

QUALITY KEEPS CUSTOMERS COMING BACK TO THIS FARM

by Eric L. Gibson

"The housewife is a busy lady, and we like to have our products ready-to-use."

—Nita Gizdich
Owner Gizdich Ranch

As the visitor turns off Peckham Road, about five miles outside of Watsonville, California and into the parking lot of the Gizdich Ranch, he or she is apt to exclaim: "Oh, I didn't know it was like this!" Nita Gizdich attributes the common reaction to what she calls the "covered wagon" effect: all the buildings—apple-juicing barn, produce sales room, pie-shop, antique store and gift shop—are barn red, and they circle around the parking lot area like covered wagons.

Situated in the "core" of Watsonville's apple country, the 85-acre Gizdich Ranch is about as American as apple pies, apple juice, apples and pick-yourself berries. While none of these activities is unique to the Gizdiches, this third-generation farming clan has polished their operation to near-perfection. "On a farm, you learn to support yourself and work hard," says Nita. "Everyone has chores, even young children." Nita speaks from experience, as she was born and raised on a Watsonville farm. Nita's hus-

band, Vincent Gizdich, Jr., is the official Apple Pie Taster, and along with their two grown sons, Vince and Mitch, grows the crops, maintains the shipshape buildings and grounds, and designs and builds much of the farm machinery.

Sell Farm Direct

The Gizdiches sell directly from their farm as much as possible. Inside the barns, jams, berries, apple juice and apples wait to be consumed by eager customers, or taken home. Customers can pick the berries themselves from May through June, or the apples from September through October. Wedges of warm apple, raspberry, strawberry or olallieberry pie a la mode are a fitting end to a visit, and you can ask them to package up whole pies as a take-home treat.

"Each of our activities could stand on its own," claims Nita, and as we walk into the sales room from the gift shop, she points to the collection—39 in all—of antique apple peelers that hang from the ceiling.



The current new model is one of the bestselling items in the store. "Nobody likes to peel a whole box of apples for pies," explains Nita—yet it does basically the same operations as did the 1889 model: peel, slice and core.

As we walk into the antique shop, Nita comments: "This is what I do in my spare time. I enjoy collecting, and just came from a Goodwill store. A lot of people today are into collecting," she continues. "Items that you sell don't necessarily have

to be old, just collectible." Some of the items in the antique shop, such as cast-iron stoves, pots and pans or dishes, may be only a generation-old, causing such visitor-reactions as: "Oh! I just threw something like that away, now see how much she's getting for it!"

When the roadside market closes down, the Gizdiches use up the apples in making cider. They run a weekly route for their cider, which includes 120 outlets from deli's to bakeries, restaurants and groceries, in an 80 mile radius. Referring to the prominent signs on their delivery truck, Nita says: "People ask us; 'Do you have a fleet of trucks? I saw your truck yesterday in Gilroy, and the day before in Santa Cruz!' They don't realize (our one truck) gets around."

Experience has made Nita Gizdich an ardent advocate of direct-marketing. "I was raised to think you had to sell through a broker," she says. "Every day, my dad would call our broker, and he'd say I sold your corn for \$1.00 a box, your melons for \$2.00, and your tomatoes for \$1.50 a box. Some of those prices were so low, he might as well have junked the produce!"

Personal Public Relations

Over the years, Nita has led many tours of the ranch to garden enthusiasts, church groups, senior citizens, and school children. She notes that many shoppers pluck produce from plastic grocery bins without knowing how it was grown or delivered to market. As many as five classes of school children may come by in a day, each paying 50 cents for the tour, an apple and a glass of juice. This is not a lot of cash income for the farm, but each of the children goes home with a flyer and warm memories, and many return with their moms and families.

The Gizdiches have enjoyed moderate returns from small display and classified ads placed in local newspapers, all within



Nita Gizdich of Watsonville, Calif., says hard work is the backbone to a successful operation. Here, Nita examines the pumpkin display at the Gizdich Ranch.

the 40-60 mile radius from which most of the customers come. Nita feels small display ads placed in the food section are her most cost-effective advertising. The only people who see the classified ads, she explains, are the ones looking for a specific product. But wouldn't that attract the canners and freezers, the customers who might want produce in a larger volume? "Not so many people are canning nowadays," explains Nita. "The housewife is a busy lady, and we like to have our products ready-to-use."

The fun promotion, however, is the twice-annual Apple Butter Festival, when three Mennonite families come out to the ranch to cook up an enormous batch of apple butter in a thirty-gallon copper kettle. The Mennonites work all day, and take some

of the jars back home with them. But mostly they put on demonstrations, to show people Mennonite customs. The Mennonites make the event special including visitors in the apple peeling, butter stirring and general bantering. "People just love them," says Nita.

The weekend event usually draws more than a thousand people, who are treated also to country crafts, the balloon man, who gives the kids balloons that, when blown up, look like various kinds of animals, or the collection of early-day gas engines, hooked up to run various implements, such as an old washing machine, or a machine to grind corn, saw wood, mill flour, sharpen pencils or pump water. "People are fascinated by the old farm operations," says Nita.

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