

FarmLIFE™

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KINGS OF THE HILLS

Farming brutal terrain with amazing tools. p. 20

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■ The Bunns commissioned murals on their farm to show visitors that produce doesn't just come out of a bag; it's sowed, nurtured and harvested by real people. The Bunns' workers served as models for the murals. Visit myFarmLife.com/murals to see them, hear Chris Bunn talk about their history and learn more about U.S. and Canadian immigrant worker programs.

Immigrant farm laborers have been part and parcel of the North American agricultural landscape for more than a century. What few outside ag realize, however, is just how critical their role is in feeding a hungry world.

STORY BY DEBORAH HUSO /// PHOTOS BY JAMIE COLE

The Great GREEN MELTING POT

The Farm is a special place in California's Salinas Valley. Including a 15-acre demonstration plot situated just off busy Highway 68, it's peppered with large murals by artist John Cerney that depict the largely immigrant labor force responsible for making Monterey County "the Salad Bowl of the World." Begun in the 1920s by Chris Bunn's grandfather, The Farm and surrounding farmland benefit from Monterey County's long growing season, which runs March through November and allows the valley's producers to double crop.

"It's an alluvial valley," says Bunn. "It doesn't get really hot or really cold." It's the ideal climate for growing an array of crops, and the Bunn's grow four different varieties of produce over the entirety of their 300-acre farm. At the farmstead, where they maintain a "demonstration farm" for visitors and school groups, they produce 35 different crops, the big ones being corn, tomatoes, pumpkins and strawberries. >>





Fennel (left), cauliflower (below) and celery (right) are three of the crops that give the Salinas area its “Salad Bowl of the World” moniker.



According to the University of California Cooperative Extension, the Salinas Valley/ Monterey County has about 1.4 million acres under cultivation. The valley is known for having the longest and largest strawberry harvest in the world. Eighty percent of the world’s strawberries come from the Salinas Valley.

Monterey County is also an incredibly expensive place to farm, even by California standards. The going rate for ag land in the Salinas Valley is \$55,000 an acre, and rents can run as high as \$3,000 per acre.

The Bunns farm both owned and leased land. “Everything here is farmed patchwork,” says Bunn. “Nobody farms contiguous like in the Midwest.” That’s because land is so hard to come by. In the Salinas Valley, it’s not unusual to see producers cultivating land almost up to the doorstep of their homes.

“If you couldn’t double-crop this ground,” Bunn adds, “it wouldn’t be worth it.” Adding to the value of what’s grown on the land, Bunn and family are organic farmers (certified by California Certified Organic Farmers) and have been for nearly three decades. “It’s not a philosophical choice,” says Bunn. “It’s about economics.”

LABOR IN THE “SALAD BOWL”

Despite a popular misperception, cheap labor is not what drives this region of the country to employ so many immigrants,

documented and undocumented. (Bunn estimates 70% of the Salinas Valley’s annual harvest is collected by undocumented immigrants. Other growers in the valley claim that number is even higher.) What does spur the hiring of immigrant workers is that most longtime residents in the area don’t want to work in the fields.

Bunn says strawberry pickers in the valley, for example, typically earn \$1.20 per case. “A good picker can pick 100 cases a day,” he says. That translates into a wage of \$120 a day during harvest season. It’s “back-breaking work,” Bunn acknowledges, and farmers like him have suggested that’s why native-born citizens aren’t inclined to apply for it.

Local strawberry farmer Kenneth Lewis, president of Gabilan View Farms in Salinas, says whenever he puts out ads for farm labor, he never has a single Caucasian applicant. Most ag workers who are paid by the hour in California receive \$11 to \$12.

According to the U.S. Department of Labor’s National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS), from 2011 and 2012, 48% of farm laborers in the U.S. were undocumented, though that is a difficult percentage to verify. Some sources claim the percentage is as high as 70. Of the 2.5 million farm workers employed in the U.S. (excluding those participating in the H-2A program), 750,000 to 1.2 million are lawful immigrants, and 33% of all farm workers

are U.S. citizens, either born in the United States or naturalized. Seventy-six percent of farm laborers identify as Hispanic.

