

# From Navy man to Rancho de Rodney: the growth of a Fresno organic farmer

By Robert Rodriguez



Rodney Wells is an organic farmer who farms four acres southwest of Fresno. He grows a wide variety of herbs and vegetables on the land where his home sits. PHOTOS BY MARK CROSSE — THE FRESNO BEE |[Buy Photo](#)

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Grilled country ribs with savory mustard marinade

2 tablespoons Dijon mustard

1 tablespoon red-wine vinegar

1/4 cup olive oil

1 tablespoon dried savory, crumbled, or three tablespoons fresh savory, chopped fine



1 tablespoon water

2 pounds country-style pork ribs (about 6)

Prepare grill. In a bowl, whisk together mustard, vinegar, oil, savory, water, and salt and pepper to taste. In a baking dish large enough to hold ribs in one layer, coat them with marinade and let stand, covered at room temperature, about 15 minutes.

Grill ribs on an oiled rack set five to six inches over glowing coals until just cooked through, about 10 minutes on each side.

— Rancho de Rodney

Roasted chicken with vegetables and herbs

Small roasting chicken

8 Roma tomatoes

4 sweet peppers, assorted colors

1 onion

2 bunches basil

8 branches, rosemary

1 bulb garlic

1 tablespoon kosher salt

1 teaspoon pepper

1/3 cup plus another 1/3 cup olive oil

1/4 cup balsamic vinegar

1 lemon

Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Cut out stems of tomatoes, quarter them. Stem and seed sweet peppers, cut into inch squares. Quarter onion, then cut quarters in half. Arrange vegetables on the bottom of large dutch oven or a roasting pan, drizzle with 1/3 cup olive oil. Remove basil from woody branches, chop fine. Remove rosemary leaves from four of the branches, chop fine. Remove skins from cloves of garlic, chop fine. Combine in a bowl and add salt and pepper with the other 1/3 cup olive oil. Mix well. Take 2/3rds of your herb mixture and work under the skin over the meat of the main body of the chicken, top and bottom. Take the other 1/3rd and sprinkle over vegetables. Quarter lemon, place pieces inside the chicken with the remaining rosemary branches. Place chicken in the middle of vegetables. Pour balsamic vinegar over chicken. Cook for one hour or until chicken juice runs clear when speared.

Serve with vegetables and pan drippings spooned over chicken and more vinegar to taste.

— Rancho de Rodney

Georgian cilantro sauce

2 ounces dried apricots

1 cup boiling water

1/3 cup shelled walnuts (1 ounce)

4 garlic cloves, halved, green shoots removed

1/4 cup lemon juice

1/2 teaspoon salt (more to taste)

Black pepper to taste

Pinch of cayenne

2 cups cilantro leaves (Two good sized bunches) coarsely chopped

1 1/2 cups parsley leaves (1 1/2 bunches) coarsely chopped

1/2 cup coarsely chopped mixed basil, tarragon and dill

5 tablespoons walnut oil (or more to taste)

1/2 cup soaking water from the apricots, as needed

Place dried apricots in a bowl and pour boil water. Let sit for at least one hour, more if possible, even overnight. Drain over a measure cup and retain 1/2 cup of the soaking water.

Turn on a food processor fitted with steel blade and drop in the garlic. When it is chopped and adhering to the sides of the bowl, stop the machine and scrape down the bowl. Add the walnuts and process with garlic. Scrape down the sides of the bowl. add the drained apricots, the lemon juice, salt, pepper and cayenne to the bowl and process to a puree. Add the cilantro and other chopped herbs and puree, stopping the machine to scrape down the side several times. Combine the walnut oil and soaking water from the apricots and with the machine running, gradually add it to the puree. Process until smooth. Transfer to a bowl and let sit for one hour. Taste and adjust salt.

Serve with beans, chicken, meat or fish, grilled or roasted vegetables or grains.

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Every farmer has a story about how they got into agriculture. Some are born into it, while others, like city kid Rodney Wells, jumped into it as a second career.

Wells, the owner of Rancho de Rodney, a certified organic farm in southwest Fresno, grew up in Compton where his only connection to farming was a vegetable garden his father tended. But Wells wouldn't make the city his home for long. At age 17 he joined the Navy as a way to escape a dismal future.

"I got out of there before I needed to choose which gang I need to be in," Wells says. "In those days you either chose what gang to join or you ended up on a curb somewhere and none of those options appealed to me."

Wells excelled in the Navy. At the peak of his 30-year career he supervised about 200 men as command master chief of the USS Pogy submarine.

After retirement, Wells and his wife Sherril, a lawyer, settled in Southern California. They moved to Fresno eight years ago when Sherril Wells became a judicial attorney with the Superior Court. After three decades in the Navy, it wasn't easy for Rodney Wells to find a job that was challenging. He tried working at a hardware store and the Internal

Revenue Service. He took several agriculture-related classes at Reedley College, where developed an affinity for farming.

“I began to see that food and farming were going to be critical in our futures,” Rodney Wells says. “And farming is no easy task. I learn something new all the time.”

Rodney Wells started off with an herb garden that Sherril helped develop about four years ago. Wells admits his first few times selling at a downtown farmers market were not successful.

“We have a card table and no tent or shade and it was the middle of the summer,” he says. “It was pretty awful.”

The couple learned from other farmers about marketing and choosing what sells.

Now, Rancho de Rodney is producing more than 120 types of herbs and vegetables on about 4 acres. The farm produces several varieties of lettuce, carrots, turnips, kale, heirloom tomatoes, bell peppers, hot peppers, fennel, thyme, mint and basil.

“We grow what you can’t find at Save Mart,” Wells says with a smile.

Rancho de Rodney sells at the Kaiser Permanente farmers market, 7300 N. Fresno St., on Wednesdays from 9 a.m. to 1:30 p.m.

Avid cook Sherril Wells encourages the farm’s customers to experiment with the herbs and offers several recipes at the Kaiser market.

“When you start using fresh herbs, it gives you so much flavor to whatever you are cooking,” she says. “And I think our customers appreciate a few suggestions.”

Although the couple are relatively new to the Kaiser market, they already are gaining customers.

Sam Mediati, of North Fork, was buying fennel from Wells recently. He and others are excited about the variety and quality of the farm’s produce.

“This is about the best that you can buy,” Mediati says.

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