

Star Route Farms sold to University of San Francisco

By Tara Duggan | August 8, 2017 | Updated: August 8, 2017 3:56pm

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Star Route Farms in Bolinas, a pioneering organic farm that has been a favorite of Alice Waters and other Bay Area chefs for decades, has found an unexpected buyer.

The University of San Francisco has purchased the farm, the oldest continually operating certified organic farm in California, for \$10.4 million. The property has been on the market since 2013.

Warren Weber, 76, who founded the farm in 1974, said the university is committed to continuing to operate the business as usual. Weber will stay on for a time as a consultant.

The 100-acre farm supplies 'Little Gem' lettuces, fava beans and heirloom vegetables with names like 'Fairy Tale' eggplants to Bay Area farmers' markets and restaurants. It will continue, under the same name, serving its restaurant and farmers' market customers, said Donald E. Heller, USF provost and vice president of academic affairs.

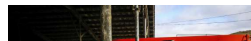
"First and foremost we're committed to continuing to operate it as a working farm," said Heller. Farm manager Annabelle Lenderink and other workers will remain on staff.

The university does not have a traditional

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Waters. “That was one of the first gardens that we bought food from for Chez Panisse. It’s really symbolic to me. But it’s way more than that. It’s the idea that edible education is valuable. That students could really learn by doing and actually being engaged with the work of a running farm.”



Photo: LACY ATKINS, SFC

Warren Weber, known as the grandfather of organic, with delicata squash at his farm in Bolinas.

According to Heller, the purchase is an opportunity to provide educational and research

“Our balance sheet is in very good shape. It’s got very low debt,” he said. “This is a relatively small item for us.”

In March, the university’s board approved an operating budget of around \$457 million for the 2017-18 academic year, and its endowment is about \$300 million. Undergraduate tuition and fees are \$45,760.

The purchase includes the 100 acres of property, 40 of which are farmed, as well as agriculture equipment and buildings.

Investment in a farm by a private and urban liberal arts college shows how much interest there is in learning about agriculture, and not just at land-grant universities, said Gail Feenstra, deputy director of the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program at UC Division of Agriculture and National Resources.

“If there’s an actual farm on-site, there’s a lot more opportunity for practical learning as opposed to from a book. Having access to a working farm would just be an invaluable experience,” said Feenstra. “It’s amazing how many young people coming out of universities are interested in going into farming right now — and they don’t have experience because their parents didn’t farm.”

Weber founded Star Route Farms on 5 acres in Bolinas, “using horse-drawn sulky plows and cultivators and a lot of long-haired ambition,” as the **official history** goes. It was at the beginning of the modern organic movement, right after the founding of the California Certified Organic Farmers in 1973, an organization for which Weber has served as president.

Star Route Farms in Bolinas, a pioneering organic farm that has been a favorite of Alice Waters and other Bay Area chefs for decades, has been sold to an unexpected buyer: the University of San Francisco.

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Though many predicted that Weber's unorthodox methods would fail, he went on to supply vegetables to some of the region's best restaurants, such as Chez Panisse and Zuni Cafe, while operating stands at the Marin Civic Center and Ferry Plaza farmers' markets. Weber's renown for sustainable farming spread so far that the eco-conscious Prince Charles and his wife, Camilla, visited Star Route Farms during a 2005 tour of Marin County.

In 2013, Weber put the farm on the market for a reported \$12.5 million. He continues to live on the farm with his wife, Amy Nathan, but they plan to move to Kentfield because their home was sold in the deal.

Weber said that he and his wife are pleased with the sale.

"I think they're going to be good stewards, and I think they're going to bring some new energy to the farm and educating around agricultural issues and food issues," said Weber. "It'll continue to be run as it has been run, and I'm going to be consulting with them over the next couple of years. We're going to make sure that that happens."

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