

INTRODUCTION

The Regional History Project conducted three interviews with Jack L. Debenedetti, Jr., the late vegetable grower/shipper in May, 1977, as part of its agricultural oral history series. This volume, *Jack L. Debenedetti, Jr., Brussels Sprouts and Artichoke Growing on the North Coast*, is published posthumously. Debenedetti died June 12, 1992.

These interviews are a significant contribution to the history of local agriculture because they include so much detailed information from a grower's point of view on two specialty crops predominant in Santa Cruz due to our unique soil and weather conditions. Also important in Debenedetti's recollections are the role of Italian-Americans in the development of these crops and his perspective on the grower/shipper as a businessman, rather than as a working-in-the-field farmer.

Debenedetti was born in 1908 in San Mateo, California, to a well-established Italian-American family, the son of John L. and Rose F. (Cuneo) Debenedetti. He attended school in San Mateo, graduated from UC Berkeley in 1932, and attended a year of law school at Stanford University. He married Jane Hanson in 1933 and joined his father as a partner in the J. L. Debenedetti Company, growers and shippers of vegetables under the brand name "Fog Kist." From the

1930s on, the Debenedetti Company leased and owned ranches totaling about a thousand acres in coastal San Mateo County and Santa Cruz County, additional acreages in other areas in the state, and from their packing houses shipped vegetables all over the country.

His paternal grandparents, Joseph Debenedetti and Teresa (Scarpa) Debenedetti, settled in Half Moon Bay in the late 1870s. Joseph Debenedetti had grocery and mercantile stores in this area and extensive coastal land holdings as well. The interviewee's father, John Debenedetti, was born in Half Moon Bay in 1880, and in the early 1920s gave up his business interests in banking and merchandising to devote himself exclusively to the development of the artichoke industry. He became known as the "Artichoke King," established the Half Moon Bay Artichoke Growers Association, and is credited with being the first to introduce the artichoke to East Coast markets.

Jack Debenedetti, Jr., opens his narration with his family's history and land holdings in Half Moon Bay and Pescadero from his grandfather's day in the 1880s until his own retirement in the late 1970s. He discusses how the company expanded from the depression years on, specializing in artichokes and Brussels sprouts on their coastal lands, and growing asparagus, peas, rhubarb, broccoli, and cauliflower in other areas, so that they were harvesting crops throughout the year. They established packing houses in San Mateo, Hayward, Santa Cruz, and Stockton, and financed growers in Kent, Washington, Hollister, and Santa Maria.

Debenedetti provides a detailed overview of coastal agriculture during a half century, describing the varieties of crops grown, characteristics of coastal soils, weather conditions, pest control, capital costs, field labor and the Bracero Program, and the vicissitudes of growing. He gives the history of the Santa Cruz Artichoke and Sprouts Growers Association, of which he was president, and detailed explanations of all aspects of growing artichokes and Brussels sprouts.

In his discussion of Brussels sprouts, he explains how the small cabbage-like vegetable came to be grown here. Unlike warm weather crops, sprouts thrive in

the foggy, cool, windy weather on the central California coast. The plant is also unusual since it has only a single stem, the main stalk, around which the sprouts grow from the bottom at ground level to the top, around 24 inches tall. Sprouts are grown in only a few other areas in this country—in New York state and on the coast in New England. Other sprouts-growing regions include England, Belgium and Holland, where a variety of hybrids have been developed.

Debenedetti discusses the adoption of the Jade variety of Brussel sprouts by most local growers and although in his opinion it was not as flavorful a sprout, and yielded less sprouts per acre (three to five tons per acre as compared to other varieties yielding six to seven tons per acre), it commanded a very good price, was very hardy, and enabled growers to have a single harvest per year. Brussels sprout cultivation begins annually in February, when the seeds are planted in open hotbeds and transplanted to the field in May and every three weeks until late summer. Harvesting takes place at intervals until around January. Debenedetti discusses irrigation, fertilizing practices, plant diseases and insects specific to sprouts, the application of pesticides and inspection and regulation by the local agricultural commissioner. He also describes harvesting, mechanization, packing and shipping, marketing, local acreages, and the introduction of the Brussels Sprouts Marketing Act.

Debenedetti discusses the history of artichoke cultivation in this area, crop propagation, harvesting practices, production costs, packing and shipping, the work of field labor, and the 1936 strike in Pescadero. His narration also includes chapters on the fate of coastal agricultural land, the decline in family farms, and his thoughts on the changes in local agriculture during his years as a shipper/grower.

Twenty years elapsed between Debenedetti's narration and the publication of this volume, and the Project unfortunately did not have the opportunity to have his own editing or comments included in the transcript. The tape-recordings were transcribed verbatim, the transcript edited for clarity and continuity, and the manuscript organized into chapters.

Copies of this manuscript are on deposit in the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; and in Special Collections, McHenry Library, University of California, Santa Cruz. The Project is supported administratively by Alan Ritch, head, Collection Planning, and University Librarian, Allan J. Dyson.

Randall Jarrell

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