

Woman named Farmer of the Year

Farm Bureau honors berry rancher

By JAMIE MARKS

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SOQUEL — The Santa Cruz County Farm Bureau picked its first woman as Farmer of the Year Friday night, naming Nita Gizdich of the Gizdich "pick-your-own-berry" Ranch of Watsonville.

At the bureau's 54th annual dinner held at the elegant Chaminade Conference Center, Gizdich was feted by Rep. Leon Panetta, D-Carmel, Supervisors' Chairwoman Robley Levy, Watsonville Mayor Betty Murphy, and representatives of the offices of state Sen. Henry Mello, D-Watsonville and Assemblyman Sam Farr, D-Monterey.

Gizdich said she didn't know of her honor until she arrived at the dinner and saw so many friends in the crowd.

"I thought something's fishy, but I kept saying to myself, 'It better not be.'"

Gizdich described herself as a "farmer's daughter" who has managed to keep farming in the family blood. Born and raised in Watsonville of parents who emigrated from Yugoslavia, Gizdich, her husband, Vince, and two sons operate the family's 68-acre apple and berry ranch, maintaining the family tradition.

Their fields on Peckham Road near Mount Madonna are open to hordes of tourists and locals to pick their own apples, olallieberries, strawberries, raspberries and even the exotic tayberry — a cross between a raspberry and brambleberry.

Apple cider is pressed weekly nine months of the year and distributed locally. Additionally, Gizdich bakes scrumptious berry and apple pies in the fall.

Although known for her direct-market operation, Gizdich said any berries remaining from the self-pick operation are sold to canneries and frozen-food processors.

Years ago the Gizdich ranch switched to self-pick as an experiment because of high labor costs and the difficulty in finding enough workers at peak harvest season.

The experiment proved so successful that the Gizdich Ranch has become the county's best-known self-pick operation.

Gizdich serves as president of the Country Crossroads Inc., an organization that distributes a free map listing farms and ranches that sell directly to the consumer. She has spoken to the National Direct Market and Roadside Stand As-

sociation and is active in the California Association of Family Farmers.

It was a sort of "family night" at the farm bureau dinner. Besides the Gizdich Ranch, three family-owned agricultural businesses were honored for their long-term contributions to the local farming industry.

John and Tom Bargetto, the third generation of Bargettos in the wine-making business, were honored for their Bargetto winery in Soquel; Justin and Jane Worth Brown, of the famous Brown Bulb Ranch of Capitola, received a plaque; as did John McGrath, an old-time dairy farmer of the Pajaro Valley.

Harking back to the family theme, Panetta told how he worked with his father on the family farm, and how his father remarked upon Panetta's first election to Congress that it would be nice for him to go to Washington, as long as he didn't bring any of Washington back home.

Turning to more serious matters, Panetta said three critical issues are affecting agriculture today — foreign trade, pesticides and the new immigration law.

"We want to be able to compete and sell our products abroad," Panetta said. But trade restrictions are keeping U.S. products out of foreign ports, while imports are flooding the American market.

Standards applied to American farm produce should be equally applied to imports, he said.

Panetta said very few import products are inspected for pesticides, and of those that are, a significant number contain pesticides outlawed in the United States.

Panetta said he and U.S. Sen. Pete Wilson are trying to tighten import regulations.

On the immigration law, Panetta said the major boon to California farmers was the Special Agricultural Worker designation, which qualifies undocumented workers in farming for temporary status.

While there have been major mistakes in the bureaucratic end of the law's enactment, Panetta said, there is progress being made with the Immigration and Naturalization Service. More border checkpoints have been set up to screen incoming workers, and the standards for documentation of residency have been ironed out.

He urged the farm bureau to keep up its pressure on Washington. "We need to have the voices of agriculture heard in Washington," Panetta said.

Mayor Murphy spoke after Panetta, saying that although she's never been a farmer herself, through her work in her husband's well and drilling company, she "grew to have great respect for farmers."

Murphy was endorsed by the farm bureau in her recent run for mayor, and said, "If you knew what I know about crops, you probably wouldn't have backed me for mayor."

But it is her stand on other issues that

has the farmers' devotion. Murphy said she still believes it would be "sinful" to pave over the fertile land of the Pajaro Valley and added, "My big fear is that we'll become a bedroom community" for the industrial development of southern Santa Clara County and north Salinas.

She reminded the audience that the agricultural buffer zone which she and the bureau have advocated is up for consideration before the Planning Commission Aug. 3 and said, "I still don't know what's so controversial about it."



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Nita Grizdich was honored by the Farm Bureau.