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◀ Alan Danser '69

# FARMER'S MARKET

BY MIKE ALLEGRA

Alan Danser '69 lives on a quiet suburban street lined with middle class colonials, respectfully spaced, with generous expanses of green front lawn. On Danser's lot, milling around the in-ground swimming pool, three black Labs, heads cocked, tails wagging furiously, welcome just about anyone or anything that crosses their line of vision. Danser is not as enthusiastic as the canines (for no biped can be), but he, too, is welcoming. He holds court at the dining room table; an eight-point buck hanging on the wall peers over his left shoulder and, over his right, a picture window overlooking the backyard reveals not a patch of lawn as the view from the street would suggest, but a wide vista of protected farmland which will soon be home to regimented rows of corn.



Freshly planted just the week before, there's not yet a hint of green, let alone a stalk as high as an elephant's eye, but it's coming and if the weather cooperates, and the demand for ethanol keeps creeping up, and the speculators keep predicting bright horizons for corn futures, Danser may just make a tidy profit.

But that's a lot of ifs.

Farmers, the successful ones, anyway, have always needed to be part laborer, part soothsayer, and part prayer leader. One year's hearty crop with a good price can be followed, due to circumstance beyond anyone's control, by something altogether different. The Danser farm can, and has, operated at a loss – the drought of 1999 being one recent example.

But Danser could never imagine another life for himself. "From the time I was four," he says, "I cut my teeth on a tractor steering wheel." Even his engineering degree from Cornell seemed to be with an eye toward returning to his agricultural roots. "This allowed me to design tractors as well as drive them," he says.

Danser is a fourth generation farmer who still works alongside the third. His father, now 78, is the only other person who helps him cultivate and maintain the 130 acres behind his house as well as the patchwork of 370 acres spread around the communities of Cranbury and Monroe on leased land – a 50 acre parcel here and 30 acre parcel there. Most of these smaller fields are in the hands of developers so they will disappear over time. When the housing slump rebounds, these plots, like, for example, the one owned by famed builder K. Hovnanian, will promptly sprout condominiums instead of edibles.

In past years, about 40 percent of Danser's crop had been dedicated to soybeans. Soy is lower maintenance than corn; it needs less fertilizer, less water, and, consequently, less labor. But soy also yields less per bushel, so this year Danser decided to make



the switch to all corn; he has seen the price triple over that last several years, easily justifying the extra expense. A good portion of last year's corn harvest sitting in storage is already spoken for, which, he points out, is unusual for early spring.

At first blush, the demand for biofuels appears to be the main factor driving up corn prices. Last year, close to 20 percent of domestic corn crops were earmarked for use in the ethanol/gasoline mix that is currently sloshing around in American gas tanks, but the price of crude, say officials from the National Corn Growers Association, is a far more significant factor in the price spike. This assertion is by no means just a convenient, speaking-before-a-Congressional-subcommittee passing-the-buck fib. Oil is not only needed to transport harvested corn (and, for that matter, refined ethanol, since ethanol's chemical makeup prevents it from being pipelined) but also is essential in petroleum-based fertilizers and pesticides which corn crops require. In other words, the crop sometimes hailed as an answer to oil dependency depends on a rather significant amount of oil to produce.

But it is the speculators' assessment of corn's demand that is making the crop appear to be a safe bet for farmers like Danser. Commodities markets are not well known for their level-headed stability. The idea of it makes Danser roll his eyes. "If the government, say, pushed back the ethanol mandate for a year, it wouldn't make a tremendous difference to the overall demand for corn," he posits. "But psychologically it would make a tremendous difference. These markets are speculator-driven and if these guys say 'Uh oh. There *might* be excess corn.' That could drive prices down a couple of dollars a bushel in two or three weeks and then take months to recover, after a real assessment of the production and usage is recorded." Of course the speculators can also push the price the other way; the recent floods in Iowa which, by some estimates, decimated two million acres of corn and soy fields, will surely set speculators' tongues wagging as much as any dialogue on biofuel.

Exactly zero percent of Danser's corn crop is used for ethanol. Instead, it goes toward animal feed. And so the price hikes head up the food chain.

Laurence Lasater '59 has a few opinions on that particular subject. "The ethanol program is a complete fiasco," he says in his Lone Star twang. "It has aggravated the worldwide trend toward food shortages. What's worse, the prices [for animal feed] jumped pretty much overnight. So anybody who runs a dairy or relies on intensive, confined animal management gets their heads cut off."

Lasater doesn't have to worry about the chopping block as much as some others; on his watch his 1,100 beefmaster cattle get their sustenance from grazing on close to 30,000 acres of Texas prairie, which gives him less to worry about than the stockyard owners who rely on the next truckload of corn from farmers like Danser.

While Lasater does sell culled cattle through meat auctions, the bulk of his business, the ISA Cattle Company, is





through the selling of breeding stock to commercial producers (“We’re the die makers for the commercial cattle industry,” he says.) and that means shipping his cows and bulls and bull semen worldwide. The travel, thanks again to oil increases, also necessitates higher prices for his cows, an increase, says Lasater, from \$1 to \$4 a mile over the past several years.

