



UC Small Farm Center

Outstanding in their Fields California's Women Farmers

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This book is dedicated to the memory of Ina Arthurs-Jolly, who was outstanding in many fields. She was an excellent baker, milliner, seamstress, farmer, gardener, communitybuilder, and mother and continues to be my principal role model.

Desmond Jolly Editor

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Desmond A. Jolly Editor

Outstanding in their Fields

California's Women Farmers

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Women and Artisanal Farming

Tp through the 1997 United States census, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) collected information only on the demographic characteristics of principal farm operators. To provide a fuller portrait of the roles of men and women in the nation's agriculture, USDA in its 2002 census collected and provides information on the first three operators of a farm. This legitimizes and officially recognizes the role of women in conventional as well as in artisanal, small-scale agriculture—although USDA has yet to make an official designation for "artisanal agriculture."

When USDA asked for information on the multiple people on a farm who are operators or co-operators, it dramatically changed the demographic portrait of U.S. farms. With the new criteria, the number of farm operators increased dramatically—from about 2 million before the 2002 census to more than 3 million. There were in fact 3,115,172 operators on 2,128,982 farms, nearly 848,000 of them women. Suddenly, women became more visible for their contributions to and roles in production of our food and fiber and husbandry of our nation's natural resources. While women represented 540,090 of second operators and 44,474 of third operators, they represented 237,819 of the 1,181,163 principal operators.



In California, 12,615 women were principal operators according to the 2002 census. They managed 2,033,470 acres of land, 1.3 million of which were owned and 739,000 rented or leased. Women were full owners of 1.047 farms: 990 were tenants. California farms operated by women generated sales of \$12,615,000 in farm products, approximately \$5 million of which were from crops and \$5 million from livestock, poultry, and animal products. The bulk of these operations were small farms operated at a scale that would fit the artisanal category. Interestingly, more than 7,000 of these farms used computers and more than 8,000 had access to the internet.

As director of the University of California's statewide Small Farm Program, I endeavored to recognize, highlight, and target the role and needs of California's female farmers and ranchers by developing a project in partnership with USDA's

Risk Management Agency in 2002. This project was predicated on several assumptions:

- Women face some challenges in farming that are different from those of their male counterparts even though many needs—for information, technical assistance, and the like—overlap.
- Women bring unique assets in the way of their experiences, skills, and perspectives and can add value to how we practice crop and animal husbandry.

Farming is not simply a mechanical process; it is also a biological one. It is also cultural. And women may find it easier to access these perspectives, both of which are consistent with the emerging perspective of agricultural sustainability.

Though California's female farmers and ranchers are ethnically diverse, the vast majority in 2002 were white—11,889 of 12,615 principal operators or about 94

percent. However, there were 39 African Americans, 170 Native Americans, 98 Hawaiians or Pacific Islanders, and 356 Asians. Of the 35,507 women who were either principal operators or cooperators, 33,189 were white, 100 were African American, 1,295 were Asian, 477 were Native American, and 98 were Hawaiian or Pacific Islander.

Interestingly, the average age of California's female principal operators was mid-fifties, though 450 of the 12,615 were younger than thirty-four. The vast majority of the principal operators lived on the farms they operated but nearly half worked at off-farm jobs as much as two hundred days a year. Still, 6,776 of the 12,615–53 percent—did not engage in off-farm work. So half of the women worked off the farm and half worked only on the farm.

As indicated earlier, these women primarily operate small farms:

- 40 percent were less than ten acres.
- 75 percent were less than fifty acres.



Products run the gamut—fruit and tree nuts; greenhouse, nursery, and floriculture products; cattle; dairy products and milk; hogs and pigs; poultry and eggs; and aquaculture. There were 933 sheep and goat operations.

This book gathers profiles of a cross-section of California's female artisanal farmers. All these women are *Outstanding In Their Fields*. Graduate student researchers who participated in this project interviewed the women profiled here and drafted the profiles that I then edited and organized.

I hope you find these stories interesting, intriguing, and inspiring. They reflect a diversity of interests and farming pursuits with a common denominator—pursuit of a chosen field that provides fodder for a meaningful life. And you will no doubt agree that they contribute in no small measure to the fullness of all our lives, at least indirectly.



