Nesh Dhillon

Manager,
Santa Cruz Community Farmers’ Markets

Nesh (pronounced “Naysh”) Dhillon is operations manager for the Santa Cruz Community Farmers’ Markets, which include locations in downtown and Westside Santa Cruz, Live Oak, Felton, and (added in 2009, after this oral history was recorded) Scotts Valley. All operate open year-round except the Felton market, which is open May through October.

Dhillon’s parents both grew up poor—his father in a farming family in northern India, his mother in rural Oregon—but with a preference for fresh, nutritious foods, which they passed on to their son. A high-school education at a
Jesuit institution in Portland, Oregon, instilled in the young Dhillon a deep concern for ethical behavior, cooperation, and justice—values that, he says, have also informed his career choices. Initially aiming toward medical school, he shifted direction when he discovered sustainable agriculture at the University of Oregon. After a stint of post-graduation employment in bars and restaurants on the Oregon coast, he relocated to Santa Cruz, where he joined the staff of a local winery before taking a job as assistant manager for the farmers’ market in 2000, eventually moving into the operations manager position.

In this oral history, conducted by Sarah Rabkin on Thursday, November 20, 2008, at Rabkin’s home in Soquel, California, Dhillon discussed the emergence of the Santa Cruz Community Farmers’ Market out of the rubble of the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake; the market’s growth and evolution over the ensuing two decades, and the pleasures and challenges of managing year-round farmers’ markets in an agriculturally rich, socially diverse, sometimes politically contentious community.

Additional Resources:

Santa Cruz Community Farmers’ Market: http://www.santacruzfarmersmarket.org/


USDA site on Electronic Benefit Transfer system for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance: http://www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/EBT/
Beginnings

**Rabkin:** It’s Thursday, November 20, 2008, and this is Sarah Rabkin. I’m in Soquel [California], talking with Nesh Dhillon, who manages the Santa Cruz Community Farmers’ Markets, and [that includes markets in] Downtown Santa Cruz, Live Oak, and the Westside.

**Dhillon:** And now Felton.

**Rabkin:** Good. We’ll want to talk about that, for sure.

**Dhillon:** That’s the newest development.

**Rabkin:** Let’s start with some background. First, when and where were you born?

**Dhillon:** I was born in 1971 in Portland, Oregon, and I grew up in the Pacific Northwest all my life. I went to college there, did everything there.

**Rabkin:** Where did you grow up in the Pacific Northwest?

**Dhillon:** Well, my mom was born and raised in Bend, Oregon. So I oscillated back and forth between Portland and Bend, and almost split my year, just because I had so much family in the Bend area. All my summers and holidays
were spent in Central Oregon. The rest of the time was in the city, really the only city in the state of Oregon. I had this dual experience. It was cool.

Rabkin: So Oregonians refer to Portland as “The City”?

Dhillon: It’s definitely “The City,” yes. The only other city, I guess, would be Seattle, which is not in the state.

Rabkin: [Laughs.]

Dhillon: Which is funny, because they don’t say San Francisco, they say Seattle.

Rabkin: Interesting. Tell me about where you went to school.

Dhillon: I went to an all-boys’ high school, a Jesuit high school in Portland, Oregon. It’s co-ed now. They stressed academics, the Jesuit version of academics and athletics, but they also taught what I thought was probably the most important thing: cooperation. Typically, high school experiences can be pretty polarized, but most people who graduate from Jesuit [schools] have a lot of respect for their fellow students, no matter where they were in the academic world and athletic world. So that was pretty monumental.

Rabkin: You feel like that has had a lasting influence on you.
Dhillon: Huge. I’d say my early educational experiences really laid out everything that I do—thinking and ethics, drawing lines to ethical dilemmas and establishing core values. That’s something that Jesuit education is so good at. I come from a non-denominational background. My father’s from a foreign country, and was of the Sikh faith. My mother grew up with various religious experiences in Central Oregon. [Laughs.] I didn’t grow up within Catholicism or anything like that.

And then from there, I went to Oregon State University for my freshman year.

Rabkin: In Corvallis.

Dhillon: In Corvallis, because I was thinking about engineering and quickly decided I hated physics. So I made lateral moves the rest of the year and then transferred to [the University of] Oregon, which was just down the street in Eugene, and ended up graduating with a degree in kinesiology and organic chemistry. So that was my focus in school. It was hard-science based.

Rabkin: How did you get from there to farmers’ markets?

Dhillon: Oh, wow. [Laughs.]

Rabkin: Therein lies a tale?
Dhillon: It’s funny, because people from my childhood still ask me that question. They’re just like, “So what exactly—?” [Laughs.] I was pretty committed to getting into medical school when I was in college, just through my love of science and also health, and helping other people, and the excitement about solving problems. I love problem solving, so I felt like that would be a good direction to go in. But I wasn’t able to get into medical school. So after quite a few years of attempting to get in, taking the exams, and doing everything that everybody does to get in, it got to this point where I said, I need to move on from this episode and move in a new direction.

Before that, I had the benefit of meeting the right people at the right time, and I got introduced to the idea of sustainable farming at the University of Oregon. That was my first experience with organic farming, urban farming. They had a program at Oregon that my girlfriend at the time was really involved in. She was a public policy management major, but she had an emphasis in urban farming. She was from San Francisco originally, so she was really attuned to what Alice Waters was doing. She got my head wrapped around these ideas of fresh, sustainable, local, seasonal foods—all of these sort of things that as a person who shopped at, say, Safeway, you have no concept of. And they made sense to me. Logically they made sense, and ethically they made sense. So it tapped into that sensibility that I had developed some time before.

The other experiences I had came from my mom and dad. Both my father and mother grew up really, really poor, and my father came from a farming family. The only way that they would be able to really eat was to grow their own food
and hunt. So I grew up hunting a lot. We didn’t grow our own food, because we lived in Portland, but my parents were always sticklers for buying fresh, quality food. It was really important in the family. You don’t eat garbage. We never ate Doritos. I never had soda pop, none of that stuff. That stuff was just forbidden, because they never had it, and they just thought it was bad stuff. So I was lucky. I was weaned on the flavors of wholesome, fresh foods. Plus, I also had a respect and reverence for the harvesting of meat, because I deer-hunted; I duck-hunted; I elk-hunted; I fished. I did it all. I still hunt. People don’t know that in Santa Cruz. But I’m going hunting tomorrow. So I had a respect for all of those things.

Rabkin: It’s interesting that both of your parents grew up in relative poverty, and yet with a very strong preference for fresh, nutritious food. I’m thinking about the contrast between that and the sort of typical situation now—in the United States, anyway—where poverty often predisposes people toward junk food just because of what they have access to.

Dhillon: That’s right. But interestingly enough, back in the seventies and even probably a little bit in the sixties, when the packaged food started to really hit the shelves, it was considered a luxury item. It was more expensive at that time than the fresh stuff. If you went and bought a bag of Doritos, it actually was much more expensive in real dollar terms in the 1970s. Now it’s totally different, because we’ve manifested this commodity-based agricultural system where the cost of the raw ingredients has come down so much because there’re huge surpluses of this. It’s flipped. Everything’s flipped around, and that all started basically in the 1970s with Earl Butz and all of the problems with the food price
shocks were happening. In my situation, I was lucky because my father grew up in another country, a country that honors food and has long cultural cooking traditions.

**Rabkin:** Where is he from?

**Dhillon:** He’s from north India. Food is a huge part of the Indian culture. I mean, huge. It still is. Even though Western ideals are starting to infiltrate into the subcontinent, it’s still a huge part of culture.

And my mother came from a Depression-era ethic. For whatever reason, she lucked out, too. They would eat fresh, wholesome food. They didn’t have a lot of it, but they would do it.

**Rabkin:** Did they farm or garden at all?

**Dhillon:** No. My grandfather died at an early age, so my mom’s mom had to raise five kids by herself in Bend. She pretty much worked seven days a week and they just survived.

Whereas my father’s from a family of twelve, and they owned a little land where they farmed, but it’s mostly to farm food for the family. And then they would go out and hunt for the meat. But in India at that time, unless you had money, you [didn’t] go out and buy meat, because it’s too damn expensive. So what do you do when you want meat? You take your .30-06, and you go find a deer, and you
shoot the deer, and that’s how you eat meat. Or the simplest form of meat was to eat chickens. Everybody had chickens. Just cut their heads off and make chicken curry.

Rabkin: So you had that influence from your family, and then you ran into the phenomenon of urban organic agriculture when you were at U of Oregon.

Dhillon: In the early nineties, I started to make a commitment—a buying commitment, a shopping commitment at a young age. Honestly, this was way before all of the fanfare. It wasn’t like there was a lot of influences. There were a lot of things tugging at the inside of me saying, this is too expensive. Why the hell am I spending all of this money when I could go to Safeway? [Laughs.] I had that battle for a long time, until I got to the point where I said, It doesn’t make any sense to be walking the fence. Consume less. Eat higher quality. I understood the ratio of supply and demand and prices and all this stuff. I said, eventually, over time, this product that I’m buying for ten dollars a pound will hopefully be five dollars or three dollars a pound because the supply will increase. And that’s actually what’s happened, just in a short ten-to-fifteen-year period. So that’s how my focus on food and agriculture started.

The History of the Santa Cruz Community Farmers’ Markets

Getting the position that I have right now was just a lot of chance. It was total chance. SCCFM, which is Santa Cruz Community Farmers’ Markets, started after the Loma Prieta Earthquake, as a redevelopment tool. The beautiful thing about
it was that it was started by farmers, and most of them were organic farmers, some of the pioneers in the area—Joe Curry [of] Molino Creek Cooperative, Sandra Ward [of] New Native Farms, Nancy Gammons [of] Four Sisters Farm. They started the organization with the intent of obviously promoting farmers, and less so as a redevelopment tool. But the city wanted something to bring people back into the downtown corridor because everybody was shell-shocked from seeing their downtown disappear [after the quake]. It was actually considered one of the main reasons why people came back to the downtown area. Since its inception, the market has bounced around to various different locations. The rebuilding of downtown happened slowly—it still is. They’re just [completing] the Rittenhouse building right now.

The organization went through various market managers since 1990, when the market started. When I came on the scene, which was about 2000, the market was going through a lot of transitions. It had recently reformed, broken away from the Downtown Association, DTA, established a 501(6)(c) status, started to operate as a stand-alone nonprofit, and established itself in Parking Lot 4, which is right across from Calvary Church. Keep in mind it had bounced around quite a bit. This was the first large, square footprint format with room to expand. All the other locations were linear in format. So the vibe of the market changed. And that all happened right around ‘96.

Rabkin: What motivated the split from the Downtown Association?
Dhillon: This is some of the controversy behind the market. I don’t know all the hard- and-fast details of it. It’s kind of in the past, and I’ve worked really hard to develop a real positive relationship with the city, [laughs] so I don’t want to un-closet these ghosts. But my understanding is that when the market was in the downtown corridor—yes, customers would come to the market, but there were all of the other elements of downtown—all of the maybe less savory elements of downtown would congregate in the farmers’ market, or around the farmers’ market, or events would happen outside of the market that required the police showing up, or something to that effect. They weren’t positive, and they were attached to the farmers’ market.

There was this tension that was building between the downtown businesses and the farmers’ market, not because I believe that they didn’t like the farmers’ market. They just didn’t like all the other stuff that was happening, which is kind of a systemic issue with downtown Santa Cruz, and has been for a long time. Anytime you have an event of that size and that popularity, and it’s open and it’s free of charge, you’re going to invite certain problems.

Rabkin: And you’ve had your own encounters with that, which we can talk about later.

Dhillon: Yes.

Rabkin: When you talk about the downtown corridor, though, as the siting of the original market, where exactly do you mean?
Dhillon: Pacific Avenue.

