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The Bi-Rite Stuff

Sam Mogannam takes
grocery retailing to
new heights—
with a farm and
an arts space



Celebrating the Food Culture of the Bay Area Member of Edible Communities



The Bi-Rite Stuff

With a new farm in Sonoma and a new arts space in the Mission, Sam Mogannam is determined to turn his tiny grocery store into even more of a nexus of food and community.

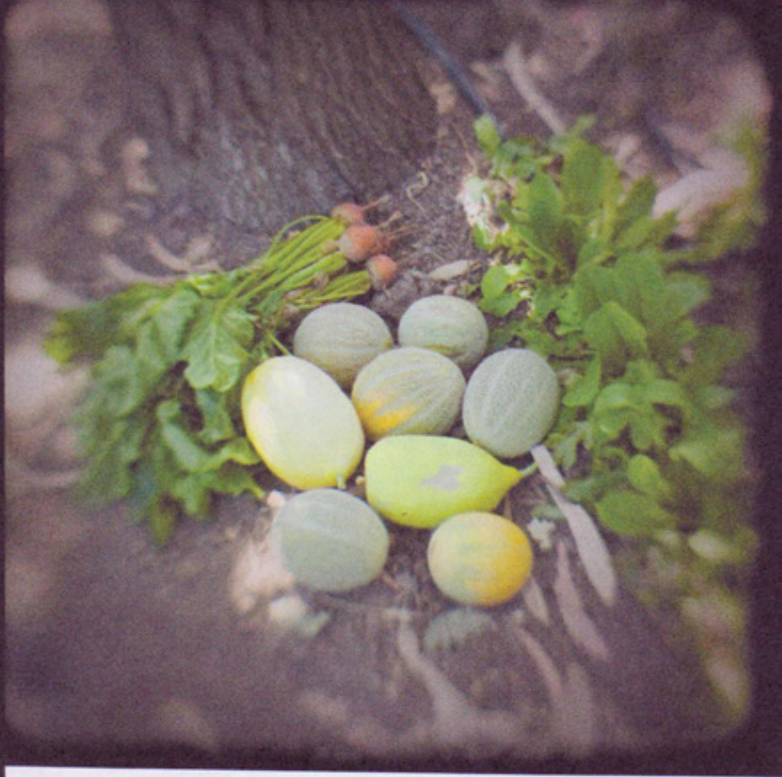
BY BONNIE AZAB POWELL
PHOTOS BY BART NAGEL

"Look at that tomato! It's *huge*! It's gotta be over a pound!" Sam Mogannam kneels in the dirt, thrusts a tattooed arm into a thicket of tangled tomato plants, and extracts a sunny yellow heirloom the size of a small boulder. "This is going to be one expensive tomato. We might as well eat it"—and he places the fruit gently inside the basket of cucumbers, peppers, beets, and more tomatoes that he's already harvested for lunch.

Seconds later something else catches his eye. "Smell this melon!" he says. Its quilted beige skin exudes an intoxicating perfume, like honeysuckle wine. "I mean, can you believe how good that smells?"

Given that Mogannam, 40, was born and raised in the grocery business, you'd think he'd have long ago stopped getting excited about fresh produce. You'd be wrong. Watch him in the early morning at Bi-Rite Market, his grocery store on 18th Street in the Mission, plucking a perfectly ripe Asian pear from a farmer's delivery truck and devouring it with distracted grunts of pleasure. The man loves food. But these tomatoes and melons are special. Mogannam grew them himself, on a thriving mini-farm surrounding the house he

These pages: Mogannam amongst the heirloom tomatoes and other produce he's growing at Bi-Rite Farm in Sonoma, CA.



and his wife and business partner, Anne Walker, bought last October in Sonoma.

The previous week, assisted by Bi-Rite farmer-in-chief Simon Richard (the market's produce buyer) and others, Mogannam harvested more than 700 pounds of tomatoes with names worthy of racehorses—Cherokee Purple, Black Prince, New Girl, Marvel Stripe, Brandywine, German Stripe—plus 300 pounds of eggplant and a surfeit of summer squash and zucchini. They also grow winter squash, sweet corn, Gravenstein apples, Indian blood peaches, flowers, lots of greens and herbs, and more.

"I'm blown away by how much we're going to produce from just half an acre. Three to four tons of food!" he says with amazement. He points at a swathe of grassy lawn near the house and whispers, "I'm going to rip some of that out and plant it too, although Anne will kill me."

