

Johnson Orchards: Thriving on hard work, community connections

By **DAVE LEDER**
For the Capital Press

YAKIMA, Wash. — If you measured Eric Johnson's wealth by his level of happiness, he would be the richest man in Central Washington.

In fact, the fourth-generation owner of Johnson Orchards and his wife, Jill, are so satisfied running their 118-year-old Yakima business that they couldn't ask for anything more.

"It's just a great lifestyle, and I can't think of anything else I'd rather do," said Eric, who took over the company from his father, Roy Johnson Jr., in 1985. "I feel blessed to be here."

"It means so much to be part of something that people find so special," added Jill. "Our customers are happy all the time, and many of them have become our friends. It really does fill your cup."

Every year, the Johnsons look forward to welcoming customers from around the Northwest to their iconic fruit warehouse, located a few miles west of downtown. The market, surrounded by 10 acres of orchards, features cherries, peaches, nectarines, apricots, plums and pluots cultivated on site, and apples and pears grown on an additional 10 acres nearby.

The family accents their selection with an assortment of local products, including wine, cider, honey, candles



Jill and Eric Johnson

Dave Leder/For the Capital Press

and lavender, plus desserts from the Little Bake Shop, which is adjacent to the fruit warehouse.

"Everything we sell is local," Eric said. "That's our rule."

The bakery, which opened in 2011, uses locally grown fruit — most of it from Johnson Orchards — to create pies, tarts, cookies and other delicacies for an enthusiastic customer base.

"We sell the baked goods almost as fast as we can make them," said Jill, who partnered with her daughter, Adrienne Engelhart, on the side venture for 10 years before selling her share to a longtime family friend in 2021.

The couple's younger daughter, Eryn Johnson, helps out wherever she can,

working in the warehouse and managing the business' social media pages. Jill, 64, handles the bookkeeping, while Eric, 66, works in the fields, doing everything from driving tractors to spraying crops.

"It's hard work, but I love it just as much now as when I started working with my dad in the 1980s," Eric said. "As long as I have my health, I will be out here."

Johnson Orchards has downsized considerably since Eric's great-grandfather, Alfred, first started growing and selling apples in the early 1900s.

He admits it's easier to manage only 20 acres versus the 70-plus acres the family oversaw decades ago, when the business relied primarily on wholesale rev-

enues. Droughts and heat waves occasionally make things interesting, but for the most part, the business runs smoothly year after year.

"Less volume, better-quality fruit — that's become the core of our business," said Eric, who uses an integrated pest management approach to his crops. "We're very careful about how we grow our prod-

ucts, and that's why we have such loyal customers."

After more than 40 years maintaining his family's verdant orchards, Eric Johnson believes he has found the sweet spot in life. And while he doesn't expect many changes in the foreseeable future, he's not sure what will happen to the business when he eventually retires.

Fortunately, he won't have to worry about that for a while.

"Being part of a century-old family farm means so much to me that I can't imagine ever giving it up," he said. "I appreciate the people who were here before me and gave me such an amazing opportunity. Just thinking about it brings a tear to my eye."



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