In either ‘99 or 2000, I was asked by the new operations manager at the time to work for the market part-time as an assistant manager. Really, my position was to just do the grunt work—cleaning up, making sure there were no dogs in the market, answering questions, etc. It was great, because I was really interested in the farmers’ market, interested in farmers’ markets in general, and I had been shopping at farmers’ markets for quite a while. I said, this is kind of an interesting little side job. At that time, I had like three jobs. [Laughs.] It went up to five at one point. Now it’s down to one, thank God.

Rabkin: So you had relocated from the Pacific Northwest to Santa Cruz at this point.

Dhillon: Yes. After college, I had lived on the Oregon coast for about five years. I had been coming to Santa Cruz, because I had friends that had lived down here or graduated from the university, and I had come down and visited. I was interested in the area, but I was still living in Oregon at the time.

Then I decided I wanted to make a change. I knew that the Oregon coast had limited economic opportunities. I was working in the service industry to get by. I was bartending and restauranting and this sort of thing, and I basically transferred those universal skills down to Santa Cruz, but with the intention of moving away from that and getting involved in new projects.
I was very interested in viticulture and the wine business. With my chemistry background and my love of wine and love of food, I said, hey, this could be kind of interesting. So I got a job at a local winery, Storrs Winery, which has been in business since the Loma Prieta [earthquake] of 1989. Steve and Pam looked at my resume and they hired me right away. I worked in wine production for five seasons with them.

At the same time, I got hired with the market as an assistant manager. Not even a year into it, the market ran into a whole bunch of controversy. In my assessment, it was associated with the techniques and tactics and attitude of the market manager at the time, basically interpreting certain problems and acting on them in a certain way, and it created this whole firestorm of controversy. This was in ’01, ’02, right in there.

**Rabkin:** So can you give me a sense, without going into any uncomfortable detail, of what the basis for the controversy might have been?

**Dhillon:** Well, at the time, like I was saying earlier, when the market first came online, there were all of these people that were showing up at the market and doing whatever—from playing music, hanging out, drumming, basically having a good time. It was creating tensions. People had problems with it. Customers had a problem with it. Vendors had a problem with it. Downtown businesses had a problem with it. But on the flip side, there were customers that loved it and vendors that probably loved it. It was this tough situation. Eventually what happened was the activities that originally were inside the market were pushed
out of the market, and then it all congregated into one location, which is what people consider the “drum circle” now.

Well, the market manager at the time thought that, because they had received a lot of complaints, that that particular gathering was detrimental to the success of the farmers’ market. A lot of farmers shared that view, too. So she took it upon herself to try to disband it. [Laughs.] That’s when the war started. Of course, that group fought back. There were certain individuals that got involved that are activists in the Santa Cruz community, and especially in the downtown corridor. It was just hellish.

I was there during that and I watched this whole thing shake down. I had the luxury of not being the manager. I just was a staff person. So I could keep myself out of the drama. But I saw it. It was a bad situation. The market manager eventually just quit. She resigned, literally walked off the job, because it was getting really bad for her. It was getting in the papers. The news media was showing up. The San Francisco Chronicle was there. It was just a nightmare, and it was getting embarrassing.

So myself and another guy, a guy named Scott Yundt, who was the other assistant manager, were put in the position where we had to run the market. Neither one of us had said openly, we want to become the market manager. I was still playing around in the wine business. I was thinking about a lot of other things, keeping my options open.
Rabkin: Did either of you have management experience?

Dhillon: Scott did not. I did, very limited. Most of my background is more in mechanics. I’ve been a mechanic in different capacities, or a construction guy. Then I got into the service industry. Never managing people. [Laughs.] Managing a farmers’ market is a whole different breed of management. Really the answer to the question is no. We were pretty green. It wasn’t like this was a career choice of mine. It was just the right place at the right time.

**Becoming Manager of the Santa Cruz Farmers’ Markets**

So both of us, we managed the market for the wintertime. And then Scott went off to law school. He’s a lawyer now. I was in this pivotal moment. At the time, I was interviewing for some very well-paying jobs in the area. I was at this crossroads. I said, what does my heart say? I said, I think I’m going to apply for this position for the farmers’ market. That was seven, eight years ago, and it was the best decision I’ve ever made. That’s the good news. I was going into such a volatile situation with a lot of bad blood on both sides. Everybody was just gun-shy. It was a really interesting time.

Rabkin: Did your Jesuit ethics training come in handy at this point?

Dhillon: Yes! Because the internal question was: who are you as a person? That’s one thing about the Jesuit education. When you identify what your ethics are, your core values, you’re basically looking inside yourself and saying: who are
you as a person? What resonates with you? That was one of those pivotal moments, because the other job I basically got was definitely not that, but the pay-out was really good. I was leaving behind a lot of money to do something that called to me on a more intrinsic level. That’s why I’m just stoked that I did what I did. So that’s the long version of how I got the job.

**Rabkin:** Great. I’d like you, if you would, to talk about the various tasks and responsibilities that make up your job as operations manager. Maybe what you could do is walk us through a typical work-week during your busiest season.

**Dhillon:** My duties have changed over the years, partially because I’ve been able to grow the business. Over the course of, I’d say, seven years, I’ve gone from being the guy who does it all—and I’m saying, pick up all the garbage at the end of the day, I mean, *everything*—to being more of an overseer, truly an operations manager position. I have a staff of six people now.

**Rabkin:** Six full-time people?

**Dhillon:** Six part-time.

**Rabkin:** Were you the only paid staff person when you walked into the job?

**Dhillon:** Yes, I was the only paid staff person. I basically ran two markets. I ran everything behind the scenes. I just quickly realized—I knew that in a couple of years, when I got the internal functioning of the market to where I wanted it, that
I needed to start delegating and hiring. I think a really important part of being a business is providing opportunities for other people. So, i.e., hiring, creating jobs for Santa Cruz County, right? If I did it all, that’s not really beneficial. Whereas I could hire out and pay somebody good wages, part-time wages, benefits, whatever, and give young people an opportunity, or whoever, an opportunity to work within the farming community.

**Revenue Sources and Budgeting**

**Rabkin:** And the funding you have for salaries comes out of the money you get paid by vendors? Are there other sources as well?

**Dhillon:** We do not rely on any grants. We don’t rely on any donations or fundraising. We’re totally self-sustaining. We do that by stall fees and membership dues. There’re a few value-added items that we’ve developed that create a little bit of a profit margin. But for the most part, it’s a real straightforward revenue, expense-oriented business. We’re totally self-sustaining.

**Rabkin:** You mentioned what sounded like three different fees: vendor fees, stall fees— Are those two different things or the same?

**Dhillon:** Two different things. Membership dues are like admin dues that are annual. Because we’re a membership-based organization, by law you actually
have to have a due. That due can be anywhere from a dollar to a million dollars. So we establish a membership due that is part of our revenue.

I think seventy-five percent of our operating budget comes from stall fees. We can get into this later. It’s an interesting discussion point, because by having an organization that relies on stall fees, there’s an inherent tendency to do the wrong thing. Stall fees and vendor fees are the same thing.

**Rabkin:** So you try to bring in lots of vendors to generate lots of revenue?

**Dhillon:** In order to survive, you must bring in adequate revenues, but if the focus is too revenue-oriented, you move away from your mission statement. It’s very, very easy to do. You have to have a good internal control system, hire good people, have a strong mission statement with checks and balances, and all this sort of stuff to protect your organization.

**Rabkin:** What’s the liability of succumbing to that temptation to take on more vendors in the interest of greater revenue?

**Dhillon:** The two things would be over-saturation of commodities. So you’re inherently hurting the farmers, which is going against your mission statement. There’s the mission of the California Department of Food and Agriculture, and then there’s the individual mission. They should coincide with each other. Farmers’ markets have been established in the State of California to protect the interests of the small-scale grower, because we have a huge bifurcation within
the agricultural community—large, small, there’s really nothing in the middle. That’s why farmers’ markets were invented.

So you start bringing in more growers, and you create saturation points, and then smaller growers inherently get hurt, because the larger growers can volume the product. If they can turn the product two, three, four times over, they’re going to still be able to eke out the profits they need. Their margins can still be kept true to form, whereas a small grower can only turn a product once or twice. If they lose that ability, then they’re hosed. And then what happens? They stop growing the commodity, or they drop out of the farmers’ market, and then they get out of farming. That’s bad. So that’s why you have to be able to keep commodity levels in check.

And then the other thing, of course, is the market starts to ebb away from being a farmers’ market and be more of a street fair. It takes on arts and crafts and all of these other little things that move away from the mission of what a farmers’ market is. Ideally, a farmers’ market should only be farmers. It shouldn’t be anything else.

**Rabkin:** Not even prepared or processed foods.

**Dhillon:** Ideally. But practically, you can’t do that.

**Rabkin:** Because?
Dhillon: [Laughs.] Because in the dead of winter, when there’s only kale, chard, beets, and winter root vegetables, maybe apples that are coming out of cold storage for the third month, you’ve got to give people a reason to come to the market. So there is this balance. But where’s the balance? Where’s the threshold? Where do you draw the line? We live in California, too, Northern California. You get out of the state, and the whole game changes.

Rabkin: You mean, where it’s not even possible to have a year-round market?

Dhillon: Yes, exactly, and it’s a struggle just to get people to come to the market, even during the height of the season.

Rabkin: Because the cultural climate is different, also.

Dhillon: Because the cultural climate is different. That’s right. If you go to the downtown Santa Cruz Farmers’ Market in the dregs of winter, you can get actually pretty blown away by what you can grow in the wintertime.

Daily Duties

So for my daily duties, that’s an overview of the bigger change that’s happened since the beginning of my employment. The high season is from April to November. We’re past the high season. It pretty much was over November 1. We’re now moving into the slower season. Come December, January, it’s definitely down season. This is when we take our vacations. We work less. I
work about seven days a week during the high season. I don’t officially ever take a day off in the high season. It’s just impossible. I’ll take two, three hours off during the day to do something different. During the down season, what I try to do (although I didn’t do it last year, which was a big mistake), was take a concentrated amount of time off, like two to three weeks, or if I can pull it off, a whole month. I’ll go travel and just be completely void of the farmers’ market stimulus so that then I can have the courage to do it for one more season. [Laughs.] It’s really important. And farmers will say the same thing. Come this time of year, they’re bored of farming. They’re bored of pain and suffering. [Laughs.] But you know what? Every year, they go right back into it, because you’ve got to give yourself downtime.

**Rabkin:** When you say seven days a week in high season, what time of day are those days beginning, and when do they end?

**Dhillon:** I get up five in the morning pretty much every morning. I’ve got a pattern. I drink my coffee; I read *The Economist*. That’s my thing. I go online sometimes. I hit the office probably around seven thirty in the morning and I work all the way up until I can’t work any more, because I’m hungry. Then maybe I’ll take a couple of hours off during the day, and I’ll come back and try to do another four hours worth of work or whatever. So my days will be anywhere from six- to ten-hour workdays. It just depends on the time of year and what needs to be done.
The market is a business, and there’re markers throughout the year for annual applications, and getting crop lists all set up. There’s a ton of stuff that has to be done. A lot of it is phone calls, tons of phone calls going in and out, contacting farmers about harvest dates, production problems, scheduling, etc. So that’s a lot of what I’m doing. Tons of e-mails. You get a flood of people wanting to get into the farmers’ market. They want to sell anything from hula hoops to persimmons. It runs the gamut, and you’ve got to filter all of that. I’m the gatekeeper. So it’s a lot of diplomacy on the phone, being firm, but also listening to people, because they want to sell a product. They’ll do anything they can to convince you that it’s the best product on the planet, no matter what you’re telling them.

**Rabkin:** Does each of your vendors have a contract or an agreement to sell particular commodities?

**Dhillon:** Yes. When I came on, I established a commodity contract system, which is a legally binding contract. I worked with our attorneys, and over the course of the years developed a selection process and a contract-based system. You as a farmer are legally liable for what you sell at the market. That’s subject to contract. Those contracts will sometimes change three, four times throughout a year. But you have a contract that you’re legally liable for. That prevents fraud. It’s also a communication tool between the farms and the Farmers’ Market Association, because a lot of these guys do a lot of farmers’ markets.

