

# Thinking big, growing small

BY MARLIZE VAN ROMBURGH

Staff Writer

Babe Farms grows a big business out of small vegetables.

And the Santa Maria-based company, a producer of specialty miniature produce, has flourished by keeping its roots close to home.

Babe Farms was founded in 1986 by Will Souza, a third-generation agriculturalist from the Santa Maria Valley. Inspired by his travels throughout Europe, where baby and miniature produce was already popular, Souza recruited four business partners and founded his own company.

Today, the multimillion-dollar business is owned and operated by Judy Lundberg, one of the original partners, and her son, Jeff. Judy's husband, also one of the firm's founders, passed away several years ago, leaving her as chief executive officer and president.

Babe Farms works its 1,000-plus acres in the Santa Maria Valley year-round, producing more than 75 varieties of miniature vegetables, including baby carrots, beats and lettuces, as well as seasonal specialties such as baby squash and bell peppers. The mini veggies are distributed and sold at specialty retailers throughout the U.S. and Canada.

Babe Farms thrives as a closely held company. Judy Lundberg was born in Lompoc and raised in Santa Maria, where she said she "grew up in the fields alongside Dad."

"Agriculture has always been a part of where I've been," she said. "I can't help but drive by a field and look to see what's growing in it. I can't really imagine agriculture not being a part of my life."

Many of Babe Farms' 120 employees have worked at the company for more than 10 years — some have been there since the company was incorporated.

"Many of our employees' kids were born when they were working for us and I've since watched those children grow up," Lundberg said. "We care about our employees and their families. We really feel like we're a family business for that reason."

Her son, Jeff Lundberg, is the company's general manager and vice president of operations. At the crack of dawn, he can usually be found out in the fields, checking on crops and meeting with his production supervisors.

Because baby vegetables are much smaller than their regular-sized kin, their growing time is much shorter. And the Santa Maria Valley's temperate climate means Babe Farms can grow and harvest tiny crops 365 days a year.

Judy Lundberg said business is going well, although the company did see a drop in sales last year as consumers cut back on buying specialty produce. Her immediate concern continues to be getting a niche business through a rough economy, but she said the worst is over.

"If we made it over last year, I think we're going to be fine," she said. "We're always developing new products — we've got some new lettuce blends out now — and that's where the company is going to keep going in the future — towards developing new products."

Although retirement isn't yet in the picture, Lundberg did say she has some thoughts about the business' future ownership: "I'd like for it to continue as a family business."

## Babe Farms

Central Coast  
Large Closely Held Company

Principal: Judy Lundberg

Headquarters: Santa Maria

Founded: 1986