

People & Places

Heirloom apples provide niche

Jim Freese and his family grow rare apples for making hard cider

By DAN WHEAT
Capital Press

OMAK, Wash. — Jim and Sandee Freese say they are stewards of what God has given them — the small orchard where Jim has lived all his life that has been in his family 108 years.

But increasing financial challenges have given rise to innovation. A refocus initiated by their son, Shea Saxe, has made them one of the state's largest purveyors and propagators of heirloom apple varieties for fresh market consumption and production of hard cider. So far, the heirlooms represent only about 5 acres of their 45 acres of tree fruit production.

They've rebranded as "Iron Root Orchards — Forging a Bold Future. Rooted in Tradition."

Iron represents tenacity and strength of their pioneer roots and hearkens back to the farm's old anvil, manufactured in England the queen country of cider making, and still used today to forge and repair tools in a barn that dates to the 1920s.

An element of the new focus will be "historic orchard tours" by appointment that Sandee plans to begin during harvest in October. She already has been selling fruit on the farm.

The house and barn are their own living museums. A pedal-driven grinder, old hay dump rake and other old implements dress the yard and an old shed houses a stationary system from which lines ran to spray fruit trees in the 1920s, '30s and '40s.

Visitors walk up a country lane through a wooded ravine to the orchard to see conventional and organic apples, pears and cherries. There are table grapes, stone fruit and thornless blackberries. They see nursery and younger and older blocks of heirloom apple trees — old varieties no longer in regular commercial production.

"I think the biggest plus we have going for us as a small farm is that grandpa chose a really nice site," Jim Freese says.

A bit of history

It all began with Freese's mother's parents, Burr and Rebecca Breshears, who bought the orchard in 1910. They came from Missouri. He was a Church of the Brethren minister and continued farming by horse until his death in 1941.

Their daughter, Hilda, and her husband, Wilbur Freese,



Jim Freese looks at a cluster of Golden Russet heirloom apples before thinning them in his Omak, Wash., orchard, June 6. He and his son see heirloom apples as their future.



Freese with a 6-gallon carboy of hard cider made from a mix of heirloom apple varieties.

took over in the early 1940s. Wilbur was fatally injured trying to stop a rolling tractor in October of 1979. It happened in the same part of the orchard where Hilda's brother, Ralph Breshears, was killed in a mechanical accident while thinning an apricot tree six years earlier.

Jim Freese, now 63, took over at the end of 1979 when he was 25. He had received a bachelor's degree in horticulture from Washington State University in 1977, an associate degree in automotive technology from Portland Community College in 1978 and was working as an auto mechanic in Portland at the time of his father's death.

Over time, Freese bought out the interest of his sister, Rebecca, in the operation, known as J&B Orchards.

Many challenges

Through the 1980s and 1990s, Freese experienced

horticultural and marketing ups and downs. The 1989 Alar scare over the alleged cancer risk of a plant growth regulator damaged industry pricing for a couple years.

By the late 1990s, the industry was in trouble from too many Red and Golden Delicious apples.

Idea for new focus

"The 1998 crop was a disaster. We lost \$60,000 on Reds and Goldens," Freese said.

After that, he sped up the transition into a high-color sport Gala, Granny Smith, Fuji and pears.

"We had times when we were kind of surviving. Dad had done well so we were kind of living off family money to get through," he said.

Freese's step son, Shea Saxe, now 45, was 15 years old in 1988 when he read an article in Mother Earth News about heirloom apples.

"A little seed was planted and in my meanderings through life I found myself as a bartender at the first multi-tap craft brewery in the Northwest, called Cooper's in Seattle," Saxe said. "It was the beginning of the craft brewery movement. I saw it grow rapidly. Cider seemed a natural cousin and it's really taking off now because of the amazing flavors and, unlike beer, it's gluten-free."

In 2003, Saxe began collecting heirloom apple scion wood and grafting it onto trees to prove the varieties. Among his scion sources were the Portland Home Orchard Society and Nick Botner, of Yoncalla, Ore., believed to have the largest private collection of apple varieties in the country.

