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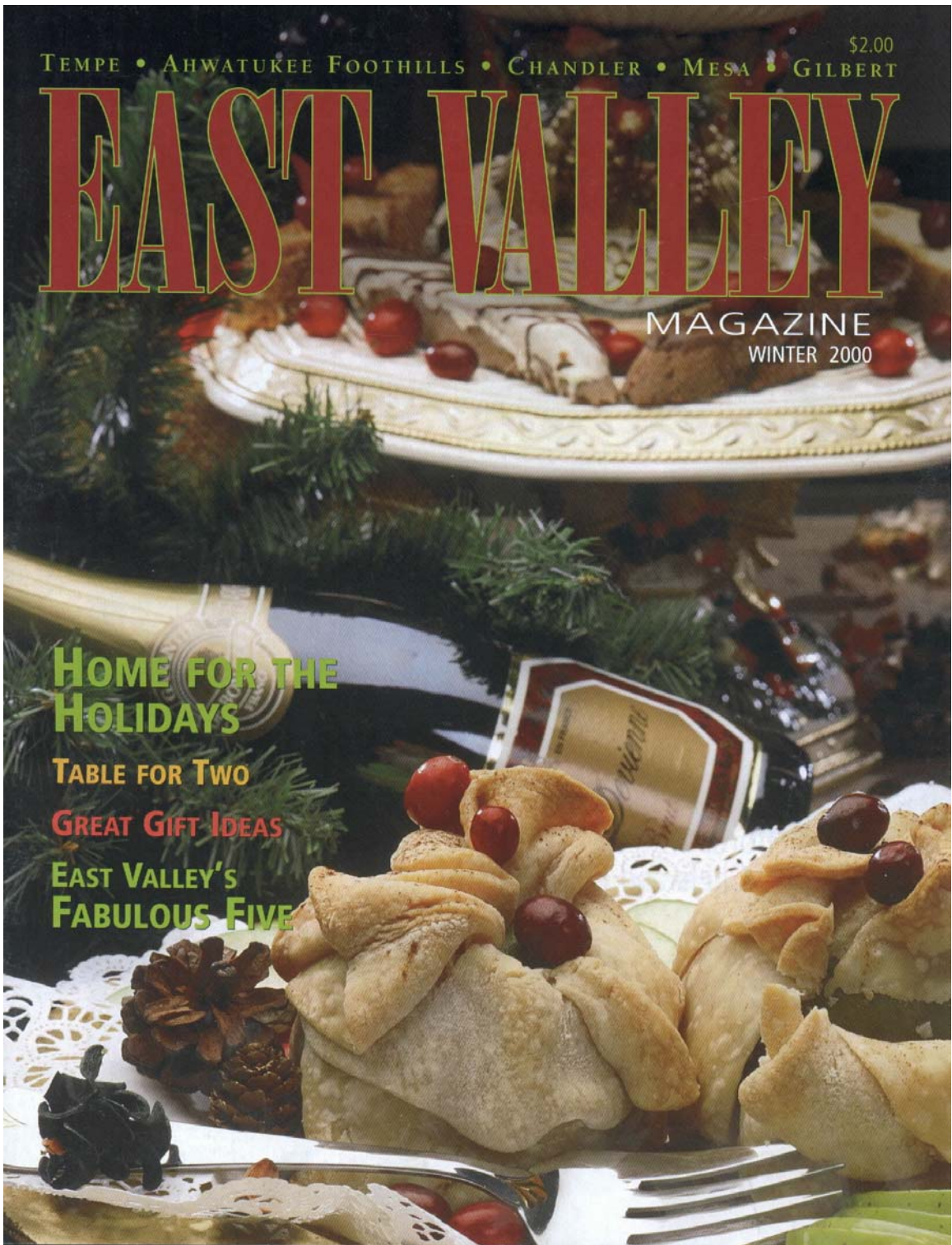
WINTER 2000

**HOME FOR THE
HOLIDAYS**

TABLE FOR TWO

GREAT GIFT IDEAS

**EAST VALLEY'S
FABULOUS FIVE**



Seeds of Change

BY GAIL FISHER

Rescuing the family farm meant launching a new trend for the enterprising Schnepfs



photo by Gail Fisher

Racing pigs, corn mazes, a petting zoo, narrow-gauge train rides, melodrama theater, corporate retreats, pumpkin and peach festivals, dueling banjos and bluegrass and country concerts — no, this isn't your grandfather's farm, and Mark Schnepf of Schnepf Farms in Queen Creek is the first to admit it. Schnepf Farms is part of a growing international trend to market farms directly to the public. Successful direct market farming — also known as entertainment farming, agritainment, edutainment or agritourism — is helping Schnepf and other farmers to save the family farm.

