

# A CONVERSATION WITH



PHOTOS BY EILEEN BRADY  
COURTESY OF NEW SEASONS MARKET



DOC AND CONNIE HATFIELD, FOUNDERS OF COUNTRY NATURAL BEEF, REFLECT ON HOW THEY STARTED THE LANDMARK COOPERATIVE OF RANCHING FAMILIES AND THEIR HOPES FOR THE FUTURE OF AGRICULTURE BY ZOÉ BRADBURY

# SAGEBRUSH PIONEERS

*Doc and Connie Hatfield are the founders of Country Natural Beef (CNB), a cooperative of cattle ranching families who grow and market Food Alliance-certified sustainable beef. Since 1986, the co-op has grown from 14 ranch families (all of whom originally came to Oregon in covered wagons via the Oregon Trail) to more than 100 families, 100,000 mother cows and 6 million acres of land throughout the West. Country Natural Beef is celebrated as a model of sustainability—for its holistic approach to land stewardship, its humane treatment of animals, its unique social fabric (women and families are integral to the organization, and all co-op decisions are made by consensus) and its low-overhead, values-based business practices.*

*Doc and Connie's visionary leadership has given rise to a new paradigm in agriculture: lean, green, eco-happy hamburgers at a quick service restaurant like Burgerville; college graduates heading*

*for the high lonesome, instead of the city, to start their careers as young ranchers; two hundred cowhands with an independent streak a mile wide running a business together in a big woo-woo circle. These are the kinds of miracles that the Hatfields have worked over the years.*

*In May 2009, Doc was diagnosed with terminal pancreatic cancer. I had the privilege of interviewing him and Connie on New Year's Eve, 2009. As I was turning on my tape recorder, an indomitable Doc wryly warned me, "You know, it might be a problem that I've got this pancreatic cancer, and I'm not supposed to live very long. There's all these people doing these last-minute interviews, but I'm feeling better than I was eight months ago...so wouldn't it just be the pits for all of you if I actually stuck around?"*

*I told him we'd take another 50 years, no hard feelings.*

*What follows are excerpts from our conversation.*

food | chef | restaurant



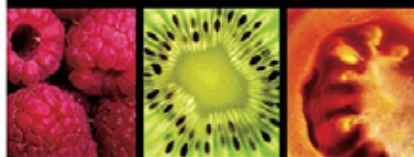
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**ZOË** Tell me about the early years, when CNB was but a twinkle.

**DOC** Well, I suppose I should take you way back. From the time I was in the eighth grade, I wanted to be a veterinarian. I grew up in Douglas County, Oregon, and went to school in Glide. I got a veterinary degree at Colorado State. Connie and I got married, and then right away we were in the army. But we said, "When we get out of the army we're gonna go to Montana and start a large animal veterinary practice." Sure enough, we got out and started up the vet practice. We had an opportunity to get a little land, took in a partner and built up the veterinary clinic.

But after about eight years we realized that I was spending most of my time taking care of problems that were due to cattle being raised in an unsuitable environment without good management. A lot of what I did...well, let's put it this way: If you're good at doing caesarean-sections, that's like being proud of yourself for rebuilding engines because you didn't put oil in it.

And so we decided there must be someplace where land and cattle and dollars and people can work together in harmony. We sold the vet practice to our partner and were able to trade our Montana operation to get into this ranch here in Brothers, Oregon. And we were fine until the first half of the eighties, which was the worst time in agriculture since the Great Depression because land values went down and interest rates went up and it was "Beef Free by '93." And that's where Connie comes in.

**CONNIE** Country Natural Beef started in 1986 and the reason it started was because we were kinda going broke. The market was down so low and all you'd hear was "don't eat red meat," and it was so negative. We'd gone to "holistic resource management," where you work with the land and the people and the dollars and the cattle, and we had everything going except for the marketing. The way it worked was, you'd put your cattle on a truck at the end of the year and you'd get whatever Chicago was paying that day.

So I went into Bend, about 55 miles from the ranch, where we get our groceries and things. At that time, there was one fitness place, and I walked in and met the man who changed our life. His name was Ace, and he was a Jack LaLanne type. You know who Jack LaLanne is?

**ZOË** No.

**CONNIE** You're too young! He was one of the first fitness guys in the fifties and I think he's still on TV now, selling juicers and the like—oh, he must be in his nineties now! My mother used to work out to Jack LaLanne in front of the TV. He said to me, "What can I do for you?" And I said, "Well, I'm a rancher from Central Oregon and I'd like your opinion about red meat for the fitness people who are interested in good health." And he said, "Well, I recommend eating beef three times per week. But we're having the hardest time getting the Argentina beef here in Bend." And I said, "Argentina beef?! Why's that?" "Because it's produced without hormones, without antibiotics, and it doesn't have all that excess fat. That's what we want, but we just can't get it."

**ZOË** Huh.

**CONNIE** Yeah, *huh*. That was exactly how I felt. I drove home and thought, you call yourself a rancher and you live 55 miles from where this man is saying he wants hormone-free, antibiotic-free beef that's raised in a good environment—and *here we are*, and we could do that, but we've never marketed it before. Instead, we just whine and complain about what the commodity market gives us.

