

# Grower Profile



## Avocados Take Center Stage at Biggest Little Farm

By Tim Linden

**T**he Biggest Little Farm is a documentary released in 2018 of one couple's journey from Santa Monica city life to country farming in Moorpark, only 30 miles away but a world apart. The movie was very well received at some of the most prestigious film festivals in the United States, including Sundance and Telluride, and was an award winner at both the Boulder and the Hamptons film festival.

The film told a visually appealing and compelling story of Molly and John Chester and their incessantly barking dog who inspired the couple to chase their dream and give up urban living for a seemingly simpler life. Molly was a private chef and John was a filmmaker prior to their switch. A decade later, the reality is that it was harder and more rewarding than they imagined. "I am living the life I love," Molly told *From the Grove* in mid-August. "It is my absolutely wildest dream come true."

But she said the movie, which depicts lots of hardships along the way including the threatening Thomas Fire in 2017, did not exaggerate the challenges. "It was only the tip of the iceberg."

The "Biggest Little Farm" in real life is Apricot Lane Farms, which covers more than 200 acres northwest of Moorpark. It is a commercial endeavor marketing most of its production, including its avocados, direct to consumers through farmers' markets. The farm is treated as its own micro-ecosystem combining many different fruit crops, livestock, wildlife and

plants to mimic the earth's natural ecosystem and create a soil that is rich in micronutrients to produce the flavorful food that is at the core of the farm's mission.

Molly grew up in suburbia but recalls loving the land in the few snapshots she remembers: her family's overgrown strawberry patch and an aunt's farm in Pennsylvania. But after meeting and marrying John, she was introduced to a fuller outdoor life including camping and a robust backyard garden. The film relates how their rescue dog, Todd, annoyed the neighbors and sent the Chesters on their journey to find their own utopia. They planned their escape for a couple of years, talked about their idea for an integrated farm with friends, and eventually attracted investors. About a decade ago they bought a 140-acre ranch, with some avocados and citrus as well as undeveloped land. They spent several years – well-documented in the film – developing the land, both in concert with nature and battling challenges. They have created an organic oasis with a biodynamics certification as well as a new certificate for their regenerative ag practices. Along the way, they have increased their holdings by purchasing two more adjacent properties.

Today, Apricot Lane Farms is home to scores of stone fruit, citrus and avocado trees, as well as a two-acre market garden, giving the farm year-round production for its regular jaunts to the farmers' markets that it frequents – currently four. At those markets, it sells meat raised on the farm as well as the fruit and its somewhat famous pastured eggs. To this day, the

eggs are one of the main items driving sales. The film documents how those pastured eggs became the farm's first success story and are still its signature crop. In fact, in Apricot Lane Farms' busy spring/summer season, it allows customers to buy a pre-made box of products for pickup at the farmers' markets with the promise that a pre-order guarantees them a carton of eggs. "Otherwise, they have to get there the first thing in the morning to make sure we don't sell out," said Molly.

She said the farm's avocados are second only to eggs as a customer attractant. And they also have started producing avocado oil to sell at those same farmers' markets. Molly said the key to their direct-to-consumer avocado sales is the array of varieties they offer. When they bought their initial ranch, it included several blocks of citrus and some seven-year-old avocado trees, mostly Hass. Since then, Apricot Lane Farms has added about 60 more acres of land and planted many different fruit trees, including more than a dozen varieties of avocados. Molly said Nabal is her favorite. "It's a great variety," she said. "I was told it is the variety that is the avocado grower's avocado."

She agrees stating that it has a unique flavor that makes the perfect avocado ice cream. While Hass is still the variety with the most volume, the farm also produces Fuerte, Hellen, Queen, Puebla, Bacon, Zutanos, Lamb Hass, Reed, Gwen, Pinkerton and Gem to name a few. The Gems, she said, have not performed up to expectations but she believes it is because of where they were planted. She plans to try some Gem trees in another location soon. On the other hand, Molly has been very happy with the performance of the Gwen and they also will be planting more of those soon.

"Our biggest issue with the avocado trees has been root rot,



*Yvette Roman Photography.*

which we are trying to deal with," she said.

Apricot Lane Farms' orchard foreman Miguel Rodriguez has been in charge of the care and growth of the avocados for the last seven years, and he collaborates with Molly Chester on strategy, vision and fertility of the orchard, as well as on all the inevitable problem-solving involved with a complex ecosystem-based farm. As mentioned, the farm has a very diverse list of products with year-round production of both



*Photo courtesy of Apricot Lane Farms.*



*Yvette Roman Photography.*

fruit and livestock. As such, Molly wears many hats. As far as the avocado trees go, she calls them “somewhat low maintenance” compared to many of the other products the farm produces. The avocado groves are 100 percent organic with the farm using a number of beneficials and a “compost tea” to aid in production.

Molly and John continue to run the farm together just as they built it together. Currently, Molly is running more of the farm’s day-to-day operations and John is able to put more energy toward driving the storytelling part of the farm’s mission. But they talk everything over and come to an agreement on all major developments. “He is such a deep thinker,” she noted.

While the vast majority of the avocados are sold through farmers’ markets, Molly said production sometimes outstrips their direct sales capabilities. In those instances, they will send a bin or two to a packing shed and they also have some direct retail customers such as Erewhon Market, a five-store chain on Los Angeles’ Westside. The farm’s fruit salesman was in the midst of their season in mid-August and did not have the time to retrieve sales numbers, but Molly said the avocados sell very well and indicated the crop is a money maker for this unique farming operation. 🥑



*Photo courtesy of Apricot Lane Farms.*