

People & Places

Local connection key for fresh produce grower

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

Competing against regions with more sun or cheaper labor is tough, but Oregon’s Cal Farms has something major food sellers want: locally grown fresh produce.

Grocers and distributors are looking to reduce their “carbon footprints” while keeping money in the community, said Ambrose Calcagno, whose family operates the Oregon City-based company.

“It’s one of the few ideas that cross over the political divide,” he said.

Of course, there are also practical reasons to have a nearby source of fresh vegetables, such as faster delivery and lower freight costs.

While Cal Farms’ long-time Northwest roots are an asset, the company still has to hustle to keep up with competitors in California, Mexico and elsewhere.

For food retailers and distributors, the bottom line is still the bottom line.

“They have embraced local on a lot of levels,” Calcagno said. “At the same time, they’re only willing to pay so much more for local.”

To begin with, Cal Farms focuses on crops that are well-suited to the cooler Northwest growing region. Radishes, carrots, beets, Brussels sprouts, squash, cabbage and mixed greens are among the company’s staples.

“We’re not up here trying to grow tomatoes and pineapples,” Calcagno said.

Automation important

Automation is a crucial way for Cal Farms to contend with rivals in Mexico who have a fraction of the labor expenses.

The company relies on self-propelled harvesters to reap its carrots, beets and radishes, reducing its labor needs by hundreds of people per crop. The farm



Mateusz Perkowski/Capital Press

Ambrose Calcagno, whose family has operated Cal Farms for four generations.

designs and builds some of the machinery itself, reducing maintenance costs.

“Mechanization is a tremendous capital investment,” Calcagno said. “But the only way we see to having a future is trying to mechanize.”

It’s not enough for the company to invest in new equipment: Cal Farms must adjust crop spacing and other processes to align with the machine’s parameters, right down to preparing the soil for such operations.

“You can’t run the machinery in rocks or really heavy ground,” he said.

The emphasis on coordinating processes extends throughout Cal Farms’ packing and shipping operations, as the company is vertically integrated from seed to sale. The advantage is scaling crop production up or down based on market conditions, or quickly making other adjustments.

“When you have vertical integration, you have control at all levels,” Calcagno said.

While the company saves

money by performing functions that would otherwise be done by packing houses or brokers, the operation takes more effort to manage.

“It’s much more intensive than just doing a cannery crop,” Calcagno said.

Eastward expansion

The company grows fresh produce on roughly 800 acres on the outskirts of the Portland metropolitan area, 800 acres near Madras and another 800 acres near Boardman.

Cal Farms began its eastward expansion about 12 years ago, partly because it’s easier to run harvest machinery in the drier climate and partly because it’s not as difficult to find large parcels of farmland.

Sales to grocers and distributors in the Northwest are still “the backbone of our business,” representing about 80% of volume, but Cal Farms also ships highly competitive crops — including radishes, carrots and beets — to Southern California.

“It’s the biggest popu-

lation center on the West Coast,” Calcagno said.

With the company’s drive toward efficiency, he said it’s possible that crops less conducive to automation may fall by the wayside over time.

“The future of the operation will be fewer items and more volume of those items,” Calcagno said. The focus will be on “items that can be mechanized.”

Fourth generation

Calcagno represents the fourth generation of his family to run Cal Farms, which traces its roots to his great-grandfather, Agostino Calcagno. The company’s vertical integration started soon after the Calcagnos immigrated from Northern Italy, with the family growing crops and delivering the produce to retailers by truck.

After farming several locations around the outer Portland area, the company bought land at its current headquarters in Oregon City in the early 1970s.

Due to the company’s specialty in fresh produce,



Western Innovator

CAL FARMS

Headquarters: Oregon City, Ore.

Specialty: Fresh market vegetable production.

History: Operated by Calcagno family for four generations.

Employees: 20 to 90 workers, depending on season.

Locations: 800 acres around Portland, Ore., 800 acres near Madras, Ore., 800 acres near Boardman, Ore.

Growing season: Planting begins in January, with harvest beginning in April and ending in December.

Staple crops: Radishes, carrots, beets, Brussels sprouts, squash, cabbage and mixed greens, among others.

Calcagno headed south to earn a degree in agricultural business management from California State Polytechnic University in San Luis Obispo.

Forging business relationships in California proved useful, as did learning about the large scale and high efficiency of fresh market vegetable production in the state, Calcagno said.

“We’re piggy-backing off proven techniques and adapting them to our climate,” he said. “We’re not trying to re-invent the wheel, we’re trying to improve the wheel that’s already been invented.”

High Desert Food Trail highlights Central Oregon agriculture

By KYLE SPURR
EO Media Group

BEND, Ore. — A new self-guided tour through the farmland of Central Oregon will allow participants to enjoy the food produced in the region. The High Desert Food Trail, which began Oct. 15, takes people on a tour of 45 different stops through Deschutes, Jefferson and Crook counties.

The stops include farms and ranches, craft beverage producers, cooking schools and vineyards.

“We are really excited to collaborate with other farms in Central Oregon to share our rich agricultural lands with our community and visitors,” said Sarahlee Lawrence, owner of Rainshadow Organics, a 200-acre farm outside Sisters.

