

Starcross starts honor system farm stand

By Lindsey J. Smith
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Julie DeRossi — known to many in the community as Sister Julie of Starcross in Annapolis — first saw an honor-system farm stand while visiting her nephew David McCarroll in Vermont two summers ago. The roadside booths selling maple syrup, where unsupervised customers are trusted to pay for what they take, stuck in her mind. So as Starcross' garden bloomed this summer, she decided to bring a bit of Vermont to Mendonoma.

Since early August, the Starcross "honor stand" has been open seven days a week, from morning to evening, in a white-painted building across Annapolis Road from the houses, barn and gardens that make up the monastic community.

It started with produce in a few cardboard boxes on the floor of the old blacksmith's shop with an enormous and crumbling bellows still tucked into a far corner. For many years, the building housed an Annapolis Volunteer Fire Department engine. But once the engine moved to a new home, the blacksmith's shop stood empty until about a month ago, when a black-and-white "Farm Stand" sign was hung on its side.

"Certain times of the year we have a lot of people around," DeRossi said. "So we feed ourselves and give to the [Starcross] Food Pantry, but have extra."

This excess has moved from boxes on

the floor to simple but carefully arranged displays. Asian pear apples; Southern pears; Astrachan, Golden Delicious, Rome and Gravenstein apples sit in crates along one wall. Produce, including pumpkins, lettuce and cabbage, zucchini, peppers and cucumbers are front and center, along with bottles of Starcross' award-winning olive oil. Sunlight filters through the blacksmith shop's windows and glances off the lids of Starcross preserves: Muscadine grape jelly, wild blackberry jam, summer apple spice butter, Satsuma plum jam, salsa and a dried-herb Italian seasoning mix. Bottles of lavender body oil and sachets of dried lavender, as well as freshly-cut sunflowers are for sale, too. All of the products are grown and made on Starcross' property, and the selection varies, based on what's in season and what's in excess.

Artistic signs, hand-drawn by one of Starcross' handful of "WOOFERS" — which stands for "willing workers on organic farms," a worldwide program where volunteers receive lodging in exchange for labor — advertise the honor stand's low prices. Apples are ten cents each; anything in a can is \$6, or three for \$15; pumpkins come in at \$2. A locked black cashbox is affixed to one wall, and customers are trusted to pay on the honor system for what



Sister Julie DeRossi in the "honor stand" with produce from the garden and Starcross' award-winning organic olive oil. Photo by Zoë C. Smith.

they take.

Usually, the farm stand brings in \$5 or \$10, but one weekend it earned Starcross \$100. Visitors leave email addresses and praise, and DeRossi is happy the farm stand is going "amazingly, surprisingly well." She said she expects it to run into October, but it will all depend on how long summer, and the produce, lingers.

The garden is a group effort. Toby McCarroll — Brother Toby, who founded Starcross with DeRossi and the late Mary Martha Aggeler, known as Sister Marti — runs the greenhouse and orders seeds. Farm manager Lance Baker oversees the day-to-day, and DeRossi, who is the glue in the small monastic community,

does a bit of everything.

"A lot of [the garden] is just for our own pleasure," she said of how they decide what to plant. Surplus goes into their food pantry, along with canned goods, eggs and meat. It is open the first and third Friday of each month from 2 to 4 p.m., and serves approximately 25 families, representing about 100 people fed twice a month, DeRossi said.

Starcross was founded in June 1976, 40 years ago. The recent milestone passed quietly, as DeRossi and McCarroll were still grieving the loss of Aggeler, who died of pancreatic cancer in February. But had they felt like celebrating, they would have had a lot to high-

light, as Starcross has done much over four decades to serve the community at home and abroad.

The lay monastic community began by taking in children in San Francisco with severe medical needs. At the height of the global AIDS crisis, it founded "Houses of Hope" in Romania, for children living with AIDS, and in Uganda, for children whose parents had been killed by the disease. These houses have raised over 150 children, and now are run by some graduates, DeRossi said.

This work was funded in part by various agricultural ventures, starting with Starcross' famous Christmas

trees. While it no longer sells trees, it holds a Christmas Faire the Saturday after Thanksgiving each year, where it sells wreaths and other products, including its "olio nuovo" olive oil. The organic olives grown on Starcross property are harvested in late October or early November each year, and the fresh-pressed olio nuovo is loved for its strong and peppery taste. Chefs have even come from the Bay Area to buy it, DeRossi said.

Although the "honor stand" brings in a little revenue, its main focus isn't money. It's an expression of the core of Starcross' work: sharing their lives and their joy with the community they care for.

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