

## A BIT OF A SCARE

Perhaps a few of you have heard of the intensity of the California wildfires this summer. The first major one of the summer came within a mile of our own farm. The County Fire began June 30 by an improperly installed electrical livestock fence. When we learned of the fire (located 11 miles and a 25-minute drive away, in the mountains near Guinda in the Capay Valley), we never dreamed it would grow to approach our own farm in Lamb Valley. Yet within hours the smoke cloud was towering nearer and soon we could see the flames. They rose high and wild in the night, waving to over 100 feet tall. We could judge their height and feel their heat from the house, still several miles away. We received an advisory evacuation notice that night. We packed up the cars with our valuables and such but stayed put, taking turns checking on the fire during the early morning hours. The next day we were placed under mandatory evacuation orders, and we again remained since we were in a position of easy departure and we could view the fire's progress from the house. We remained at the farm under evacuation orders for four days and nights. We continued farming, as did many neighbors, some of whom lived at the foot of the mountains burning nearby. The valley was oddly peaceful and unmoved in some ways, though only a short distance away the mountain ridges were smoking and flickering with flames. By the early morning hours of July 2, the fire had crossed the highest ridge of the mountains west of us and by the end of that day had burned in a remarkably slow, quiet burn to the bottom of the range. Neighbors' homes were rather easily saved, due to a miraculous lack of wind and of course the effort of the firefighters, and the fire was easily contained in its entrance to Lamb Valley. We were entertained one day by the unbelievable daring of the air tankers, dumping retardant at the base of the hills to stop the fire. The fire was fully contained by the 13th of July, and by its end had burned over 90,000 acres and 20 structures (few, if any, were homes) At its height it caused evacuations in six small towns and burned 1,000 acres per hour. But we are safe, most farmers' land is safe, and the almond crop has not suffered a bit of harm from the smoke. Due to the direction of the breeze, smoke was minimal. We are thankful for the destruction we were spared.

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## TOO CRUNCHY OR JUST RIGHT?

Periodically we hear from either a customer who complains that our almonds are too hard or a customer who loves how crunchy (hard) they are. Here is a little information about that:

Moisture level is probably the most important food safety and flavor aspect to consider in almonds. Too high moisture level can lead to a number of serious quality and food safety issues, from simply a bad, off-taste or poor flavor to mold or aflatoxin (fungus). This quality and safety is sacrificed when almonds are stored with high moisture content (above 6-9 %). We allow our almonds to dry in the open air and sun as much as possible to achieve the lowest moisture level and thus provide the best conditions for storage, therefore optimizing flavor and food safety considerations. The Fritz variety is harvested last (in cooler September) and tends to have a slightly higher moisture level but still well below quality and food safety targets.

So for those who love crunchy nuts—enjoy as is! For those who prefer a softer nut, here's an easy fix—just introduce moisture by soaking the almonds, cover them with a wet towel, or keep them in a humid environment (refrigerator exposed to refrigerator air—not in closed bag or jar). We suggest you do this for only the amount of nuts you will eat within 24-48 hours or flavor and quality may suffer.

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Just before hull-split, the Monterey variety adopts hues of rainbow; the four Paddock children shortly after moving to Esparto; the growing family picking up the almond trees ready to plant in 2009

## MEET THE FARM

We hope you have enjoyed the past series of articles titled “A Day in the Life of a Farmer,” where we gave you a glimpse into our daily lives farming here at Capay Hills Orchard. For the next few newsletters we plan on including a new series. This next series will introduce the farm and the family members that operate it in more depth to you. We will begin this series here with an article on how Capay Hills Orchard came into being.

In the year 2000, the Paddock family (the four children at the time ages 2, 4, 6, and 8) moved from their home in the city of Vacaville to the 15-acre piece of abandoned almond orchard outside of the farming community of Esparto, in Lamb Valley, which is just on the edge of the Capay Valley and an hour west of Sacramento. There was hardly anything on the land except for a well installed in the 1970s and never really used and the neighbor’s cow patties dotting the earth. In the back, a small creek held the neighborhood’s junk of the past few decades. We began life on the land quite simply, living for almost a year in an old mobile home while the house was built. There were few toys, all the children were in one bedroom, and life was cramped, but it was simple and full of memories. After the house was built, the years passed with continual work on the land, landscaping a new portion of the yard every year by ourselves, removing the junk from the creek and planting native trees and shrubs alongside it, and maintaining the old orchard on the land. Shortly, we started harvesting the dry-farmed, abandoned almond trees on the land by ourselves and by hand. Two more children (and orchard workhands) joined the family in 2002 and 2005. At this time we called the place Paddock Orchards. In 2008 a quietly-held dream of Brian’s began to reach fruition. A government-grant was made available to help us plant a new orchard if we used drip irrigation (vs. the more wasteful sprinkler systems commonly in use at that time) and planted a hedgerow of native plants in the orchard. That fall (the kids now ages 3, 6, 10, 12, 14, and 16) we tore out the majority of the original 1916 almond orchard, prepared the land, and in the springs of 2009 and 2010 we planted the new orchard with the help of neighbors, friends, and extended family. The next few years were full of caring for the young trees.

Every year we are learning and trying new ways to best care for our orchard. As stewards of the beautiful piece of land given to us, we work hard to take care of it, and we have always done almost all of the work ourselves. It was and is back-breaking and sometimes quite stressful work, but it has always been rewarding in an inexplicable way. The family now numbers nine: Brian and Gretchen (married since 1986), Kyle and his wife Bailey (both aged 26), Nicholas (24), Alicia (22), Jessica (20), Joshua (16), and Rebecca (almost 13).

We became certified organic in 2007 and have been selling truly raw, organic almonds directly to the consumer as Capay Hills Orchard ever since our first harvest in 2011. In all honesty, it would not be without the generous and honest support of our customers that Capay Hills Orchard is what it is today—a small, family owned-and-operated organic farm, proud to offer you truly raw, organic almonds farmed in the most sustainable manner possible.