**Rabkin:** So fraud, for example, would entail somebody selling produce that they had not grown themselves?
Dhillon: That, and selling something they’re not approved for. So, for example, strawberries and tomatoes—two big cash crops, especially the Early Girl dry-farmed tomatoes. Everybody wants to sell them in the market. Why? Because this area is a great area to grow Early Girls, and you can dry farm them. There’s enough moisture in the ground, the whole bit. Strawberries, for obvious reasons. They’re a total cash cow, especially if you’re an early-season strawberry grower. The first guy to hit the market with tasty sweet strawberries makes a killing. So everybody wants a little bit of that business.

If you don’t have commodity contracts, some farm, Farm X, could come in and be selling a bunch of stuff, and then decide they want to get into the strawberry business. Well, that contract prevents them from bringing in a product that they’ve not been pre-approved for. If they want to sell that product, they have to go through a process. It’s a protection for the Farmers’ Market Association, the consumer, and the farmers. Keep in mind, if there’s only three people in the market selling strawberries, and a new farm brings in strawberries, a fourth one, and they’re a really big grower, it’s going to disrupt the supply and demand of the commodity.

Rabkin: Thanks. You were talking about your function as kind of a gatekeeper.

Dhillon: So as far as my daily duties, that’s a lot of what I do. I got up this morning, and before I saw you I talked to three or four people on the phone trying to get into the market, some people who qualified, and some people who would not qualify as applicants. The ones that do qualify, there’s all of these
questions that they have that I have to help them out with. They’re coming to me to find out what’s it going to take to be able to sell in our markets. And whether they’re going to sell in our market or not, I give them the information and the tools to be able to sell in other farmers’ markets, like say in South County or Monterey County or over the hill. You get a lot of that. Other duties would include website content and current project work.

**Rabkin:** Is website maintenance your purview also?

**Dhillon:** Yes, I built the website with the help of a friend. It’s an interactive website, so I can get in there and change the content and photos any time I want. I want to start using the website as a gatekeeper more than me, because I think it would really help us out as far as making my time more efficient.

**Rabkin:** So all of that information you’re now giving out on a call-by-call basis and all that gatekeeping, some of it could actually happen in the interaction between the farmer and the website?

**Dhillon:** Not the farmer, but the non-member. It’s more the non-member. The farmer interaction will always have to be one-on-one.

**Rabkin:** Farmers who are already members.
Dhillon: Yes. There’s no gatekeeping between me and the farmers within the membership. They can call me at two o’clock in the morning, and they have. [Laughs.]

Rabkin: I was using the wrong terminology. I was thinking about people who are hoping to sell in your market.

Dhillon: Those people would then go to the website. That’s what I’m hoping. It will cut down on the amount of time I’m spending on the phone with these people. But the farmers, the people within the membership, have total access to me all of the time. I don’t think other farmers’ market associations do that. I’m very available, because they need answers quick. Stuff comes up, and they want to move on stuff.

Rabkin: So you’ve been describing essentially a desk job so far.

Dhillon: Yes.

Rabkin: What proportion of your job would you say is, in fact, behind the desk?

Dhillon: It’s becoming more and more, because I’m delegating more and more responsibilities to staff people. We run three farmers’ markets. We’ll be running four next year. I can’t physically be at all four markets for anywhere from six to eight hours and then have enough energy for the other three days to do all of the office work. Not even the energy, I don’t have enough time.
For example, on the weekend markets, on Saturday, the Westside Farmers’ Market, I’ll get up in the morning. I’ll go immediately over to the farmers’ market. My staff person will be there. I’ll check in with them. I’ll have some little agenda items I need to get to with vendors at the markets. I put my eyes on the site, make sure everything looks good, looks the way I want it to be. I’ll be there for maybe a couple of hours, and then I’ll say bye to my guy. I’ll go back to the office on Saturday, and then I’ll work for another four hours on stuff. It’s great. The phone’s not ringing. I can get a lot of stuff done. So that would be my Saturday, for example.

Then on Sunday, I would go to Live Oak Farmers’ Market, maybe not work in the office that afternoon. It just depends on the time of year. Monday, Tuesday are pure office work, from the time I wake up until the time I drop. Wednesday’s the Downtown Farmers’ Market. I’m there. I make a habit of being there from the beginning to the end.

I also have a weekly staff meeting, which happens right before that market, because I have the highest number of staff people at that market. So that’s a good time to check in about issues or scheduling. Then Thursday, Friday—office. That’s a summertime work-week. In the wintertime, I take Thursdays and Fridays off, if I can.
The Board of Directors

**Rabkin:** How is the oversight of the markets divided between you and the board of directors? How do you share that responsibility with them?

**Dhillon:** The board of directors—we have a meeting once a month. There’s a commodity board meeting, which then goes into the regular board of directors meeting. They vet what I do. I ask them permission to do certain things that are out of my jurisdiction, and we work on long-range strategy. They’ll check in with me on long-range strategy or short-term strategy. If there’re emergencies that come up, we deal with that. If there’s disciplinary actions that need to be handled further than what I’ve done in the market, then they get involved.

**Rabkin:** For breaches of contract?

**Dhillon:** Anything under the sun. Breach of contract or the market rules. If I have problems with a particular vendor, chronic problems, and I don’t feel like I can alleviate the situation, solve the problem on my own, then I take it to the board, because they’re technically my boss.

But they don’t get involved in the day-to-day operations at all. We have an attorney. We have a CPA. We have payroll service. We have a bookkeeper. Everybody I need to talk to is always there. Within the board, there’s a treasurer who is responsible for bringing the profit-and-loss sheets to the monthly meeting. We’ll take a look at operating revenues at that point, match it up with
projected budgets and all of this sort of stuff. So yes, that’s as much as they interact with what’s going on. I would say that our particular board is very involved, in the sense that they are also farmers.

**Rabkin:** Your entire board is made up of farmers?

**Dhillon:** Almost all of them are made up of the farming community. There might be three positions on the board that are not. So they have a real-time understanding of what’s going on.

**Rabkin:** Can somebody be both a board member and a vendor at the markets, or do you make a distinction between those?

**Dhillon:** Yes, they also could not be a vendor. The board has various seats that are designated for either non-vendors or non-members and individuals that are a part of the organization.

**Part of the California Department of Food and Agriculture**

**Rabkin:** Are your markets certified through the California Certified Farmers’ Markets?

**Dhillon:** They’re not California Certified Farmers’ Markets. That’s kind of a separate little deal. We are a CDFA market, which is California Department of Food and Agriculture, which you don’t have to be, to be a farmers’ market, but
you have to be if you want to be a certified farmers’ market in the state of California. What that means is that our farmers’ markets are part of the CDFA. It’s not an association; it’s part of the state of California Department of Food and Agriculture, and we fall under their jurisdiction. They perform spot inspections at all the markets to ensure compliance. I often get cited for little technical things.

**Rabkin:** Like what?

**Dhillon:** Like not having agricultural certs posted at the market on a particular farm. If there was an inspection, and Farm X did not have their Ag Cert posted, they got a citation; I got a citation. The citation didn’t cost us anything. It was more like, “Just have the cert up.” If they commit an infraction, there’s a chance that I’m also going to be party to that, which is fine. I like that. I like the oversight; I like the checks and balances. I think it’s totally healthy. Getting in trouble is good, because you realize, “Wait a second. I’m slacking over here, and we need to do something about this.” They help me do my job better.

**Rabkin:** How frequently are you inspected at the markets?

**Dhillon:** Twice a year at each market location. I don’t know when it’s going to happen. They are spot inspections. That’s in all three markets. The same goes with Health Department inspections. That’s the only other government organization that looks over us.
But California Certified Farmers’ Markets is more of a marketing organization. So what they do is you pay them, and then they give you a little banner saying, “You’re a California Certified Farmers’ Market.” Which is a little misleading, because people think, “Oh they’re a certified farmers’ market,” meaning they’re certified with the Department of Agriculture, or they’re certified organic. That’s mostly what people think. They think it’s certified organic. As soon as they see the word “certified,” they assume: certified organic. It’s amazing, that connection there.

So we don’t really have anybody who advertises that. There are people who participate with them, but they don’t advertise it at our markets.

**Rabkin:** Who advertises?

**Dhillon:** Certified California Farmers’ Markets, because there’s banners and whatnot that people will put up. All we care about is that you are a legitimate farm, and you’re certified by the Department of Agriculture. And then there’s some other paperwork you have to have. And either you are, or not, certified organic.

**Rabkin:** Just to make sure I’m understanding this, the Department of Agriculture certifies both farmers and markets?

**Dhillon:** Correct.
Rabkin: Okay. And the certification of the market involves affirming that you are complying with various regulations and certifying that the people who are selling at your market are growing in California and selling their own products?

Dhillon: Correct, that’s right. Those are the two biggies. You’re in the state of California, and you’re actually growing the things that you sell. So when I mentioned fraud before, the biggest fraud problem is supplementation, meaning that a farm that typically grows one acre of tomatoes, but is actually selling two acres worth of the tomatoes at the market is probably supplementing. Where did that other acre come from? Probably from a packing house. So that’s one type of fraud scenario.

Rabkin: How often does that kind of thing happen in your markets?

Dhillon: I would love to say never at all, but I honestly couldn’t say for sure how much fraud there is going on. I would guess very, very little, because of our control systems, and the fact that if I get a sense that you’re cheating, I’m going to be on you. We’ve kicked out various people for cheating.

Rabkin: How do you tell?

Dhillon: [Laughs.] It’s tough. It’s a really slippery slope. You have to be very, very sure. Things like—and this is the blatant obvious one, and if you get caught with this, you just deserve to be caught—showing up with stickers on your fruit.
Rabkin: [Laughs.]

Dhillon: Or the one that I’ll see is that people who like to cheat, but also have farming experience, will push seasons, the front end and the back end. Like, for example, asparagus. Asparagus historically comes in about March, maybe sometimes April. It depends on the season. South County will get it first, and it starts to move up. What if you show up with asparagus in the beginning of February, or the middle of February, or maybe at the end of February, depending on how much you want to push it? If you can get a two-week jump on competition for a hot commodity like asparagus, and you’re not growing it, and you’re buying and reselling it, it’s pure profit. You can sell it for a premium, and you didn’t have to put any labor into it. If I start to notice that, then I’m going to start paying attention. I’ll start making phone calls. I’ll get the Ag. department involved. I’ll call for spot inspections. I’ll call Monterey County or Santa Cruz County, or San Benito—whatever county you need to call and say, “I want an inspection.”

Rabkin: So you can get a county inspector to that person’s farm to actually check on the ground whether they’re growing asparagus.

Dhillon: I can make the request. Whether they do it is another thing. Santa Cruz County is really good. If I even suggest the idea to a Santa Cruz County Ag inspector, there’ll be an inspection within an hour. Other counties, it’s not always like that. In fact, I had one particular producer who we had photographic evidence of committing fraud. I had the whole case lined up, and the county that
had jurisdiction and was really pivotal to making the whole thing happen just dropped the ball. They just said, “Sorry, we can’t help you.” I don’t even know why. Maybe somebody was getting paid off. I have no idea.

Rabkin: Understaffing?

Dhillon: It could be understaffing. It could be just laziness. It’s just really hard to say. But those things are really frustrating, when you know somebody’s cheating and you can’t bust them.

Working with other Sustainable Agriculture Organizations

Rabkin: Tell me about your relationships with other local organizations and institutions that deal with sustainable agriculture, like Community Alliance with Family Farmers [CAFF], or the Organic Farming Research Foundation [OFRF], or the Agriculture & Land-Based Training Association [ALBA], or California Certified Organic Farmers [CCOF]. Are there any organizations that, in your position, you have regular dealings with, or that have been supportive?