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A DEFINITION OF ARTISANAL PRODUCTION

An easily agreed upon definition of artisanal production remains elusive because of the diversity of variables involved in production and use. Nonetheless, representatives of forty-four countries who met in Manila in 1997 for the UNESCO/ITC International Symposium on Crafts and the International Market agreed upon the following definition:

Artisanal products are those products produced by artisans, either completely by hand or with the help of hand tools or even mechanical means as long as the direct manual contribution of the artisan remains the most substantial component of the finished product. These are produced without restriction in terms of quantity and using raw materials from sustainable resources. The special nature of artisanal products derives from their distinctive features, which can be utilitarian, aesthetic, artistic, creative, culturally

attached, decorative, functional, traditional, or religiously or socially symbolic and significant.

Artisans can be basically defined as persons who carry out a manual work on their own account, often helped by family members, friends, apprentices, and even workers with whom they keep constant personal contact and by which they generate a community of intellect and attachment to the craft.

Source: UNESCO/ITC International Symposium on Crafts and the International Market: Trade and Customs Codification, Manila, Philippines, 1997.



PAT MFADE

D at Meade has owned and managed West Valley Alpacas in partnership with her husband, Jon Robbins, since 1994. Located near Esparto in western Yolo County, West Valley Alpacas grew out of Pat's lifelong interests in animals, textiles, and rural life. She and Jon breed alpacas and sell alpaca fiber, yarn, and clothing through their ranch studio and retail shop. They also offer classes in spinning, weaving, knitting, dyeing, felting, and other fiber arts. In addition, Pat hosts sit-and-spin evenings on the first Thursday of every month. Fiber artists of all kinds—spinners, quilters, knitters, needlepointers, and so on—come together to work on projects, help each other past

tricky spots, and enjoy each other's company.

Like many career-changers, Pat Meade started ranching to realize a lifelong dream. Her ranch reflects her experiences and interests, combining her love of animals and of fiber arts. The roots of Pat's ranch can be found in her early experiences. At the age of twelve, Pat moved with her family from Arizona to Saudi Arabia. Although her parents declined to get their two daughters the camel they wanted, that experience may have influenced Pat's selection of another exotic animal—the alpaca—as the livestock of choice for her ranch. And there may be something of a Middle-Eastern hospitality to her classes and spinning evenings. Pat's



West Valley Alpacas

skills, self-knowledge, likes, and dislikesformed over years in a variety of jobs on both coasts-all have contributed to her unique ranching venture.

The concept that would become West Valley Alpacas took form long before Pat began ranching. After studying at boarding schools in Beirut, Lebanon, and in the U.S. in Massachusetts, Pat headed to Hampshire College in western Massachusetts, earning a degree in land use planning that integrated her interests in architecture, design, and science. She then joined Jon, her husband-to-be, in Santa Cruz, California, where he was working on a doctorate in marine biology. Pat first worked for a geologist writing environmental impact reports but found it disillusioning. "It became clear that the same amount of work and

expense was involved for somebody who was really very cautiously caring for the land and doing a timber harvest—just maybe thinning wood—as for

someone who was building a shopping center or clearing off agricultural land forever. I completely lost interest in all aspects of that." Jon, meanwhile, found that he was more interested in working on airplanes than on his dissertation, so he left his doctoral program for aircraft mechanic school. Pat had always wanted to learn to fly, so together they took a first step toward creating a life they wanted for them-

selves. They moved to Watsonville and pursued their love of aviation.

Pat took a job pumping gas at the Watsonville airport. There, she learned to fly, an experience she found both magical and frightening. After earning her pilot's license, she worked as an air traffic controller at Oakland Center, the radar facility serving the western region of the U.S. It proved to be a very challenging and stressful job. Pat remembers that there were few other women working there then and one of the men told her that she had to do better than all the men in order to make it. In response, she says she just looked at him and said "no

sweat" and that changed her personality. Though her coworkers were tough on her at first, she found that it taught her to be assertive. "It has served me well throughout my life. I am not that way by nature; I am not confrontational.

