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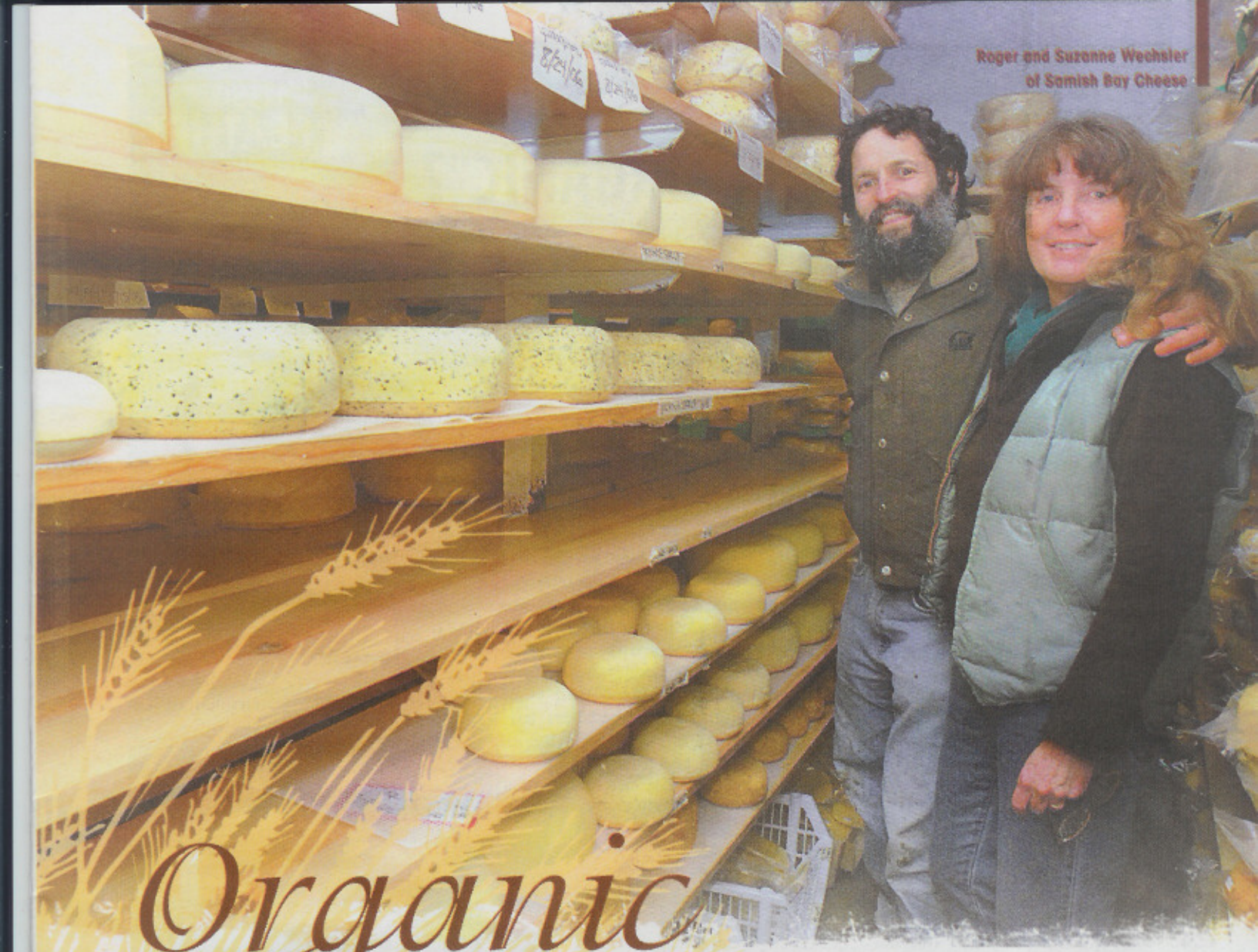
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Roger and Suzanne Wechsler
of Samish Bay Cheese

Organic food

"You gotta remember that this organic program is of the people, by the people, for the people. It wasn't led or initiated by government or big business, so it's a trend where the people are going. Industry is following. Government is following," said George Vojkovich, co-owner of Skagit River Ranch in Sedro-Woolley.

Indeed, what was once considered the food of hippies is now an industry whose retail sales have been growing at a rate of 20 percent annually for the past several years, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. With a recent commitment by Wal-Mart to sell more organic food, it is expected to grow even more.