**DOC** The commodity markets reward least-cost production of a mediocre, anonymous food product. And that's what's really tough about [ranchers] trying to do the right thing: When their meat gets to the end market, it's all mixed up with everyone else's meat.

**CONNIE** So what we did was call some of the ranch families we know around the state who thought kinda like we did about how to take care of your land. And we called Ace and asked him if he'd come out to the ranch and talk to some

ranchers, and tell them exactly what he'd told me about an opportunity to put our beef in a form that the customers would like—and that's exactly what happened.

**DOC** We had the idea for CNB in February, and we wrote a goal in March, which was "to provide a sustainable means through our group to profitably market quality meat products desired by the consumer while maintaining ever-possible independence." That "ever-possible independence" is a key to why this has worked. Most ranchers aren't interested in working together in a group. But if you can get together, then suddenly you have a critical mass of product and resources to provide somebody like a New Seasons or a Burgerville. So we're reluctant hand-holding circle people.

**ZOË** Talk a little about the culture you've created at Country Natural Beef.

**DOC** At our meetings, there'll be 160 to 200 people in the room, and we all sit in a circle. Now there's so many of us it's hard to find a room big enough, and the circle is three deep. The thing is, everybody gets a voice in the room at the start of the meeting. You sit in a circle and listen to everyone with respect. That's powerful when you're working with ranchers and farmers and trying to get them to work together.

**CONNIE** Our kids, some of the new babies that were born in those early years, have graduated from college now, so our kids don't know there's other ways to have meetings besides sitting in a circle and listening with respect. It's really fun. It's magic.

**DOC** The other key to getting people to work together is including the women. We saw that when the men would come to the meetings, nothing would happen, but when the husband-and-wife teams would come, you kinda had the right and left brain working together, and things would start to happen.

Another thing that's real interesting: The business schools at Portland State

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and Oregon State Universities have been collaborating on an intense study of CNB over the past few years, and asking the question, "What kind of people fit in CNB?" 'Cuz after all, this is strange behavior for red-county Republicans! They coined a word to describe CNB ranchers: "conservationistic." And libertarian. What that means is that if you're interested in healthy food and healthy land and healthy animals and viable families and communities, we really don't care about your sexual preference or your political preference or if you're mostly a vegetarian—those things don't matter.

#### Zoë Looking back, what are you most proud of?

**DOC** The thing that we are most proud of at CNB is that any well-intentioned urban customer who supports what we do can afford to buy our hamburger, and of course Burgerville is the classic example. It costs more than Burger King or McDonald's, but it's not so much that ordinary people can't afford it.

#### Zoë What gives you the most hope looking ahead, for CNB and for agriculture as a whole?

**DOC** We think the best years are ahead because finally people are paying more attention to their food. What a great endorsement of that, when during the worst recession since the Great Depression, our customers—like Burgerville and New Seasons and Whole Foods—haven't crashed and burned at all! They're doing well and we think it's a growing trend.

**CONNIE** The other thing we're working real hard at is setting it up where the ranchland could be locked in for perpetuity to be kept as a grazing landscape. Seven or eight or nine generations down the road...it might not be that young couples can buy ranches. We couldn't even do that in this day and age! But they can keep the traditions, keep the lifestyle, keep the wonderful things that we're learning to do better than we used to do. It's going to look a little different, but the key values are going to be the same.

#### Zoë Looking ahead, what gives you the most trepidation?

**DOC** The thing that worries us is that too many of the models that we have now are based on the standard capitalistic system where you do good things, you make money, and then you get big and you sell out. Ben & Jerry's is a good example. Petaluma Poultry, Coleman Natural beef—they all started as "save the family farmer" or "do the right thing," and then they got big. We need a change in the capitalist model—not that capitalism is bad, but if it just leads you to get big and sell out and the values are lost, you haven't gained anything. That's why part of CNB's creed is that we can never be bought or sold.

Hopefully these "agriculture of the middle" business models—like CNB, Organic Valley, Shepherd's Grain, New Seasons Market—will be adopted by more folks. We've got to make that leap from farmers' markets to where [the food] is available everywhere. Local's great, but it isn't necessarily sustainable. If everyone in Portland wanted to get their food at the farmers' market, there'd be a lot of hungry people in Portland. And there's a lot of high-quality food we grow in Oregon that's not going to be eaten in Portland. So how do we bridge that gap? We think agriculture of the middle is how you bring the eaters and the producers and the whole story together. Its time hasn't quite come, but it's the next thing...and we're excited. <sup>cl</sup>

Zoë Ida Bradbury runs a diversified truck farm on the southern Oregon coast. She writes when it's raining outside and is a Food and Society Policy Fellow.

[In November 2009, Doc and Connie Hatfield were awarded the "Ag Connection of the Year" Award from the Agri-Business Council of Oregon. Listen to their peers reflect on their lifetime of work in a video that aired at the award ceremony at [www.aglink.org/denimdiamonds/hatfields.php](http://www.aglink.org/denimdiamonds/hatfields.php).]



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