"I had a patch of Bisbee Red and they were not going anywhere, so I let him graft onto those," Freese said. "He was ahead of the curve on the hard cider craze."

Saxe now has more than 500 varieties and has proven about 300.

Golden Russet is a popular one for fresh eating and "a champagne-type hard cider," Freese said. "Sandee sold some to a local market and everyone wanted Golden Russet over other heirlooms."

Macoun is another popular variety.

A Western Washington cidery "comes over and pays top dollar and hauls it off," Freese said. They sold 10 to 12 bins of heirloom apples last year.

Sharing a vision

Costs, labor, regulations all increasingly take their toll on Washington's small tree fruit growers, who once ruled the industry.

Even Freese's sport Gala did poorly this past year because of internal browning and general Gala oversupply.

"I was at 36 percent pack-out, \$15 per bin. So I was losing my shirt," Freese said.



Western Innovator

Jim Freese

Age: 63

Born and raised: Omak, Wash.

Family: Wife, Sandee, retired school teacher; son Torrence Saxe, 47, soon to become general in charge of Alaska Air National Guard; son Shea Saxe, 45, sommelier, bartender and heirloom apple guru.

Education: Graduate Omak High School, 1973; bachelor's degree in horticulture, Washington State University, 1977; associate degree in automotive technology, Portland Community College, 1978.

Work history: One year auto mechanic, KP Automotive, Portland, then owner-operator of the family orchard.

"The only saving grace for me since the late 1990s is that I grow more pears than apples. Farming is like being out on an ice flow and jumping from piece to piece.

"We're more on the ragged edge right now than we've ever been. It's pretty tough. The downturn in apples is pulling everything down."

Beside pears, his late season Staccato cherries can do well.

Rather than follow the industry into planting the new state apple variety, Cosmic Crisp, Freese has planted SugarBee, a new proprietary variety of Chelan Fresh Marketing.

But he and his son also share a vision of finding a niche, moving more into heirloom varieties, selling the fruit, nursery trees and scion wood.

They have 10,000 to 12,000 heirloom nursery trees that needed to be sold this spring but they didn't have their state nursery license yet. They say they will have it for fall.

Saxe comes home to the orchard on weekends, but otherwise is a craft bartender and sommelier in the Seattle area. He hopes to open a craft cidery there. He wants to propagate rare heirloom apple varieties and promote them throughout the country.

People his age and younger, he said, are becoming more interested in cider than beer.

Flavor combinations are endless from pairing heirloom varieties that have bitter sharp, sharp and sweet categories.

Capital Press

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Saturday-Sunday

June 16-17

84th Annual Glenwood "Ketchum Kalf" Rodeo. 12:30-10 p.m. The Glenwood, Wash., Rodeo Association is a nonprofit, all-volunteer organization that sponsors this rodeo. Cost: \$10 for adults, \$3 for ages 4 to 12.

Wednesday, June 20

Forestry Shortcourse. 9 a.m.-noon. Sandpoint Orchard, 10881 N. Boyer Road, Sandpoint, Idaho. This is the second session of a six-session course on forest ecology, silviculture, wildlife habitat, and other forestry topics. Cost: \$38 Email: cschnepf@uidaho.edu

Saturday, June 23

2018 Washington State Dairy Ambassador Coronation. 5 p.m. Bellevue High School Performing Arts Center, 10416 SE Wolverine Way, Bellevue, Wash. Five candidates are vying to become the Washington State Dairy Ambassador for the coming year. The doors open at 5 p.m. and the program begins at 6 p.m. Tickets ordered by June 12 are adults \$20, students \$10

and 6 and under free. Tickets purchased after June 12 or at the door will be adults \$25, students \$15, under 6 still free. Tickets will be available for pick up at the door. For ticket information, please contact Gloria Edwards by email at gloria.wsdw@hotmail.com or 360-273-7313.

