



## The *New* American Farmer

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### Lon Inaba and family, Inaba Produce Farms

Wapato, Washington

#### Summary of Operation

- *Fresh produce (vegetables, melons, and grapes) on 1,200 acres, 200 acres certified organic*
- *Grower; shipper; packer*

#### Problems Addressed

*Low produce prices.* A variable marketplace, particularly for fresh produce, meant that the Inaba family needed to diversify both their crops and their production methods to maintain profits amid stiff competition.

*Limited labor supply.* The family needed to attract a stable, productive workforce to make their large-scale vegetable operation efficient.

*Diminishing water resources.* When the three Inaba brothers, Lon, Wayne and Norman, returned to their father's farm, they confronted a 50-year-old irrigation supply system reliant upon mountain reservoirs. It was challenging to supply water to their high-value crops in a dry year.

#### Background

The Inaba Produce Farm is in the Yakima Valley of Washington, an area dominated by apple and hops production. The farm is within the borders of the Yakama Indian Reservation; the family owns about a third of the land and leases or rents the rest from tribal members.

The Inabas grow, pack and ship fresh market vegetables, including asparagus, bell peppers, sweet corn, onions and green beans, as well as watermelons and Concord grapes. They sell primarily to supermarket chains, and employ 100 to 200 seasonal farm workers from Mexico during the harvest season.

Many family members bring their skills to the farm. One brother, Wayne, handles wholesale marketing and does the accounting; another, Norm, is their computer expert and is exploring direct markets, such as farmers markets and community supported agriculture. Their mother, Shiz, keeps the books. Brother-in-law Troy, a food technologist, is also their main mechanic, and other relatives less directly involved bring various skills to the farm.

Lon Inaba, the “operations manager,” used to be a research engineer at the Hanford Nuclear Reservation. His wife, Sheila, works off the farm. They have one young son, Kenny. Lon credits his long-term employees as crucial to overall farm management; they help the family “grow a good crop and put a quality product in the box.”

#### Focal Point of Operation — Sustainable fruit and vegetable production

In the early 1980s, the Inaba brothers expanded their father's farm from 300 acres to 1,200 acres. A lot of their newly acquired land was marginal. They worked hard to build the soil, using cover crops and adding organic matter. Then, it made sense to certify some of their fields and sell those crops as organic. They faced less competition in the smaller organic market and could sometimes get both premium

price and recognition for better quality.

“It’s always better when we can differentiate our crops as specialty items, not just commodities,” Inaba says.

The Inabas had used manure off and on in the past, but decided to compost in an effort to reduce weed seeds and further build the soil. Composting is an age-old practice Lon’s grandfather employed when he came from Japan in 1907. The farm now has a fairly large composting operation, with a compost turner and five miles of windrows scattered across the landscape. Not only do they recycle all of their packing plant vegetative waste, but they also accept yard waste from school districts, manure from local dairy farms, mint wastes from neighbors, wheat straw, waste paper, leaves, grass clippings, even cardboard boxes. The wastes total thousands of tons a year.

“One of my jobs is finding materials,” Inaba says. “I’m the guy who’s going to do things differently, to think ‘What new things can we do or use?’ ” While the compost operation is costly, Inaba expects real benefits to soil quality over the long term.

The farm uses cover crops and rotations on both conventional and organic acreage, although there is no typical rotation. If they harvest early, they seed a cover crop, such as annual ryegrass, wheat, vetch, winter peas, clovers or white mustard. Inaba has begun to rely mostly on wheat as a cover crop, since it’s cheap and locally available.

With the Inabas leasing their land, improving their soil for a long-term gain is more of a risk, but the family plans to continue. “It’s the right thing to do,” Inaba says.

The Inabas had always minimized their pesticide use and had been reluctant to use herbicides, using lots of hand labor instead. Much



David Cannstein

*Lon Inaba has noticed that soils improved with cover crops and compost (pictured) seem to be more uniform and easier to farm.*

of that comes from their employees, whom they respect as integral to the operation. The Inabas diversified their operation partly to expand the harvest season, which creates a longer employment window for workers.

Lon Inaba appreciates the additional challenges organic production presents. “You need to be willing to learn about the biology of organisms,” he says, “and you need to pay more attention.” The Inabas work closely with university researchers and readily volunteer their land for pest control research projects.

The organic portion, with its increased record-keeping, separations for crops and equipment, and different pest control options, complicates the operation, but it also complements it. “Organic farming puts all our farming in perspective and makes us examine all our practices,” says Inaba. “It forces us to be better farmers with our conventional production. We can compare production practices. For example, if we are seeing all kinds of bugs in the conventional fields but not in the organic, it makes us question the practices we are using there.” He’s noticed that the organic fields —

which get the most dedicated attention to cover crops and composts — sometimes seem to be more uniform, easier to farm, more forgiving of stresses. “Anytime you build soil, you don’t see as many fluctuations in yield,” he says.