In Washington, the organic food industry has been growing "exponentially," according to Miles McEvoy, program manager of the Organic Food Program at the Washington State Department of Agriculture (WSDA). From the inception of the program in 1988 to 2006, the number of certified farms grew from 63 to 634, and the sales of organic food jumped from \$2.5 million to \$112 million. In 2005, the USDA ranked Washington third in the nation for number of certified operations behind California and Wisconsin.

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Story by Rachel Robertson | Photography by Scott Terrell

WHAT IS "CERTIFIED ORGANIC"?

"I feel like we are putting out a really high quality product and something that is desirable for people... And so when they are coming in and saying 'Wow, this is really good bread, I want to buy more,' then you can start talking to them about the fact that it is organic, and why it's organic, and what we are trying to achieve by that fact."

- SCOTT MANGOLD | OWNER, BREADFARM

Organic farming relies on natural methods of crop and animal management, such as composting and hand weeding, and rejects the use of substances such as synthetic chemicals, antibiotics, and hormones.

Jim Meyer of Cascadian Home Farm in Rockport remembers the early years of organic farming before it was considered an industry. Local farmers sold to their local co-op or directly to the customer. "There was almost a line of sight from the consumer to the producer," he said. "As that evolved and larger producers got in the game, and there were more steps in between the producer and the consumer—you couldn't really see where your food was coming from. That's when third party certification became more essential." During the late 1980's he chaired the certification committee for California Certified Organic Farmers as the group transitioned from an organization of farmers that checked each other to a third party certification program.

Washington was the first state to have its Department of Agriculture operate a certified program, and still today stands out as a leader, as most states continue to rely on private organizations such as Oregon Tilth. As of 2002, all organic certifiers comply with the USDA National Organic Program standards, a set of rules that took 12 years to develop. The first proposal came out in 1997, and was eventually rejected after public outcry. "That [proposal] was really a disaster because they basically didn't listen to the National Organic Standards Board and put in a lot of things that were very much opposed by the organic industry, including allowing the usage of genetically modified organisms and irradiation," said McEvoy. A second proposal was finalized in 2001 and implemented the following year.

When McEvoy started his career in

1988 as a WSDA Organic Food Program inspector, he recalls the standards were a one-page rule that listed the allowable materials for organic crop production. How times have changed: Currently the USDA National Organic Standards are 31 pages long and cover more than just crops—rules about livestock, processing, certification, labeling, compliance actions, and accreditation are also included.

"We see our role as certifiers to protect organic integrity, which means inspecting and verifying that organic standards are being met by everybody that we certify,"

McEvoy said.

"What we also try to do is some surveillance of the marketplace to ensure that all organic claims in the state meet that consistent standard."

WHY BE ORGANIC?

Compared to conventional methods, organic farming is more labor intensive, more expensive, and has additional regulations and fees. So, who wants to do it and why?

"It just makes sense," was a phrase echoed by many of the Skagit area organic business owners, citing health benefits for people as well as for the planet.

"I wouldn't do it any other way," said Roger Wechsler, co-owner of Samish Bay Cheese in

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Bow. "I've been involved in organic for 35 years and it's in my heart and I wouldn't do it any other way." He and his wife, Suzanne Wechsler, who has a similarly long history in organic food, purchased Washington's only organic cheese dairy in 1998, expanding their already existing organic farm. "My real passion is the source [of food]," Suzanne said. "Where does it really come from and how does it really taste?"

It was a trip to the hospital with a heart fibrillation that got George Vojkovich into organic food. When the doctor mentioned it was likely caused by chemicals in his food, Vojkovich started making changes. "I was a guy who stopped at the gas station and got a fill-up, and two corn dogs, and a polish sausage, and maybe a burrito," he said. But no more—he and wife, Eiko, converted Skagit River Ranch to organic in order to produce food they felt safe to eat, but soon became certified organic, selling beef, pork, chicken and eggs to customers who are looking for something unique. "The person who eats our food products has a nutrient dense food. That's our focus—to produce food that is actually healthy to eat," he said. "And delicious," Eiko adds. Both she and 12-year-old daughter, Nicole, also feel an important aspect of their small-scale organic farming is the humane treatment of the animals.

