

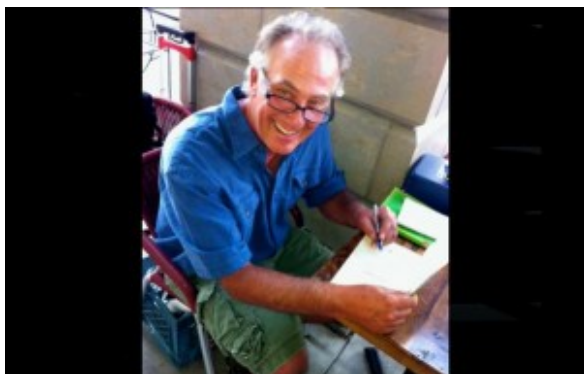
'Why I Farm' gets to the core of small farming

By Susan Wood

RENO – The roots of “Why I Farm,” as told by small, third generation farmer Gary Romano, run deep.

It was clear by the recent Meyers-based Bona Fide Books opening party releasing Romano's historic, semi-political account – subtitled “Risking it all for a Life on the Land” – that there's a vested interest in the topic. About 40 people showed up at Campo restaurant in Reno on Thursday to hear the author toast, read and answer questions relating to the book. Some knew him. Others didn't. Still, among the supportive crowd, all have a stark interest in Americans taking responsibility for what they consume and how the industry that supports them stays alive.

Small farmers are a dying breed these days. Yet, there is a segment of people associated with the Slow Food Movement who would love to buy local and fresh. Unfortunately, they do not make up the majority of Americans. Romano is among those rare outspoken farmers who want to do something about that.



Gary Romano's book delves into the plight of the small farmer. Photo/Daphne Gauged

The Sierra Valley Farms owner joked about how farming is not a lucrative business, but one in which you can receive much reward. Few people can dictate the utter beauty of using a locally grown heirloom tomato “to make that (bacon, lettuce, tomato sandwich)” with such passion.

“It doesn’t get any better than that,” he said.

The audience seemed transfixed as Romano read and explained his need to dive into the dirt.

During the question-and-answer session it became obvious the attendees bought into the message.

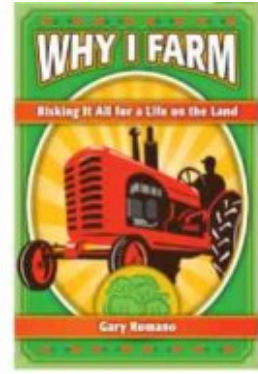
“What grows best in the Sierra Valley?” one woman asked.

“Greens,” Romano quickly responded.

“The key is to know where your food comes from,” renowned chef and Campo owner Mark Estee told the attentive crowd while holding up the book. Estee, who commercially buys produce from Romano’s individual farmers market in Sierra Valley, reminded those who raised a glass of Prosecco and enjoyed his culinary snacks to make sure they purchase the book.

Consequently, Romano and Bona Fide Books Publisher Kim Wyatt accommodated a line of eager buyers after the talk.

“I’m a local farmer, you’re a local book publisher. Let’s make a book,” she recounted his introduction in finding her as “a kindred spirit.”



"Why I Farm" is the latest release from Meyers-based Bona Fide Books.

"I love his family history," she added. Wyatt also thrives in publishing local stories, as shown by the release of "Permanent Vacation," "Tahoe Blues" and "Get Out of My Crotch."

Romano's quick read highlights his evolution into farming as an adult in the 1990s, decades after he was introduced to the craft and industry as a child. The book is full of pictures, descriptions and 91 years of memories of his grandfather and father's fresh flower business that took him from the metropolis of San Francisco to the Sierra Valley north of Truckee. The book is part political in trying to find a solution for the industry and consumers seeking to support it through their food choices. It's also part nostalgia with a sentimental twist of this close-knit Italian family.

He told *Lake Tahoe News* the making of the book was sometimes emotional.

"It is because I lost my brother. And with twins, you have this connection. And he knew our (family) history better," he said of his late brother, Larry.

Wendy Baroli, co-proprietor of Girl Farm, could relate. The fourth generation farmer with Italian roots makes a living at the long-standing family craft with Jill Heaton. Even on the night of the book launch, Baroli brought lettuce for Romano.

The two farm operations often barter.

Like Romano, Heaton finds it ironic that the masses tend to worry more about food grown locally at farmers markets rather than the produce of big distribution chains selling at the supermarkets. The American public often leans toward the familiar. Then, there's the borderline absurd farmers face from the public's fear of bug infestations to illness outbreaks.

"I think it's very interesting their top concerns (are) how fresh is it and then the safety of it," Heaton said, while shaking her head. "I tell people: 'If there's something wrong with the food, we're done'," she said. Heaton and Baroli have their Northern Nevada household food supply down to a science, only buying coffee, sugar and flour at the traditional grocery store.

Romano also touched on how the self-sufficiency of growing your own food is lost on a younger generation pursuing a better paycheck. So the support of other small farmers into the food web represents a welcome change in our society.

The idea of supporting each other is: "You lift one small farmer up, you lift them all": – especially as the book points out, the farmer is not the most experienced self-promoter.

The next promotional event highlighting "Why I Farm" is June 12 at Sundance Bookstore and Music in Reno. "Why I Farm" is available through Bona Fide as well as Amazon, but the latter takes more than a 55 percent cut.