The insanely popular Bi-Rite Market celebrated its 10th anniversary in June, and Mogannam seems determined to keep growing the store in new directions. Instead of opening branches elsewhere, as customers from other neighborhoods have begged, he's deepening the store's already extensive roots in food and community. The motivation behind the Bi-Rite Farm is to "close the loop," as Mogannam puts it, between soil and shelf—for him and market staff to learn firsthand what goes into growing food the hard way, organically and sustainably, and to sell the fruits of their labor in the store as well as use them in its myriad

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prepared foods. And with 18 Reasons, a nonprofit arts space around the corner on Guerrero Street that Mogannam opened in July, the idea is to connect food and art in order to strengthen the community that has supported Bi-Rite all these years.

Mission to serve

Bi-Rite Market was built in 1940: its distinctive Art Deco sign and tiled façade are the originals. Sam's father, Ned, and his uncle Jack bought the business from the store's first owners in 1964, after emigrating from Ramallah, in Palestine, where their Catholicism had isolated them. The neighborhood, with its proximity to Dolores Park, has often been a rough one in which to run a business. Bi-Rite was almost looted by Mission high school students when Martin Luther King, Jr., was killed: Ned says he threw "boxes of candy into the street to distract them and to get away, and it worked!" The store was robbed at gunpoint three times during Ned's tenure, but "we gave them everything and nobody got hurt," says Sam's father.

Sam started working at Bi-Rite when he was just 6, dusting shelves for a dollar a day. "My mom would put me on the street car in West Portal with a nickel and a bag of food," he says. By 8 he was ringing up sales, and by 12 he was stocking, making \$10 per day. He worked every day after school, until the store closed at 9 o'clock.

But as he says, he gets bored doing the same old thing. Once he finished high school, he was done with the grocery



Above left: Bi-Rite Market in an unusually uncrowded moment. **Right:** Mogannam at his latest venture, a nonprofit community arts space.

business: "I worked in the market for 11 years. That was enough for me." His father didn't try to change his mind—then, anyway. When Ned and Jack retired in 1989, they sold the business (but not the building) to a man who ran it as a liquor and convenience store.

Mogannam, meanwhile, got a degree in the hotel and restaurant program at City College, then went to Switzerland to apprentice as a cook for a year—not for any burning desire to make fondue, but because it was the only European country in which he could get a work permit. In Europe, the seeds of his food philosophy were planted. He saw farmers coming in the back door of restaurants with deliveries of seasonal produce, and noticed that no one used strawberries in winter and people shopped daily for their dinner—"and just how spontaneous

and how cool that could be."

Back in the United States, he worked for Jim Moffet and Scott Miller at the Pasta Shop in Oakland for two years, which he loved. In 1991, at the age of 23, with \$40,000 of his own savings and a little help from his family, Mogannam opened a 40-seat restaurant, *Rendezvous Du Monde*, in the Financial District, where he "was doing seasonal, local stuff long before it was cool," he says in a rare boastful moment.

Skip to mid-1997. Sam was having trouble with his restaurant's absentee landlord, and his father was having trouble with his Bi-Rite tenant.

"My dad called and asked me to take the grocery business back over. I said no—but that maybe I would do a restaurant in there," Sam recalls. "And then *he* said no, because he thought I worked too many hours, and I would never have kids that way. So I thought about that for a while, and then I told him, 'OK, but I have to cook. I have to do a market with a kitchen in it.'"

Mogannam Sr. thought the idea was crazy—no one else was trying anything like it—but he agreed. "I didn't believe

he could do that good," Ned admits. "His vision was ahead of me. He was always ahead of me. I am conservative. Sam is advanced in his ideas. He was an adventurer; he had traveled all over. He said, 'Someday you are going to be proud of me; I know what I am doing.' And he was right. You can't find another place with food and creativity like that."

The price of values

Sam and his brother Raphael gutted the building and remodeled it. They kept only the vintage fixtures and the Bi-Rite sign, after restoring it to its original glory. The new Bi-Rite opened in mid-

1998, back when Dolores Park was a gang stomping ground and this rundown block of 18th Street had few restaurants. To the neighborhood's surprise, instead of potato chips and microwaveable burritos, the new store was selling just-picked produce, only meat that was humanely raised (from Niman Ranch), and foods prepared in house from the same high-quality ingredients, like meatloaf, pasta salads, and vegetables,



mostly Mediterranean style. Items, basically, considered expensive by many folks.

"Yeah, a lot of people thought we were nuts. Some of my father's old customers boycotted the store because it wasn't cheap enough for them," Mogannam says matter-of-factly. "But many did support us."

So why didn't he also offer some regular old bologna? Some canned fruit cocktail?

