



# THE DEL CABO PROJECT



BY DIANA FRIEDMAN



A Mexican Collective Exports Organic Produce To The U.S.A.

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HEN SANDY BELIN AND LARRY JACOBS, two organic farmers from Pescadero, California, planned their first vacation to the warm seas and sunny skies of the Los Cabos region of Baja, Mexico, they intended to hike and swim like most of the other tourists there. But perpetual farmers that they were, it didn't take long for them to notice the agricultural potential of the region: fertile soils, ample water and warm sunny winters. Within a few days of their arrival, they began toying with the possibility of farming in San Jose del Cabo in the winter, when it was too cold in Pescadero. However, their plans changed dramatically when it became clear that there were already plenty of small farmers in the region. What there wasn't, was a market.

Now, four years later, Sandy and Larry, along with Steve Farrer, another organic farmer from California, spend each November to June in Baja co-directing the Del Cabo project, a network that airfreights the organically grown vegetables of the farmers of the Ejido San Jose del Cabo to the rapidly expanding organic and specialty markets in California. Instead of starting their own farm and competing with local growers and, as Larry and Sandy put it, "hiring a bunch of people to work for us and exploiting them," they went to work

with the farmers. "The idea was," Larry says, "to teach [the growers] about organic farming and introduce them to a market they didn't have."

Although Los Cabos has always been a popular resort area, it did not experience the negative ramifications of being a tourist center until after 1973, when the completion of the first highway linking it to Tijuana ended its relative isolation. As the highway brought increasing numbers of visitors and hotels, many young people

*I never used to buy fresh tomatoes in the wintertime, knowing that they came from Mexico and that the heavy amounts of chemical pesticides used to grow them were unregulated by the Mexicans, and virtually uninspected by the U.S. The collective described here is changing all that. It is the dead of winter as I write, yet the tomatoes I bought today from the tip of Baja California are sweet and juicy, and organically grown.*

*This is also a story about individuals doing third-world development aid that works. It came to us initially as a video; the video-that-becomes-article is something we are seeing increasingly.*

*The video is called "El Otro Lado del Cabo (The Other Side of del Cabo)" and is available for \$24.95 postpaid from Veritable Vegetable, 1600 Tennessee Street, San Francisco, CA 94107. Wholesale produce suppliers interested in finding out more about these products should write: Del Cabo Project, c/o Larry Jacobs and Sandy Belin, P. O. Box 508, Pescadero, CA 94060. Diana Friedman, who also wrote the script for the video, is a free-lance writer specializing in sustainable-agriculture projects.*

—Richard Nilsen

◀ Carlos Ruiz (left) inspects his tomato plants for insect damage with Steve Farrar. Staking and tying the plants to increase quality and yield is a new technique for these farmers, as are the organic production practices.



were pulled away from the farms to work in the more lucrative tourist industry. Although the tourist sector could certainly be commended for providing jobs, it no doubt offset this service by contributing a substantial rise in the costs of local goods and services while doing nothing to support local industries. Rather than buy locally grown food, for example, hotels import produce from large growers on the Mexican mainland, or frozen vegetables from the U.S.

This situation inspired Larry and Sandy to help the farmers of the Ejido San Jose del Cabo, one of hundreds of semi-collectives set up by the Mexican government's agrarian reform law of the 1920s. The object was to find a market for their produce so that both older and younger generations could continue to farm. The two North Americans were also motivated by their observation that those businesses not linked to tourism and the U.S. dollar had suffered even more in the last few years, as the peso continued to depreciate dramatically, and the Mexican economy had become increasingly dependent on the U.S. dollar. Local farmers, they concluded, had to be tied to U.S. currency either indirectly or directly, if they were to survive.

It is easy to see how Sandy and Larry fell in love with the Los Cabos region of Baja; large jagged granite peaks tower over farming valleys and small desert cacti march right to the sea, adorning parking lots and oceanfronts. This area of Baja is distinct from the rest of the desert peninsula, for it lies in a temperate zone and has plenty of water for farming. In the autumn, wild rains come flying through the area, bringing fertile silt to the fields. And while the lands of San Jose may look barren and infertile, they produce a dazzling array of cucumbers, zucchini, tomatoes, peppers, and eggplants.

