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A Peach of a Place

A big-city couple build a second career out of an old Sonoma farm

By Sarah Tilton

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Sonoma, Calif.

When they started house shopping in Sonoma's Dry Creek Valley in 1998, Gayle and Brian Sullivan were looking for a weekend getaway, not a new profession. But one look at the 60-year-old farmhouse, the tractor, the 1980 Toyota pickup truck, the chickens and the orchard, and Mr. Sullivan was sold.

His wife was slightly more skeptical. She already had a job working in the city as a marketing consultant (he as a bond trader) and they were raising their one-year-old son. Plus, "We'd never grown anything in our lives," said Mrs. Sullivan, who will only say she is in her 40s. But she gave in. Buying the 6½-acre property in 2000 for \$1.5 million, the Sullivans decided to learn the peach business first and put off fixing up the house, a 1950s-era 2,000-square-foot, three-bedroom, two-bath ranch-style home with a few 1970s touches and a sagging 1990s addition.

PHOTOS: SONOMA PEACH RETREAT



The house and pool, seen from the orchard. PAUL DYER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

That was the start of a burgeoning second career for the Sullivans, whose Dry Creek peaches have since developed a national following and regularly show up on the tables of Chez Panisse and Charlie Palmer's Dry Creek Kitchen. On a summer day, Mr. Palmer will stop by to see

what's ripe and neighbor and tech entrepreneur Ridgely Evers will pick up the Bellini mix that Mrs. Sullivan makes using white peaches (the less pretty ones), simple syrup and lemon juice.

The Sullivans didn't get to their renovation until 2006, motivated by a leaky roof and the discovery of dry rot. Like their farm, one of the only organic peach farms in the county, the Sullivans were determined to preserve the character of their little house. It's an unconventional notion in an area burgeoning with trophy wine estates bearing their own tasting rooms and gift shops. To that end, they hired San Francisco architect Catherine Carr. "Catherine had a good sense that this was a little organic peach farm and what we were trying to preserve," said Mrs. Sullivan. "I wanted it clean and simple and appropriate to a farm."

The intervening years gave the couple time to create their wish list. Mrs. Sullivan, who had since worked at Wolfgang Puck's Postrio part-time for four years in a bid to figure what to do with all those peaches, wanted an uncluttered kitchen with a Wolf range and seamless counters for easy clean-up. The priorities of Mr. Sullivan, 54, included a screened porch to remind him of his childhood on the East coast where his father, a carpenter, had built many porches. Both agreed the house should be oriented out toward the orchard and they envisioned an open kitchen and great room where they could have 20 people over for a canning party.

Ms. Carr fulfilled the wish list, adding 600 square feet of living space. The great room, part of an addition, has three sets of French doors looking out at the grid of peach trees. It comes directly off the centerpiece of the home—a new kitchen where the counters are 30 inches deep as opposed to the usual 24 inches, just right for rolling out the pastry dough for the peach pies. The island, half Carrara marble and half stainless steel, is nearly 10 feet long, enough for six work stations or about 20 people in the kitchen. Menus devoted entirely to peaches are often enjoyed out on Mr. Sullivan's screened porch.

"The kitchen should be a prototype for what people do with kitchens. It is not overwrought," said restaurateur John Ash, who's been buying Dry Creek peaches for 25 years and now gives cooking classes in the remodeled area. "People were afraid it would become another chichi winery."

The Sullivans declined to say how much they spent on the remodel, though property-tax records assess the land and house at \$1,856,911. Seven miles away, a 4,370-square-foot Victorian house on 12 acres with a pool and sport court is listed at \$3.5 million.

Peaches are ubiquitous here. A peach twig wreath hangs on the front door. Jars of peach jam fill the kitchen shelves. Bags of peach prunings wait to be made into a thatched roof for the pergola that will soon be added over the ipe deck. Bowls of dried peach chips sit on the kitchen counter (the Sullivans slice them extra thin and don't add sulfites).

On a recent Sunday, Mr. Sullivan was in the orchard looking at the holes left behind by the aging trees that they'd removed. Meanwhile Mrs. Sullivan was looking at containers of peach pits, whole and ground, stacked on the kitchen counter.

"If you have 40 tons of fruit a season, that's 80,000 pounds, that's hundreds of thousands of peach pits," said Mrs. Sullivan, who is planning to replace the black slate floor in the mudroom (she says it shows everything) with a peach-pit floor.

The couple hope their 11-year-old son will one day take over the business. He already sells his peach lemonade at the revived farm stand (50 cents a glass) just steps from the house.