

# No profits yet, but Perkins thinking long-term, community benefit

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unique is its location — smack dab in the middle of a new housing development and just outside the city limits. Instead of the city growing up around an existing farm, he chose the location to take advantage of its easy access to customers. Visibility is good for selling produce right out of the field, as he does, because it's a high-traffic spot on the south side of four-lane Grant Road leading to the regional Pangborn Memorial Airport. New homes line South Mary Avenue to the west and will soon populate the nearby 207-lot Maryhill Estates subdivision to the south and east. The development will include 96 apartment units and 5 acres for businesses.

## Good neighbor

The entire area used to be apple orchards. Perkins' 14 acres went fallow for years. Pumpkins were grown on a small part of it for a couple of years as a school fundraiser.

Perkins, 41, a fruit salesman for one of Washington's largest fruit marketers, Chelan Fresh Marketing, wondered why someone didn't do something bigger.

"I saw it as a massive opportunity," he said. "The perfect location."

He views the current and coming housing as a big asset, providing plenty of potential produce customers. And the developers like his farm.

"It's great. It's a nice activity for the community during Halloween and he makes nice produce so it's a win-win for everybody," said Jason Gaul, a Maryhill Estates partner.

In 2015, Perkins leased the 14 acres and with the help of his then-girlfriend, Annie Weaver, started Annie's Fun Farm, growing and selling pumpkins, squash, melons and offering family entertainment in the form of a corn maze, an apple sling shot, a big dragon castle bounce house and hay rides.

After a second season, Perkins bought 11 acres, continued leasing 3 acres and entered a third season as sole owner of the business, keeping the name Annie's Fun Farm.

County records show Perkins paid \$825,000 for the 11 acres — that's \$75,000 an acre — and \$355,000 for an adjoining home on 1 acre.

Gaul said he and his partners had previously looked at buying the ground as part of their development, but it was too expensive.

Perkins acknowledges that some may think him to be a "little nuts" to spend so much to grow vegetables, when he could have found cheaper ground farther away from town.

But it wouldn't have been the same, he said. Elsewhere, neighbors couldn't have seen their food growing right next door. To him, that's what "makes it cool."

"It's a passion. Something I enjoy," he said. "I'm fortunate to have a good career and so I can buy some land and do this."

## Affinity for farming

Perkins was born in Toledo, Ohio, and from the age of 10 grew up in Loveland, Colo. His mom worked in banking and his father in construction, but his great-grandparents, on both sides, had farms and as a youngster he helped plant crops.

"We always had family gardens and my mom canned our baby food," he said.

One of Perkins' first jobs was in a King Soopers grocery store, a Colorado chain owned by Kroger, one of the nation's largest food retailers.



Photos by Dan Wheat/Capital Press File

Jake Chanley carries pumpkins to his car followed by his sister, wife and kids at Annie's Fun Farm, East Wenatchee, Wash., in October 2015. Fall weekends are busy with hundreds of people buying produce and enjoying activities such as a corn maze, petting zoo and hay rides.



Nate Perkins picks up squash left in his field from last season. He will soon till the ground for this year's crops. Houses in background are across South Mary Avenue. Grant Road is to his back.



Annie's Fun Farm has high visibility next to Grant Road in East Wenatchee, Wash. Nate Perkins' house is in the background.

He worked in produce and stayed with the company during and after college. He obtained his bachelor's degree in restaurant and resort management at Colorado State University in 2000.

Perkins ascended in the Kroger corporation and in 2005 was assigned to Wenatchee as the company's national buyer of apples, pears and cherries.

Chelan Fresh Marketing was a client he bought fruit from and in 2010, the company recruited him to join its domestic sales desk.

"I love produce. I've always loved and missed the retail side of it, working with the consumer. So this kind of fits in with that," he said of his small farm.

He gets that direct contact with consumers by selling about 95 percent of what he grows right out of the field in a temporary stand he puts up and takes down each season. The rest of his crop is sold to other produce stands in the area.