### Economics and Profitability

People often predict that yields will decrease with organic methods, but this has only sometimes been true for the Inabas. Lon has found, however, that labor costs will more than double, mostly for weed control and soil-building practices. “There’s a big difference between putting out 30 tons an acre of compost and 300 pounds of fertilizer,” Inaba says.

Only about half of their organic production, certified by the state of Washington, actually ends up being sold as organic; the rest goes through regular channels. The organic market is small, and the Inabas have found it can be easily oversupplied. “We feel good about doing it and it is a direction the market is going,” Inaba says.

They concentrate on selling all their crops as high-quality specialty crops, not simple

commodities, and the organic becomes another specialty crop they can offer. A new venture of selling at farmers markets diversifies their outlets and also gives them more direct communication with consumers. They hope this will improve profits, because the wholesale markets are so variable. “Organic prices vary widely in the fresh market,” Inaba says. “Produce prices can change a few dollars a day.”

Moreover, vine-ripened produce benefits from less shipping. “It’s best marketed directly to consumers,” Inaba says. “Sometimes, you find the worst produce in stores that are in the same communities where the crop was grown. It has to go all the way to warehouses in the big metropolitan areas and back again.”

#### Environmental Benefits

Using cover crops, compost and well-managed rotations has helped build the soil and lessened erosion. Soil and water conservation remain high priorities for the Inabas. In the past, all irrigation on the farm was delivered through furrow irrigation, which caused considerable sedimentation and erosion. The Inabas changed 500 acres to drip irrigation and 300 acres to sprinkler irrigation, at a cost of \$1,000 an acre.

Some fields have hybrid systems. In their remaining furrow-irrigated acreage, they use a soil-binding polymer [polyacrylamide, or PAM] to reduce soil loss in the furrows. They collect runoff in settling ponds and re-apply the sediment to the fields. Building organic matter through cover crops and compost increases water-holding capacity and decreases runoff.

Their extensive composting is a natural, on-farm recycling program, reducing their waste stream and turning their vegetative trash — and that of their neighbors — into fertile soil supplements.

#### Community and Quality of Life Benefits

Three generations of on-and-off discrimination against Japanese-Americans have given the Inabas an empathy with their immigrant farmworker population. Shukichi Inaba, Lon’s grandfather, immigrated to Washington from Japan in 1907 and helped dig the original canals that transformed the area from sagebrush to agriculture.

Alien land laws in the 1920s stopped them from being able to own or rent land, and the Inabas were forced to become sharecroppers. When the second generation grew up, they were U.S. citizens, and were able to sign for land. The family started over on the farm. Then, during World War II, the Inabas were sent to detention camps. After the war, they came back, and started farming all over again. Recently, the family began renting the land Shukichi Inaba had carved out of the sagebrush. “It’s come full circle,” Lon Inaba says.

That history motivates the Inabas to be good employers. Most of their workers have been with them for many years. With the extra work during the peak season, they have the equivalent of a year-round job, with a break in the winter for many of them to go home to Mexico. The Inabas built a row of affordable duplexes that can accommodate 40 people. Inaba describes them as “nicer than the house I grew up in.” Their next step: building family housing units.

Several times a year, they hold harvest festivals for their workers, sometimes inviting others with whom they work in their community, such as their bankers and suppliers.

Good relations with the Indian community around them also remain important to the family — in times of discrimination many Indian landlords reached out to help the family. “We give away a lot of free produce to

show our appreciation to our landlords and neighbors,” Inaba says. “We also get a lot of goodies in return. You have to take care of the community and work with your neighbors.”

#### Transition Advice

Inaba advises producers to start small, question customary practices, and make changes slowly and carefully. “A lot of farmers look at only the short term — or are forced to by the terms of their financing. If you are looking for quick fixes, and if you don’t like hand labor, it’s very difficult to go to organic...Talk and listen to your neighbors, find people who are using good methods, and emulate them.”

#### The Future

Inaba expects to increase sales at farmers markets, and considers selling there an investment in consumer education. “Consumers need to learn how good fresh, local produce is and learn to appreciate the quality-of-life benefit of having farms in their community,” he says.

Inaba clearly likes to farm. “Farming takes a lot of assets and the return is not great, but there are lots of non-monetary rewards,” he says. “Farming is a good, honest way of life. We have fresh air, exercise, good people. We can get the freshest produce available and it’s a big advantage to raise your family in a farming environment.”

■ *Deborah Wechsler*

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*Editor’s note: This profile, originally published in 2001, was updated in 2004.*