

People & Places

Heirlooms rule at tomato farm

By JULIA HOLLISTER
For the Capital Press

REEDLEY, Calif. — Amber Balakian remembers growing up on the family farm — going to farmers markets, playing in the irrigated rows of vegetables and eating fresh produce right off the vine.

“My great-grandfather, Zadig Balakian, came over to live during the Armenian genocide,” she said. “My grandmother, Stella, met my grandfather, John Balakian, and began farming the Fresno County ranch that we still continue farming today.”

The 20-acre certified organic farm now boasts 50 varieties of tomatoes as the primary crop.

Amber credits her mother with transitioning to heirloom tomatoes in the 1990s as a means of developing a niche in the marketplace.

The farm also grows organic peaches, nectarines, plums, pomegranates, figs, grapes squash, eggplants and Armenian cucumbers, according to its website.

Amber has also developed a line of “Organic Blended Heirloom Tomatoes” in jars that can be used as a tasty ingredient for a variety of dishes and a “Not So Bloody Mary Mix” for cocktails using the bleached tomatoes.

“I was determined to find a way to create value from the non-valued, and so I set out to create something beautiful, unique and delicious...,” she said on the farm’s website.

Not all of the tomatoes are harvested at the same time.

“Tomatoes ripen from the bottom up and each variety differs in when they are ready,” she said. “With heirlooms, it really depends on certain factors like the



Jesse Segovia

Amber Balakian, 34, in Balakian Farms’ greenhouse. She is the fourth-generation owner-manager of the 20-acre farm in Reedley, Calif., that grows 50 varieties of organic heirloom tomatoes.

temperature, variety, etc., which can change from year to year.”

Balakian’s favorites are the Marvel Stripe, a gold-and-red tomato that can grow to 4 inches in diameter, and the Chocolate Stripe, a dark red heirloom tomato with dark green stripes.

Because the farm is organic it can run into issues with pests. Nematodes are the most common pests in the area, she said.

In addition, another pest has attacked her business and many others — COVID-19. Balakian said

the virus has taken a bite out of the farm’s sales, primarily to restaurants, which were closed or shifted to survival mode with carry-out orders.

Many of her customers are chefs and restaurants, so the closures have had an severe impact.

Farmers market attendance has also been lower, cutting into sales.

However, markets have started selling community supported agriculture subscriptions that have helped offset some of the sales decreases.

The Balakians are also regulars at one of San Fran-

cisco’s most prominent farmers markets.

“The Balakians have been a part of the Ferry Plaza Farmers Market for more than 20 years,” said Christine Farren, executive director of CUESA, which operates the market at the city’s Embarcadero. “Generous in nature, committed to their craft, and talented in farming, they have a loyal following.”

As an inter-generational farm with deep roots in the Central Valley, they exemplify sustainable farming with their dedication to organic stewardship and



AMBER BALAKIAN

Hometown: Reedley, Calif.

Age: 34

Education: B.A., economics, University of California-San Diego, master’s degree in management and operations, Harvard University

Occupation: Fourth-generation owner-manager Balakian Farms

Personal statement: Matthew 17:20: “Jesus replied, Because you have so little faith. Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.”

preserving delicious heirloom varieties, Farren said.

At a time when the industry needs young farmers more than ever, she said it is inspiring to see next-generation women farmers such as Amber innovating through value-add products, while carrying on the family farming legacy.

“It is equally important that Amber, who is Armenian and African American, reshape the public’s perspective of who can be a farmer, as diversity in farm ownership strengthens our food system and enables greater equity,” Farren said.

Nursery offers plant sales with a conscience

By GAIL OBERST
For the Capital Press

PORTLAND — Here’s a new word for your urban dictionary: plantfluencer, a portmanteau describing influential people in the social networking world of retail nurseries.

Portland’s Birds & Bees Nursery co-owner Amanda Simard modestly says she doesn’t deserve the plantfluencer title bestowed on her and several others in June in a Los Angeles Times story about Black nursery owners.

Simard and co-owner Caitlin Gaul have owned the boutique Southeast Portland nursery for eight years.

“Caitlin actually does all the social media,” Simard said.

The small nursery has been a lightning rod for publicity. In addition to the L.A. Times, the Portland Monthly, the Bee in Gladstone, the Oregonian and several social networking sites have followed the nursery’s activities, from its opening in 2012 to its services during COVID-19 closures, and its monthly fundraising promotions for Black Lives Matter and other social justice groups.



Gail Oberst/For the Capital Press

Amanda Simard, left, and Caitlin Gaul are owners of Portland’s retail urban nursery, Birds & Bees. The nursery promotes social justice causes at once-monthly sales events. Birds & Bees gathers stock from dozens of wholesale nurseries.

The two women are Portland natives whose friendship was forged while attending Lincoln High School. Both say they developed an interest in gardening because they liked working outdoors. They developed

an interest in retail sales while they were both employed at Finnegan’s Toys & Gifts, a downtown Portland shop. After a few years of working for someone else, they began to think of owning a business.

“We wanted to open our own place,” Simard said.