As for how many illegals The Farm employs, Bunn doesn’t know. “They have to show documentation in order to obtain employment,” he notes. “But we aren’t the USCIS [U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service]. It’s their job to check everybody out.” California producers can get slammed with a \$1,500-per-person fine for knowingly hiring illegals, however, so workers without documentation (even if the latter is sometimes forged) are unlikely to find jobs in Monterey County. At full harvest time, The Farm employs about 50 workers.

NEED FOR IMMIGRANT LABOR

In Canada, immigrant workers make up just under 23% of the country’s farm labor, according to Statistics Canada’s Labour Force Survey 2013. Li Xue, Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada’s chief of agricultural policy analysis, says just over 15% of hired immigrant farm workers are permanent residents, with the remaining 7% temporary workers. Mexicans still make up the vast majority of farm workers in Canada, followed by workers from Jamaica and Guatemala.

Bill Truscott, proprietor of Truscott Farms in Creston, British Columbia, grows tree fruits and vegetables on 35 acres, selling



directly to consumers; though up until six years ago, he grew cherries on 100 acres and shipped them to 38 countries. Of his 17 to 20 employees, only two right now are immigrants, both permanent residents from Poland. And even when he was a wholesale cherry grower, he never took advantage of Canada's Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program (SAWP).

"We have been lucky enough to get a sufficient supply of local workers and French Canadian workers," he explains, though times may be changing. Over the years, Truscott has taken advantage of the government-sponsored Young Workers Program to seasonally hire French Canadian students under age 25 at harvest time. But the stream of labor is slowly being pushed out by the influx of Mexican farm workers in the cherry industry, Truscott says.

The use of immigrant labor definitely has an upside, he adds. "The biggest issue is productivity. Mexican workers will work [extremely hard] and produce, and work 60 to 70 hours per week. They want as much time as they can get in while they're here." According to Truscott, young Canadians have a decidedly different mindset about work.

Xue says she has no numbers on illegal immigrants in Canada employed in agriculture, and says if they even exist, their numbers are small. "Canada's

immigration system is very different from the United States," she notes. Nevertheless, whether documented or not, immigrant farm laborers have become a driving force in many agricultural sectors in the U.S. and Canada. "It's become a critical component of Canadian agriculture," Truscott notes. "What Canadian parent wants his or her child to seek a career in migrant labor? The seasonal workers program fills holes we can't fill otherwise."

For Bunn, immigrant labor is critical, as it is for many producers in California and elsewhere. "Labor is one of the most expensive and important inputs for agriculture [here]," he remarks. "With commodity crops, it takes one person per 1,000 acres; for us, it's one to two people per 10 acres." Without an immigrant labor force, producers like Bunn would never have made the Salinas Valley America's "Salad Bowl." **FL**

NIMBLE WORKHORSES

CHRIS BUNN EXTENSIVELY USES THREE CHALLENGER® TRACTORS

on his farm, all purchased in 2009. "All of our Challengers have excellent power, fuel efficiency and very friendly user applications," he remarks. "Soil compaction in our Blanco adobe soil conditions is extremely important, and the Challengers all float across our fields with great comfort and speed like ships on the sea!"

Bunn uses his Challenger MT765B for disking and light groundwork. The 320-HP tractor offers a smooth field ride and reliable utility. And wide belts and tread spacing reduce berming created by many other track tractors.

He uses his two Challenger MT835Cs for heavy groundwork, like ripping and subsoiling. The two 410-HP tractors feature speed-sensitive differential steering, 30-inch tracks with and without ballast, 16 forward and four reverse gears, and an independent PTO, making for a powerful, yet nimble workhorse. On average, says Bunn, the MT835C's fuel efficiency is 23 gallons per hour when running at full horsepower. The tractors also feature adjustable, vibration-reduction seats for comfort. "They're great workhorses," he says of his Challengers.

Bunn's dealer is Quinn Company in Salinas. "We've been with Quinn for 70 years," Bunn says of his family's relationship over the past three generations. "They're great, fine people with good machinery. The people who support your equipment are so important."