It was sort of a sad lesson to learn, but I learned it. In fact, after that I got along great with everybody on my crew."

Pat's work as an air traffic controller led her to take classes in computer programming. Discovering that she had an aptitude for it, she eventually worked as a software engineer in medical imaging. However,

she and Jon subsequently moved, first to New Hampshire and then back to California in 1988 when they bought the Esparto ranch that would become West Valley Alpacas.

Initially after moving to the ranch, Pat worked as a flight instructor at Woodland's airport and later returned to programming. Meanwhile, Jon worked as a helicopter mechanic for the California Highway Patrol. Not until 1993 did Pat identify alpacas (camelids) as the livestock of choice for their ranch. She and Jon then spent a year researching the animals before buying a pair. Over the years, she gradually reduced



her off-ranch work hours to spend more time ranching. She then also worked as an independent software consultant. Finally, nine years after buying the Esparto property and three years after launching West Valley Alpacas, Pat left her off-farm job in 1997 to spend all her time on the ranch. They still hope that at some point Jon also will be able to leave his city job for full-time ranching. Pat and Jon plan to earn their retirement income from livestock breeding, sales of alpacas and fiber, and whatever else they can raise at the ranch. Their ideal is to include an organic walnut orchard in their ranching venture. Walnuts are a hardy crop in their area, require relatively little maintenance, have a cooling effect on the microclimate that would benefit their livestock, and are grown by many neighbors with whom they could share equipment. But Pat and Jon cannot afford to plant an orchard right now. "At this point in our lives," says Pat, "we are not going to borrow money!" They recognize that they may have to compromise on this part of their dream.

Despite inevitable compromises and disappointments, Pat and Jon are making their dreams come true at West Valley Alpacas. Pat remembers one morning about four years after buying the ranch when she and Jon were taking their morning walk with the dogs. Knowing that until that point in her life she had moved at least every four years, Jon said, "Well, we have been here for four years now. Does that mean we have to leave?"

PAT MEADE

Pat's response was a decisive no—their place felt right. Jon agreed and together they have been at the ranch for fifteen years.

West Valley Alpacas

Pat's initial idea was to raise sheep—until she happened on an alpaca at a fair. That was it! At the time, alpacas were still novel in the United States, having only been in North America since the mid-1980s. Moreover, they are relatively expensive animals; most alpaca ranchers sell the animals, ignoring the fiber. Pat recognized that limiting the venture to fiber would not produce sufficient income; she would have to include sales of animals in her operation. But she sells animals only as necessary.

Pat and Jon's first two alpacas were gelding (not breeding) quality males. They wanted to first learn about the animals and how to care for them. Alpacas turned out to be much easier to deal with than other livestock with which Pat had worked. To expand the herd, they borrowed money to invest in four females while also acquiring a few males for breeding. The balance of their current herd of seventeen are homegrown, having been born and bred on the ranch. Pat's priorities include maintaining a manageable herd of between fifteen and twenty animals, continuing her breeding program, and producing high-quality fiber from the youngest animals. In

keeping with those priorities, she sells one or two animals each year.

Pat has found that alpacas have an even, calm temperament and are bright and trainable if one is willing to invest the time. She and Ion have established some basic rules about how they treat their animals. They give the alpacas treats and treatments in the barn. but the pasture is the animals' turf. They never approach an animal when it is in the pasture. If an alpaca walks up for some attention in the pasture, Pat gives it a scratch, but she does not give it any rewards or do anything unpleasant like trim its nails or give an injection. When it is time to care for the alpacas, Pat approaches each animal after the morning feeding in the barn, calls its name, and asks it to stand. She calls this "their fair warning to expect something."

Since Pat and Jon have established such a clear, consistent pattern, the alpacas have become easier to work



Some of West Valley's alpacas.

with and the whole process is relatively straightforward and stress-free. The animals know that they will not be snatched out of the pasture for a procedure, and it shows in their demeanor. According to Pat, "When people come here to look at the animals, they say that this is the first time that they have been able to walk among alpacas without them running away. Just a few little rules have made life a lot easier." The training methods put their animals at ease, which has additional benefits. As Pat explains, "It's not just good vibes. If you have a stressed animal, it is going to be more susceptible to illness and you will get stress breaks in the fiber. The healthier they are, the healthier your business is."