"I wasn't going to sell what I wouldn't eat," he shrugs.

From the very beginning, Mogannam believed that Bi-Rite should operate by this and other simple values that may or may not contribute to the store's financial bottom line. He and

Richard choose the fruits and vegetables they sell based on flavor and quality, not sameness and shelf longevity. That means buying from people who are passionate about growing food, directly from local small and mid-size farms.

For example, Bi-Rite Market is the only retail account for Johann Smit, who grows apples and grapes at Hidden Star Orchards in Linden, CA. He sells at the Ferry Plaza and the Noe Valley farmers markets and doesn't want to bother with any other stores. "Others have approached me. But I am really, really particular about who we deal with in terms of how people manage my fruit," says Smit. "Bi-Rite does a phenomenal job of connecting customers to my product. They handle it well, and they move it in a timely and caring manner."

Farmer Greg Rawlings of Blue Moon Organics in Aptos, CA, wishes he had five more customers like Bi-Rite for his strawberries and raspberries. "Sam and Simon love the flavor, and they're willing to pay our prices to deliver them a quality product," he says. "A lot of the smaller chains really hit us on the prices, and they're not at fault—I guess everyone's trying to compete with someone who's cheaper than them, like the Safeways. I have very few customers who don't complain about the price, and Bi-Rite is one of them."

The store's customers, however, sometimes do complain. Bi-Rite's Yelp reviews uniformly mention sticker shock. Even longtime loyal customers like Castro resident Winnie Chen will say—carefully—that "Bi-Rite is not inexpensive." She does think the prepared foods offer good value: they are "as good at what you'd get at a really nice restaurant but are much more affordable."

Mogannam admits that sometimes the sniping about Bi-Rite's prices stings him. "Sure, I'm sensitive to negative

criticism," he says. "I don't know what to do about it, because we're committed to buying the best we can, at the fairest price to our suppliers. If a farmer asks for \$20 a box, we pay it. Because that's what we figure he needs in order to live. I'm not going to play the game of squeezing my suppliers. It's tough when everybody else is hustling, trying to match the lowest price. Look at how Trader Joe's does business."

Some compromises do have to be made. Though it clearly pains him to say so, Mogannam reports that he does sell tomatoes in winter—organic ones grown in Mexico—and other imported items out of season. That's one of the challenges of being a grocer: if you refuse to stock things people think they

need, they'll go elsewhere, he says. "We did decide that we would not sell Southern Hemisphere grapes once the local season was over," Mogannam adds. Customers complained at first, but with help from signage—Bi-Rite is festooned with notes about its ethics and the provenance of the food it sells—and education by the staff, most soon accepted it.

Even Bi-Rite's critics grudgingly admit that the staff is among the most knowledgeable,

friendly, and passionate around. Mogannam refers to his 90-plus employees as the "Bi-Rite family." The store offers a staff meal every shift and a 20% discount on purchases along with more substantive (and rare in the grocery industry) benefits like subsidized health and dental insurance, paid time off, a 401(k), and referral bonuses. All staff have access to extensive, ongoing training in butchery, wine, cheese, and produce; in addition, Bi-Rite has offered English classes to its non-native speakers. Mogannam says he gives the managers pretty free rein: "Each buyer within the store acts like a separate department; they have their own business plan. Basically, we pay them well and we let them do what they want."

The seeds of community

Soon after re-opening, Bi-Rite's presence started to change the neighborhood. It wasn't long before Delfina moved in, and Tartine Bakery followed. In December 2006, when another space became available, Mogannam and his wife opened Bi-Rite Creamery down the street, which Walker runs with pastry chef Kris Hoogerhyde. The creamery uses milk from a local organic dairy, Straus, and the same high-quality local fruit and produce that the store does.

Like Bi-Rite, the creamery was successful from the get-go. The company is a dynamo for its size: Bi-Rite's year-over-

'We are committed to buying the best we can, at the fairest price to our suppliers. If a farmer asks for \$20 a box, we pay it. Because that's what we figure he needs in order to live.'

year growth has averaged 20%, Mogannam says. That's even though the actual customer space inside Bi-Rite tallies just 1,800 square feet, he estimates, versus the average Whole Foods store of 40,000 square feet, which is in turn dwarfed by the Safeways and Wal-Marts of the world. (See page 12.) "They have these massive stores just so you can buy 50 kinds of cereal," Mogannam marvels. "I think choice just makes us consume more, and that's what they want." Bi-Rite, by contrast, stocks the bare minimum in frozen and canned food. The idea is to encourage people to do smaller, more frequent shops, like they do in Europe.