A Lasater has been raising cattle in Texas since before the Civil War. In other words, the family knows its way around a cow. Lasater’s father, Tom, developed the beefmaster, one of the most popular cattle breeds in the U.S. “He was also an ecologist before anyone ever heard of the term,” says Lasater.

“His whole thesis was that using the power of nature, like the buffalo herds did, was, in the long term, more viable than the input-intensive agriculture that was common in his day.” That means no horn removal, no growth hormones, and no pesticides.

Lasater documented his father’s trailblazing efforts in breeding and genetics in his 1972 book *The Lasater Philosophy of Cattle Raising* published by the University of Texas at El Paso Press. Despite the seemingly esoteric appeal, the book became the number-one title in the publisher’s line, running through 16 printings. *The Denver Post* even paused long enough to give the slim volume a glowing review.

The book’s appeal can be seen once the spine is cracked; the elder Lasater’s ideas are spelled out, not so much as a cattle ranching how-to, but more of a philosophy of life. In one anecdote, Tom Lasater’s weariness of prairie dog burrows threatening the ankles of his cattle and horses, agrees to take part in a government-sponsored prairie dog extermination program.

“The poison the government provided worked like a charm,” says the son. “Problem was the fields became less green and lush without prairie dogs aerating the soil.” So his dad brought the prairie dogs back.

The prairie dog incident can serve not only as an “everything in nature

A herd of beefmasters roam the Texas plains.



Photograph by Connie Thompson



Photograph by Barney's Studio





has a function” parable, but also as a pretty solid example of why Lasater tends to look upon federal programs with a skeptical eye. “The government always has a well-intentioned program in operation that from the long-term standpoint is usually not such a good idea.”

Danser doesn’t take as hard a line as Lasater, but he is more than aware of how a high-minded government policy can do a world of unintended damage. He cites the Russia Grain Embargo, President Jimmy Carter’s response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. With the stroke of a pen, 17 million tons of U.S. grain was displaced, sending prices spiraling downward, and setting

a price ceiling that lasted more than a decade.

“So I don’t trust the politicians,” Danser notes with a smirk. “Especially in an election year.” (And, for the record, the grain embargo was in 1980, an election year.)

Phil Glaze ’74 knows all about election-year politics. An advocate for the U.S. Apple Association for the past 15 years, he frequently makes appearances on Capitol Hill chatting up senators and representatives to discuss policies that affect the industry. U.S. Apple’s primary issue is nothing short of a political hot potato: the need for temporary workers.

Glaze is an unpaid board member for

U.S. Apple; his day job is managing a 750-acre apple orchard, so he understands the work shortage issue firsthand. “If we can’t pick them,” he sighs. The policy measure he had been pushing on The Hill for years was the Agricultural Job Opportunities Benefits and Securities Act (AgJOBS), a policy that, in short, would increase the number and availability of foreign and migrant workers for labor-intensive crops and offer an “earned legalization” program enabling many undocumented farm workers and migrant workers who are a part of H-2A, the existing guest worker program, to earn “blue card status” with the possibility of becoming permanent residents of the U.S.

Proposals like this, needless to say, set off alarm bells.

“AgJOBS has been pretty much squelched,” Glaze says. “We worked pretty hard to get it passed last year.” And a number of advocates for the AgJOBS program were optimistic that the change in congressional leadership in the wake of the 2006 midterm elections would get the bill moving after many months of fits and starts. It didn’t. A more recent bill drafted by California Senator Dianne Feinstein, which incorporated some of the same language in the AgJOBS proposal, was also recently blocked.

“And now we’re in an election year. And in an election year it is political suicide for any candidate to talk about labor,” Glaze says. “When we recruit to pick apples, any U.S. citizen who wants to pick apples is welcome to come pick apples. And nobody comes. So we need those temporary workers.”

Jeff Dolan ’79 shares Glaze’s view. “Congress has not had the fortitude and wherewithal to deal with this issue properly,” he asserts. “They need to do some work to make sure we have an adequate and legal labor supply.”

Dolan is the California field operations manager for the DiMare Company. Begun by his grandfather

in the thick of The Great Depression with little more than a vegetable cart, natural salesmanship, and a knack for dodging truant officers (Grandpa DiMare was a school-age teenager at the time), over the years the company grew to become the largest vertically integrated tomato company in the U.S., owning or managing over 8,000 acres of tomato fields.

Tomatoes are another labor-intensive agricultural commodity, so it should come as no surprise that Dolan is also a supporter of the seemingly dead-in-the-water AgJOBS proposal. He notes, however, that the recent slowdown in the housing market has made the demand for workers less urgent than in previous years. Workers, who might otherwise have become, say, roofers, are turning to the California tomato fields for more steady work.

While both Glaze and Dolan are irked by the government response to AgJOBS and similar bills, neither can complain too loudly for both industries are direct beneficiaries of other areas of government assistance. The \$307 billion Farm Bill, recently passed over President Bush’s veto, offers up expanded and brand new opportunities for folks like Dolan and Glaze. The Market Access Program, for one, provides funds for specialty crops (read: fruits and just about any vegetable that isn’t corn) to develop markets in foreign countries. DiMare has taken advantage of the program to build demand for U.S. tomatoes in Mexico, Canada, and Japan. The 9,000 growers represented by U.S. Apple have similarly used this program to take their produce worldwide.

