

Corn maze covering college costs for seven Idaho siblings

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

BLACKFOOT, Idaho — Produce farmer Richard Johnson expects his family's annual fall corn maze and associated agricultural tourism activities to cover college tuition for all seven of his children.



Richard Johnson

Since starting his Wild Adventure Corn Maze six years ago, Johnson estimates he's averaged more than 13,000 visitors per season — ranging from peak years of about 20,000 customers to an unprofitable maze last fall, when 9 inches of rain fell in eight weeks.

He and his family also operate Grove City Gardens, a large produce farm that also offers a CSA.

This year's maze, carved into a 12-acre corn field, encompasses more than 6 miles of pathways, which form the images of a nurse, a firefighter and a police officer when viewed from the sky. Johnson explained the theme is "heroes." Local emergency responders and military members get reduced admission daily, and got in for free during a special Sept. 30 tribute to hometown heroes. The maze will run every Monday through Saturday until Nov. 4.

Johnson said his oldest son, Bryce, has already earned a business degree at Brigham Young University-Idaho, with his tuition covered by maze revenue. Now the maze is supporting Utah State University tuition for his daughter, Marissa, and son, Jeremy. Four younger children will follow suit.

On weekends, Marissa and Jeremy head home from school in Logan, Utah, to lend their family a hand in running the operation, which includes

the region's largest pumpkin patch, four mini ziplines, farm-raised Mexican crazy corn and other concessions, a petting zoo, a Toddler Town with peddle carts and rocking horses, displays on how food is produced, ticket booths in retrofitted grain silos, a straw-bale maze and three different games to play in the corn maze.

Marissa said working the maze has also padded her resume and provided fodder for discussions in her strategic sales class.

"It's a big weight lifted off my shoulders not having to worry about finances and having to pay for everything," Marissa said.

Those who enter the maze are tasked with collecting rubbings of animal tracks, solving the mystery of who kidnapped Farmer Joe or scoring the most points in a "treasure hunt."

For the brave of heart, Idaho State University's Beta Alpha Psi chapter will host its Third Annual Zombie Fun Run in the maze at 6 p.m. Oct. 21, benefiting the fraternity and Junior Achievement.

Sheldon Anderson, of Beta Alpha Psi, explained runners are given flags, which zombies attempt to steal, and are eligible for raffle prizes if they make it through with at least one flag remaining.

Johnson hosted his family reunion in the maze before opening day and offers discounted rates for field trips.

Past maze themes have included the Idaho Potato Commission's 75th anniversary, Idaho wildlife, Duck Dynasty, Lewis and Clark and Race to the Moon. Johnson said he chose the hero theme to show the community's appreciation for police and other emergency responders.

"You look at the discontent across the country and you see how some of these people aren't really appreciated for all of the sacrifices they make," Johnson said.

Weather pushes wine grape harvest

By DAN WHEAT
Capital Press

CHELAN, Wash. — Gaston Rocha worked swiftly, clipping Pinot noir grape clusters with his right hand and catching and dumping them into white, 5-gallon plastic buckets with his left.

He seemed oblivious to the beauty of the setting — perfect vineyard rows dropping sharply downslope to a placid Lake Chelan.

But time is of the essence while he's working, not just because he's paid by how much he picks, but because rain and cold may soon close the harvest window.

While the last 10 percent of California's wine grape harvest was hit by wildfires and Idaho counts a light harvest from last winter's frost damage, Washington's crop appears to be near normal or slightly under last year's record 270,000 tons.

The August crop estimate was 260,000 tons. That's updated post-crush in November.

"It can be up or down. It's gone both ways," says Vicky Scharlau, executive director of the Washington Winegrower Association in Cashmere.

"We have some winter damage in older vines, but no drastic freeze damage," Scharlau said. "Our heat units at the end of August were more like 2013, more normal."

Cluster weight is down slightly, which will contribute to a bit lighter crop, she said.

Oregon had heavy smoke during the last two weeks of ripening. The effects so far are unknown.

But Shane Collins, vintner of Rocky Pond Winery, Chelan, which owns Clos CheValle Vineyard where Rocha works, said wine grapes so far are testing negative for wildfire smoke taint from the Columbia



Dan Wheat/Capital Press

Epifanio Reyes dumps Pinot noir wine grapes into a bin on the tractor driven by Rafael Negrate in Clos CheValle Vineyard overlooking Lake Chelan, Wash., on Oct. 16. The state's wine grape crop may be down a little from last year's record 270,000 tons.

Gorge to Lake Chelan.

"It's a timing thing," he said. "There's a 14- to 17-day window around veraison (when grapes accumulate sugar rapidly) that's the critical time."

