

Meeting the producer on the good earth of

Text and photos by MEGAN LEE

Put on your overalls and come visit the Alvarez Farm in Mabton, Washington. The Alvarez family's organic-farm transcends time and space (It could be anyplace in the centuries since organized agriculture began).

There is a little of everything on the Alvarez

farm, variety is the specialit. You never know what is around each corner.

Spring has turned to summer and the farm is fecund. The sandy fields are bright green, laden with basil, lettuce, asparagus, squashes, peas, onions, garlic, peanuts, egg plant, exotic zucchinis and – their speciality – tomatoes and *all the peppers*.

"I take care of the farm and the workers," said patron Larry "Hilario" Alvarez, peering out playfully from under his woven, wide-brimmed hat and giving his signature wink. "And the boys take care of the selling. Here on the farm there is so much to do, we have so many kinds of everything, so much variety, I have about 85 kinds of peppers growing, right now and more than 20 varieties of tomatoes. Each year we have more. Maybe next year we will have 100 kinds of peppers. Our peppers are wonderful."

Quick hands weave chosen peppers together into wreaths and hanging clusters – Alvarez Farm's recognizable, and frequently photographed, "Rings & Strings." Alvarez jokingly says the idea arose from people buying just two or three peppers, now they buy bouquets. These eye-catching clusters of multi-colored peppers, and sometimes garlic and other accouterments, are functional arrangements, to be used for cooking or dry as decoration. Even untreated they last several years.

It is a Market mystery who was the first to introduce "Rings & Strings" here, but they are definitely popular.

Alvarez employed a variety of clever sales techniques over the years. He recalls, in Tacoma, betting customers that they couldn't eat one of his chili-peppers. They would pompously take his bet, and confidently pop the peppers. Next thing they would be running to the toilet. Alvarez said very few went double or nothing.

Farming itself is a lifetime endeavor. "It is more than just throwing seeds around." Farming is careful planning: choosing what and when to

grow what where, rotating to keep the soil vital and, with the current drought, irrigation is a huge micro-management issue.

He told the story of a guy he knew who wanted to get into farming. Alvarez gave the rookie all the advice he could, later the man came back, distraught. He'd done everything Alvarez said, then doused his crops in Round-Up – an herbicide – instead of weeding, to save time. Alvarez just shook his head.

Mindfully glancing around the farm's neatly manicured rows – each long line of green seedlings represents one of Alvarez's many offerings – he surveys and admires his extensive fields.

"We had 50 acres, then added 25 more last year, but now, that's enough. I think. We'll see," he pragmatically adds. "We'll see."

Everyone on the Alvarez farm says 'we'. It is a mantra. They are one big family running their own 'small' farm together. Each generation is represented. Each doing its part, performing its duty and taking quick breaks when the heat gets to be too much. Everyone busily bustles about, in seeming harmony, frequently joking. There is never a dull moment on the farm, and the family brings that feeling to market.

In 1976, Alvarez moved his family from California to the fertile and picturesque Lower Yakima River Valley with Mt. Adams, Mt. St. Helens and Mt. Hood visible.

Eddie, who helps oversee the farm, is one of Larry and Marie Alvarez's nine children. He and Rosa have a few of their own (little Saul runs the farm in his own way). Besides Eddie Alvarez, several Alverezes live and work on the farm, and sell in the various markets.

Since the summer of 1982, Alvarez Farm has been selling farm-fresh produce in the Pike Place Market. Over the years Alvarez Farm worked to earn organic certification and now is one of the two biggest organic farms in Eastern Washington.



Larry Alvarez on the farm with his grandson Saul.

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