For a year before they opened, the pair sought help developing a business plan from Mercy Corps Northwest. The Mercy Corps provides training, financial services, grants, loans and coaching for would-be small business owners like Simard and Gaul. The Corps events and classes in Portland are funded in part by the U.S. Small Business Administration.

With plans in hand, Simard and Gaul opened their nursery on SE Gladstone Street. Three years ago, they moved to a busier intersection at 50th and Powell, about a mile east of their first place.

Before COVID-19 moved buying habits into isolation, the small house-turned-nursery featured gift items, cards and house plants inside with nursery plants displayed outside.

Now, the nursery has curtailed

its open hours and limited its in-person shopping to outside displays and sales. But to offset the inconvenience of shortened hours, the women have added a popular service: customers within the city can now order plants and supplies online and have them delivered contact-free.

The nursery caters to urban gardeners, and to those who may not have large, or any, gardening space. Houseplants and terrarium supplies take their place alongside seeds, tools, pots, vegetable starts, flowers, succulents and cacti and Northwest native plants, trees and ornamentals. The nursery’s products are listed on its website, <http://www.birdsandbeespx.com/>, along with instructions for ordering. The business also has active Instagram and Facebook sites.

Although there are dozens of nurseries within 25 miles of Birds & Bees, Simard and Gaul have gathered to the Tabor neighborhood products from dozens of area growers and suppliers including Yaquina Nursery, Weber’s Wholesale, Little Prince of Oregon, Fothergill’s Tropicals, Orchid Tropical Nursery and Potted Elephant.

Hikers rescued after close encounter with mother cow, calf

By MARGO CRAIG
Capital Press

A California Highway Patrol helicopter crew rescued an elderly couple injured when a cow chased them off the trail in the Lynch Canyon Open Space Park in Northern California.

Officers with the CHP Golden Gate Division report

the hikers came across a cow Aug. 11 with her calf on the trail. The cow charged as the hikers tried to pass, causing them to fall and sustain minor injuries.

A CHP helicopter responded to the 9-1-1 call with Solano County firefighters and medics.

Once the helicopter located the couple on the trail,

a flight paramedic determined the couple needed a lift to the trailhead.

Video posted online by CHP shows a black cow and calf standing a few feet away from the elderly couple on a barren, rocky slope. The cow bellows as the helicopter hovers overhead.

The flight paramedic used the helicopter siren to scare

the cow and calf away before hoisting the couple, one by one, to the trailhead, where Solano County medics transported them to a local hospital.

Officials did not release the hikers’ names.

According to the park brochure, Lynch Canyon is a working ranch on the Solano Land Trust northeast of the Bay Area. Grazing sheep and

cattle help minimize weeds and wildfire risk.

Cows are protective of their young, and visitors are advised not to get between a calf and its mother cow, the brochure warns.

“Cattle are not aggressive by nature,” the brochure says, “but they are curious about the visitors that share their trails.”

CALENDAR

TUESDAY, AUG. 25

WSTFA Annual Golf Tournament: 8 a.m. Highlander Golf Course 2920 Eighth St. SE, East Wenatchee, Wash. Join us for the 27th Annual Washington State Tree Fruit Association Golf Tournament. Your participation in our tournament helps raise money to support scholarships that are awarded to students in honor of past tree fruit industry leaders. As part of our tournament, we are doing a silent online auction of the Washington apple No. 3 license plate. Website: <https://wstfa.org/golf-tournament/>

WEDNESDAY AUG. 26

Teleconference on plan to raise Anderson Ranch Dam (online): 6 p.m. Public comments taken on Draft Environmental Impact Statement through Sept. 14. Website: <https://www.usbr.gov/pn/studies/boisefeasibility/index.html>
Safety Lockout-Tagout (webinar): 1 p.m. In this free one-hour webinar we will cover the requirements of 29 CFR 1910.147 Control of Hazardous Energy, provide best practices that can be applied immediately, discuss some common issues and discuss some methods to ensure your program is compliant. Informa-

tion: 208-426-3820, janehokanson@techhelp.org Website: <https://tech-help.regfox.com/lockouttagout>

WEDNESDAY-MONDAY SEPT. 2-7

Twin Falls County Fair: Twin Falls County Fairgrounds, Filer, Idaho. The fair will include exhibits, judged FFA and 4-H shows, entertainment and carnival rides. Website: <https://www.tfcfair.com/>

THURSDAY-SUNDAY SEPT. 3-6

The Magic Valley Stampede: Twin Falls County Fairgrounds, Filer, Idaho. The Magic Valley Stampede

features rodeo events and entertainment. Website: <http://tfcfair.com>

THURSDAY SEPT. 17

Small Farm School 2020 (online): Small Farm School 2020 has reconfigured its offerings to present a webinar series that will be offered twice weekly from 6:30 to 8 p.m. Tuesdays and Thursdays starting on Sept. 17 and running through Nov. 19. Registration for the school is open. Website: <http://blogs.oregonstate.edu/smallfarm-school/> Fee: \$35 Contact: Clint Taylor, 979-820-3980 or clint.taylor@oregonstate.edu

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Index

Dairy 7
Markets 10
Opinion 6

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R-CALF USA annual convention: The Lodge at Deadwood,
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