

CREATIVE PRESERVATION IN CALIFORNIA'S DAIRY INDUSTRY*

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ABSTRACT. Farmers in Marin and Sonoma Counties, located north of San Francisco, are experimenting with numerous alternatives to California's widely known industrial dairy style. Many analysts suggest that consumer politics, food scares, and globalization explain such shifts to organic and other types of "quality" food production. While acknowledging the importance of these factors, we argue that the alternatives in this region are best understood as an outcome of broad-based land-conservation efforts developed through historical and ongoing struggles over urban growth, rising concerns about environmental values, and deep regional interests in dairy preservation. Over time, preservation of this agricultural landscape has contributed to the emergence of a quality food industry historically rooted in the region's politics of place. *Keywords:* California, dairy farming, food quality, land preservation.

An unmistakable dynamism permeates the dairy region of California's Marin and Sonoma Counties, even as many indicators suggest that it is in decline. Expensive ranchettes and "starter castles" are supplanting dairy farms in this iconic Northern California landscape, widely known for its dramatic coastlines, grasslands, and extensive ranching history (Figure 1). North Bay dairy operators struggle to compete with more efficient dry-lot farms located farther south.¹ In Marin County production has fallen by half since its 1959 peak of more than \$40 million in constant 1980–1984 dollars (Table I). Since that peak the county has lost 318 of its 363 dairy farms, and its aggregate dairy herd shrank by nearly half (Table II). Performance in Sonoma County is slightly better. The number of dairy farms dropped precipitously, from 2,725 in 1950 to 121 in 1997, but, at 32,407 head, the county's dairy herd numbered only 10,000 cows fewer in 1997 than it had in the 1950s. Production is slightly higher by an inflation-adjusted \$3 million. In the early twentieth century, Marin and Sonoma were the state's leading dairy counties. Today, they represent, together, less than 3 percent of state production (U.S. Department of Agriculture 1999; California Agricultural Statistics Service 2002; U.S. Department of Labor 2004; County of Marin, Agricultural Commissioner, various years; Sonoma County, Office of the Agricultural Commissioner, various years; U.S. Census Bureau, various years).

Nevertheless, these farmers are resurgent. Rather than sell out entirely or relocate to expand their operations, they are transforming their farms. They are experi-

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