Despite wildfires uplake, Lake Chelan smoke was nothing this year like it was in 2015, he said.

Smoke taint gives wine "an ashtray, gasoline taste," he said. Nothing anyone wants but hard to detect because it develops over time, he said.

In 2015, wineries dumped it or sold it early, he said. "Karma Vineyards sold it as Bad Karma,"

he said.

Freddy Arredondo, vintner at Cave B Estate Winery near George, said his 100-acre crop is lighter than last year, possibly from more of a January freeze nip than he originally thought. Mildew pressure was big from an overly wet spring, he said. Clusters are lighter, he said.

Washington has more than 53,000 acres of wine grapes, more than 860 wineries and is second to California in production.

Washington harvest normally begins in earnest right after Labor Day and ends in early November. It was about 80 to 90 percent done as of Oct. 17, Scharlau said.

Idaho is growing quickly and "stellar" in quality but is small compared to Wash-

ington, just as Washington is small compared to California, Scharlau said. Wine grapes tend to stay specific to AVAs and there are so many factors in buying wine "that it's hard to draw any kind of conclusions" about one area's loss benefiting another, she said.

Rocky Pond Winery owns the 30-acre Clos CheValle Vineyard on the south shore of Lake Chelan and the 90-acre Double D Vineyard 20 miles southeast at Sun Cove on the Columbia River.

Plans call for adding 30 acres at Double D and developing 50 acres of vineyard farther south at Skeels Road, Collins said.

Progress is being hampered by a lack of labor, he said.



GMO Answers

A screen shot from the GMO Answers website.

GMO Answers website attracts more than 2 million visits a year

By SEAN ELLIS
Capital Press

A website created by major seed companies four years ago to provide consumers with accurate information about genetically modified crops is receiving more than 2 million visits a year.

"We do feel like we are making a difference," said Michael Stebbins, director of external engagement for GMO Answers.

The website is funded by members of the Council for Biotechnology Information, which includes BASF, Bayer, Dow AgroSciences, DuPont, Monsanto Co. and Syngenta.

The online conversation about genetically engineered crops, commonly called GMOs, is not where CBI members want it to be yet, "but it's certainly in a better place than it was a couple of years ago," Stebbins said. "We do feel like we are making a difference and we'd like to move the needle a little bit every year."

The website invites people to ask tough questions about GMO crops and encourages them to be skeptical but also open-minded. Questions are referred to independent experts who are not paid by GMO Answers, Stebbins said.

He said most of the questions have to do with the safety of GMO crops, "even



Sean Ellis/Capital Press File

Recently harvested sugar beets, which are genetically engineered. The nation's sugar beet industry and other farm-related businesses that benefit from genetically engineered crops are making a concerted effort to engage consumers online and change their understanding of GMO crops.

though this issue has been addressed again and again. People still have their doubts."

Robert Wager, a molecular biologist at Vancouver Island University in Canada, is one of the experts who donate time to answer questions submitted to the website.

"Very clearly, after 20 years of commercial genetically engineered crops and thousands of tests, there is no evidence that shows genetically engineered crops represent any unique risk beyond the normal uncertainties of plant breeding," he told Capital Press.

Wager believes the conversation in the U.S. about GMO crops is starting to turn in their favor, thanks in part to efforts of groups like GMO Answers and individual farmers who are "stepping

up and telling the public what they do, how they do it and why they do it."

"The public is getting a much more balanced view of this technology than they did five years ago," he said.

The nation's sugar beet industry recently announced it will launch a \$4 million online campaign this fall aimed at changing consumers' minds about the safety and benefits of GMO crops.

Idaho sugar beet farmer Duane Grant, who is helping lead that effort, said users of GMO crops made a conscious decision when the technology was introduced commercially in 1996 not to engage consumers about it, deferring communication about it to the federal agencies that regulate GMO crops and gave them a green light.

Community BANK

Local Money Working For Local People

Contact a Loan Officer Today to Discuss Your Financing Needs!

<p>Adrian Harguess Joseph, OR 541-432-9050</p>	<p>Mollie Hulse La Grande, OR 541-963-3434</p>	<p>Cliff Schoeningh Baker City, OR 541-524-7667</p>
<p>Christina Smith Pendleton, OR 541-278-9000</p>	<p>John Ngo Hermiston, OR 541-289-4480</p>	<p>Todd Wood College Place, WA 509-525-9860</p>
<p>Heidi Zellerhoff Clarkston, WA 509-758-6878</p>	<p>John Gass The Dalles, OR 541-296-0779</p>	

- Farm Real Estate Loans
- Ag Operating & Lifestock Loans
- Equipment Loans
- Farm Service Agency Guaranteed Loans

www.communitybanknet.com

1-800-472-4292 Member FDIC