

CANNABIS COVERAGE FROM
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GreenState

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GREEN STATE | AGRICULTURE



Photos by Ramin Rahimian / Special to The Chronicle

Aaron Keefer of Sonoma Hills Farm harvests lettuce. The farm uses permaculture principles that integrate cannabis crops, right, with traditional farming. The produce is prized by fine-dining chefs.

Cannabis added to farm's menu

Weed flourishes in high-end garden

By Marcus Crowder

Aaron Keefer wields his slim machete deftly, slashing just under a head of red butter lettuce near the front of his expansive vegetable garden. He whacks the lettuce head next to it, picks up the lettuces and places them in a large, flat wicker basket. Later he hands me a washed leaf, which tastes like no other lettuce I've ever had — peppery, sweet and tart.

Farming runs in Keefer's blood. He got his first agriculture job when he was 5 years old, picking beetles off his grandparents' raspberry plants at their farm in upstate New York. He always knew that making a living from the land was less a romantic notion than a commitment to a demanding lifestyle and ethic.

"Growing up in that environment, you're working all the time," Keefer says. "Throwing hay bales when you get strong enough to lift one and then just doing work the whole time."

Keefer turned that work into a profession fueled by passion and expertise. For 10 years he worked as culinary gardener for chef Thomas Keller, eventually overseeing the cultivation of vegetables for Keller's entire coterie of fine-dining restaurants: Bouchon, Ad Hoc, La Calenda and Bouchon Bakery as well as the famous mother ship, the French Laundry.

"It's a three-star Michelin, so the hyper-focus on ingredients and the hyper-focus on every single detail, it really sharpened my blade," Keefer says.

Daily collaborations with the chefs and meet-



ing their demanding expectations honed Keefer's skills. "I'd gotten pretty good at my craft," Keefer says. Then in 2019 Sonoma Hills Farms founder and CEO Mike Harden asked Keefer if he'd be interested in developing another long-held passion — growing high-grade cannabis flower.



Harden is founder of and a partner in Big Rock Partners, a San Francisco strategic advisory firm focused on cannabis, wellness and hospitality. Big Rock owns and operates Sonoma Hills Farm, which is 30 miles north of San Francisco in the hills outside Petaluma. Keefer, who's been growing cannabis since he was a

teenager, couldn't pass up the opportunity. He's now vice president of cultivation and production at SHF.

Keefer is a leader in the emerging high-end craft cannabis industry, where cultivators are both the vineyard masters and "winemakers." In one of SHF's initiatives, Keefer has begun to

explore collaborations with Beard Award-nominated chef Kim Alter of Nightbird. Alter, who sees cannabis-infused cocktails making their way into the mainstream, has created menus pairing Keefer's cannabis strains with her dishes.

"He understands the different stages of the

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Culinary gardener turns to cultivating cannabis

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growth of the vegetables, the same with cannabis,” Alter says. “It’s nice to have someone who understands. We can brainstorm together.”

Back in his garden, Keefer strides over to the next vibrant row of plants, adding D’Avignon radishes, shishito peppers, Mokum carrots, Koginut squash and lemon verbena to the basket. Finally it can hold no more of the highly-sought-after specialty produce. The basket looks photo-shoot ready, as if styled by Martha Stewart rather than casually arranged in the field by the sun-bronzed farmer who grew it.

Though Keefer has evolved into a master cultivator, he initially trained as a chef. He graduated from the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, New York, in 1994 before coming west to California. His cooking skills were refined through stints with some of the most creative culinary talents in Northern California, including Julian Serrano at Masa’s in San Francisco and Michael Chiarello of Tra Vigne in St. Helena. At the French Laundry, training included spending time in the culinary garden, where Keefer found a natural fit. He was promoted to head culinary gardener there in 2013.

Keefer squints beneath his broad straw hat in the unforgiving late summer sun. He sets the basket in the back of his dusty farm cart, we jump in the front and he guns it up the curving dirt road. Keefer’s constant companion Huck, a lean Australian shepherd, sprints alongside the vehicle and then ahead — he knows where we’re headed next. Up a slight hill behind a jumble of small buildings lies a contained forest of lush, carefully tended cannabis plants, hidden behind tarp-covered chain-link fencing. Huck crouches in the shaded opening, panting and waiting for us.

Pink Jesus, Cherry Cheesecake, Durban Biscotti, Jalapeño Gelato, First Class Funk and Black Diamond are among the strains being cultivated. Several workers are tending the plants. Keefer kneels, grabs some moist soil and kneads it between his fingers.

“It takes a lot from the land to pull out even one crop,” Keefer says. “If you grow conventionally, you can throw in a bunch of salt-based fertilizers which are made from oil and extract-



Photos by Ramin Rahimian / Special to The Chronicle

Above, Sonoma Hills Farm cannabis displayed in a century-old barn on the farm in Petaluma. Right, Aaron Keefer washes some harvested carrots while Huck takes a drink.

ed from oil. I look at traditional or conventional growing agriculture like steroids. They pump up the plant, but there’s a lot of things missing. A lot of the micronutrients are missing, and what’s really missing is the life in the soil.”