Something new to the 2008 Farm Bill is the School Snack Program, whereby apples and other fruits will be available to students in lower income districts at little or no cost. “This will hopefully provide a lift in demand and the kids get a nutritious snack,” says Glaze. “It’s a win-win.”

While many in agriculture are at the mercy of international trade deals or an



occasionally ill-conceived edict from DC, others find great success on a much smaller scale. Case in point: Most consumers wouldn’t know a gooseberry if it were shoved right under their noses. Terhune Orchards grows gooseberries. Not *many* gooseberries, but enough to make you scratch your head and wonder why. The reason, says Tannwen Mount ’94 (who is the retail manager and partner of Terhune with her parents and sister, Science Master Reuwai Hanewald ’91) is because a customer suggested them. A customer also suggested currants. And blueberries. And raspberries. And you get the idea.

“We’ll try anything once.” Mount says with a smile. “We start small

and if it works, we grow from there.” No jumpy speculators affecting productivity here. At Terhune, all politics is local.

Terhune is less than three miles from The Lawrenceville School, but what a difference a couple of miles make. A turn here and a follow-the-bend there and the traffic congestion of Route 206 immediately gives way to open fields. The pedestrian crossing signs are replaced with horse crossing signs, which are followed by tractor crossing signs. Then the orchard comes into view, row after row of squat, chunky apple trees.

Just beyond the trees is a picture-postcard perfect white farm house with





black shutters and a hand-hewn iron gate. The house sits next to the farm's country store. Resting on the store's wooden porch (the wide planks of which deliver a satisfying "tunk" with each footfall) lies a sleepy ol' yellow dog who seems to be specially bred to endure children's pets against the grain without showing signs of irritation. And, yes, there is also a little red barn, and bucolic fields containing goats and sheep – whose sole purpose appears to be standing around looking cute. The goats and sheep are very good at this.

It's essentially a farm right out of a Frank Capra movie, almost a self-conscious display of what a farm is "supposed" to look like. And, confronted with this impression, Mount smiles even wider than before. "We are very active in our community, so everything we do is with an eye toward marketing," she explains. "We always say the shopping is secondary. The farm *experience* – the whole package – comes first."

This, it turns out, is a very effective policy. At 9:30 in the morning the gravel lot is filled with over a dozen SUVs and a school bus. The farm is teeming with parents buying produce, perennials, and fruit pies at the store while children play on tractor pedal toys, admire the cute sheep and incorrectly pet that genial dog.

Mount grew up at Terhune (her mother was pregnant with her when her parents first bought the place) and could never get the farming lifestyle out of her blood. After a five-year post-college stint in San Francisco in the Alumni and Development Office of the University of Berkeley, she returned east. "All arrows pointed to coming back home and being a part of this enterprise here," she says.

She became the tenth generation of Mount to farm in Central Jersey and dived into her new role with gusto. After working on the main farm as well as managing a neighboring pick-your-own orchard the family bought in the 1980s, she and her husband, former



History Master Jim Washburn '93, moved into the farmhouse on a 65-acre plot that abuts Terhune. There Terhune Orchards grows organic vegetables, which have been enthusiastically received by the farm's regular clientele.

Terhune sells its wares at the farm store, where over 500,000 customers come annually, as well as area restaurants, farmers markets, a produce stand in Trenton, Wegmans Market, and a variety of schools – the first of which was an independent school of some note less than three miles away. Apples, fruits, vegetables, and the famed Terhune apple cider, are

prominent fixtures in the Irwin and Abbott dining halls and play a key role in Lawrenceville's mission to support local farms.

"The local food movement is growing more and more popular," Mount notes. "For the first time people are thinking about how far produce is traveling and the quality of the food when it reaches them. And that's good for us."

Whether selling produce around the block or around the world, whether a farmer meets his ethanol quota or helps that nice woman find a few gooseberries at the Lawrenceville Farmer's Market, one aspect of the farming lifestyle seems consistent across the board: the passion found in its practitioners. Danser, Lasater, Glaze, Dolan, and Mount are the product of a family industry that began, in some cases decades before they were born. And despite the unpredictability of the market and the weather, despite the level of work required to only *maybe* become successful, none of the above has plans to move on to something more stable or less strenuous. Danser says he will never stop growing corn until he is physically incapable of doing so (in which case his protected land will be leased out to other farmers).

In some cases the torch has already been passed. Lasater's son, now 40, plays an active role in the ISA Cattle Company, following the Lasater philosophy and promoting the beefmaster breed.

Mount, who sat through her entire interview with her three-month-old son, Becket, in her arms, waxes philosophical when contemplating whether or not her little bundle will constitute the 11<sup>th</sup> farming generation. "I'm going to adopt the policy my parents had with me. They were supportive of everything I wanted to do. They let me go out there – no pressure – but it was made clear that I'd always be welcomed home with open arms," she says.

"I'll do the same with Becket and hope he'll come back."