mike Cowdrey, Scio; Tasha Wahl, Shedd; Correy McAtee, Prineville; Kip Krebs, Ione; Morgan McKenzie; Langlois; John Kokkeler, Junction City.

Oregon Make it with Wool director: Chandra Worman, Bend.

Oregon Sheep Commission representative: John M. Fine, Roseburg.

Calendar

Sponsored by: 

GASES / WELDING / SAFETY / FIRE

20 Northwest Locations

To submit an event go to the Community Events calendar on the home page of our website at www.capitalpress.com and click on "Submit an Event." Calendar items can also be mailed to Capital Press, 1400 Broadway St. NE, Salem, OR 97301.

Saturday, March 12

Financial planning workshop. This is the continuation of a workshop that began Friday. 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Learn a planning process that will help you create the profit you desire and invest your hard-earned dollars in the most effective manner. Lazy R Ranch, Cheney, Wash. Cost:

\$247. www.rootsofresilience.org

Spring into Gardening, McMinnville Community Center, McMinnville, Ore., 503-434-7517. This year's theme is Home Landscaping: Small Changes, Big Impact. Presented by Oregon State University Extension and the Yamhill County Master Gardeners Association.

Monday, March 14

Farm Succession Workshop, 6-9 p.m. Learn about the options available to you as you prepare to transition your working lands to future generations. Speakers will discuss the legal, financial and business factors that a farm family should

consider when planning for the future. They will present real world examples of how to address these important issues while balancing the complexities of family dynamics. Sponsored by the East Multnomah Soil and Water Conservation District. Holiday Inn Express, 477 NW Phoenix Drive, Troutdale, Ore. <http://emswcd.org/workshops-and-events/upcoming-workshops/all-events/farm-succession/>

Wednesday, March 16

2016 Ag Forum, 11 a.m.-1 p.m. Join Idaho Lt. Gov. Brad Little, the 2016 Canyon County Farm Family of the Year and the state Department

of Agriculture for a discussion of ag and the opportunities it offers. Ford Idaho Center, 16200 N. Idaho Center Blvd., Nampa, Idaho. Cost: \$20. www.nampa.com/ag-forum.

Friday, March 18

2016 Oregon FFA State Convention, Oregon State University, Corvallis. Runs through Monday. <http://www.oregonffa.com>

Northwest Horse Fair & Expo 2016, Linn County Fair and Expo Center, Albany, Ore. The largest equine expo in the Northwest will feature dancing horses, clinics by world-class horse trainers and riders, breed and stallion review dem-

os, equine entertainment and a trade show. Runs through Sunday. <http://equinepromotions.net/>

Saturday, March 19

Women in Agriculture Conference, 8:30 a.m.-3:30 p.m. Pacific time, 31 locations across the region. The 2016 Women in Agriculture Conference will offer women in Washington, Idaho, Oregon, Montana and Alaska a unique opportunity to gather in 31 locations for a one-day event featuring knowledgeable speakers, inspiring stories, networking with other producers and practical advice for learning new skills. <http://womeninag.wsu.edu/>

Capital Press

Established 1928
Board of directors
Mike ForresterPresident
Steve Forrester
Kathryn Brown
Sid Freeman Outside director
Mike Omeg Outside director

Corporate officer
John Perry
Chief operating officer

Capital Press Managers
Mike O'BrienPublisher
Joe Beach Editor
Elizabeth Yutzie Sell Advertising Director
Carl SampsonManaging Editor
Barbara Nipp Production Manager
Samantha McLaren Circulation Manager

Entire contents copyright © 2016
EO Media Group
dba Capital Press

An independent newspaper
published every Friday.

Capital Press (ISSN 0740-3704) is published weekly by EO Media Group, 1400 Broadway St. NE, Salem OR 97301.

Periodicals postage paid at Portland, OR, and at additional mailing offices.

POSTMASTER: send address changes to Capital Press, P.O. Box 2048 Salem, OR 97308-2048.

To Reach Us

Toll free 800-882-6789
Main line 503-364-4431
Fax 503-370-4383
Advertising Fax 503-364-2692

News Staff

N. California
Tim Hearden 530-605-3072

E Idaho
John O'Connell 208-421-4347

Idaho
Carol Ryan Dumas 208-860-3898

Boise
Sean Ellis 208-914-8264

Central Washington
Dan Wheat 509-699-9099

E Washington
Matthew Weaver 509-688-9923

Oregon
Eric Mortenson 503-412-8846
Mateusz Perkowski 800-882-6789

Graphic artist
Alan Kenaga 800-882-6789

To Place Classified Ads

Ad fax 503-364-2692
or 503-370-4383
Telephone (toll free) 866-435-2965
Online www.capitalpress.com/classifieds

Subscriptions

Mail rates paid in advance
Easy Pay U.S. \$3.75/month (direct withdrawal from bank or credit card account)
1 year U.S.\$49.99
2 years U.S.\$89.99
1 year Canada\$275
1 year other countries call for quote
1 year Internet only\$49.99
1 year 4-H, FFA students and teachers\$30
9 months 4-H, FFA students & teachers\$25
Visa and Mastercard accepted

To get information published

Mailing address:
Capital Press
P.O. Box 2048
Salem, OR 97308-2048

News: Contact the main office or news staff member closest to you, send the information to newsroom@capitalpress.com or mail it to "Newsroom," c/o Capital Press. Letters should be limited to 300 words. Deadline: Noon Monday.

Letters to the Editor: Send your comments on agriculture-related public issues to opinions@capitalpress.com, or mail your letter to "Opinion," c/o Capital Press. Letters should be limited to 300 words. Deadline: Noon Monday.

Capital Press ag media

www.capitalpress.com
www.FarmSeller.com
www.AgDirectoryWest.com
www.OnlyAg.com
www.facebook.com/capitalpress
www.facebook.com/farmseller
www.facebook.com/onlyAGdotcom
twitter.com/capitalpress
www.youtube.com/capitalpressvideo
www.blogiculture.com

Index

CaliforniaX
Dairy 14
Idaho 8
Livestock 14
Markets 16
Opinion 6
Oregon 10
Washington11

Correction policy

Accuracy is important to Capital Press staff and to our readers.

If you see a misstatement, omission or factual error in a headline, story or photo caption, please call the Capital Press news department at 503-364-4431, or send email to newsroom@capitalpress.com.

We want to publish corrections to set the record straight.