Pat learned to spin soon after she started ranching. "People see you spinning and they say, 'Oh, I can't believe you spin and you weave,'" she remembers, "but until several generations ago, everybody did. How hard can it be?" Then she noticed that other people who spin, weave, and have fiber animals seemed to come out of the woodwork. She took a few introductory classes in weaving and did "a lot of experimenting at home and working through the tragedies!" She says she is "not the best spinner and weaver on the planet" but she loves it.

Now, Pat hosts and teaches fiber arts classes at her on-ranch studio that include spinning, knitting, weaving, crocheting, felting, and dyeing. The

cozy studio's large windows overlook the ranch and the alpacas, inspiring her students and connecting them with the source of their fiber. In addition, she hosts "Sit & Spin" get-togethers on the

first Thursday of every month. People come to the studio to spin, weave, knit, needlepoint, quilt, or work on whatever other creative fiber projects they have going. There is no charge to participate and it has turned out to be a great forum by which people share ideas and techniques. As the conversation ranges from knitting patterns to children to politics, participants



Both the classes and the spinning evenings are effective ways to introduce new people to West Valley Alpacas' retail shop, which carries a wide range of supplies, including raw fiber for spinning, patterns, yarn, knitting needles, looms, spinning wheels, and crochet hooks, plus some finished items like scarves, hats, mittens, and sweaters. The shop is open by appointment and during classes and events, but, as Pat says, "If someone calls and we are home, the shop is open."

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Every spring, Pat and Jon host an open house. Educating the public is important to them, and they are

happy to open their ranch to visitors. All kinds of people attend, including those who are thinking about getting alpacas, people who already have them and want to learn more, and "local people who always wondered what the heck we were doing out here." Pat and Jon demonstrate how to shear an alpaca and then take requests for other training demonstrations on topics like tooth or nail care.

Thanks to her background as a software engineer, Pat was able to design and maintain the West Valley Alpacas

website—www.westvalleyalpacas.com. She was mindful to design a simple,



Pat works with a participant in one of her spinning classes.



West Valley Alpacas' on-ranch retail shop.



Visitors have an opportunity to meet the alpacas during a West Valley Alpacas open house.

straightforward website that "someone on a computer like mine, the slow one with the phone connection, would be able to visit." Now, thanks to the website, Pat and Jon sell yarn all over. The downside to the website is that, in addition to yarn, people also want to buy her alpacas. Though she did sell three to a buyer in Maryland, she is not generally comfortable with that and prefers to sell them locally. The sale to a Maryland buyer worked out well, but it took a lot of time on her part to check out the prospective buyer.

When they sell alpacas locally, Pat and Jon always offer to teach the new owner how to do everything necessary to take care of the animal, including giving shots, drawing blood, and caring for its teeth and nails. They also give new owners an extensive information packet that details how to take care of alpacas and check back with them to make sure that everything is going well.

If there is ever a problem, such as with a birth, Pat and Jon will make the trip to help out.

In addition to these marketing avenues, Pat advertises her products in national spinning, weaving, and knitting magazines.

Products

When Pat and Jon originally purchased their alpacas, the fiber industry was so new that it was not economically feasible to have their small batches of fiber processed into yarn at a large industrial mill. At the same time, their alpacas produced too much fiber for Pat to spin it all. Given these constraints, they at first thought they would just sell Pat's handwoven pieces and the fiber to handspinners. However, as their herd grew and the industry expanded, a group of breeders in the U.S. began experimenting with fiber pools in which they combined their various fiber supplies and sent them to mills for processing. Eventually, their fiber pools evolved into an alpacafiber cooperative.