Dhillon: All of the above. I have regular dealings with all of them, except for the Organic Farming Research Foundation. I know the director really well, [Mark] Lipson.¹ I talk to Mark all the time, but we don’t actually work with their organization on projects. We probably should, because a lot of what we’re doing is unique. But CCOF, my gosh, because they’re a certifying organization and the biggest and the most well known and probably the most respected, I deal with
them all the time, sometimes from an enforcement standpoint, sometimes just for an informational standpoint, whatever it might be.

I’ve worked with CAFF since Day One. I worked with them on the Buy Fresh, Buy Local campaign, which I think has been one of the most successful marketing campaigns that’s ever been introduced. I’ve worked with ALBA not so much, but I’m working with them more and more. Unfortunately with ALBA, a lot of the people who graduate from their program are growing products that are already represented in the farmers’ market. Really what ALBA wants, any organization that does what they’re doing, these helper groups, is they want to get their base into our farmers’ markets, which would be great if we could make something happen, but only if we can use the product. So that’s where we haven’t been able to work together so much.

**Rabkin:** Because you’re already saturated.

**Dhillon:** Yes. I mean, applying for strawberries and tomatoes? [Laughs] Come on. Come on! All of these groups have been very proactive groups. I’ll work with anybody, really. There’s no reason why we shouldn’t.

**Rabkin:** Are there others I haven’t mentioned that have been important allies or colleagues?

**Dhillon:** Second Harvest Food Bank has been great.
Rabkin: What do you do with them?

**Electronic Benefits Transfer Program**

Dhillon: I’ve worked on the EBT system, the implementation of the electronic benefits transfer, which I think single-handedly has improved the redemption rate of food stamp dollars, but also brought more people into farmers’ markets.

Rabkin: Do your markets all accept EBT cards?

Dhillon: Yes. The last time we checked, we’re the only organization in northern Monterey Bay that does it. We were the first.

Rabkin: So any one of your vendors would take that aid money?

Dhillon: Correct. You’re going to have to go back and vet this, but I think we were the first one to do it, when we made the transition, because a lot of farmers’ markets said, “Oh, no, we’re not going to do that, because that means we’ve got to do X, Y, and Z, and we’ve got to hire an extra person and all of this stuff.” Understandably, there’s infrastructure cost, you have to create banking systems, accounting systems, and you have to create scrip. You have to replace the food-stamp dollar with something. We just said, “We’re doing it.” The great thing about it was our redemption rate went from, say, seventy-five to one hundred dollars per week at one market, to like five hundred.
Rabkin: Explain what that means.

Dhillon: Originally food stamps were just little paper scrips, like the old days, and they would be, I think, a dollar or two dollars—I can’t remember the denomination—but basically the person would come into the market and spend the food-stamp dollar like they would at Safeway. We really didn’t get involved. There really wasn’t that much involvement. We would redeem the food-stamp dollars at the end of the day and make a deposit, but that’s like getting checks. There’s only like literally fifty, seventy-five dollars, maybe a hundred bucks on a really busy summer day.

Rabkin: And is each individual vendor taking in this scrip and then redeeming it for cash?

Dhillon: Yes, because back in the old days, food-stamp dollars were universally accepted. So anybody could take it. If they had an account with the federal government, they could go ahead and cash them in, but 99.9 percent of them would just turn them in to us, because we had an account with the federal government. So we would deposit them into our bank account.

Then the federal government decided to get rid of the paper scrip, because of too much fraud and a bunch of other problems, and they wanted to go to an electronic form. So they issued these credit cards called EBT cards. Each state’s got one. These particular cards, you can use at any POS machine, point-of-sale machine. When you go into New Leaf or Staff of Life, they have the little
electronic reader where you run your card. That’s a POS machine. That POS machine’s built into the infrastructure of the retail facility. Well, we’re a rogue operation. We set up in parking lots or streets or wherever a farmers’ market sets up. We have no infrastructure. We have nothing to plug into. So that became a problem.

So what the state said was, “Okay, what we’ll do for farmers’ markets or other organizations that have this problem: if you do a certain amount of redemption per month, we’ll give you a free machine. The machine’s a five-hundred-dollar machine; we’re going to give it to you for free.

Fortunately, we redeemed enough food stamps under the old program that we qualified for a free machine. We still had to buy the scrip and get it printed. There are specifications that the government had for the scrip. We had to create our own accounting system. And we had to staff it. You’ve got to have somebody that actually people come to, whereas the old food stamps, you didn’t have to do that. So you have to add labor costs.

Well, we just said, “Fine. We’re going to do it.” We developed this system, and I have to say, it’s a really good system. It’s easy to run. Anybody can learn it. Our redemption rate over the course of—I would say like two years—went from seventy-five, to one hundred, to three hundred, to four hundred. Now we’re hitting five, five fifty.

Rabkin: At a given market on a given day.
Dhillon: At one market, yes, at the Downtown Santa Cruz market. So it’s telling me more people that (I mean, this is an assumption) that are probably in a more vulnerable position are now accessing more quality food. Like what we were talking about in the ’70s and what’s happening now. The poor are being subjected to eating cheap food. They have to eat cheap food, but the only cheap food that’s available is this high-calorie, no-nutrient—junk food, whatever you want to call it. Now what we’re hoping is that will flip around.

Well, Second Harvest Food Bank really helped us along the way [with] signage and promotion and co-promotion, any grant funding that they had, I’d get a phone call from Lee Mercer, “Hey, Nesh, I’ve got a thousand dollars to spend, and I’ve got to spend it by this date. What do you think? Let’s do this, this, and this.” I’m like, “Sounds great. Let’s do it.” With the intent of getting more people to shop at the farmers’ market and using the food stamp dollars. So that sort of stuff. The Second Harvest Food Bank has been great.

Rabkin: This must be very hard to measure in anything other than an impressionistic way, but I’m wondering whether you have actually been able to detect a shift in the market clientele, or an addition of lower-income customers that you didn’t see before the EBT was available.

Dhillon: A little bit, yes, because of that. It’s a fairly big market, and there’re a lot of people shopping. I’m also noticing people with more money shopping at the farmers’ market that I never saw before, especially at the Santa Cruz market. The Westside market is a different story. You have to judge how people are dressed.
That’s the best way. I’ve seen people with suits coming into the market, whereas before it wasn’t really that scene. So you’re seeing that. You’re seeing people getting off work in the downtown corridor that are shopping there. Then you have the long-time Santa Cruz customers. Then you’re starting to see this infiltration of probably lower-income clientele that are coming in and they’re using EBT cards or WIC coupons (Women, Infants, and Children).

So yes, we’re getting more of a balanced customer base. I think the whole thing across the board needs to grow. Everybody needs to be shopping at the farmers’ market as best as they can, and hopefully the farmers’ market is set up in such a way that still allows the customer to have a value shopping experience. Sure, you can have your real high-end farm that’s selling its peaches for nine dollars a pound, but you also have another organic farm that’s selling them for, say, six dollars a pound, or maybe even cheaper. Or you have the larger farm that volumes a bunch of kale or chard for fifty cents a head versus the normal dollar-fifty a head. Not all the time, but it’s there. It’s the value play. And people who are on limited income streams will always gravitate— Actually, I think in general, us as humans, the behavioral psychology is such that we’ll always gravitate towards the value play. So if a farmers’ market is set up to have value in it, I think it’s going to be a successful farmers’ market. If it’s real high-end across the board, then it’s going to be subjected to economic cycles. People are like, “Whoa, that’s too expensive! I’m not going there.”
Food Security Issues

**Rabkin:** There does seem to be a sort of impression abroad that it costs more to shop at farmers’ markets than it does to shop at Safeway. How do you respond to people who say, “I’d love to buy all my produce at the farmers’ market, but it’s just too expensive.”

**Dhillon:** [Laughs.] That’s the big million-dollar question and answer. Because they’re right and they’re wrong. And we’re right and we’re wrong in our response. The question’s based on money. It’s based on how much money they have to spend and much they can get. So my answer to them, again, is really essentially what I said before: If you shop around in the market, you’re going to find good deals there. Yes, at times, it will be more expensive, but keep in mind that at the farmers’ market, they’re subject to price fluctuations much more than the stores are.

So I say, just go shop around. Be proactive. Don’t go spend your money right away. Just go shop away and then come back. That’s how you do it in the Old County. Go shop with my aunt in north India, man. She walks around three or four times in the farmers’ market. She haggles a deal, and then she comes back and pays for the best quality for the best price. Us as Americans, we’re not used to that. We’ll just go to the store and pay the price. The farmers’ market offers a more flexible opportunity, a much more flexible opportunity. It’s actually much more free market.
Rabkin: Are you saying that people can actually haggle for deals at the farmers’ market?

Dhillon: They can, but it depends on who you’re dealing with. Some farmers get really upset: “Hey man, I worked my butt off for this. Don’t be asking me for a deal.” But some other ones, they’ll give you a deal. We have a couple of farms in there that—they’ll roll this stuff at the end of the day. I mean, they’ll sell it three for one, two for one. They’ll start shucking and jiving in the market. It becomes this real dynamic thing. If you’re a savvy customer and you’re looking for the value, looking for a good deal, you can find it. You can find it in the market.

The other answer is more philosophical. It’s not really philosophical. It is practical, but it has a philosophical element to it. You’re going to save money on the front end, but you’re actually going to be spending a lot more money on the back end because of health reasons, because of the paradigm by which the wholesale distribution, centralized distribution food system works, you’re actually going to collectively, us as a species is going to be paying more money in the long run. By supporting a local venue, you’re actually creating more security for yourself, because what you’re doing is you’re supporting an infrastructure that has a better chance to survive. If you take away dollars from local farmers, then they will stop farming. If they stop farming, then you’re not going to have local farms. If you don’t have local farms, then you have to go to the outside area for food. That creates risk. And the more risk you have, then the more subject you are to systemic shocks.
What I do nowadays is I just say, “Let’s just look at the case of oil as a grand example. We have to go and start wars in other countries to secure oil fields, because there are systemic shocks that are coming down the pipe. We’re tapping all of our oil from cheap, cheap sources, but it comes at the expense of our domestic security. Food is no different. As we move into this new paradigm of the global system, i.e., global food system, and we’re growing our food farther and farther away, well, what if the shipping lanes get chopped down? What if there’s a big storm? What if they just dump more DDT than they should? There’s a lot of inherent problems with supporting the old system. Whereas if you support the local system, you know what you’re getting and you’re looking at the farmer in the face.” So that’s more of the economics side. That sometimes falls on deaf ears, because it really boils down to like: “Well, it just costs me more, and I’ve got to feed my family.”

**Rabkin:** Right. When you’re talking to people who are really living close to the bone, they may even subscribe to those arguments, but not necessarily be able to act on them, because of their economic situation.

**Dhillon:** Exactly. I don’t know how to solve that problem right now. It’s a tough one. I think that WIC and EBT helps. I think it really does help, but it’s not a solution. It’s just the cost of food has to come down at the local farmers’ market. But then, at what expense? You live in the state of California. Do you know what land prices are? The cost of living, the cost of doing business in this state, it’s fixed. I mean, if you lived in a different region, maybe it would be cheaper. It’s
hard to have those conversations with people. I don’t want to bore them. [Laughs.]

The Flavor of Each Market

Rabkin: Let’s talk about another aspect of the market besides the sale of food. You mentioned briefly something about music and performers. So I wanted to ask you about your relationship to the provision of entertainment or aesthetic values at the market. Is that important to you?

Dhillon: It is, but I treat each market separately. With the downtown market, for example, which is our flagship market, the essence of that market is the commerce. It’s the excitement of food and buying food and bumping into people. It’s the chaos of the open market. Putting music into it, I think would just take it over the edge.

Rabkin: [Laughs.]

Dhillon: So you look at it and you say, “Listen, man. The feng shui of this market is such, and there’s not much we can do with it. Yes, we could add music, and it would make some people happy, but it would drive other people totally mad.” I look at it and I say, okay, it is what it is, and we just want to maintain.