For Wallace Farms, the motivation was customer based. While conventional potatoes remain the largest part of their business, Jack Wallace states that organic potatoes are a "significant part" of the family operation in Burlington. "The organic part of our business was just a natural fit for us, and there are some market diversification advantages to having both organics and conventionals," he said. The Wallace family history of farming in the area goes back to 1903. "Our farm started long before chemicals were available so we felt that we could apply some of the same techniques that our farm utilized growing potatoes before chemicals were available and grow great organic potatoes today," Wallace said.

Alan Mesman is eagerly anticipating when he will be an organic dairy farmer in February. It was the low prices of conventional milk that motivated him to change his La Conner operation to organic—a not-so-easy process. "It's really about a five-year thing, by the time you plan that you are going to be a pasture operation and get things switched over and get all settled in...But at this time in history, the milk price that they are paying for organic milk is a pretty nice

thing if you can set yourself up to do it." Organic certification for dairies requires that the pasture land has been managed organically for three years (as are organic crops) and the cows treated organically for one year prior to certification.

Although he has yet to sell his milk as organic, Mesman already sees a difference in the cows. "There are certain problems you don't have when you have cows in top condition," he said. "Our cows, in the hot summer heat in July and August when the grass is short, will have to walk as much as four miles a day between milkings and feedings, and so they are pretty tough."

Making organic bread seemed the right thing to do for Scott Mangold when he started the Breadfarm three years ago in Edison, although he also recognizes the advantage of being in a niche market. Additionally, he hopes his presence will encourage more interest in organics. "I feel like we are putting out a really high quality product and something that is desirable for people—that they want to buy regardless of whether or not it is organic. And so when they are coming in and saying 'Wow, this is really good bread, I want to buy more,' then you can start talking to them about the fact that it is organic, and why it's organic, and what we are trying to achieve by that fact."

THE ISSUES

With its roots in small farms that sold only locally, the organic food industry is beginning to suffer some growing pains as larger companies rush into the market. For some Skagit area businesses, being organic and being local go hand-in-hand.

"The local thing is really big. People are very interested in having their food sourced locally. The impending fossil fuel crisis has people really thinking about our food economy right now and that's a huge concern that I'm hearing in the industry," said Skagit Valley Food Co-op Produce Manager Ben Goe. When buying for the Co-op's certified organic produce department, Goe focuses on organics (98 percent of the produce sold is organic), but buys local as much as possible.

For Mangold of the Breadfarm, it doesn't make sense to have long transportation times for a perishable product, but he also wants to support other local artisan bakeries and tries not to encroach on someone else's market. "We are really conscious of who we are competing with, even in Edison we aren't doing coffee and we aren't doing pastries because we don't want to take any business from Farm to Market Bakery," he said.

How local is local? Right now, the Wechslers feel that they couldn't make it without selling their cheese to the Seattle market. Within a 100-mile radius, it is still what many consider local, but Roger Wechsler dares dream of less. "If we could sell it all in people's walking distance from here that would be even better."

Cascadian Farm started as local farm that founder Gene Kahn nurtured into a big business by contracting with other organic growers and selling products nationally. In 2000, General Mills purchased the business, but the original farm (called Cascadian Home Farm) is managed locally by Jim Meyer and operates as a small farm with its produce sold through the farm stand and the local region.

Roger Wechsler, an early owner of Cascadian Farm, said of the operation, "They've gone toward large scale growers for many years, because it's easier. It's easier when you are on that kind of a scale to work with fewer larger growers." He continued, "A lot of small growers are having a hard time surviving because bigger growers squeeze them out."

As the market changes from small to big and local to national, some small business owners are not only concerned about competing for business, but also of possible changes in the organic standards. Seen as motivated more by profit than by ethics or quality, the fear is that bigger businesses will have the power to erode the organic standards into something that is easier for large scale operations to comply with. The recent issue of inadequate access to pasture by large certified organic dairies (namely, Horizon Organic Dairy and Aurora Organic Dairy) has done little to dispel this fear.

"That's been quite controversial and very disheartening for a lot of people within the organic food industry, that these few dairies have been certified organic even though they provide very limited access to pasture for the animals," said McEvoy.

Is there any benefit to big business entering the organic food industry? "It's better than not," said Scott Mangold. "Buying organic Heinz ketchup is better than buying conventional, for sure, so it's not all bad and it also exposes a lot more consumers to organics, which isn't bad either. So there are definitely benefits to it, but there are also drawbacks."

McEvoy feels more positive about the changes. "If mainstream America is interested in organic food production, then that basically shows great success by the organic food industry," he said.