**L**ARRY AND SANDY met on an organic farm in Maine 12 years ago and have been working and farming together ever since. It takes only a moment of observing them moving slowly through the fields, stopping to inspect a tomato or cucumber plant, to see that to them, organic farming means accepting a stewardship for the earth.

Their particular commitment to farming without synthetic chemicals in Mexico results from their experiences with unregulated agricultural production in other parts of Mexico. "You couldn't have fabricated a worse situation," Larry says. "I've seen Mexican workers mixing Malathion with no rubber gloves or masks, just their

bare hands, and then spraying it underfoot. The people who sell this stuff don't care."

The del Cabo project is commendable because it offers safer and healthier modes of production, but with the high prices its produce commands, it would not be successful unless consumers were concerned about safe consumption. And clearly they are, judging by the constant sell-out of del Cabo produce. Many shoppers in the San Francisco Bay area, well aware of the hazards of eating non-seasonal produce from other countries, have welcomed the high-quality and clean del Cabo produce not only because it is one of the few positive alternatives to eating unsafe Mexican produce in the winter, but also because it provides practically the *only* available organic supply of summer vegetables from December to April.

Sandy says that one of the largest challenges was developing the means for the growers to absorb all of the new organic-pest-control information they were given. "It's one thing for them to understand it being explained," she says, "but another for them to be able to fully take it in. It's not something they can pick up overnight.

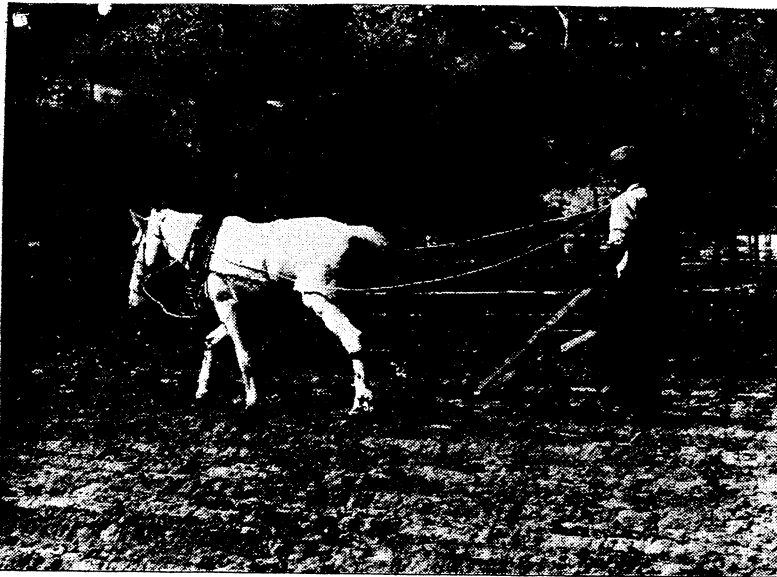
"The different sprays all get different names," she continues, "to make them more recognizable. The names we've given the materials come directly from their appearance. Maxicrop, a seaweed foliar spray, looks like chocolate when it's mixed with water and it's often sprayed with milk and sugar, so we named it 'chocolate.' *Bacillus thurengensis*, a worm-killing virus, comes in a red can and is consequently known as simply 'the red can.'"

Another innovative approach the couple used was a thorough immersion in the lives of the farmers their first year in San Jose del Cabo. "We spent the entire year," says Sandy, "learning how they farmed. We did beds, watered, planted, transplanted, dropped seeds and covered them with our toes, and harvested."

Larry adds, "We felt that if we were going to develop a relationship with these people, we needed an appreciation of methods they'd been using. It was important not to have the perspective that we had a better way, but to affect them as gently as possible. These people have been doing things a long time and they know what they're doing. We needed to learn from them, and then, maybe, our experience would have something to offer them."