Now at other markets that we run, like the Westside Farmers’ Market and the Live Oak Farmers’ Market, I built a whole different motif around the market. I
said, okay, I want to be different. I want to create a reason for people to come to this market, and I don’t want it to be size. I don’t want the size to be the factor. Americans love size. Why do they go to the Cabrillo market? Why do they go to the Downtown market? The selection and size. They feel it’s very abundant. Well, it is, but you know what? The Westside market is very abundant, too. If you pay attention to what’s there, you can get almost everything you need, with the exception of a few things, which over the next couple of years, that [deficiency] will be eliminated. But it doesn’t feel as big. So people go, “Hmm, it’s a smaller market.” So how do we get over that emotional dilemma that they’re going through? Let’s give them another reason to come and hang out. So I built the whole café seating section. I’m not sure if any other markets are doing that. And I created a music series. I actually started at the Live Oak market, and then I saw how the response was, and then I replicated it at Westside. I felt like, hey, the music, the café seating, the ambiance, the aesthetic, the overall aesthetic—I don’t know if you’ve noticed. Have you been to that market?

**Rabkin:** Yes.

**Dhillon:** The market is square. The idea is to create no disadvantages for anybody that’s in the market. Everybody is on equal ground. There are no blind spots in the market. You could turn left, right, north, south, whatever, and you’re going to get quality. Have good distribution of products so that one side’s not lumped up with one thing, and do it in such a fashion that everybody’s looking in. It’s kind of the Mexican downtown-plaza concept. Everything is just looking in.
Rabkin: All the stalls are around the perimeter and looking toward the center.

Dhillon: Toward the center, the waterfall, and whatnot. In this case, it’s café seating. And then you have live music. So it’s giving people an extra incentive to come to the market.

I also did this (I’m not sure if I should reveal my business secrets here, but what the hell) as kind of a hedge against Whole Foods coming into town, because I knew that Whole Foods, once they come into town, they’re going to become very competitive. That’s their model. I think that they’re moving into a bracket where the “Whole Paycheck” concept—they’re going to get rid of that. I think they’re going to try to become more of the value play so that they can compete in a much more competitive environment. I’ve been following the company. I follow the internals. They have to move to the value, especially in a downturn. We’re going to move into a very protracted recessionary period. If they want to keep that stock up and keep that company profitable, they’re going to have to change their tune.

Rabkin: “Whole Paycheck” is the moniker they’ve earned by people who see them as an exclusively high-end store.

Dhillon: Exactly, and it’s the one thing that hurts them. So I have a feeling that they’re going to become very, very competitive, and Staff of Life, New Leaf, and Shopper’s Corner—local venues—I think are going to struggle a little bit, which is unfortunate, but it is what it is.
I knew they were coming in. I wanted to create something that they can’t replicate. I wanted to give the customer an opportunity to feel special, feel different. So that’s how the whole aesthetic was developed, but it wasn’t born out of that. That was more secondary. That was kind of a developed concept after the fact. Primarily, I wanted to do something beautiful and special, to make the farmers’ market more successful for the farmers. The customers’ response has been really positive. People really, really enjoy what’s there. I’m really happy about that.

The Drum Circle Controversy

**Rabkin:** I guess while we’re on this subject, it would probably be a good time to bring up the controversy over the presence of the drum circle at the downtown market, which you’ve already brought up in terms of the market’s history, but of course, it’s been in the news again recently.⁵ There’s a drumming circle that draws large crowds, and some vendors and customers complain about the noise, or disturbance, or mess that’s drawn in by that situation, and even the police have had to pay attention. Other community members are staunch advocates of the circle’s continuation. I’m just curious how you have experienced the situation and what your thoughts are about it.

**Dhillon:** Yes, it’s a tough one. [Laughs.] I’m in this really odd position, because I’m the face of the market. I’ve seen firsthand what happened when the face of the market took on this issue. I was there, and I’m shell-shocked by it. So there’s
a side of me that doesn’t even want to get involved, because it’s just drama to me. And it’s really not the farmers’ market. It’s this other thing that’s happening.

Let me just say, first of all, the big issue that I think everybody universally holds onto is that there’s some inherent safety problems with the gathering in the form of illegal commerce that’s happening, i.e., drugs and drug sales and the use of, and the fact that it’s so open. It’s so in your face. People really get concerned about that. People take offense and whatnot. The amount of people that can gather in the summertime, people who are just traveling through town can get to the point where the parking lot’s totally unusable, or at least it’s perceived that it can’t be used.

Rabkin: Unusable as a market?

Dhillon: No, just to people who want to park in the parking lot. We don’t control that parking lot. We have no jurisdiction. We just control what’s happening within the footprint of the farmers’ market.

Rabkin: So you’re talking about the lot where people park in order to shop at the market.

Dhillon: Or shop downtown Santa Cruz. I mean, it’s a public lot. So depending on the size of the gathering, it’s going to have various impacts. It’s tough. There are all these issues, these multiple sensitivities to the collateral events, around the drumming or the music. It’s really just music. It’s not even necessarily
drumming. And then there’s the right to play music and whatnot. They’re almost like two separate things. There’s all of the bad behavior, and then there’s the behavior that’s not bad or good. It is what it is. It’s just music, right? And nobody can separate the two; they just can’t do it. I’ve had a lot of conversations with people over the years, and I’m to the point where I’m tired of having the conversation, because I realize I can’t talk to everybody and try to separate the two and try to reason it out. It’s just like it is what it is. I think it reached a crescendo recently this last summer—a lot of complaints from customers and people in the downtown corridor and business owners. There was a whole flood of complaints. People were looking at them and going, “This is just an unfettered party. This wouldn’t be allowed anywhere else.” If you had this happening two blocks down the street, the police would shut it down. But for whatever reason, it’s being allowed in this parking lot.

So the police obviously responded to all of the complaints. The farmers’ market has just stayed out of it. We’ve talked to police and said, “Look, you might want to be taking care of the safety issue here. There are some problems here. We are getting complaints, but we’re not going to inject ourselves into this process, because we really feel like this is an issue for the police to deal with and the city to deal with. If you want to allow people to set up in a parking lot and party and play music and do whatever they want without any rules or regulations, then I guess we all have to live with that. But as it stands right now, the law the way it’s written doesn’t allow for this sort of thing.” We pay dues. We pay fees. We have to subscribe to the rules of the City of Santa Cruz. We have insurances. We’re
playing by the rules. Why is it that this thing gets to happen next to us, and it’s completely unregulated? It doesn’t make a lot of sense to me.

**Rabkin:** It sounds like you and your board have been fairly neutral on the issue, and yet it also sounds like you have a real financial stake in the outcome of the situation, if indeed the vendors’ complaints are correct that, to some extent, the crowds and the noise and the mess interfere with commerce.

**Dhillon:** Yes. There is no doubt that people aren’t coming to the market, because they perceive that event as bad. The two complaints you hear about the downtown market is: There’s not enough parking, and “the element.”

**Rabkin:** [Laughs.]

**Dhillon:** They call it “the element,” which is what they’re talking about. They’re like, “I don’t want to be harassed,” or “I don’t want to feel threatened,” or whatever, whatever somebody’s perception is. Especially this last summer, it kind of turned—semi—not violent, but it just had an edge to it that I’ve never seen before, and people really were honing in on it. Who knows what it is? Downtown Santa Cruz kind of peaks and valleys with respect to its drug problems.

**Rabkin:** You mean, geographically or chronologically or both?
Dhillon: I’m just saying over a course of time, it goes up and down. There seems to be a larger percentage of homeless, mentally ill people in downtown Santa Cruz, something I’ve really noticed over the years. I’ve worked in downtown for a decade. And I don’t know what that is, but that contributes to the issue. You have unstable people. They don’t know any better. It just adds to the tension, “the edginess” and the tension, and it’s sad, because I do think the farmers’ market suffers financially, because of it. Which is unfortunate, because it means the farmers suffer. But at the same time, there are people who say, “Hey, I come to the farmers’ market only because of that.” So there’re people on both sides of it.

I think that for me, if they say, “Well, Nesh, you can’t have it both ways. You’ve got to strike something right in the middle. You’ve got to Bill Clinton it or something,” I’d respond, “Okay, why don’t we get rid of the illegal activity and let the music happen, but have them get a sound permit, go through the same things that we have to, like go through the review, and have people that are accountable and responsible, like you can’t plug in, and if you do, you’re going to get a ticket. We can’t plug in. But all the drug dealing and drug use and all of the aggressive behavior and all of that other stuff, that’s got to go.”

Rabkin: Have you seen any constructive conversations or movement towards resolution of this very difficult issue since the big eruptions this summer?

Dhillon: There are certain people within the activist community that injected themselves into the whole thing, which completely distorts the whole issue. It
becomes less about anything except about themselves. I’ve seen this time and time again. There’re certain individuals in Santa Cruz. When they get themselves involved, everybody is like, “Ai-yi-yi,” and they just step away, because they just know what the end result is. It ain’t resolution. We’re farmers. We’re a farmers’ market. It’s asking us to participate in something that I don’t feel like we should be participating in. I really do. It’s an unfair position to put us in. That’s my opinion. Maybe other people feel different on the whole thing. My allegiance is to the farmers and to the farmers’ market. Whatever I do and say has to protect their interests first and foremost.

Expanding to Felton

Rabkin: Thank you. You mentioned, when we began the interview, adding the Felton market to your circuit. Tell me about that.

Dhillon: Well, the Felton market’s been in business since 1987. It’s operated as an independent farmers’ market. They’ve never had any other farmers’ markets associated with their association. SCCFM, for years, we’ve talked behind the scenes, fantasized about one day maybe absorbing the Felton Farmers’ Market, because it seemed very appropriate. It’s like, “Look, Felton’s part of Santa Cruz. This is part of the family.” And a lot of their vendors were in our membership. I just started thinking about it in pure business terms. There would be a huge advantage to the Felton market by being under SCCFM. All these infrastructural needs are instantly transferred. The cost of doing business goes way down, because there’s [currently] duplication of tasks. I mean, it’s just a win, win,
The only thing they’re really losing is their autonomy, so to speak. That’s more perception and ego than anything else. It’s like there’s no disadvantage. And I’m like, “This is something we need to put out there.”

So it was put out quite a few years ago, maybe like three or four years ago, and it was instantly shot down for the reason I just mentioned: autonomy. “What are they doing? They’re the big organization that wants to eat us up. We’re not even big. We’re not very big at all.” So we just let it go. Well, at least we reached out.

Just recently, this last year, they experienced a lot of turnover in their management. They had three managers in the course of a year and a half. The board president really started to take stock of that. She started to become concerned. She felt like, there’s something that needs to change here. One of the market managers who quit (he went on to better things) approached me with the idea. I said to him, “You know what? We’ve been thinking about this for years. It got shot down. People on the Felton board weren’t into the idea. But you know what? I’m totally open to the discussion.” And he goes, “Well, I think it’s a good idea. I’m going to suggest it to the board.” So he started the ball rolling.

And before you know it, I got a phone call from the board president, and then she and I started discussing things. Over the course of, I’d say, five months—I spoke with their board many times, had discussions, talked to our legal department, talked to our board, negotiated the deal. Last Tuesday, I got an e-mail from their board president saying that their board unanimously voted to de-incorporate and for us to take over the organization. So that’s kind of the short of
it, which is great. It’s wonderful. SCCFM is four markets deep. And the same mission, the same rubric that we use, the same rules and regs and bylaws—all the same. Everything that we have, boom, goes to Felton. So the Felton Farmers’ Market, instead of being the Felton Certified Farmers’ Market will now be the Felton Farmers’ Market. People are not going to feel any difference.

**Rabkin:** Why that change in name?

**Dhillon:** Just because their DBA got de-incorporated. We’re just calling it the Felton Farmers’ Market, like the Live Oak Farmers’ Market. Because the way our organization works is SCCFM, Santa Cruz Community Farmers’ Markets is the parent organization, and then we have the farmers’ markets underneath it. So there’s the association and then the individual markets.

