GROVES AND GRACE

Fred Schwarz grows over two dozen types of citrus in his Braithwaite, Louisiana, grove and harvests it all by hand, with the occasional help of a friend or family member. His was one of the first organic citrus farms in the state.

Notes from a Louisiana citrus farm

by Rinne Allen

FOR THE LAST THIRTY-FIVE YEARS,

citrus farmer Fred Schwarz has tended the six hundred–plus satsuma and navel orange trees on his family's land in low-lying Plaquemines Parish, ten miles downriver from New Orleans. As a child in New Orleans, Schwarz and his parents escaped the city on weekends to tend their small grove.

Eventually, Schwarz and his family relocated to the land full-time. He planted more trees and grew the farm into a vocation. He was an early leader in the Louisiana movement for organic citrus designations and supplied Whole Foods Market with satsumas for decades. The acreage got plenty of rain during Hurricane Katrina in 2005 but didn't flood, partly because it faces a strong bend in the Mississippi River where a deep swath of batture buffers the river and levee.

Seven years later, when Hurricane Isaac passed over, Schwarz watched as floodwaters rose ten feet in just forty-five minutes. The water came not from the Mississippi River, but from the rear of his property, to the east, from the direction of the Gulf and Biloxi Bay.

Schwarz was here when the storm hit. He waded westward to the twenty-six-foot levee in search of higher ground. A modular home floated by at eye level, and he entered it for shelter. The corner of the structure lodged itself into the earthen levee, which stopped Schwarz's forward motion. He waited inside the floating home for hours, sitting atop the kitchen counter, until the storm passed.

LEFT: A kumquat close-up. Schwarz's chickens roost in the trees.

Schwarz has an open-air processing area where he runs his harvest through a rusty—but reliable—sorting machine. extracting blemished fruits by hand.

Over the next few days, the water receded. He surveyed the damage: The first floor of his house had flooded, and all of his trees had been fully submerged. That fall, his crop was rendered inedible due to saline contamination. The next year, as he worked around the clock to rebuild his home and business, a well-meaning parish-led patrol sprayed his organic grove with pesticide to stave off an invasive insect. Schwarz had declined the treatment, but the spray planes misidentified his land. His crops, while sellable, were quarantined from the organic label for the next three years. Revenue dropped, but he persisted, selling his citrus on Saturdays from the back of his truck in the Garden District, a few blocks from where he grew up.

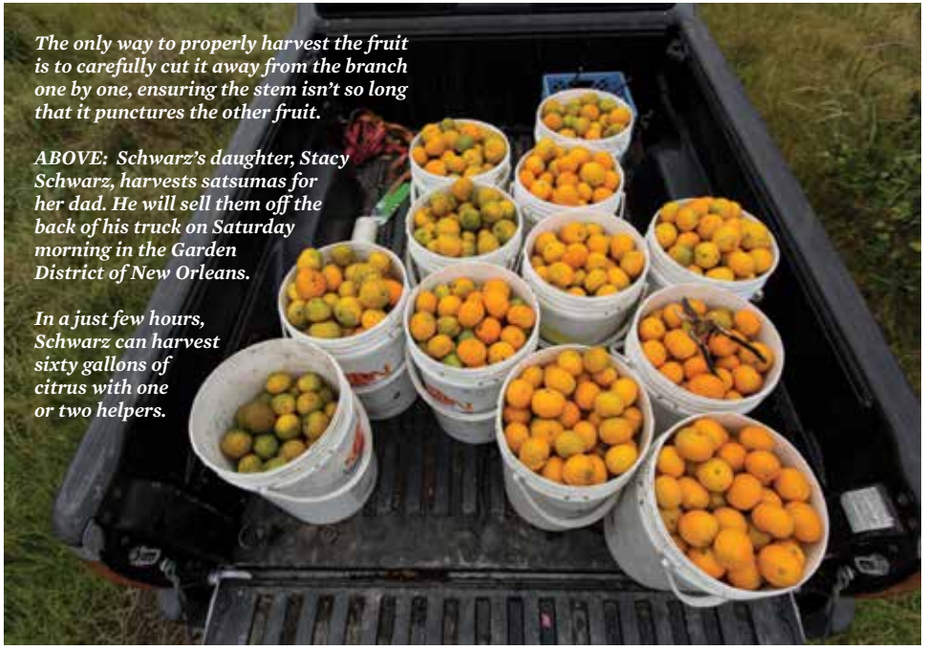
This year marks the end of the three-year quarantine, but Schwarz will likely not seek the organic certification due to the high cost and time-consuming application process. Salinity from Isaac still plagues some of the trees. He also predicts a smaller harvest because of recent unpredictable weather patterns: earlier blooms combined with late-season frosts. He says, "I would like to get out to the world how goddamn fragile this environment is, and how bountiful."

Rinne Allen is a photographer based in Athens, Georgia.

All of the citrus is rinsed and air-dried before being packaged in forty-pound waxed boxes.

Schwarz's home, shown mid-reconstruction, in late 2016. The family home was raised twenty-six feet post–Hurricane Isaac to avoid potential future floodwaters. Members of the Schwarz family now climb twenty-nine steps to reach the front door.

The harvest varies from year to year. Sometimes there is more fruit on the trees than manpower to harvest it. In a good year, Schwarz can harvest eight to ten cases per tree. It has been a while since he has seen a good year.



The only way to properly harvest the fruit is to carefully cut it away from the branch one by one, ensuring the stem isn't so long that it punctures the other fruit.

ABOVE: Schwarz's daughter, Stacy Schwarz, harvests satsumas for her dad. He will sell them off the back of his truck on Saturday morning in the Garden District of New Orleans.

In a just few hours, Schwarz can harvest sixty gallons of citrus with one or two helpers.

Satsuma season runs from mid-October to late December, but Schwarz says he often starts nibbling on them as early as September. As he harvests, he often takes a break to eat one. He says he never tires of their flavor, referring to them as "sunshine."

While Schwarz cuts the fruit away from the trees, he speaks of a deep reverence for this place. "It is all so precious," he says.

Schwarz is best known for his satsumas. He attributes their taste to the absence of chemicals or synthetic fertilizers. Native to Japan, satsumas arrived in the United States in the early 1800s and, by the late nineteenth century, were planted predominantly in Louisiana. They are juicy, easy to peel, and have few seeds.

Some of Schwarz's grapefruit and pomelo trees are so old that they tower overhead, up to forty feet in the sky.

On Saturdays from mid-October to late-December, Schwarz sells his fruit at the corner of St. Charles and Lowerline, across from the streetcar stop. He sells satsumas, and other citrus, by the bag, including grapefruit, navel oranges, kumquats, lemons, limes, and pomelos.

Schwarz says, "This is why I am here, on the land, because of the fruit."