

THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

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Whatcom Locavore: Cloud Mountain Farm moving to direct sales

NANCY GING - FOR THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

Anyone who lives in Whatcom County has probably eaten some food produced by the dedicated people at Cloud Mountain Farm near Everson. Have you eaten at Nimbus, Prospect Street Cafe or Boundary Bay? Enjoyed some of the exotic fruit flavors in Mallard's ice cream? Some of the ingredients you ate were almost certainly grown at Cloud Mountain Farm.

Founded 30 years ago by Tom and Cheryl Thornton, Cloud Mountain Farm was originally an organic apple farm. Over the years the operation expanded until they now have more than 250 varieties of fruit, plus vegetables and herbs, certified grape vineyards, a retail nursery operation for ornamentals, and landscaping services.

Diversity and experimentation are at the heart of the farm's approach. They grow an astonishing number of plant varieties. Try their hardy kiwi, for example, which has a smooth skin and can be eaten like a grape. Or sample a josta berry, a cross between black currants and gooseberries, and experience its explosion of spicy fruit flavor.



Cloud Mountain does research work with Washington State University, testing plant varieties and growing techniques. They also seek and grow rare and heirloom plants, with a special interest in varieties historically grown in Whatcom County.

Right now, they are developing techniques for growing fruits and vegetables in hoop houses. Cheryl Thornton, who gave me a tour of the farm last week, says the covered hoop houses help control heat and disease, requiring fewer chemical controls.

Though Cloud Mountain started as an organic apple farm, Cheryl said they quickly realized that idea wasn't going to work. For example, the natural, organic controls they used contained sulfur, and the amount they had to use to control pests and disease was actually harming beneficial insects and soil microorganisms. They abandoned the idea of growing organically, at least temporarily.

That doesn't mean their earth-friendly values have changed, though. The Thornton's now use an integrated pest management system that focuses on using minimal non-organic controls and ensuring what they use has no ground water effects. Three years after they started using the system, soil tests showed that their soil was actually healthier and more fertile than when they practiced purely organic methods.

They constantly look for ways to become more organic and efficient without the negative side effects. At the moment, Cheryl says their tomatoes are completely organic, and the cherries are moving that way thanks to the hoop houses they've built.

Cloud Mountain sold fruit to Haggen grocery stores for years, but recently shifted their focus to direct marketing, now selling to restaurant chefs and to consumers at the Bellingham Farmers Market. Cheryl says they like direct sales because they get to know and interact with their customers. She also is quick to say they respect and appreciate the efforts Haggen makes to carry local foods.

Part of the direct marketing emphasis includes consumer education. Cloud Mountain offers free workshops on raising fruit, food preservation, sustainable gardening, landscape planning, gardening with native plants, and using tunnels and hoop houses. See their catalog or website for their workshop schedule.

Their Fall Fruit Festival will be held Oct. 2 and 3, offering a day of fun and flavor that has been an annual event for more than 20 years. More than 200 varieties of fruit and fruit products will be available for tasting, along with live music and u-picking in Julia's Pumpkin Patch.

Julia's Pumpkin Patch was started as a small side business to help their 5-year-old daughter Julia learn about the farming business. Julia selected and planted the seeds, and helped sell the pumpkin harvest. All proceeds were put into an education fund, which the now-grown Julia used last year to study abroad in Ireland.

Cloud Mountain Farm is located at 6906 Goodwin Road, about 15 miles northeast of Bellingham. You can see the farm's catalog, as well as more information about their products and services, on their website at cloudmountainfarm.com. You can pick up a print catalog by stopping by the farm store, which is open Wednesdays through Saturdays, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., or Sundays 11 a.m. to 4 p.m., or stop by their booth at the Bellingham Farmers Market any Saturday.

This week's pesto recipe is intended to take advantage of the abundance of marvelous fresh local basil currently available. The challenge was to work around the absence of local olive oil. I served the pesto on fettuccine made by Bellingham Pasta and topped the dish with fresh chopped tomatoes from Cloud Mountain Farm. Ultimately, I didn't miss the olive oil at all!

LOCAVORE BASIL PESTO

2 cups fresh basil, loosely packed (The Growing Garden, Bellingham)

2 cloves green garlic (fresh garlic before it is dried), coarsely chopped (Rabbit Fields Farm, Everson)

1/2 cup butter, melted (Breckinridge Farm, Everson)

1/4 cup apple cider vinegar (Bellewood Acres, Lynden)

1/4 cup water (or as needed)

3/4 cup hazelnuts, whole (Holmquist Hazelnut Orchards, Lynden)

2 ounces gouda cheese, finely grated (Pleasant Valley Dairy, Ferndale)

salt (exception)

Put basil, green garlic, melted butter and apple cider vinegar in food processor or blender. Puree, adding water as needed. Be careful not to not add too much water. Mixture should have a stiff consistency, and not be runny. You may have to use a spatula to work ingredients down into the cutting bowl.

Grind hazelnuts in coffee grinder or with mortar and pestle. Stir into basil mixture.

Add grated cheese, and season with salt to taste.

The proportions of these ingredients may need to be varied, depending on the flavor of the basil you are using. Feel free to adjust as necessary.

Makes approximately 4 cups.

FOOD SOURCES

Terra Organica, 1530 Cornwall Ave., Bellingham;

Community Food Cooperative, 1220 N. Forest St. or 315 Westerly Road, Bellingham;

MORE RESOURCES

Bellingham Farmers Market, 1100 Railroad Ave., Saturdays 10 a.m.-3 p.m.;

Fairhaven Market, Fairhaven Village Green, Wednesdays noon-5 p.m.;

Ferndale Farmers Market, Centennial Riverwalk Park, Saturdays, 9 a.m.-3 p.m.

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