Initially, the cooperative's goal was to process the alpaca fiber in North American mills. Unfortunately, available mills did not produce a sufficiently high-quality product; North American mills simply did not have machinery designed for processing alpaca fiber and could not retool to process a small three-day run of alpaca fiber. This was a disappointment to the cooperative's members, who decided to process the fiber in South

America for the time being. Though the cooperative sends a relatively small amount of fiber to the mill in Peru, alpaca fiber there is a multimillion-dollar, longstanding industry. South American mills and equipment are tooled precisely for alpaca fiber and, as a result, they make the best yarn.

More recently, North American mills have developed some capacity to process alpaca fiber, and the cooperative plans to eventually move all of its fiber processing here. Members have been encouraged by the appearance of "mini mills"—smaller modular machines that complete one part of the processing, such as carding and separating the fibers, and can be housed within an average-sized barn. Mini mills (see www.minimills.net for more information) are not yet suitable for the cooperative's purposes; they are expensive and the amount of fiber they handle is too much for individual ranchers but too little for the total North American fiber harvest.

As Pat and Jon shear their alpacas in April and May, they "skirt" or sort the fiber into different qualities. Fiber from the animal's back and neck is the highest quality, while leg and belly hair is of lesser quality. The fiber is then sorted by animal and into compatible colors. Next Pat decides what to send to the cooperative. She is required to contribute a certain amount as a member but the cooperative only accepts fiber of a particular staple length and fineness. She then pulls out the fiber that has already

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been claimed by customers. Finally, she chooses fiber that she wants to use in special projects for friends or family. The lower-quality fiber, which is discarded by most alpaca breeders, is sent to a mill through a separate pool system. It is combined with sheep wool to make a coarse but very warm yarn that is perfect for gloves and socks. Some fiber is processed locally at Yolo Wool Products in Woodland. "Like most small-farm people," Pat says, "I want to do as much local stuff as I can."

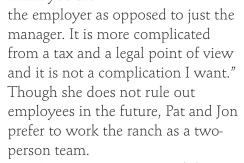
The West Valley Alpacas Philosophy Pat and Jon's philosophy for West Valley Alpacas is "good relationships with the planet and the people."

Minimize environmental impacts. Pat and Jon try to use as few agricultural chemicals as possible on their ranch. They spray as infrequently as possible and use the gentlest applications they can. They lease forty acres of their property to a neighbor who grows alfalfa using conventional methods. As they see it, "We lease our alfalfa out to our neighbor; he does what he wants. That's another compromise." They recognize that they could be making more money from the property by leasing the acreage to someone growing a more lucrative crop, but they are happy to work with their neighbors. "Unless we have to make some changes, we

won't," Pat said. "It's not all about money but enough of it is about money that you have to make some hard decisions sometimes."

No employees. While a software engineer, Pat realized that "the last thing

in the world" she wanted to do was manage people. "I enjoy working with people and I enjoy people. I don't have any problem saying, 'Look, here is how I really wanted this job done.' But that is not how I want my life to be. It is so much more complicated when you are



 Dream big! As Pat says, "Our philosophy is that if you get to the end of the project list, you die. So you might as well have a long list!"

The Question of Scale

The most significant challenge Pat has faced is building and maintaining the ranch business at a manageable scale. Since Pat and Jon prefer not to have employees, they appreciate the network of neighbors on which they rely for machinery trades and favors. They also

rent a house on the property, and the tenant helps out here and there and keeps an eye on things when they are gone. Pat has been going through the challenging process of deciding how many alpacas she can reasonably manage.

Pat also started ranching at what she calls "an advanced age" and her later-than-usual entry has certain ramifications. "As your dreams expand, your physical capabilities may be going in the

other direction. You have to figure out what is doable and what machinery you want to use, but it is all a compromise. If you hold on to your main dream, you can compromise on a lot of the other things."



Participants in one of Pat's spinning classes.

Words of Wisdom

 One step at a time. Pat recommends this approach to challenges: "Break the problem down into doable chunks. Give yourself a break! Say 'Okay, I



don't have to accomplish all of this stuff this year.' Do one little thing this year, one little thing next year." With that in mind, she recognizes that "the big picture is hard to cling to. Sometimes we look around and think that this is just overwhelming. We are not getting anything done. We thought we would have this done last year. And then somebody will come by who has not been here in a few years and say 'I cannot believe how much you guys have done!' It is hard to keep that big picture for yourself, but it is important too."

