



Ron Cockerille

Gizdich gave the thumbs-up sign after claiming the award.

Nita Gizdich named Farmer of the Year

By STEVE STROTH
STAFF WRITER

Watsonville's Nita Gizdich, a self-described farmer's daughter and a Pajaro Valley native, was named Farmer of the Year last night by the Santa Cruz County Farm Bureau, becoming the first woman to win the annual award.

The Farm Bureau also honored three family farming operations: the Bargetto Winery in Soquel, the Brown begonia-bulb ranch in Capitola, and Watsonville's McGrath family, which has grown hops and other rowcrops in the Pajaro Valley for more than a century.

Gizdich and her husband, Vince, run the 68-acre Gizdich berry and apple ranch on Peckham Road, property the family has owned for nearly 50 years.

The couple was one of the first in the Pajaro Valley to have customers pick their own produce. More recently, the ranch has become famous locally for its seasonal pies and apple ciders.

After 24 years of "U-pick" operations, the Gizdich Ranch is one of the most successful roadside businesses in the county, Farm Bureau Manager Jess Brown said. It's also made Mrs. Gizdich a national figure in direct-marketing techniques for farming, he said.

Gizdich has addressed recent meetings of the National Direct Market and Roadside Stand Association on direct-marketing techniques.

In addition to her involvement in the farm bureau, she also serves as president of Country Crossroads Inc., an organization that produces a free map of local farms and ranches that sell produce directly to the public.

But the talk of last night's award ceremony was the Gizdich pies, which Mrs. Gizdich said she began baking seven years ago using seasonal berries and apples at the request of visitors to her ranch.

Gizdich, whose farmer father immigrated from Yugoslavia, received her award at the Farm Bureau's 54th annual meeting before 125 farmers, farming families and politicians at the Chaminade Whitney Conference Center in Santa Cruz.

"I was really surprised," said Gizdich, who didn't know she was getting the award but thought "something was fishy" when her entire family and some close friends all showed up at the dinner event.

"I love farming," she said. "I've been a farmer's daughter all my life and farming is just a wonderful thing to be doing."

Gizdich was also surprised to learn that no woman had ever won the award, but said she was happy to be the first.

"I wouldn't be up here (accepting the award) if it weren't for my family," she said.

The Gizdich Ranch, which devotes about one-third of its land to seasonal "U-pick" operations, is run by the Gizdiches and their sons, Vince and Mitch.

REFERENCE