Lawrence, 39, was born at the farm, which her family started in 1970. She and her husband, Ashanti Samuels, opened a farm store on the property in 2015. At the store, Lawrence offers meats, grains and vegetables all raised on her farm. Participants on the food trail are encouraged to visit Friday and Saturday each week, when the store is open and



Dean Guernsey/EO Media Group

Melody Luloff organizes produce in the farm store at Rainshadow Organics on Oct. 14.

meals are served, she said.

“We call it farm-driven cuisine,” Lawrence said. “We really are cooking what we grow, and it changes every week, every season.”

Lawrence is familiar with other food trails in Oregon, including one in Hood River called the Fruit Loop.

She is thrilled her farm is on the new trail. It helps people find her farm, which like many other farms is off the beaten path, she said.

“We are definitely not on a main road,” Lawrence said.

“It’s a beautiful drive, but it’s not really on the way to anything.”

The High Desert Food Trail was created by the High Desert Food and Farm Alliance and Travel Oregon, which runs the Oregon Food Trails. The new trail joins eight other Oregon Food Trails throughout the state, and is the second east of the Cascades Mountains.

A map of the trail is available on the food and farm alliance website.

Annie Nichols, who organized the trail for the food and farm alliance, said brochures with the map will be available at Travel Oregon visitor centers across the state and the Redmond Airport.



Dean Guernsey/EO Media Group

A flock of turkeys roams the grounds at Rainshadow Organics.

The goal is to promote the agriculture of Central Oregon to visitors and locals who may not be aware how many food producers are in the region, Nichols said.

“Central Oregon has this vibrant food scene that I think a lot of people, especially in Western Oregon, are not quite aware of,” Nichols said. “We have this really cool scene out here that we are trying to highlight and package in a more exciting manner.”

Jeff Fox, who owns Sun Life Farm outside Prineville, said he is eager to share his property with visitors on the food tour.

Fox, who grew up in Salem and worked around the country in web development and logistics, bought the 160-acre farm two years ago. He was drawn to the views and rich soil, where he now grows 7,000 lavender plants. His farm also features 5 miles of hiking trails and an area with 19 bee hives where he produces honey.

“That’s our biggest drive, to really provide an experience at the farm,” Fox said. “It’s experiencing the life, experiencing the products and experiencing the adventure of the farm.”

Sun Life Farm is one of four Crook County farms on the food trail. Fox hopes people spend time at his farm and then visit the others.

“We have a pretty good representation for our portion of the trail,” Fox said.

Fox’s farm relies on visitors, who come to buy lavender and honey and stop for a meal. He believes the food trail will bring more people, who otherwise wouldn’t know to visit.

“I see that as the value in the trail itself,” Fox said. “It does entice visitors to the High Desert area to get out and see more.”

CALENDAR

WEDNESDAY-SATURDAY
OCT. 27-30

National FFA Convention and Expo: Indianapolis, Ind. The National FFA Organization will host an in-person 94th National FFA Convention & Expo Oct. 27-30, with a virtual program. National FFA will continue to follow all health guidelines set by the county, state and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. More information will be shared as it becomes available. Housing for the in-person event will open July 14, with convention registration opening Sept. 8. Website: <https://convention.ffa.org/>

SATURDAY

OCT. 30

Ag in the Classroom Fall Harvest Dinner and Auction: 5 p.m.

Linn County Expo Center, 3700 Knox Butte Road E, Albany, Ore. Join us to celebrate and support Oregon Agriculture in the Classroom. Website: <https://bit.ly/3ovujYy>

MONDAY-THURSDAY
NOV. 1-4

Western Dairy Management Conference: Peppermill Resort Spa Casino, Reno, Nev. The conference will include a host of presentations on animal health, fertility, genetics and production systems. Website: www.wdmc.org

FRIDAY-SATURDAY
NOV. 5-6

Farm and Food Conference: Centennial Hotel, 303 W. North River Drive, Spokane Wash. The two-day in-person event will focus on regenerative farming. Sponsored by the Spokane Conservation District. Soil scientist Ray Archuleta is the keynote speaker. Website: <https://bit.ly/3vgZC4C>

FRIDAY

NOV. 12

Food Regulations and Labeling (online): 10 a.m.-noon. Product claims are advantageous to your company because they signify a higher perception of quality for your consumers and increase purchase intent. However, such claims can have profound legal implications that your company should be aware of. Learn about the product, testing, and processing requirements necessary to add these essential marketing claims on your sales material, website, and product label. Our presenter will also compare applicable certifying bodies to help you navigate certification for

specific claims. Website: <https://bit.ly/3hBM4uV> Contact: 208-426-2181

TUESDAY-THURSDAY
NOV. 16-18

Washington Farm Bureau Annual Meeting: Yakima Convention Center, 10 N Eighth St., Yakima, Wash. Washington Farm Bureau members will get together for their annual meeting. Website: <https://wfbannual-meeting.com/>

Willamette Valley Ag Expo: Linn County Fair & Expo Center, 3700 Knox Butte Road E, Albany, Ore. Exhibitors, equipment, seminars, classes, food and fun. In addition to the exhibitors and classes, attendees can enjoy other attractions such as “Dine Around Oregon,” an antique farm equipment display and an educational area from Oregon Women for Agriculture. Website: www.wva-expo.com



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