

A black and white photograph of an apple orchard. The foreground is filled with rows of apple trees, many of which are heavily laden with fruit. The trees are supported by wooden stakes. In the background, a range of mountains is visible, with the highest peaks covered in snow. The sky is clear and bright.

BelleWood Acres

New distillery, facility to open in 2012

text by Jessica Harbert

photos by Pete Earheart

Once-dairy farm turned thriving apple orchard, BelleWood Acres has grown from the aspirations of owners Dorie and John Belisle. Home to 25,000 apple trees and a vast selection of farm-made products, BelleWood Acres will expand in 2012 to include Whatcom County's first distillery, a larger bakery, community space and year-round activities.

The Belisles, who bought the farm in 1995 after moving to Whatcom County from Florida, planted their first block of Jonagolds a year later. The initial plan for the farm was to grow a single variety of Jonagolds, and sell them wholesale. But by 2000, the brutal truth became apparent; growing only Jonagolds was not working and if something didn't change, the Belisles would lose the farm, Dorie said. But the two were not ready to give up.

"We knew we could grow apples," she said.

The calf shed on the farm was converted into a packing line in 2002 and BelleWood Acres began packing its own apples. They also started growing another variety of apples: Honeycrisp.

They now grow 20 varieties of apples that thrive in a maritime climate, including the classic Honeycrisp, Gala, McIntosh and Fuji. New this year are Pink Pearl, Red Jonaprince and Hidden Rose. The Belisles have learned the skill of grafting trees to create new varieties, expanding the capability of the farm.

In addition to the apples, BelleWood Acres offers many apple-related treats. In 2005, the Belisles started with apple chips and apple cider, then added farm-ground peanut butter, apple turnovers and other baked goods, homemade caramel and caramel apples along with apple cider vinegar, and apple cider syrup. The farm makes 40,000 gallons of cider each year, Dorie said, and new this year is sparkling apple cider – both beverages celebrated during the farm's first ever Cider Fest held in early November.

BelleWood products are available at multiple locations, including Haggen's, Community Food Co-Op, Bellingham Farmers Market, and the Safeway in Lynden.

Maintaining the quality is the hardest challenge while continually keeping up with the demand, Dorie said. "The goal is for everyone to taste real food. And any food we produce has to have a "wow" effect."

The Belises recently acquired 17 acres, bringing the farm to a total of 62 acres. With just under 25,000 trees, each acre supports 170 trees with 31 acres in total growing trees, Dorie said. The farm also grows pumpkins, pears, squash and sunflowers.

The newly-acquired 17 acres will make way for a 12,000 square foot facility housing a distillery, new store, deli space and community room, Dorie said, as well as more crops.

The new distillery will be managed by Jake Fowler, and opened by next fall. The Belises hope it will create year-round interest, including educational opportunities and expanded retail. A variety of apple beverages will be created at the distillery, such as vodka, gin and brandy, and available in the new tasting room.

The new bakery space will allow for expanded offerings, such as applesauce, apple butter and more baked



Owners Dorie and John Belise.

goods. The deli will offer the baked goods, sandwiches and other items, with room for 20 patrons to sit. While the community room will be used for classes and made available to rent.

With this expansion on the horizon, the farm is fortunate to have survived a time when apple orchards across the state were closing, Dorie said.

"In 2000, nearly 25 percent of all apple orchards in Washington State closed," Dorie said. The entire food distribution structure changed from many small packing houses and small grocers to large ones. When the demand increased drastically due

to the larger grocers, the packing houses were pushed to increase supply, and buying each other to keep up with the larger grocers, Dorie said.

"It was a little fish, big fish scenario," Dorie said.

As more consumers are interested in buying local, it is crucial to understand what "local" means, Dorie said. It can cover anything from a zip code to a general region, like the Northwest, which includes Montana, Oregon, Idaho and Washington.

"Don't assume, ask," Dorie said. "Get to know your produce buyers and ask them where it's from. Ask them their definition of local. It is

For more information:

BelleWood Acres is located at 231 Ten Mile Road in Lynden and open daily 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. through Dec. 31. For more information, visit bellewoodapples.com or call (360) 398-9187.



good to know what you are supporting."

At the peak of the high season, BelleWood Acres has 45 to 50 employees, from people harvesting to making cider and baking in the kitchen and working in the store. During the off season, the farm has seven employees.

Growing up in farming communities, John and Dorie came to Whatcom County to start a farm and learn about agriculture, Dorie said. The life of a farmer adheres to a challenging schedule, working January through August growing, grafting,

working with the science behind farming, weeding and manual labor, Dorie added. Then September rolls around, and the celebration begins with the harvest and having people out to the farm, which continues until December.

"Being tied into the season is fulfilling," Dorie said. "We are doing what we want to do."

BelleWood Acres would not be where it is without the current combination of wholesale, visitors to the farm and the support of the local community, she added.

"It's the whole deal really. And we love it."

"Being tied into the season is fulfilling. We are doing what we want to do."

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