**Rabkin:** So it doesn’t mean anything about a change in certification status.

**Dhillon:** Just the DBA. It’s just more legalese. They are a certified farmers’ market.

**Rabkin:** So that will happen as of when?

**Dhillon:** January 1, ’09.
Relationships with other Farmers’ Markets in the Monterey Bay Region

Rabkin: Tell me about your relationships, if you have them, with other local and regional farmers’ markets in the Central Coast region, like the Monterey Bay Certified Farmers’ Markets, the Watsonville market.

Dhillon: A very close relationship with both. The Watsonville Farmers’ Market is run by Nancy Gammons of Four Sisters Farm, who’s also part of our membership. I see her every Wednesday. She’s kind of the matriarch of the markets. She’s been there for a long time. She’s seen it all. She’s very sagey and wise, and I go to her for advice and just insight and critique. We work together. She sends people my way. I send people her way. We see eye-to-eye on pretty much everything, which is really nice. I mean, we see eye-to-eye when it comes to the core elements of why we do what we do.

Monterey Bay Certified Farmers’ Markets—I have a great relationship with Catherine Barr who runs that association. We talk a lot. We talk offline a lot. She calls me and I call her. We get advice. We share notes and this whole thing. I have a huge respect for her. She’s done incredible things with her farmers’ markets, and she doesn’t bend. She runs a tight ship. She totally believes in the integrity of farmers’ markets, too. That’s the thing that I value. She has total integrity. So that’s a really cool thing to have.

There has been some tension with some groups that show up in town and try to start a farmers’ market, but they don’t even contact the farming community.
They never contact us. They try to set up these little rogue operations. That’s the only time where I get a little peeved, because I’m like, “Okay, first of all, you’re disrespecting what we are doing, and secondly, you’re not looking at the economics of what’s going on. Farmers’ markets should be established to support farmers. If you create too many farmers’ markets in an area, if you don’t study the area, then you’re going to dilute the food dollars, potentially dilute food dollars, which means you’re going to hurt the farmers.” This has happened time and time again over the hill in San Jose, throughout the whole Bay Area. You’ve got a farmers’ market, they’re like two blocks away, or they’re in the same location one day apart run by two different organizations. I mean, that’s totally insane.

So I’m very vigilant about that. I’ll go to City Council meetings and whatnot, and put my two cents in, and I’ll call people up and say, “What are you up to here?” [Laughs.] I know, everybody thinks farmers’ markets are cute and cuddly. “It’s a farmers’ market. Let’s just do it.” But they don’t understand the long-term ramifications to the existing markets. I can’t stop anybody from doing it, but I can at least tell them that this is not in the best interest of the farming community, if they’re trying to set up one down the street.

**Rabkin:** Do you and Catherine and Nancy coordinate your efforts to prevent this sort of thing from happening?

**Dhillon:** Yes, we do, and we’re doing it more and more. In fact, we’re starting a sub-association with all of the farmers’ markets in the Monterey Bay to set out
Nesh Dhillon

guidelines that are stricter and higher than what CDFA does, because we just feel like there’re a lot of problems with farmers’ markets in general.

Rabkin: Would those guidelines have any enforcement power over attempts to start markets that take away integrity?

Dhillon: Not yet. That’s pretty tough to do. What we’re trying to do is communicate to the general public that we’re doing things above the standards. And there’s a reason why. We want to remind people that when you shop: buyer beware. Don’t trust everything that’s out there. We’re giving people a reason to trust us more. We’re revealing a little bit about what’s going on behind the scenes. So that’s something that Catherine and I are working on with Nancy and some of the other farmers’ market associations in South County.

Rabkin: Do you have any wider networks of support, relationships with semi-organized or formal groups of other farmers’ market managers around the state?

Dhillon: You know, I don’t. I’ve gone to the Small Farm conference. I go to Eco-Farm and whatnot, and I meet other people. I’ve had farmers’-market associations and managers call me for advice about this and that, from around the state and out-of-state. It’s not super common, but it happens. I haven’t really seen any value in working with some of the other associations. It’s not to say that there isn’t value in it. I just haven’t seen any. I feel like a lot of the other associations don’t run markets with the same sort of value that we do. I feel like
what we’re doing is unique. I feel like it’s kind of a cut above. So I just haven’t seen the need to communicate with some of those other associations.

The only other groups that I have actively worked with is Berkeley, the Berkeley Farmers’ Market and the Ecology Center there. I have worked with Penny Leff quite a bit. I do like CUESA [Center for Urban Education about Sustainable Agriculture]. I like what they’re doing with the Ferry Plaza Farmers’ Market [in San Francisco]. And I think Marin Organics is top-notch stuff, but they’re almost like big businesses, and they are sometimes driven by the bottom-line value more so than the farmers’ value, the farmers’ bottom line. But I think Marin Organics in general is just good stuff. So maybe in the future, more so. We live in a bubble here in Santa Cruz, you know. [Laughs.]

Choosing Vendors for the Farmers’ Market

Rabkin: So I want to talk a little more about working with vendors. We touched on this earlier, but I’m curious about how you make all the decisions involved in allocating space among different kinds of vendors. I’m just going to run through a whole bunch of categories here, and maybe we can take them one-by-one. I’m wondering what policies and priorities you have that guide you when you strike a balance between, say, certified organic, versus sustainable but not certified, versus conventional farmers, the types of produce that you have represented. We talked about that some with your commodity contracts, but I’d like to hear more about that. Very local, versus more regional growers. Fresh produce versus, say, flowers, versus prepared or processed foods. Long-time members versus
newcomers. There are a lot of different decisions you have to be making when you allocate space in the market, and I realize they’re different kinds of questions. Maybe we could start with the whole certified-organic issue. Do you put a premium on certified organic growers, or not?

**Dhillon:** We do. This is an ongoing discussion, because of the different derivatives of what organic farming looks like. Sustainable, but this. Biodynamic. I mean, there are so many different cuts of kind of the same thing. In some cases, certified organic is not the cleanest option, as the biodynamic group will tell you. Some would even argue that certified organic—Tim Vos⁹ would tell you that the modern interpretation of certified organic with the USDA is definitely not sustainable, because large-scale organic agriculture wrote the language. Since the book has not been written on it yet—we put an emphasis on certified organic, because legally, that’s the safest thing to do.

**Rabkin:** How so?

**Dhillon:** Well, because certified organic is the only recognized term. It’s the only thing that’s defined. Sustainable is not defined by USDA. None of that stuff’s defined. It’s like: “beyond organic.” I mean, the stuff that’s being defined by a region or a town or a group of people. Certified organic is the only thing that’s defined, and there’s paperwork behind it. There’s a process. There’s accountability. So we feel like at this stage of the game, certified organic is what we’re going to go by, and that’s what we look for. We look for people who are
production farms, not backyard growers, who go through the certification process.

**Rabkin:** I spoke with another market manager about the same subject who said that she prefers actually to let the customers in dialogue with the vendors figure out whose practices are respectable. In other words, she seems to put less emphasis on organic certification, I think, because of some of the problems you’re raising—that organic certification doesn’t necessarily reflect the best possible practices.

**Dhillon:** Sure, yes. Well, we don’t penalize people for not being certified or organic unless they are truly—Like, if they are a conventional grower, and we have two participants that apply to the market and one’s an apple grower who uses whatever, and another one’s a certified organic apple grower, if we have an opening for apples, we’re going to approve the certified organic grower ten out of ten times.

Now if we have a certified organic grower and a sustainably farmed grower, then what we would do is—and this is the beauty of our system. There’s flexibility. We have a rubric that gives guidelines by which to make your choice. But it’s a non-binding thing. Tim Vos and I built it that way because we wanted to be able to think out of the box, and we wanted to have the ability to change it in the future. So if we have that sustainable person versus the certified organic, then we’ll go back to the sustainable farm and say, “Okay, you need to describe exactly what you’re doing with your farming practices.”
Now here’s the beauty: We have a commodities committee, and they’re all a bunch of farmers, so they’re going to know exactly what’s going on. And in fact, next year, I’m developing a whole new application process that will allow them to input all of the necessary information so that we can make that choice without going back to them. So in that case, if the information came back and the sustainable farmer, in the opinion of the commodities committee, was a better choice, they felt like it was a more progressive approach to farming, whatever the reason, they could choose and would possibly choose that candidate, and deny the certified organic grower. So there’s flexibility that’s built into the system. Tim and I did that on purpose, because we knew that this is just an unwritten book. Here’s a guy who did his whole dissertation on the National Organic Program and certified organic versus everything else. But as a general rule of thumb, we’re looking for people who are gravitating away from petrochemicals. [Laughs.]

**Rabkin**: [Laughs.] To put it in a nutshell.

**Dhillon**: Yes, to put it in a nutshell. We’re looking for sustainable-based farming, not large-scale mono-crop agriculture. With the local producers, we have a big pool of really good candidates. And that’s why you see a lot of local producers here.

**Rabkin**: Do you try, when possible, to emphasize as local as possible over more distant regional growers?
Dhillon: Absolutely. In our selection process we select growers that are closer to the farmers’ market center, and we move out from there. But we don’t give it a 150-mile radius, because things like stone fruit or citrus and whatnot might fall a little bit out of that radius. In order to have a successful farmers’ market, i.e., business, you’ve got to have enough crop variety to make it work with the customers while they come to the market.

Rabkin: So you might have orange growers or avocado growers coming in from beyond the 150-mile radius.

Dhillon: Absolutely, yes, even though avocados do grow really well here. But if you get a little bit of a frost, they’re done. It’s like what we had two years ago. All of those people who planted avocados at Ocean Street Extension, most are gone.

We’ve got product from Soledad and Ventura, Brokaw Nursery, and citrus from Fresno County or the foothills, Clementines and stuff like that. You have to be flexible, but the emphasis should always be on local production first. It would be ridiculous bringing in strawberries from Santa Maria, which I’ve seen in farmers’ markets in the Monterey Bay. It’s like, wait a second. The last time I checked, the #1 agricultural product in the Monterey Bay area is strawberries! And you’re going to Santa Maria?

The last thing I would say is our customer base demands it. If we’re pulling people from who-knows-where, our customer base is going to be like, “Wait a
second.” They understand. This is an educated population. They understand the value of supporting local food systems. So we’ll continue to do that.

Rabkin: You mentioned earlier having an ideal of being able to sell a hundred percent fresh produce, rather than processed or prepared foods or other value-added products. On the other hand, you said just in order to be able to have a viable market, especially in the down season, you have to have some of that. So I wonder what your criteria are for allowing the sale of value-added products.

Dhillon: There hasn’t been a criteria at all up until now. There’s a lot of discussion going on about applying the same set of standards that we do for the agricultural section of the market to the non-ag section. In developing the ideas and systems behind it, I ran into some problems, because I started to [sighs] get concerned that we were implementing too many regulations on a section of the market that might or might not have any margin based into their product. They make money on the turnover. So if you start squeezing that margin, all of a sudden they’re out of business. They just drop your market. I’m like, are we working against ourselves on this?

So I just feel like it’s something that will happen, but it needs to be really well thought out. I will tell you that any new non-farming vendor who gets into our market is selling something unique and of high quality. For example, Companion Bread. I’m not sure if you’re familiar with them, but they’re a newer producer. They’ve been at the market maybe about three years. They do stone-ground, hand-baked breads, artisan breads. Eventually, they want to source their wheat
from Pie Ranch, from Jered [Lawson] and Nancy [Vail].\textsuperscript{10} Everything Companion Bread sells is based on quality of ingredients. It’s Old-World style stuff. Their pastries, the same thing. Everything they do. It’s not just another pastry person that has a bakery in Santa Cruz and wants to be in the farmers’ market. It’s something unique. It’s something you can’t get anywhere else.

\textbf{Rabkin:} Do these people have a retail outlet in Santa Cruz?

\textbf{Dhillon:} No, it’s all direct sales through the farmers’ market, and they’re also doing a CSA-style system, but for bread. So people will buy shares of bread beforehand. They’re applying the same principles. These are farmers, too. These are people who used to work in the farming community.