Some 60 years ago, Schnepf's grandparents purchased their fertile Queen Creek land, and his farmer parents transformed the desert into successful producing cotton fields. In the late 1940s, they added wheat and then potatoes in the 1950s. During the 1960s and 70s, they diversified into mixed vegetables and fruit and began exporting to Asia and Europe. At the height of their operation, they were farming 5,000 acres.

When the overall farm economy changed in the 70s, Schnepf Farms started to consolidate, according to Schnepf. "The wheat embargo forced us out of the wheat business, and we stopped growing cotton in the 80s because we philosophically disagreed with the subsidy program," he says. "We realized in the late 80s and early 90s that if we were going to survive as a farm, we would have to reinvent ourselves and take a whole new direction. Traditional commercial crops weren't going to cut it anyway."

The transforming idea for Schnepf Farms, although they didn't realize it at the time, had already taken root. Schnepf explains that while he was growing up, his dad always planted a family garden of corn, tomatoes, beets, squash and other vegetables that they freely shared with friends for the picking. Strangers often inquired about buying fresh produce and, as Mark says, "All of a sudden the light went on. Maybe we could make a little money by selling direct to the public."

They started a country store business selling the family garden specialty crops, along with potatoes, onions, watermelons, lettuce and cantaloupe from the commercial crops. Later, this small business, or "hobby" as Schnepf describes it, moved from a roadside stall into a renovated building as the farm struggled with commercial farming.

Meanwhile, Schnepf organized the first Schnepf Farms small festival by inviting local 4H Clubs to show their animals. He advertised the event, and several hundred people attended the show and



HILLBILLY BOB AND HIS RACING PIGS



LEFT TO RIGHT: CARRIE, HAYDEN AND MARK



THE PETTING ZOO
photo by Gail Fisher

bought vegetables from the country store. "That was the beginnings of our farm festival, and it grew from there," he recalls.

Carrie Schnepf, Mark's wife and former newscaster and city girl, expanded the events to include annual peach festivals, October pumpkin and chili parties and a Country Thunder music event that attracts some 100,000 Country-Western fans. Mark and Carrie Schnepf represent a new breed of farmers who ride farm land in golf carts fielding phone calls on a headset.

Both Mark and Carrie love working with people and educating visitors to Schnepf Farms. They have four children, ages six, four, three and one, and want them to grow up experiencing farm life. "I believe that for everyone there is a real connection with soil — a need to get back to the original way we did things," he says. "City people crave the experience of coming out to the farm. We feel a sense of accomplishment that through all the improvements and education we offer that the farm will be preserved and remain economically viable."

Their innovative work is paying off, and the Schnepfs are able to create enough income to justify keeping their farm as opposed to selling out for development. "This [selling out] is what most of our neighbors have done," he says, "not because they necessarily wanted to, but because it was getting next to impossible to earn a living farming in this area."



THE CAROUSEL — A FAVORITE AT SCHNEPF FARMS

Six years ago, the Schnepfs discovered the North American Farmers' Direct Marketing Association (NAFDMA), and now they are active members attending meetings and tours. They even spend family vacations visiting other entertainment farms for new ideas. In January, the NAFDMA 16th Annual Conference and Trade Show is being held in Mesa and is expected to draw some 1,500 farm direct marketers from around the world.

Schnepf, a former Queen Creek mayor for 11 years, envisions the Queen Creek area full of bed and breakfast cottages, orchards, entertainment, festivals, country and specialty stores — a whole agritourist attraction. "Queen Creek is the only place in the Valley where we can create that," he says. "Everywhere else is too urbanized or desert. We are the last best hope to create something like that for everyone to enjoy, and Carrie and I take pride in getting that trend started." ■