

The Green Zone

By Patricia Dines



Fields of Gold

In search of the great (organic) pumpkin

Editor's Note: Help us welcome Patricia Dines to the Green Zone this week. A seasoned environmental writer, Patricia will be helming this column following Gianna De Persiis Vona's decision to retire in order to focus on her fiction. We're pleased to have Patricia join us, and anticipate that you will be, too.

As summer's spacious sunlit days fade and the cold air hints of winter, I start to feel a little melancholy. This year's economic drama sure isn't helping much. Still, I've learned that I'm more sane when I embrace rather than resist the changing seasons. So it's probably no coincidence that my inner child has requested a visit to a pumpkin patch.

Of course, given my eco-proclivities, not just any patch will do. Yes, I want the trifecta: local, small and organic. But is that just a fantasy, when some patches actually populate their fields with cheaper imports? Thankfully, after discovering one closed organic patch, my journey takes a happier turn, and I actually find two local organic farms offering home-grown pumpkins and a farm experience for children of all ages. Remembering my vow to enjoy our local treasures, I decide to visit both.

After wandering Petaluma's back roads, admiring the unpretentious farmhouses and weathered slat fences, I arrive at my first destination, Ryan O'Shannon Farms. Large pumpkin signs, then hay bales, guide me into the bumpy, mowed parking lot. The main tent attractively displays the farm's bounty of pumpkins, gourds, tomatoes, strawberries and preserves.

Here I meet the farm's co-owner, Linda McDowell, who shows me where visitors can milk a cow, make butter and buy sometimes-organic

snacks. We continue over the bridge, past the hayride wagon and sunflower maze, to the field where I can pick from mini-pumpkins, sugar (pie) pumpkins, larger (jack-o'-lantern) pumpkins and beautiful decorative gourds.

When we return, Linda's husband Mike zooms up in his ATV, and we all chat. My first question: Is there a Ryan O'Shannon? No, Mike named the farm after his two children, Ryan and Shannon, now young adults. Mike's family has owned this 400 acres for a century, running a dairy farm until the 1970s, then renting pasture land. Mike started his 15 acres of organic produce in 1995, after neighbors said they were "making a million" at it. He laughs, describing his trial-and-error "learning curve." Linda joined the project in 2002. Though not raised on a farm, he kids that she's become "quite a farm girl."

Why do they grow organically, I ask, and make the effort to be certified? Because there's a market for it, they reply, and they like not using toxic pesticides. Linda says she can taste the difference in the food. Plus, if farmers aren't certified, she advises, you really don't know their methods. Organic is more than "no spray"; it's a program of practices that includes cover cropping and avoiding GMOs and synthetic fertilizers that can carry hidden toxics.

"Ag is a tough business," Mike shrugs. "You roll the dice every day. There are so many variables that you can't control."

Traveling down the road, I find my second stop, Andersen Organic Vegetables. In October, this farm stand adds pumpkins, melons, expressive squash varieties and Halloween décor. I talk with owner and Petaluma

native Rodney Andersen, still active in his 70s. For 11 years, he's worked these 16 leased acres, enjoying both farming and offering people healthy food. I ask his trick for survival and he answers, "To learn a little each year, and not make the same mistake twice."

Out in the field, Rodney tells me the names of various pumpkins, including giants up to 150 pounds. The farm's activities include a corn maze, hayride and mini-train ride with cheerful homemade wooden cars. Although he's also opened a farm store near town, Andersen says folks still like coming here for the farm atmosphere and seasons' changing colors.

As I head home with my farm-fresh produce, I feel gratitude for the farmers who treat the earth kindly while creating nurturing delights. But I also feel soothed from touching beneath this culture's ever-shifting craziness to the true source of my well-being and survival. Filled by this autumn moment, I start imagining ways to carve my organic jack-o'-lantern into a smile.

Both Petaluma patches are open through Friday, Oct. 31, have free entry (with rides and mazes costing \$3-\$4) and offer group tours. Ryan O'Shannon Farms, 5360 Bodega Ave.; 707.762.4895. Andersen Organic Vegetables, 4588 Bodega Ave.; 707.529.1279. Also, Marin's Lafranchi Pumpkin Patch offers local organic pumpkins and activities. 5300 Nicasio Valley Road, Nicasio. 415.662.9100.

© Copyright Patricia Dines, 2008. All rights reserved. (www.patriciadines.info, 707.829.2999)

Published in the North Bay Bohemian, October 22, 2008.