That’s the sort of stuff that I look for and I’m interested in—unique, value-added items. Other items would be fermented foods or pickled foods. But we want to make sure that the person who’s making the fermented foods are buying a big percentage of the raw ingredients from our local farms, so you have this full-circle approach. For example, Happy Girl Kitchen, which sells pickled vegetables, is buying most of the raw ingredients from the farmers in our membership. And like the India Clay Oven, the Indian food guy there, he’s buying most of his vegetables from Blue Heron Farm, Route One Farm, Happy Boy Farm, Pinnacle Farm.

That’s the approach that we take. I think over time, it’s going to get a little stricter. There’s a good chance we might ban GMO oils from being used.
Anything that’s out of season can’t be used, like we don’t want to see tomatoes in the dead of winter, unless it’s coming from Nagamine Nursery, which is a local hothouse production here in Santa Cruz that’s also in our membership.

But the emphasis is always on the farming section, to answer that other question. It will always be the emphasis. There’re quotas that were established, but we removed those quotas, because it takes away flexibility. We’ve got to keep the non-ag section in check. It’s got to be farm first, non-ag second. But in the wintertime, gosh, when you’ve got limited produce, the non-ag section’s always there. It draws people in.

Challenges for New Farmers

Rabkin: I’ve been told fairly frequently about the difficulty for new vendors to get into farmers’ markets, especially if the crops they grow are already represented by other growers. I’m wondering what your perspective is on the challenges for farmers who would like to begin selling at the markets, who are just trying to break in.

Dhillon: Yes, it’s a tough one. If we’re just talking about Santa Cruz in general, it seems that everybody who graduates from [the UCSC] Farm and Garden, the Agroecology program, wants to stay here. They all want to stay and farm here. But there’s just truckloads of other people that are already farming in the area. There’s only so many farms that can be productive locally. There’s a carrying capacity. There’re only so many markets you can have in order to have healthy
farmers’ markets. So there’s a carrying capacity to that too. And when you hit the max on both of those, then you have to reevaluate and say, “Well, maybe I need to be in a different region.” Is it everybody’s goal that graduates from UCSC Farm and Garden (I’m using them as an example), but is it every young farmer’s goal to stay in the local area and farm here? It’s impractical, unless you’re willing to look between the lines.

I say to farmers—young farmers mostly—because the older farmers know what’s going on. They’ve been through it, and if they’re still farming after twenty years, they’re not calling me up and saying, “How do I get into your market?” They understand—You have to go out of the local area. You’ve got to sell at other farmers’ markets. But at the same time, start growing commodities that could be sold in your local market. Eventually, some of the older guys will retire, and there’ll be opportunities for the young people to come in, but it’s a waiting game. Harvard’s got a thousand seats open every year. Well, you’ve got a hundred thousand people applying. How do you get in? Well, you can apply every year until you get in.

**Rabkin:** [Laughs.]

**Dhillon:** Or you could just go to Stanford or MIT or whatever. You can go another place. I have a lot of young farmers come to me. They get very frustrated, and they take offense. They take it so personally. “Hey man, don’t take it personally. You’re doing good work. It’s just we don’t need these products, and we’re not going to bring you in and then create disturbances for
other people. It’s not going to benefit you. It’s not going to benefit them. If this is something you want, then you have to be patient. That’s it. Just be patient.”

**Increasing the Customer Base for the Farmers’ Market**

**Rabkin:** You pointed at the beginning of your response to the overall limitations on the carrying capacity, as you said, the basic customer base for those commodities. I wonder if, thinking about the bigger picture, whether you have thought about any ways of, in economic or political terms, broadening that carrying capacity.

**Dhillon:** Yes, the way to broaden the carrying capacity is to increase the customer base of the farmers’ markets. That’s all I think about.

**Rabkin:** What are your thoughts about how that can happen?

**Dhillon:** Oh, man. It’s one of these things. People are pattern-oriented. You’ve got to get them into the market. You’ve got to get them interested in what they see, and then you’ve got to get them to develop a pattern. Coming to the market a few times, because it sounds nice and it’s cute, is not really what the farmers’ market needs. They need core customers that are spending twenty, thirty, forty dollars per week, fifty, a hundred. We need to create core customers that we can rely on, that the farmers can rely on. And that is just going to take time.
Education. Guys like Michael Pollan have done wonders for the farmers’-market business. One of his books does more than five years of my advertising. It’s getting the word out. It’s programs like [the UCSC] Farm and Garden. It’s UCSC programs like Community Studies. It’s programs like agroecology. It’s educating the youth about the importance of supporting local food systems. I would say that the local high-school systems need to get on board. I think that there needs to be more of a connection with the farming community. I think that young people need to have an opportunity to get their hands in the dirt, and at the same time, get an opportunity to try to run a business, the farmers’-market business. So I have interns all the time. And I give them a crash course in the reality of what we do for a living. Then they’d go out and they tell other people. That’s just how it starts.

You have asked the million-dollar question: How do we get more people into the market? Everybody’s got an answer. “Well, just get music. Just do this.” It’s like, come on. I’m not sure it’s a simple answer, but I’m always searching. I’m always trying to figure it out. The café seating at the Westside and Live Oak Market, well, that’s one approach. Live music is another approach. Diversity of product. Great parking. Cool advertising. Everything you could possibly do to get customers to come in, get excited, and then hopefully, they set a pattern: “I’m going to support this.” But I think the pivotal way for them to start the pattern is that they intrinsically believe in what they’re doing. And education is paramount to that. Michael Pollan, again, has done a great job of educating the masses to the importance of supporting local food systems, and he’s done it in a very non-verbose way. It’s very approachable. People read the book and go, “Oh, yes, this
makes total sense.” You don’t have to have a degree to understand what he’s saying.

**Rabkin:** Yes. I’ve heard it suggested in some corners that one of the big obstacles to the growth of a farmers’ market clientele is the organic produce sections in big box stores and large grocery chains, that that’s a direct competition. Is that your experience?

**Dhillon:** Not so much, because if you go and shop for that food, it doesn’t look, nor does it taste, anywhere close to what you’re buying at the farmers’ market. The farmers’ market will never be beat when it comes to freshness, never be beat. Whole Foods will never, ever beat us out. If centralized distribution systems—yes, they do do regional buying—do it more and more, just because they’ve gotten a lot of flak. But any time you do centralized distribution, then you’re going to have to harvest in such a way that you will have to give something up. What do you give up? Freshness.

When you go to Windmill Farms’ stand at the Downtown Market, Ronald [Donkervoort] is covered in dirt, because he’s been picking those beets that you’re going to eat that night out of the ground that morning. He was out in the fields. Or the strawberries that people just die for, he just harvested right before the farmers’ market. I mean, I *know* his operation. Where are you going to replicate that? Nowhere! You can’t replicate it anywhere, and that’s where a farmers’ market has got everybody beat. I promote that freshness.
And you’re meeting the farmer. You’re talking to the farmer. You’re meeting the person who grew your food. You can’t do that in the organic section of a store where you’re buying Earthbound [Farms] lettuce. You’re just not. But at the same time, I’m glad those people who don’t have access to farmers’ markets have access at least to foods that aren’t sprayed with who knows what, or coated with who knows what. I’m glad they have that option. And I don’t think it’s too much of a competition. I really don’t. I think the competition for a farmers’ market in this region is really patterns. It’s mechanisms within individuals that prevent them from coming to the farmers’ market, because they haven’t built a pattern to shop there yet. They haven’t been exposed. They’re too busy, whatever it is.

I think that’s really it. Because if somebody spends some time in the farmers’ market, they’ll realize that there are great deals. It’s a great value. It’s a great experience. It’s very rewarding. You walk in and feel, wow, I really participated here. You’re shopping for your food. You’re looking for the best stuff. You go to a retail outlet with fluorescent lights—you don’t feel like you’re participating. It’s like, I just went to the gas station, and you just check it off your list. I got my oil changed and went to the store. There’s no heart to it.

**Symbiosis: A Diverse Food System**

Rabkin: How do you see the relationship between farmers’ markets and local organic and natural food markets like New Leaf [Market] or Staff of Life?
Dhillon: That’s a good question. I’d like to say our relationship should be symbiotic. I don’t think we should be necessarily in too much competition with each other. Although there is inherent competition. You can’t deny it.

Rabkin: You’re selling some of the same farmers’ produce.

Dhillon: Yes. But the interesting thing is—and I love this about New Leaf—they look at the farmers’ market as an opportunity to educate people about new food items. And then they come into New Leaf on the six days that the farmers’ market’s not happening and they go and buy the stuff. Or in the case of the downtown New Leaf, somebody will go to the Downtown Farmers’ Market, buy all of their produce and fruit, and then they’ll buy all of their value-added one block away at New Leaf. They’ll go in and finish their shopping.

Rabkin: Yes.

Dhillon: And supposedly—I should look into this again—but their numbers are pretty good on Wednesday. So business is actually pretty good. It’s not like they just get blown away.

Rabkin: Is it possible it’s even better, or do they not have those numbers?

Dhillon: I don’t know if they’d release that, but that’s a good question. That’s a really good question to see what the economic impact is of, say, the Downtown Farmers’ Market on local businesses. My understanding is that business goes up
for everybody because there’re more people coming into the downtown area. But yes, I think that it’s an unspoken thing.

There has to be symbiosis. We live in a competitive world. Obviously there’s inherent competition, but we don’t need to be squashing each other, stepping on each other. We need to work together cooperatively. And if New Leaf has got a better deal on peaches, well, then people are going to go there and buy their peaches if it’s cheaper than the farmers’ market and tastes better. And they probably have had better peaches from time to time. So it is what it is.

Changes in Farming on the Central Coast of California

Rabkin: Your relationships with dozens of market vendors give you an unusual perspective on the state of small farming in the region. I’m wondering what changes you’ve seen in the Central Coast farming scene, if any.

Dhillon: The one thing I’ve come to recognize is that if done properly, if done right, and with a lot of hard work, farming is a business that can survive. You have to be smart. You’ve got to be really smart. But it can be done. There are people who are totally supporting themselves, supporting their families. They’re living fine lives. I see it all around me. But it takes a certain personality type to be able to stick with it. And you have to attack with a diversified approach. It’s not just farmers’ markets. As a small farm, not as a big farm—as a small farm, you’ve got to attack— Use CSAs if you can, but if not, that’s fine, farmers’ markets, direct-to-restaurant sales, roadside stands. Look at your produce and see if you
can turn it into value-added, which has shelf life and actually has really good return on your dollar. Just look at it as a business. Because a lot of farmers, that’s the thing that a lot of them lack—business skills. But if you can blend those two worlds together and look into the future, if you can be a real visionary, you’re going to do fine. A grand example of that is Jeff Larkey at Route One Farms, a total visionary, totally ahead of the curve. He’s one of the most successful organic farmers.11

**Rabkin:** Ahead of the curve, how so?

**Dhillon:** He sees where things should be and where they’re going to go, and he just like, “Screw it. I’m just going to do it. I don’t care if it doesn’t make any sense. I’m going to do it.”

**Rabkin:** Can you think of a specific example?

**Dhillon:** Well, I mean, his organic lettuces, how he cultivated lettuces and plants on the coastline and then works the back, warmer regions to create this year-round matrix, to be able to sell lettuce all year round. He had market share for periods when nobody else had anything. He grows certain things that nobody else is growing, because he feels like there’s going to be a good market for it. He just nails it. He’s very smart about the money piece. I’ve seen it. Some people get a little irritated, because I think they’re jealous. But he’s successful. He’s still in it, and he’s out there working his butt off. Jeff’s been great. He’s been in it for almost thirty years now.
Rabkin: What kinds of concerns do you hear expressed by the farmers you work with?

Dhillon: Smaller farms that started out small, then getting bigger and bigger, and then—

Rabkin: Literally acquiring more land?

