



MARK PASTERNAK

of Devil's Gulch Ranch, Nicasio

BY LESLIE HARLIB

When he was only two years old, Mark Pasternak knew he would be a farmer. It's not the usual dream for a Jewish man born and raised in Los Angeles, but he says his earliest memory is of sitting on the back of a rental pony, its coarse mane clutched in his tiny hand, saying "Yes, this is where I want to be."

Now in his 50s, Pasternak has been a farmer since 1971. He and his wife and business partner, Myriam Kaplan-Pasternak, a large animal veterinarian, are nationally known for Devil's Gulch Ranch, their 65-acre diversified family farm in Nicasio, California. The Pasternaks specialize in rabbits, pigs and sheep. They also raise champion quarter horses, chickens and quail, and cultivate eighteen acres of wine grapes and vegetables. They also open their ranch to hundreds of children during winter school breaks and throughout each

summer for Summer Farm Camp, which has been operating since 2004 and has flowered in the last two years. The Pasternaks also volunteer in Haiti, one of the world's most impoverished countries, lending their expertise to farming projects and working with exchange students.

"My classic belief is it's way better to be lucky than smart," says Pasternak, a lean, bearded man with intense eyes shaded by his signature straw cowboy hat. "Every morning I get up and say, I cannot believe it. I feel extraordinarily lucky."

The couple has developed a caring partnership with their land, thinking of it as a stewardship as much as a business. They harness the power of the wind from their own windmill. They irrigate with water from their large pond and grow organically and sustainably as much as possible.

Devil's Gulch Ranch is tucked away in the bottom of a wooded valley, off an old route linking the town of Nicasio with Paper Mill Creek, once West Marin's main water source. The ranch got its name from the hills looming over the gulch which were said by the local wags to be so treacherous to traverse that the devil must have carved them. The farmhouse, which Pasternak built beginning in 1971 "with some of my blueprints, just my own drawings on paper," is covered with thick wisteria vines and an explosion of climbing roses. The air is scented with flowers and the "green" aroma of water from the pond (it's also a swimming hole) a few yards away. The whole operation, down to the poultry coop, roofed horse-training arena and vast barn where more than 1,700 rabbits live their short lives in roomy cages, is as clean and earthy-looking as a farm in a Disney flick.

"There's been a lot of evolution for us," says Pasternak. "We were always interested in healthfully raised meat, such as our pigs and, earlier, beef. As consumer interest flared up into buying and eating higher-quality food, we've segued into other areas."

"You're always trying to find new ways to make money with what you're doing when you're in farming," Myriam adds. "It's about surviving as mindfully as you can."

What first put Devil's Gulch on the culinary map was rabbit. The couple first began raising them when Myriam's mother Raymonde, born in France and now living in the Bay Area, bemoaned the unavailability of rabbit. Fifteen years ago, Raymonde gave a dinner party and served Devil's Gulch Ranch-grown rabbit. One of her guests was a French-born and trained chef living in San Francisco. "He couldn't believe it," Pasternak recalls. "He phoned us and started buying from us. Then others heard." Devil's Gulch Ranch soon had orders for rabbit from restaurants such as Manka's in Inverness, Chez Panisse in Berkeley, The French Laundry in Yountville, and Spago in Los Angeles. Within five years, Devil's Gulch rabbit had earned a national reputation.

Demand soon grew for the Pasternak's sustainably raised pork and sheep, as well. At a promotion called "Meats of Marin" held one night in April at Picco restaurant in Larkspur, chef/partner Bruce Hill served Devil's Gulch rabbit and pork on a special menu. Hill says at least 50 percent of the packed house of customers that night ordered Pasternak's offerings.

"His meats just have soul," Hill says. "The pork tastes like an animal that had a good life. And the rabbit, it's one of those indescribable flavors. We just know these animals have been raised correctly."

For the Pasternaks, it's about a practical understanding of stewarding the land. They get the message out through their website, www.devilsgulchranch.com, their stand at the Sunday Marin Civic Center Farmers' Market, and through educating children who attend their camps about the value of family farms.

As Mark puts it, "All creatures, plants, (and) Mother Earth should be given the respect they're due. I respect animals for companionship and for meat and for fiber. This is a way of life."

Leslie Harlib has been a food writer and lifestyle journalist since 1976, and was food writer/restaurant columnist for the Marin Independent Journal for 14 years.





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