"I have a vision of having a fruit stand and sustainable small farm. Growing unique varieties that taste good. Not necessarily high-yielding but good quality and flavor," Perkins said.

He realizes he's a bit of an anomaly — someone who works for and believes in corporate agriculture but also works in and believes in the local food movement.

"I like the idea of supporting the local community in general and

bringing the community closer together," he said. "The farm becomes part of the community and helps build a sense of community."

"A lot of people thank us for being here because it's fun for the family. It's outside. People come and spend hours. People come from Seattle and buy stuff. They say they like the flavor of the fruits and vegetables from this area."

But his goal isn't to create solely a tourist destination, but to be a part of and serve the local community — a place where people can see their food growing and get to know the people growing it.

## The season

The season starts with tilling, discing and ground prep, adding a base layer of fertilizer and making growing beds with plastic mulch and drip tape irrigation. Transplanted tomatoes, peppers and onions are the first to be planted in May.

Strawberries he planted last year will produce their first crop this year. He grows several varieties of watermelon and cantaloupe, 20 varieties of hard squash, a large variety of summer squash, pumpkins, all sorts of cucumbers, a range of chili peppers, sweet corn, egg plant, tomatillo, onions, basil, cilantro and other crops.

"Half of my customers are Mexican so I have people working here who are bilingual," he said. "I cater to the whole community."

He adds entertainment in Octo-

ber to attract even more customers. In addition to the bounce house and apple sling shot, he has a corn maze and petting zoo with miniature ponies, goats, turkeys and chickens.

The only pesticide he uses is to combat worms in his sweet corn. He's fought aphids with lady bugs and wants to move toward greater use of cover crops to replace fertilizers and keep weeds down.

"Buying seeds is cheaper than buying chemicals," he said.

His farm is not organic. If it were, he would have to spray more often since organic sprays are "soft," he said. Neighbors have asked about his sprays but haven't complained about the noise from his 75-horsepower John Deere tractor.

"They probably get as much noise from Grant Road as they do from my tractor," he said. "The only complaints have been about dust so we try to make sure not to be doing field work when it's dry and the wind is blowing hard."

He bought a corn seeder from Kallstrom Corn in Ephrata, Wash., but plants and harvests everything else by hand, employing up to six people at the season's peak.

Parking can get crowded on busy weekends in October, but he picks crops inward from South Mary Avenue to make room for parking in the field. Neighbors Howard and Steve Delp allow 20 to 30 cars to park at their place to help out.

"We love having the farm here. He does an excellent job and every

year is trying to make improvements like more drip irrigation and less overhead," said Howard Delp.

"You couldn't have a nicer fellow for a neighbor and he has a real passion for what he does," Delp said. "Anything we can do to help him out, we do."

## Profitability

Sales continue from August through October. He sells melons by the pound and sweet corn by the ear, \$6 to \$8 per dozen. Mini-pumpkins are \$2, larger ones are \$12 and giant pumpkins go for \$25 to \$50 each.

Perkins smiled when asked about profitability.

"We're not even close to being profitable if you add in the cost of the land," he said. "A goal is to get annual revenues to service the land debt. I do have a joy for it. I like doing it, but I want it to pay for itself and I think long-term as I build up the retail side it can be very profitable, but it will take a lot of years to get there."

He won't make it, he said, on an August through October sales season. He would like to turn his field into a Christmas tree lot in November and December to augment income but hasn't done so yet.

"I do not have any partners or investors. I put my life savings into the purchase and still have a sizable debt," he said. "I barely broke even on operations last year even though sales were up 70 percent and have increased each year."

# Economic impact study on Oregon Wine industry shows impressive gains in tourism, jobs, total value

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Sally Murdoch, spokeswoman for the Oregon Wine Board, said even they were surprised to see big gains were.