But that doesn't help the crowds. Everyone bugs Mogannam to open additional stores around the city or in the East Bay, but he isn't interested in expanding. Not yet, anyway. "It's a quality-of-life decision," he explains: his and Walker's daughters are 5 and not quite 2, and he is finally getting to spend more time with them.

For now, the Bi-Rite Farm and 18 Reasons provide thrills



aplenty. Growing food is something new for him, and seems to excite the excitable Mogannam in an entirely different way from selling it. Although Sam's parents bought a farm about six years ago, Sam is new to the production side of things. Richard, who farmed in Colorado for several years, provides the knowledge and expertise that got the Bi-Rite Farm off the ground—or rather, into it.

"I have no farming experience. This is it—I'm learning the hard way," Mogannam says, waving at the rows of tomatoes bowed over into hedges because he and Richard didn't stake them early enough. "It's amazing learning about the soil. I am in awe of the land and what it can do."

Nearly all the store's managers have been brought up to plant, weed, and/or harvest. "The idea is to give them a feel for what this all takes," explains Richard. "At Bi-Rite, we believe everyone should keep learning about food. The farm is another education tool."

Closing the loop also happens to be good business. While

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the farm's fruits and vegetables constitute a minimal percentage of all that Bi-Rite sells and uses, the kitchen hasn't had to buy any eggplant, basil, arugula, or chard for a while. "What I love about this is how little waste we have," Mogannam crows. "If I have split tomatoes, we make gazpacho. That means we have a much higher yield than traditional farmers."

Some of Bi-Rite's growers admit to being a little chagrined about this turn of events. "I can't say I'm entirely happy about it, no, because they're buying less of my tomatoes," says Rawlings of Blue Moon Organics. "But hey, I get it. It's fun to farm and they got their own spot."

Mogannam is clearly having a blast with 18 Reasons as well, as an avenue for outreach, discussions, and education. The spare, white-painted space, about the size of a San Francisco living room, was hung recently with "Neighbors," a show with textual and visual fragments about proximity. (Joyce Engebretsen is 18 Reasons' art programmer; Josh Alder, Bi-Rite's wine buyer, is its food programmer.) Other events have included a wine tasting and dinner with Bonny Doon winemaker Randall Grahm, and classes in truffle making and weaving.

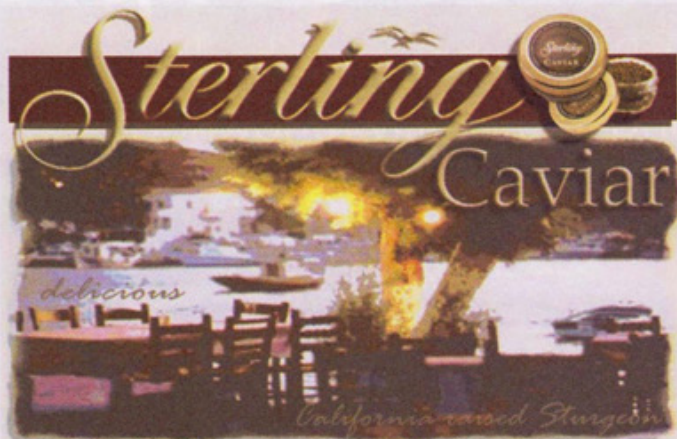
Bi-Rite Market
3639 18th Street
San Francisco, CA 94110
(415) 241-9760
www.biritemarket.com
Mon.-Fri. 9 a.m.-9 p.m.,
Sat.-Sun. 9 a.m.-8 p.m.

Memberships to 18 Reasons cost \$40, and include \$30 worth of coupons for free ice cream at the creamery and goodies at other businesses. "It's not supposed to be a revenue stream," Mogannam explains. "We want to have events be as cheap as they possibly can be and cover our costs." For example, the Valentine's Day truffle making class cost \$25, but people got to go home with \$40 worth of chocolate, he says, and a recent \$40 wine dinner should've been \$100. "But we want them to be accessible, to strengthen this community and to bring more people together around art and food."

As he locks the door of 18 Reasons and prepares to plunge back into the lunchtime melee of the market, Mogannam dismisses a comment that he's some sort of Renaissance retailer, or indeed anything unusual at all, with a laugh and a shrug.

"Hey, I'm just trying to have fun, man, just trying to make a difference," he says. "I get bored doing the same old thing." **ESF**

Oakland freelancer **Bonnie Azab Powell** is the deputy editor of *Edible San Francisco* and the founder of the group food-politics blog *Ethicurean.com*. She wishes she lived closer to Bi-Rite.



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