

Potatoes are the stars at this farm

By LACEY JARRELL
For the Capital Press

Gemstar potatoes are the star of the show for one Southern Oregon farm.

According to Rob Unruh, owner of Robert L. Unruh Farms in Malin, Ore., gemstar russets are good in taste, quality and appearance.

"The gemstar is an absolutely gorgeous russet potato," Unruh said.

A past industry leader, the russet Burbank, is one

of the most versatile and tasty potatoes, but it isn't pretty on the store shelf, according to Unruh. He said gemstars compete well with Burbanks in every category.

Unruh's wife, Cheri, said gemstars are currently her favorite: She can bake them, mash them, make rolls with them, and gemstars even fry well.

"I can do anything with them," Cheri said.

In Malin, 150 acres of Unruh's 700-acre farm are dedicated to potatoes. In 2014, about 100 acres were dedicated to gemstars.

Much of the land Unruh farms has been in his family for generations.

"We're still raising spuds on a piece of ground my grandfather farmed in the 1940s. For some reason, it still raises an excellent potato," Unruh said.

Unruh said his operation the "ultimate family farm."

"The farm basically consists of my wife, my son and myself," he said.

"We raised two kids on the farm. It's a great livelihood, a great way to raise kids."

Their son, Jonathan, and Cheri's father both still help out from time to time.

According to Unruh, who has farmed potatoes since he was 13 years old, the spud market has changed drastically over the years.

"I love growing them, but it's not really smart business. It's kind of like a gambling addiction — the next hand's going to be the big winner," he said.

Unruh said 2015 will be his 42nd year raising potatoes. In the early years, he made a really good living, but between the years-long drought plaguing Southern Oregon and sluggish markets, it's been more difficult.



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To Rob Unruh, growing potatoes — especially these gemstar russets — are like an addiction. He said potatoes are a crop that "gets in your blood."

"It's become a tough business," Unruh said. "The money hasn't been in it, especially for the small family farm."

Unruh attributes some of the industry's struggles to recent diet fads that discourage eating potatoes.

"Potatoes have gotten a bad reputation," Unruh said. "A potato is a great food — it's close to a perfect food; it's just gotten a really bad rep."

In addition to gemstars, the Unruhs grow experimental red and Sierra Gold potatoes. The family is also considering trying its hand at organics.

"If you're going to stay in the business, I think you've got to be diversified in potatoes," Unruh said.

The family is always in the market for something that's cheaper to grow and successful on the shelf, he added.

Placing a potato wedge in the ground and nurturing it through a 120-day growing season to maturity is a fascinating process, according to Unruh. To him, there's nothing quite like a baby potato fresh from the field.

"Little baby potatoes are one of the best things in the world," he said.

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