Dhillon: Yes, acquiring more and more land and then saturating the market and trying to turn and burn products, like dropping the pricing on certain things for an extended amount of time, which really hurts other small growers that don’t have that option. They can’t play that game.

Rabkin: So your growers are watching this happening around them and feeling out-competed.

Dhillon: Yes. Some farms are moving in that direction. There’s nothing we can really do about it, because it’s like, well, the farm has the prerogative to acquire more land and take on larger scale. The only way you can compete with that is to get bigger yourself. Then the question is: What’s too big? So that’s probably something that will eventually be addressed.

The perception, of course, is having too much product in the market. That’s the biggest concern. Farms want their commodities protected. We have a commodity control system that regulates what comes in initially, but does nothing about the
amount of product sold if it grows over time. We can make existing contract modifications if the initial contract specifies some sort of quantity restriction. So we look at, okay, you’ve got $x$ amount of tomatoes being sold in the market. We determine if farms are selling out. We’ll take data reports on it. I’ll send my staff out, and they’ll do actual quantity checks at the beginning and the end of the market. We’ll run numbers for a month, two months. And then at the monthly commodity board meeting, we’ll make modifications to contracts. Okay, you’re allowed to sell twelve flats instead of eight flats, or we’re chopping you down to four flats, or whatever. And then eventually if the market’s customer supply increases enough and those quantity-restricted items start to sell out for all the farmers, then we’ll open up the commodity to all the farmers. There are no restrictions, and the farmers are allowed to sell as many tomatoes as they want.

Rabkin: So you can change that on the spot in response to what’s going on in a given season.

Dhillon: Yes, and that’s a big part of my summer work. Another potential problem is seasonal commodity deficiencies. What if you get to a point where you have a four-to-six-week window where the consumer can’t get what they should be getting? Eggs are a great example of that. So I need to communicate with the different farms and make sure that we have enough commodities in the market for the consumer.
Rabkin: In response to the difficulty faced by smaller farmers watching other farms get large, do you try to privilege relatively small farms when you’re handing out space in the market?

Dhillon: You mean, if they’re sitting on equal footing?

Rabkin: Yes, would you privilege a small farm over a larger one?

Dhillon: Well, the small grower’s going to get priority over a larger farm if they’re competing for the same crops. My only concern is that when you get too small, then you become really seasonal, meaning that your window of participation becomes really, really small. The efficacy is lost. So the larger farm actually has more value to the farmers’ market than the smaller farm at that point. Do you know what I’m saying? It just depends. It’s case by case. That’s why we don’t have these binding rules when it comes to this—it’s like case-by-case, commodity-by-commodity. There’s just so many variables, but the emphasis is on small growers first, over large growers.

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)

Rabkin: Have you seen any effect on the farmers’ markets by the growth of the CSA movement over the past decade or so?

Dhillon: No, not too much. Nothing that I can put my finger on. I actually had my doubts about CSA when I first started learning about it. I felt like it was too
esoteric. Americans like convenience, and something like a CSA takes control out of their hands. Americans love control, and just humans like control in general. They like to control their destiny. So I’m like, okay, wait a second, you’re going to take the control out of their hands and you’re going to ask them to pay for something that they don’t even really know what they’re going to get. They kind of know what they’re going to get. I was like, I don’t know, maybe for a select group of people. But as a model, I just had some doubts. But I have actually been proven wrong. People I’d least suspect for enrolling in a CSA are getting CSAs, which is great. I never wanted to see it not be successful. I just was kind of doubting it. Jered Lawson and I used to debate this all the time. He’s the big CSA guy. “I don’t know, Jered.” We’d just go back and forth.

But yes, the CSAs have been great. It’s brought a lot of awareness to foods and whatnot. But I don’t think it’s pulled too many people out of the farmers’ market. If everybody did CSAs, well, yes, the farmers’ market would suffer. But I just don’t ever see that ever happening. It’s a balance. It’s the reason why mutual funds are successful versus individual stock picks. You’re diversifying. You’re spreading risk out over ten companies versus one company. Well, it’s the same thing with food. Michael Pollan would argue this, too. We don’t want to put all of our eggs in one basket. Having a multi-pronged approach to food is really smart, and it’s safer. So CSAs— The retail outlet still has its place— The Safeways, all that sort of stuff. The farmers’ market. And then whatever else they dream up at UCSC.

Rabkin: [Laughs.]
Stresses of the Job

**Dhillon:** In the back rooms of UCSC. [Laughs.] That’s my attitude towards it. Farmers’ market—it’s like one bullet in your gun to attack food-related issues. I want to see everybody support it. But it’s not convenient for everybody.

**Rabkin:** Do you have time for a couple more questions?

**Dhillon:** Sure, yes.

**Rabkin:** What keeps you awake at night about your job?

**Dhillon:** Lawsuits.

**Rabkin:** Actual lawsuits or the potential of lawsuits?

**Dhillon:** Potential lawsuits. I sleep really well. I try to go to bed every single night with the understanding that I made the best decisions that I possibly could that day. If I don’t think I made a good decision, then I stay up that night. It really boils down to, like I said, ethics. Are you doing the best work you possibly can? Are you making the right decision? How much of your ego is involved in this? Just really being pragmatic, but also being very compassionate at the same time, trying to combine those two.
As long as I’m focused on the farmers’-market mission, always focused on the core value of what the farmers’ market’s about, I think I will always make the right decision. I’ve got an incredible staff. They’re extremely motivated. We all work well with each other. There’s not a real top to bottom. I work cooperatively with everybody. Obviously, there’s an inherent chain of command. Everybody honors it; everybody works together for those common goals. So I’m pretty stoked.

But yes, liabilities. Liabilities keep me up at night, just because I’ve worked so much with attorneys that I understand liabilities better than the average person walking down the street. I look at what we do and I go, “Oh, my God.” But it’s one of these things that you can never ultimately solve. You just try and create as much boilerplate as you can, and protect, and create processes and whatnot, and you just kind of have to say, “Okay, I have to be happy with this.”

Rabkin: Are you insured as a nonprofit with liability insurance?

Dhillon: Oh, yes. We also have directors and officers insurance. We’ve weathered two lawsuits since I’ve been in the farmers’ market. Yes, we’ve got it all. [laughs] And we require all of our membership to have product and general liability insurance, too. That’s a requirement of being in an SCCFM.
The Mission of the Farmers’ Market

Rabkin: You’ve invoked a few times the core mission of the markets. If you had to articulate that in a sentence or two, how would you articulate it?

Dhillon: The core mission of the market is to support small-scale, local, sustainably farmed agriculture. That’s it in essence. That’s what we do. We’re an organization that creates a platform by which farms can come and meet in a safe environment and just do what they do—run their business and be totally supported. That’s what we do. We’re the support system. We’re the wheels behind the scene. We’re not the front of the market. We’re behind the market. We’re the back house. That’s how I really want it always to be. That’s why I always kind of shy away from—people will say, “Oh, well, the success of the market. We owe you.” No, no. You’ve got to look at the bigger picture here. These are the guys that are doing the hard work. I’m just supporting them. Yes, we are working together. But that’s the focus. The farmers have got to be the focus. Because if you start losing sight of that, then you’re like, “Well, what are we doing? This is a street fair.” If we support them, then we’re doing the right thing.

Rabkin: Is there a complementary element to your mission that involves what you do for customers?

Dhillon: What do you mean?
Rabkin: You say that the core mission of the market is to support local sustainable agriculture. I’ve read your website, and I think I remember that in your mission statement on the website, you also talk about an essential purpose of the market being to bring fresh, nutritious, wholesome, affordable produce to the local community.

Dhillon: Right. That’s actually a very old document there. I’m going to redo that this winter. But you’re right. Time and place. I can’t ignore the fact that we are creating a community event. There’s no doubt about it. But that’s almost secondary to what we’re doing. What we’re doing primarily as an organization is trying to create the healthiest platform possible for the farms to sell their goods to the consumer. Yes, we do get involved in, like you said, the aesthetics of the market to capture more people. But it’s that basic commerce between farmer and consumer, or food and the eater of the food. We’re just trying to link those two together. I’m not sure if I answered your question?

Rabkin: Yes. What, for you, are the most gratifying aspects of the work you do?

Dhillon: Oh, man. Just seeing the whole concert come together. There’s not much that I don’t like, even the legalese stuff, dealing with the attorneys and the nitty-gritty details. I like that stuff on some level. I mean, it’s fun. It’s a challenge. I just love the whole concert. The Downtown markets (I always use that as an example), but when you go to a Wednesday market and all the cylinders are firing; you’re in there in September; everything is on the table. There’re gazillions of people, and they’re buying their food! The farmers are doing their thing. It’s
this whole energy that just takes over, and you look at it and go, “Oh, my God. This is amazing. This is so important, this interaction is just like—it’s so fundamental.” It’s not buying a new car. It’s people buying food. They have to have it, and they’re not willing to grow it themselves, so this is the next best step. You see it all come together under one roof. And you’re just like, “Whoa, this is amazing.” That’s some of my happiest moments, definitely.

**Rabkin:** Do you have hopes, dreams, visions, and/or apprehensions about the future of the market?

**Dhillon:** Yes, I do. I do want to continue to grow the organization. I want to employ more people. We want to become a little bit of an economic machine in Santa Cruz, because I think that’s important.

**Rabkin:** How so? What do you mean, an economic machine?

**Dhillon:** A machine in the sense that we provide job opportunities. We provide educational opportunities. We’re providing an opportunity for agriculture to survive. I also want to inspire spin-off businesses, which will hopefully stay in the area.

**Rabkin:** Like what kind of spin-offs?

**Dhillon:** Food-related, other non-profits, agricultural related items, whatnot. Maybe cooperative baking centers, these sort of things. Inspire people to
communicate and create value-positive change for the community, or at large to move on to other areas. Inspire, you know? I think as a larger organization, we have more and more clout to do that. And so I plan on growing, (without giving away my secrets), but I definitely have a plan. We’re marching in that direction. So that’s exciting.

My biggest fear. My primary fear is the city of Santa Cruz not focusing more on what we do, focusing on the details around us, not focusing on the essence of what we do. I think that the Downtown Farmers’ Market in Santa Cruz needs to have a permanent infrastructure. I think it needs to be developed in concert with local developers, the city of Santa Cruz, and the community at large. I think we need to have a permanent infrastructure, so when people say the Downtown Santa Cruz Farmers’ Market, there’s one place you go to. That’s something that I’m concerned about, because there’s all of this chitchat in the city of Santa Cruz about moving us, or building a parking structure where we’re at. I’ve been working on this for a couple of years with these guys, but that’s my biggest concern. It’s almost like they see it, but they don’t see it. They don’t get it. I see other towns where the farmers’ market is so embraced. The city is bending over backwards. It seems kind of ironic that the capital of organic farming, the city of Santa Cruz, isn’t more willing to have discussions with us about these sort of things. It’s just kind of interesting. But we’ll figure it out. It will come together.

But I’m really optimistic. I think we’re moving into a golden era for farmers’ markets. I want to keep the bar raised really high so people will come to trust and respect the institution and what we represent.
Rabkin: Great, terrific. Well, thank you very much, Nesh.

Dhillon: Yes, you’re welcome.

1 Earl Butz served as Secretary of Agriculture from 1971 to 1976. He ran the Department of Agriculture during a period in American history of steep price increases in food.
2 On October 17, 1989, Santa Cruz County was hit by a 6.9 magnitude earthquake centered near Loma Prieta Mountain, ten miles south of Santa Cruz.
3 See the oral history with Mark Lipson of Molino Creek Farm, the oral history with Sandra Ward and Ken Kimes of New Natives, and the oral history with Nancy Gammons in this series.
4 See the oral history with Mark Lipson in this series.
6 See the oral history with Wendy Krupnick in this series for more about the Felton Farmers’ Market.
7 See the oral history with Nancy Gammons in this series.
8 See the oral history with Catherine Barr in this series.
10 See the oral history with Jered Lawson and Nancy Vail in this series.
11 See the oral history with Jeff Larkey in this series.