

# Apple orchards: 'All that's left is the memories'



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Al Amaral, a retired wine and liquor salesman, farms five acres of apples on Green Valley Road as a hobby that shows little profit and 'you love to love to do.'

## Economics sound knell for industry that defined Pajaro Valley

By TOM RAGAN  
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

WATSONVILLE — There was a time in Santa Cruz County when there were 15,000 acres of apples. That was at the turn of the 20th century.

In the 1970s, the number fell to 8,500 acres. Today, just 2,700 acres of apples remain, according to the county Agriculture Commissioner's Annual Crop and Livestock Report, released last month.

Make no mistake. The orchards are dying out here. Slowly but surely, they've given way to development and to strawberries, changing the face of a landscape that once was an ocean of apple trees.

That's the reason David Stolich, a third-generation apple grower from Watsonville, waxes nostalgic and hangs on to old packing labels like they're a valuable baseball-card collection.

"All that's left are the memories," he said.

There's also the 120-year-old tree that sits in his back yard, a reminder of the day when apple farming was huge here.

With just less than 100 acres of orchards, Stolich sees the writing on the wall. He realizes he may be the last generation in his family to grow apples.

"It's fun to look at the old photographs and remember how it was way back when," he said.

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## Orchards

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### Lower profits

The number of orchards in the Pajaro Valley keeps shrinking as third- and fourth-generation growers either sell their land or rent what's left of it to berry growers, who are willing to pay a pretty price.

Where there were once hundreds upon hundreds of growers and just as many orchards, only about 100 growers remain in the Pajaro Valley.

Many will begin to harvest their apples late this month.

Although the orchards have been in decline since the 1950s — as the area's population grew and land was developed — the nosedive occurred in the '80s when growing strawberries became more profitable.

And that, in turn, boosted the value of land, forcing many apple growers out of business.

"It's kind of like the chicken and the egg: Did the price of land go up first or was it the price of the crop?" said Tom Rider of H.A. Rider and Sons, which processes apples for juice. "The orchards have shrunk because of the returns. You don't get as much money per acre as you used to. The flat land down in the valley where you have alternative crops are much higher in revenue."

China's entry into the apple-juice concentrate market and competition from

Washington state has made it harder for apple growers to fetch the prices they once did, and turn a profit.

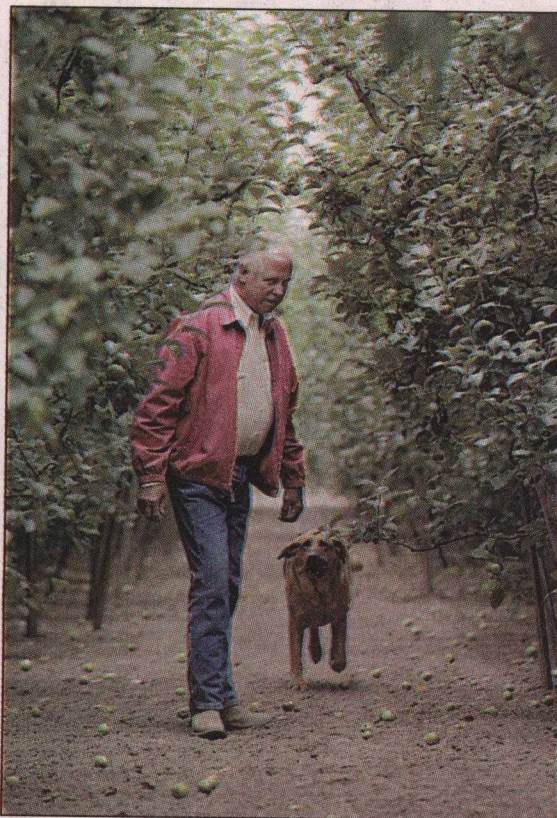
"Washington state took over the fresh market from our guys," said John Martinelli of S. Martinelli & Co., which buys the majority of apples produced in the Pajaro Valley for juice. "Washington can supply apples on a 52-week basis, but our guys can't."

Martinelli's quest, he said, isn't as much for quantity as it is for quality. So the company pays more than \$200 a ton for local apples, especially the New Town Pippins, the main ingredient of Martinelli's juice and a variety Washington state is short on.

The larger grocery stores, meanwhile, buy the more popular Granny Smith, the Gala, Fuji, Red Delicious and the Golden Delicious.

Although these varieties are grown in the Pajaro Valley, the volume doesn't approach that of the Pacific Northwest. Washington growers "wine and dine" the grocery store chains and sell their apples as cheaply as \$20 a ton, Martinelli said.

That leaves apples in the valley, which were the No. 1 crop in the early 1900s, at number 11 when it comes to the price they fetch per acre — behind such



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Grower David Stolich says he may be the last generation in his family to farm apples for a living.

crops as flowers, lettuce and other vegetables.

### The diehards

But apple growers are not to be out-

done or underestimated, given their history, said Jess Brown, executive director of the county Farm Bureau.

"They've evolved over time and have succeeded in reinventing themselves," Brown noted.

Jim Rider, a longtime grower in the Pajaro Valley, is a perfect example. He's made a name for himself by specializing in a number of varieties, including the Honey Crisp, a relatively new brand invented a decade ago in a University of Minnesota lab after hit-and-miss experiments with cross-pollination. The Pink Lady is also a hit with consumers.

Other growers, like Dick Rider, have been tapping the organic market for years and still others have found their niche selling at farmers markets.

But the days in which apples reigned supreme are gone. The days when apple festivals were akin to Castroville's big artichoke party are history.

"It's unfortunate, but it's a matter of economics," said Ron Tyler, a former farm adviser who lives in Watsonville.

"You might want the good old days back, but things don't stay the same in agriculture. Our land is too valuable and you have to get a return on your investment. Farming is a business."

Then there's Al Amaral, who grows five acres of apples as a hobby.

"This has always been a sideline for me," said Amaral, 62, a retired liquor and wine salesman who farms on Green Valley Road. He says he's lucky to break even.

"It's just something you have to love to do," he said.

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