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Farm Forum explores Sonoma's food/farming future

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Clark Wolf emceed the lively Farm Forum and kept it moving. Photo: Jeff Kan Lee/PD

By SUZIE RODRIGUEZ / Sonoma Valley Correspondent

Food and farming are alive and well in Sonoma County if the third in a series of Farm Forums is any gauge.

Co-sponsored by the City of Sonoma and the girl + the fig family of restaurants, the

Tuesday event was hosted by food/restaurant consultant Clark Wolf and radio personality Marcy Smothers. The venue: the outdoor patio of Sonoma's Estate Restaurant.

Not surprisingly, local politicians turned out for this timely topic. On hand were Efred Carillio, president of the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors; Jennifer Hainstock, District Director to Supervisor Valerie Brown; and Sonoma Mayor Laurie Gallian. Sonoma Land Trust Executive Director Ralph Benson was also in the audience.

The lineup of more than a dozen speakers covered various aspects of the local food world, and included a chef, cheese maker, egg farmer, writer, and a few entrepreneurs. Speakers had only three minutes to explain what they do and how it affects the greater community.

Sonoma County's consulting Agricultural Commissioner, Dave Whitmer, noted that three vital ingredients are needed for a local food community to thrive. "You need the proper climate, soil, and people," he said. "With that combination you can do anything—and Sonoma County is one of the few places on earth where you find all three. You have a treasure in your midst."

Whitmer discussed the [Sonoma County Food System Alliance](#), which works to increase access to healthy food for county residents. The Alliance has identified eight major goals: food security, food and agricultural literacy, demand for locally produced and grown food, local production, local distribution and processing, economic viability, opportunities for food system and farm workers, and environmental regeneration.

Kristee Rosendahl talked about the company she founded, [smartgardener.com](#), "a free online service that helps people plan and grow their own organic food." Gardeners select the plants they want to grow and enter information such as how many people the food will support or the garden's size and sun orientation. They end up with a garden plan designed just for them, a weekly To Do email, and more.

Dr. Rachel Friedman offered up two startling facts: "Our nation spends an average of \$1,000/person on diet-related diseases," she said, "but only \$1/person on preventing those diseases." She added that 60-80% of premature deaths could be prevented with proper diet and exercise.

Friedman works with **SAVOR (Sonoma County Alliance for a Vegetable Outreach Program)** to increase consumption of local, healthy food, particularly by low-income populations. One success has been to implement the use of EBT/food stamps in Farmers' Markets. Another program, VeggieRx, gives "prescriptions" to low-income pregnant women at risk for gestational diabetes; they can be redeemed at farmers' markets for produce.

Peggy Furth, co-founder of [WholeVine](#), discussed full-cycle sustainability in the wine business. Her company's goods are made with Sonoma County vineyard byproducts like grape seeds and skins; until now, they had no use and were thrown away. Among WholeVine's products are gluten-free cookies developed from grape seed flour; eight varieties of grape seed oils; flours made from seeds and skins; and food colorings.

Sheana Davis of [Epicurean Connection](#) and the Sonoma Cheese Conference has a long history of supporting local producers and entrepreneurs (she's helped launch 19 cheese companies, including superstars Cowgirl Creamery and Bellwether Farms). "I'm predicting a big future for Sonoma's artisan products," she said, "because our community has created the foundation." In 2010, Davis's own Delice de la Vallee cheese was voted the No. 1 cheese in its category by the American Cheese Society.

Erin Sheffield of [Gold Ridge](#), Luther Burbank's 1885 Experiment Farm in Petaluma, discussed a few of the many fruits and vegetables Burbank introduced in his lifetime, including the Santa Rosa plum—still the most popular plum in markets and home gardens. On October 8-9, Gold Ridge will hold an open house from 10 a.m.-4 p.m. with music, docent tours, and more.

Food writer Kathleen Hill talked about Sonoma Valley's vibrant **school garden program**, which owes much of its success to her efforts. She announced that, earlier that day, plans were made to bring a portable kitchen to the schools "to teach kids how to cook what they're growing." She urged chefs, kitchen workers, and others to help propel this project forward by volunteering time.

Fourth-generation egg producer Arnie Riebli of **Petaluma's Sunrise Farms** noted that today "we get more eggs from half the chickens than in 1950. Back then chicks laid 120 a year, and now they lay 285 a year—with 65% less feed. We do that by embracing genetics, just like Luther Burbank." Riebli decided 25 years ago that he didn't want to use antibiotics—and he hasn't.

Riebli is also working with the Sonoma County Water Agency's Farms-to-Fuel program to recycle chicken poop and create clean electricity. Earlier this year he was honored with the Petaluma Area Chamber of Commerce Excellence in Agriculture Award.

Other speakers included Yannick Phillips of [Sonoma Valley Grange](#); Chris Silva, CEO of St. Francis Winery; KSRO radio host Steve Garner for "Garden Talk" and "The Good Food Hour;" and John Toulze, Executive Chef and Managing Partner of the girl + fig restaurants.

After the formal program, audience and speakers alike undertook an intense but happy inspection of local foods, sampling Sonoma wines and devouring fabulous little bites prepared in Estate Restaurant's kitchen.

Proceeds from the event will benefit three Luther Burbank projects: the [Fruit Tree Restoration Project](#) at Santa Rosa's Luther Burbank Home & Gardens; the [School Education Program at Gold Ridge Experiment Farm](#); and the Luther Burbank School Orchard Project.

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