- Make each other's dreams come true. For business partnerships, Pat recommends that "for the success of a marriage and a farm, make each other's dreams come true. The fiber thing was not Jon's dream. That was mine. It has to be a cooperative effort."
- Turn your failures into success! Pat credits much of their success to maintaining a creative, positive perspective on how their business and lives have unfolded. For example, she said, "I had what I considered a failure just a few weeks ago. I did something that was a complete waste of my time and a lot of effort. By the time I got home, I was thinking, 'Okay, you

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know what you should really do? You should try this, this, and that.' It is important to consider your failures as another success, another way to generate ideas. Sometimes you think you do not have the energy to think like that, but energy breeds energy. Once you start going in that direction, it really helps."

Hang on to your dreams! Pat nurtured her dream of somehow combining her love of animals, fiber arts, and country living for years before it became a reality at West Valley Alpacas. Looking back, she says, "Not all your dreams may come true, but if you don't have them, they won't. Find that dream! Mine has changed so much along the way, in ways I could not have imagined. My original dream did not involve alpacas, but it involved animals and fiber. Be willing to change the course, but hang on to the main thing. Life is full of compromises and disappointments and things you are just going to have to figure out how to do differently. The change part is the challenge, but it is also the joy."

Supportive Organizations and Resources

• California Alpaca Breeders Association (Calpaca) and the Alpaca Owners and Breeders Association (AOBA). Both organizations have been a great resource as the ranch has become better established.

Calpaca (www.calpaca.org) was the first regional organization of alpaca breeders in the U.S. Started by a handful of breeders who wanted to learn more about alpacas, Calpaca today focuses on public education, sharing ideas, and offering resources. AOBA came to Pat's attention early on when she discovered its by-mail lending library. There were few books and no websites on alpacas at the time, so this service was invaluable. Currently, AOBA devotes most of its resources to marketing alpacas and alpaca fiber.

- Esparto and Woodland Chambers of Commerce. Early on, the Woodland Chamber of Commerce called to let Pat know about the University of California (UC) Small Farm Center and invite her to a luncheon that might be relevant to her business even though she was not a member. Pat remembers fondly that chamber members would call her to let her know about events. She was deeply impressed and has been a happy member of both chambers since. The two chambers offer individual websites-Esparto at www.espartochamber.com and Woodland at www.woodlandchamber.com.
- Murray Fowler, University of California Davis. Pat and Jon feel lucky to be so close to the university. When they started raising alpacas, there were only

- about twelve breeders in California, mostly on the coast. Alpacas were healthy and hardy stock in the mild coastal climate, but Pat was not sure how they would do in hot, dry Yolo County. Fortunately, she found Murray Fowler, a world-renowned camelid expert, zoo veterinarian, poison-plant specialist, and professor emeritus at UC Davis. He cowrote a pioneering book on alpacas and was a tremendous resource. Thanks to his assistance, Pat's alpacas have never suffered heat stress.
- UC Small Farm Center. Pat has found the UC Small Farm Center to be a helpful resource for building her business. As she remembers her first experience with the center, "I went to a luncheon, went to a workshop, and all these magical things happened!" She was particularly pleased with the center's Harvest Trails map of agtourism venues in Yolo, Napa, and Solano Counties. She worked with the center to include West Valley Alpacas in the map and is pleased with the final product. "That really impressed me. That is the kind of support and exposure I need in the long term as a business." The Small Farm Center offers an extensive website of support and information at www.sfc.ucdavis.edu.



Outstanding in their Fields California's Women Farmers



This book gathers profiles of a cross-section of California's artisanal farmers. Their stories reflect a diversity of interests and farming pursuits. Among the fruits of these pursuits are honey, cashmere, wine, soap, cheese, berries, grain, balms, jam, olive oil, candles, flour, heirloom vegetables, yarn, and organic fruit plus opportunities for visitors to participate in the rural way of life through classes, tours, and tastings.

— Desmond Jolly, Editor and Project Director