"It's emblematic of the hard work our growers are putting in day in and day out that we see this growth," Murdoch said. "They don't cut corners, most everything is crafted by hand, especially with our small- to medium-size producers which make up the bulk of our state's wineries, and people who go to tasting rooms often are treated to talking with the winemakers working the land themselves."

Other numbers in the study show wine grape acreage is up 27 percent in Oregon, and the value of grapes in the vineyard has risen from \$128 million to \$167 million, or about 30 percent. Winery revenues, meanwhile, are up 46 percent.

Full Glass Research is an independent market research company run by Christian Miller, of Berkeley, Calif., specializing in the craft food and beverage industries. By

maintaining their focus on premium wines — highlighted by the state's flagship variety, Pinot noir — Miller said Oregon winegrowers have managed to turn their lower yields and cooler climate into an asset.

At the same time, Miller said the market is shifting in that same direction, with sales of over-\$15 bottles of wine growing faster than under-\$15 bottles for nine out of the last 10 years.

Factor in the growing tourism, and Miller said the value of Oregon wine is poised to increase exponentially. But maintaining long-term success won't be easy, he cautioned.

"It's not like the first premium wine boom in the 90s, where if you had a good wine you could put it out there and it would sell itself," Miller said. "You really have to invest in sales and marketing in one channel or another to succeed."

That is where Murdoch said the Oregon Winegrowers Association and Wine Board come into play, raising the profile of Oregon wine across the country. Last year, the association received a \$174,540

specialty crop block grant from the USDA and Oregon Department of Agriculture for market outreach in major cities over the next three years.

The first event is scheduled for April 24 in Los Angeles, featuring more than 50 Oregon winemakers.

"This event will be an immersive Oregon experience and our hope is that LA's wine enthusiasts will fall in love with what we're making and pouring," Murdoch said.

Oregon has grown its out-of-state wine sales over the last decade, from 888,000 cases in 2006 to 1.86 million cases in 2016. Direct-to-consumer sales, which can also include mailing customers outside Oregon, have also grown from 399,000 cases to 593,000 cases.

Miller, with Full Glass Research, said the short-term outlook for Oregon wine is positive, with factors such as demand for higher quality wines playing in the industry's favor.

"All of that has aligned pretty well for Oregon over the next few years," he said.

# Sarbanand was subject of three state probes

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The third investigation, the one involving pesticides, received less attention, but was wrapped up with the other two and also alleged harm to farmworkers.

The records released so far by L&I redact key elements, including accident reports for claims for injuries not related to pesticides. The pesticide investigation began with three claims but were eventually narrowed to a complaint filed by a farmworker on Aug. 15. The worker reported that he may come into contact with chemicals and suffered a headache July 15.

It was unknown why the worker, whose name was blacked out in the released records, waited one month to report the incident to the state. By the time the investigation began, he had left the farm and could not be contacted, according to L&I records.

The farm sprayed blueberries July 12 for spotted wing drosophila with the insecticide Entrust SC, according to farm records. The worker said he may have come into contact with chemicals in the field three days later.

Department of Health official

Tito Rodriguez helped Rossi interview three farmworkers. Two said they had never smelled pesticides or gotten sick. A third worker said his eyes are irritated by the dust and that he sneezes a lot, but that he had not smelled chemicals, felt nauseous or developed a headache.

"The farm keeps scrupulous records and neither Tito nor I can find anything that would indicate a pesticide exposure from drift or early re-entry," Rossi wrote in the email.

Before Ibarra died, about 70 other foreign workers with H-2A visas walked out in protest and were fired. Columbia Legal Services and a Seattle law firm have filed a class-action federal lawsuit alleging that hundreds of Sarbanand workers were underfed and bullied, and the ones who staged a one-day strike were illegally dismissed. The company has said it will vigorously defend itself against the suit.

The suit does not blame Sarbanand for Ibarra's death, nor does it accuse the farm of exposing workers to pesticides.

L&I declined to release records related to its investigation into Ibarra's death, citing an exemption in Washington's public records law.