

# I Am Ag': New calendar to showcase beauty of Santa Barbara County's farms, vineyards and ranches

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From scenic Santa Maria farms and ranches to picturesque panoramas of Lompoc flower fields and views of Santa Ynez vineyards, sights and scenes of Santa Barbara County's diverse agricultural regions are the focus of a new, 12-page photo calendar produced by the Santa Barbara County Farm Bureau. Executive Director Teri Bontrager said proceeds from sales of the 2019 "I Am Ag" calendar will support agricultural advocacy, outreach and education programs sponsored by the county Farm Bureau. Calendars will cost \$20 and can be purchased at various locations starting December.

"Even though we work and live around it, we don't realize the agricultural diversity we have around here," she said, noting some of the more than 200 crops grown within the county's borders. "[Because] we're so diverse and agriculture is amazing here, we thought, 'Why not hold a photo contest and put it in a calendar?'"

At the close of the inaugural "I Am Ag" photo contest, Bontrager said the Farm Bureau had more than 60 submissions from community members across the county. A panel of five judges selected the winning 13 images that will be used to illustrate each month, plus the back cover.

"Every photo that was sent in captured the essence of agriculture," she said. "Some were more outstanding than others; it was a hard choice."

Jennifer Morrell said she decided to submit a photo she snapped of Kodiak, one of her Labrador retrievers, titled "The Ducks are Calling," for the contest after seeing a flier posted around Solvang. An outdoor enthusiast and self-described amateur photographer, Morrell's photo was selected by the Farm Bureau as its grand prize winner.

Perched atop a bale of hay in front of a field of sunflowers, Morrell's perky pup sits between a pair of pumpkins somewhere off Alamo Pintado Road. Staring out into the distance, the dog sits alert, ears at the ready, listening to the calls of a nearby flock of ducks.

Morrell spent 15 years traveling across the United States as an interpretive ranger with the National Park Service. From rotations on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., to the Mojave National Preserve near the California-Nevada border, Morrell said that a trip to the grocery store was sometimes all she needed to remember her hometown.

"When I was in Omaha, Nebraska, I bought strawberries from Santa Maria. It instantly brought me home," she said, expressing her admiration for the region's strong agricultural community. "We're still a major [agricultural] producer even though it's diminishing to great extents in large parts of the country."

Matt Hiltner, marketing coordinator for Santa Maria-based Babé Farms, said he heard about the contest through owner Judy Lundberg. Hiltner submitted a photo of baby pink carrots — a peachy pink variety of carrot with a mildly sweet flavor — as a way to showcase some of the farm's specialty vegetables. during an educational event at the company's sales offices, was selected by judges as the first-place photo.

"Many folks on the Central Coast have no idea of all the wonderful varieties of produce grown just minutes from where they live," he said. Somewhat new to the field of professional agriculture, Hiltner said he is grateful to have the opportunity to work in the industry.

"Agriculture is the driving force of our local economy," he said. "It provides jobs for a substantial portion of the population and we are so lucky to have a climate that allows us to grow year-round."

Santa Maria Camera Club member Cheryl Decker said she first heard about the contest during one of the club's regular meetings. Her photo of a wild jackrabbit, "Ranch Jackrabbit," taken on the small ranch she owns with her husband, was selected by judges as the second-place winner.

An accidental discovery of sorts, Decker said she spotted the jackrabbit one day while having difficulty with her automated gate-opener. After rolling down her car window to try and manually enter her gate combination, Decker spotted the hare gazing back up at her. She grabbed her camera from the passenger seat and shot off a dozen frames.

"If the opener had worked, I would have driven through and missed the jackrabbit," she said, adding that the clarity and brightness of the wild rabbit's eye is what drew her into the image.

Now working as an emergency medical physician, Decker, who holds a bachelor's degree in agriculture, said she appreciates people who work in agriculture for their "honest and down-to-earth" demeanor.

"We like the rural life, even though neither of us are from a farming background," she said. "Living in the midst of our area's grapes, vegetables and berries is amazing."

Karen Jowers' photo "Peaceful Easy Season," of a vineyard off Happy Canyon Road in Santa Ynez, was selected by judges as the third-place winner.

Learning of the contest from the Farm Bureau magazine her daughter received, the amateur photographer set out with a friend to scout locations for the photo contest. Taken earlier this spring, Jowers said the blooming cover crops at the base of the rows instantly got her attention.

"I have never seen a cover crop in bloom among the vines; it was beautiful," she said. "The oak tree on the hill really put it in the valley setting."

Jowers' connection to the region's strong agricultural community came largely through her children, who raised livestock as members of county 4-H programs. The former horse project co-leader said she and other valley residents have benefited from the area's strong agricultural ties.

"It is an amazing way of life with values of hard work, family and community," she said. "The entire community benefits from the ranching and farming families here."