Saturday-Sunday

June 23-24

Aquaponics in Oregon: Discover the Growing Potential Conference. Western Oregon University, Smith Hall, 345 Monmouth Ave., Monmouth, Ore. Aquaponics is the marriage of hydroponics (growing food in water) and aquaculture (growing fish) in a sustainable closed system. This highly sustainable closed-loop ecosystem creates the optimum environment for fish and plants to thrive naturally, therefore, growing pure, chemical-free food. This weekend workshop is intended for anyone interested in learning more about how we can grow this emerging green industry here in Oregon. We will hear from some of the top commercial growers, innovators and educators in this emerging green industry and discover the challenges and opportunities aquaponics presents. Cost: \$75 for Saturday or Sunday; \$135 for entire weekend. Website: https://bit.ly/2KdDXSM

Wednesday, June 27

Forestry Shortcourse. 9 a.m.-noon. Sandpoint Orchard, 10881 N. Boyer Road, Sandpoint, Idaho. This is the third session of a six-session course on forest ecology, silviculture, wildlife habitat, and other forestry

569 Hanley Road, Central Point, Ore. Learn everything you need to know to get your produce and crafts to market. This class will walk you through market preparation and presentation. Experienced farmers, crafters jury committee chair and a site manager from the Rogue Valley Growers and Crafters Market will review the rules for entry into markets. They'll also share tips and tricks learned over the years to make bringing products to market easier and more profitable. There will be some handouts for reference. A sample booth will be set up. Cost: \$10 Website: http://bit.ly/JacksonSmallFarms

Snake River Pest Management Tour. 8 a.m.-5 p.m. Aberdeen Research and Extension Center, 1684-1698 2700 West Road, Aberdeen, Idaho. The tour will feature several weed-control trials in potatoes including targeted herbicide programs in potatoes, Sonalan tank mixtures and sulfentrazone-formulation comparisons. Researchers will also discuss their work on herbicide mechanism of action, quinoa herbicide screening and Litchi tomato herbicide management.

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topics. Cost: \$38 Email: cschnepf@uidaho.edu

Snake River Pest Management Tour. 8 a.m.-5 p.m. Kimberly Research and Extension Center, 3806 N 3600 E, Kimberly, Idaho. The tour will include broadleaf and wild oat control in spring wheat, clover cover crop in wheat, safflower tolerance to sulfentrazone and weed-control comparison between direct seeded and conventional tillage sugar beets. Research into potato psyllid, Colorado potato beetle and aphid and wireworm management in potato will also be featured.

Saturday, June 30

Goats/Sheep Parasite Management SIPM. 9 a.m.-4 p.m. OSU Southern Oregon Research and Extension Center Auditorium, 569 Hanley Road, Central Point, Ore. This one-day class on Sustainable Integrated Parasite Management (SIPM) will include learning about: managed grazing, 5-point checks, fecal egg counts, body condition scoring, condensed tannin feeds, nutritional management, culling/selection and copper-oxide wire particles. Cost: \$45 one-day event. https://extension.oregonstate.edu

Sunday-Wednesday

July 1-4

Molalla Buckeroo Rodeo. 5 p.m. Buckeroo Rodeo Grounds, 815 Shirley St., Molalla, Ore. Join us in celebrating our nation's birthday with non-stop rodeo action, mutton

bustin', a carnival midway, food and vendors. A fireworks show, live music and dance follow each evening performance. Website: http://www.molallabuckeroo.com

Tuesday-Saturday

July 3-7

St. Paul Rodeo. 7:30 p.m. Rodeo Grounds, Main Street, St. Paul, Ore. The 83rd annual St. Paul Rodeo runs July 3-7 and celebrates Independence Day with five days of fun. Website: http://www.stpaulrodeo.com

Eugene Pro Rodeo. 5 p.m. Rodeo Grounds, 90751 Prairie Road, Eugene, Ore. Rodeo, dances and fireworks are featured. Closed Thursday, July 5. Website: http://www.eugeneprorodeo.com/

Wednesday, July 11

Caneberry Field Day. 1-5 p.m. OSU North Willamette Research and Extension Center, 15210 NE Miley Road, Aurora, Ore. This is the annual field day for commercial and backyard caneberry growers. Sponsored by Oregon State University. Website: http://oregonstate.edu/dept/NWREC/

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