

# KNOW YOUR FARMER, KNOW YOUR FOOD

## Golden Bear Ranches

Lodi, CA

John Gibson realized that he wanted to be a farmer as a teenager, while helping out on an uncle's farm in Linden during summer vacations. Now as the founder and President of Golden Bear Ranches (GBR), he farms sweet cherries and heirloom tomatoes on 150 acres in Lodi, CA.

Along the way, John won a football scholarship to the University of California at Berkeley, where he majored in agricultural history. When he got injured in his third year and had to quit the team, he poured all of his attention into farming and hasn't looked back. Berkeley was a transformative experience, and the famously progressive hotbed of organic cuisine and environmental awareness left its mark on the way GBR (named in honor of his alma mater's colors and mascot) produces food.

After graduation, John went about setting up his business with a student's careful attention to detail. He talked to as many farmers and food buyers as possible, trying to figure out what was in high demand amongst Bay Area and Sacramento chefs -- what was that "next big thing"? Eventually he settled on high-quality heirloom tomatoes, starting with 150 varieties on two acres. Five years later, he has narrowed the varieties down to thirty-five and grown his production to ten acres. His foremost criterion for selecting which heirloom varieties to grow is hands-down great taste, and GBR tomatoes are sought-after by some of California's best chefs. "Every one has a different taste," John exclaims excitedly. "Each one is its own thing."

GBR tomatoes and cherries are shipped direct from the farm to chefs and other buyers. Often they are picked that same morning. This summer their produce will also be available through the Growers Collaborative Bay Area aggregation hub, allowing them to reach new and bigger markets via mainstream distributors. Next school year they will also begin selling to schools in the Lodi and Stockton area, starting with kid-friendly cherry tomatoes. GBR's on-farm practices are based on biological and conservation farming methods, and the farm is Certified Naturally Grown. John considers stewardship to be a big part of what he does. He uses integrated pest management (IPM) and keeps insect pests in check with weekly ladybug releases. Soil fertility is maintained with organic compost and both annual and permanent cover crops. "I don't want this spot to just to have everything taken out of it and nothing put back in," says John. "You always have to give back to the dirt. Every spring." But John is perhaps most excited by his new weather station. The state-of-the-art soil moisture monitoring system employs an array of probes that detect moisture, temperature and salinity. The system records data every 15 minutes, giving the farmer an extraordinarily detailed, real-time picture of what is going on underground.

The weather station means that irrigation and fertilizer applications can be calculated with precision, and nothing goes to waste. It means saving money on energy, water and pump time, and John estimates that GBR's weather station will pay for itself within five years. Since heirloom tomatoes are likely to split if they are over-watered, efficient irrigation also means making more money on a better, more consistent product. John is excited about making GBR work better as a system. He plans to add more soil sensors, and perhaps a wind turbine. "Every single day you find out something you didn't know about your farm, something you can do better," he says. "Every day I wake up at 4:00 a.m. and get home at 7:00 or 8:00 p.m. But it's not a job. It's something I get to do every day."



**BUY FRESH  
BUY LOCAL**

[www.buylocalca.org](http://www.buylocalca.org)

 **CAFF**  
COMMUNITY ALLIANCE  
WITH FAMILY FARMERS

[www.caff.org](http://www.caff.org)