

Trial and error: Learning to raise cider apples

By GAIL OBERST
For the Capital Press

OTHELLO, Wash. — You farm and you learn, and you keep going.

Paul Booker, whose family has farmed in Eastern Washington since 1901, can attest to that. He planted his first apple test plot in 1997, and with plenty of hiccups, had expanded it to 3,000 trees by 2017.

Missteps are a valuable tool for those who hope to grow and market cider apples, Booker said. He has shared his challenges with other farmers at two CiderCon gatherings and with the Washington Tree Fruit Research Commission, admitting he still has a lot to learn about growing tree fruit.

Despite setbacks, Paul, his wife Jen, and three children, ages 6 to 16, haven't given up on farming. His extended family's irrigated grain and row crop farm near Othello continues to thrive. Even if it didn't, Paul, like many farmers, has a side job: he is a mechanical engineer who works on the Hanford Nuclear Reservation, training U.S. and international law enforcement personnel to combat weapons of mass destruction.

Given the current world situation, his job security is rock solid. So, why bother with farming?

Farming is just fun, and an ideal environment in which to



Paul Booker with young cider apple trees.

raise well-rounded kids, Paul said.

He's not the first farmer in his family who has seen hardships during the 120 years since the Bookers established a homestead between Othello and Connell, north of modern day Scooteney Reservoir. The family farmed dryland wheat in a region that gets an average of 8 inches of rain annually, meaning yields weren't great, even in good years.

Still, the family managed to survive farming with mule teams, shipping bags of wheat on the railroad from Hatton.

Paul's grandmother's side of the family planted orchards in the early 1900s near Wenatchee — cherry orchards still in production when Paul was young. Paul inherited a '71 Ford truck from that oper-



Cider apples growing at Paul Booker's orchard.

ation, which his family still uses.

When center pivot irrigation arrived in the Columbia Basin, his family rotated grain and seed crops and leased land to potato and onion growers. These lower value commodity crops for export suffered with the rise of the U.S. dollar, which prompted a closer look at high-value tree fruit. While working summers on the farm, Paul and his brother, Dan, now a civil engineer at the Grand Coulee Dam, saw

the impact of the global economy on Northwest growers.

In 1997, Paul, with help from his hometown sweetheart, Jen, planted the first orchard test plot as a high school project — putting in Honeycrisp, Gala, Cameo and Fuji varieties. Some grew well, some didn't. Most promising were cider apples, where blemishes don't matter. When opportunities arose to mechanize cider apples, the Bookers expanded Paul's high school experiment.

In 2015, Paul returned to farming full-time. Three generations helped him plant 1,000 cider trees in Othello.

While GPS steered the tractor, as he was planting corn at the home farm Paul tapped the agricultural minds at Washington State University, Penn State, Virginia Tech, Michigan State and Cornell. He got help from local growers, including Nolan Empey at Sheffield Cider. In 2016 he began pressing unique cider juice purchased from other

growers that they marketed in an auction-based model they called CiderAuction.com.

"The first auction was a bust," Paul said. "We only had a dozen online bidders who got great deals on frozen juice."

Paul's revised approach was to sell his and other growers' frozen juice online, go back to his engineering job in 2017, and buy a tiny urban farm in West Richland, aimed at keeping his family involved in farming. The cider orchard experiment languished while his parents ran the main farm.

Meanwhile, the CiderAuction.com marketing model — connecting NW growers with cider makers across the country — saw its first small profit. More lessons learned.

"The main farm and our tiny farm are surviving," he said. When local schools closed for the pandemic, the Booker kids went to work pruning trees and repairing trellises in the orchard. Home-school and remote school families have visited the West Richland farm to learn about growing livestock, pumpkins, corn, and of course, apples, an educational component the Bookers hope to expand.

This spring, Paul's family planted another 400 cider apple rootstocks in the main farm's orchard, and started a small U-pick orchard in West Richland.



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