The payoff from this approach is obvious not only in the agricultural success of the project, but in the effect it has had on developing the mutual respect and closeness that now exist between the couple and the participating growers.

Anselmo Burgoin, like most of the other growers a quiet, older man, describes his first reaction without a moment's hesitation. "When Sandy and Larry first



◀ *Anselmo Burgoin preparing his field for planting. Many of the farmers in the Ejido San Jose del Cabo still use horse-drawn ploughs.*



are paid the same price for their crops, and come together under the umbrella of *collectivismo* by pooling their product under one label.

It remains somewhat unclear what would happen were Sandy and Larry to leave. While Herlindo Espinosa, one of the growers, was quite sure the ejiditarios could run the whole show by themselves, the couple disagreed. Sandy pointed out that she and Larry had created a situation of dependency rather than self-sufficiency, but explained that they were training local people to assume all tasks, including pest identification and control. She stressed that it was only the third year of the project, and that she and Larry still had a lot to learn. They agreed that their ultimate goal was to minimize their own role, to the point of one day being unnecessary.

With the 16-hour days, the daily frustrations, did they ever think about packing it up? What was it that inspired them to stay?

"It's certainly not the money," said Larry with a laugh. Then, more seriously, he explained: "We were interested in setting it up as a development project as well, seeing how far could you go in teaching people to grow without chemicals. Could you work in a Third World country and not just teach them how to do it, but make it economically viable? It's not just the lack of poisons," he concluded, "but providing them with economic alternatives. For organic farming to be successful in the Third World, it has to be economically viable." Sandy agreed and added, "For me it's being able to help people, interacting with the farmers. And for them, it's not so they can have a color TV, but so they can send their kids to school, and have better food."

Last June, when I saw Larry and Sandy in California, they proudly announced that del Cabo's produce had been arriving in San Francisco for a few weeks since they had been back in Pescadero. For the first time, the members of the Ejido were doing the entire process independently. And with close to 50 new growers wanting to join, Larry was going to train Salvador to be the on-site inspector/certifier of the farmers' fields. As I munched on a delicious dried tomato, the newest del Cabo product, I thought of Salvador's closing words: "We're learning that a well land is like a healthy organism. If it's well fed, it rejects illnesses. The same with plants." He had paused, looking at his young son placing beneficial predatory wasps in the tomato plants. "Our grandparents worked the land this way, but it was never passed on to us. Now, we have it." ■

came to us and told us about the project, we said, why not? We were accustomed to pesticides because they had been recommended by the department of agriculture. But, when I was a kid we used to do all this without fertilizers, or pesticides — it was all natural — we took what the land gave. So far, the results have been effective."

Angel Salvador Cesena, former president of the Ejido San Jose del Cabo and also a farmer, was originally quite skeptical but is now a convert. "When Larry and Sandy first came to me, I thought this was going to be an absolute failure," he says. "But they insisted, and when someone likes to work in a particular way, I like to support it. I saw they were interested."

Pleased at having been able to help set up the project and select the original growers, Salvador explained that it was a low-risk venture for the pioneer participants, since they didn't have anything tangible to lose, except for time spent in the fields. The project was presented as a voluntary experiment to those growers whom Salvador felt had integrity and good soils. He also chose farmers who had used natural fertilizers such as manures and composts, and who had land that had not been sprayed chemically for at least one year.

When we discussed his responsibilities as president of the Ejido, it became clear why Salvador had been interested in working with Larry and Sandy. "One of my roles as president of the Ejido was to look for markets for our agricultural product. We have been asking the Mexican government for assistance and so far we have received none."

Salvador confirmed that the project did indeed fit within the structure of the Ejido, which he said falls somewhere between a collective and a kibbutz. While ejiditarios share tools and water, whatever they produce on their own land is theirs to sell themselves. He pointed out that the project, in which 16 farmers were involved in 1987-88, lives up to the goals of the Ejido, since all growers are allowed to participate provided they follow the guidelines of organic production. All