Keefer gently inspects the plush, bushy plant in front of him. He clips off a bud, squeezes it just a bit and hands it to me. It’s more complexly fragrant not only than any other cannabis I’ve ever smelled, but any plant that is not a flower.

Sonoma Hills Farm sits in a rolling valley just a few golden brown hills from the ocean. The geography is key for farming, as cooling coastal winds and periodic fog push through the corridor, heading to San Pablo Bay, bringing additional moisture to land that has been productive since the Gold Rush. The soil is called Steinbeck loam. In 2018 this region, known as the Petaluma Gap, became the country’s 240th American Viticultural Area (AVA).

“It is 9.8 miles from the Pacific, and there’s a constant pressure of wind, which really does some amazing things to the plants,” Keefer says. “It stresses out the plants. Just like grapes, stress is good, as long as it’s not damaging and they can’t grow.”

SHF was recently certified as one of only two



“comparable-to-organic” cannabis farms in not just the state but the country. The California Certified Organic Farmers’ new certification program, OCal, administered through the California Department of Food and Agriculture, awarded the certification to legacy farmer Sensiboldt Organics in Humboldt County and to Sonoma Hills Farm’s Highland Canopy, the acre of land dedicated to cannabis. The farm’s pastures (they have their own livestock), vegetable and flower gardens have also been certified organic.

SHF’s 60 acres are made up of two adjacent parcels of land. There are about 40 acres set aside for grazing cows, hogs and chickens, 5



acres of buildings, 4 acres of vegetables, and two-thirds of an acre of cannabis. (Sonoma County allows for up to 1 acre of land to be used for commercial cannabis.)

The Chefs' Ranch at Sonoma Hills Farm, which Keefer oversees, grows produce year-round, rotating through tomatoes, beets, carrots, cucumbers, lettuces, cabbages, broccoli, string beans, fennel, peppers, strawberries, potatoes, collard greens, corn, squashes (zucchini, pumpkin, summer squash, etc.) and herbs (parsley, chives, thyme, sweet marjoram, cilantro, basil).

Celebrity chef Tyler Florence is sourcing vegetables at SHF for his latest restaurant, Miller and Lux. The menu includes the farm's Little

Gem lettuces for what Florence is modestly calling "the best salad in the world."

"The flavor coming off the herbs I grow out here is way better than anything I've ever grown," Keefer says. "I think it has a lot to do with the pounding of the wind, and the cannabis is a wind-pollinated plant as well, so it seems to respond to the wind very, very well." He also notes that cannabis can finally be grown on actual farmland, not just on the side of a gully where no one can see it or reach it.

The food grown at SHF provides more than simply a nice visual of a working farm or a throwback to Keefer's culinary days. In early 2020, when Keefer had just come aboard at SHF

and was consumed with bringing in the ranch's first commercial cannabis crop, the pandemic upended the food industry. Keefer wound up growing more food than he had planned to.

"We planted 4 acres of food, which is a lot of food. Corn, potatoes, mixed vegetables. We didn't know what would happen, but we figured, 'At least we'll eat.'"

As time passed, Keefer could see his colleagues struggling.

"We decided to give away all of our vegetables to shops and local restaurants and try to help them through," Keefer says.

He worked with David Nayfeld from Che Fico, Kim Alter, and Kyle and Katina Connaughton of SingleThread in Healdsburg, who were helping Sonoma Family Meal. Keefer also connected with an old friend from his French Laundry days, the acclaimed chef Phil Tessier. Tessier, now at the Press in St. Helena, led a group of regional chefs and restaurants in figuring out how to not only keep their businesses alive but also support food-insecure people in the region.

Keefer began donating produce to Tessier, who in turn helped it get distributed through his Feed Our Families donation meal program for needy local families, in partnership with the Boys & Girls Club of St. Helena and Calistoga. Tessier says the longtime relationship was the key to pulling it together.

"He was super generous to make the time and effort to drive all the way over here to do that," Tessier says. "Obviously he was going out of his way at a time when things were pretty crazy for him — he's always been that kind of guy who would just go the extra mile."

The Chef's Ranch at Sonoma Hills Farm has donated over 10,000 pounds of produce to restaurants and organizations since 2020.

Keefer and SHF are planning for the day when consumers can visit their property with the same purpose that they can at a winery. Taste, buy, chill.

"I believe that cannabis is now the third leg of hospitality. We've had food and drinks forever," Keefer says. "We're trying to grow the cannabis we want to smoke, we want to put in our bodies, just like we're growing the kind of food we want to cook and eat."

They are building out their property with the idea of making tasting and socializing comfortable and engaging. There will be tours, and sommeliers will guide tasting.

"We're just trying to show everybody this is just a plant, trying to normalize it," Keefer says.

Marcus Crowder is a freelance writer.