

From Ewes to Pears: Farming in the Gorge

THE SECOND TIME I DROVE UP TO MEET PAULETTE LEFEVER-HOLBROOK I counted five dogs in the front yard. No Paulette. I opened the car door slowly. Three of the dogs raced over tails wagging, pushing their heads onto my lap. But the big white dog Cloud stood in the yard watching me. A small dog barked at me from behind him. As I walked up the driveway, I saw a penny in the gravel and bent over to pick it up. Cloud rushed over growling and barking. I stood up and waited till he calmed down and bent again to pick it up. In that second, he nipped me.

Just doing his job: guarding the farm and the pennies.

The Rancher

Paulette's farm lies just west of Goldendale, Washington. I expect to see an old farmhouse instead of the modern ranch-style house. It sits on a rise overlooking the valley around the town, the Simcoe Mountains to the north, and to the west 12,276 foot high Mt. Adams. This area averages 12 inches of rain a year. The only trees around are the small ones lining the drive to the house. She tells me they are dead. The single mom is trying to make a living on a 240-acre farm, where economists say a viable farm needs 3,000 acres. And they need irrigation rights, which she also doesn't have. But she is allowed a well and that gives her enough water to raise livestock: 80 breeding ewes and a few rams, 10 to 15 head of cattle, chickens, and ten year-old son Conor's two pigs.

"We in the U.S. have cheap food, but is that a good thing?" Paulette asks. "To produce cheap you must be big, so I'm looking for niches. I try to diversify to cushion for a bad market or sales in one market area."

Using dryland farming techniques, she can grow one crop of alfalfa. Farmers with irrigation rights grow two or more crops in a season. She leases 140 acres to another farmer who owns the expensive farm equipment. They share expenses and profits 70-30—30 to her. The crop must be fertilized and sprayed for the alfalfa weevil. "It cost \$150 an acre to break even, a ton of alfalfa," she says. After the May cutting she lets it re-grow; in the fall she grazes her sheep there.

"I'm more fragmented than I would like to be, but I can't imagine anything else. When I wake up I'm excited. When I go to bed I'm tired but I'm excited by this life."

Fourteen year-old daughter Madison has a bread baking business. I arrive for the first interview on a cold foggy January morning. Paulette invites me into the house for coffee and slices of Madison's bread.

Paulette is trying to put together more ventures to make the farm provide enough income. She does catering on the side. Her ex-husband leases the ranch's shop and that provides a steady income. He also helps with some of the heavy ranch work. Otherwise the labor pool is Paulette, Conor and Madison, who feed and water the animals, clean stalls, gather eggs, tend the garden, market their products and help with lambing.

Late winter and early spring is lambing season. In the barn, expectant ewes pace on fresh straw. Just outside dozens of black lambs play in the fenced yard. She predicts her ewes will produce 160 lambs this year. Some will be sold for meat and some as breeding stock. County fairs have been an important place to sell her sheep, but Governor Gregoire has proposed cutting state funding for fairs to try to balance the state budget. It worries Paulette.

Most of the lamb meat she sells over the internet to customers in Portland. When it comes time to slaughter, a mobile unit comes to the ranch. That means the meat does not have a USDA stamp. To get that, the sheep would have to be slaughtered at a USDA facility; the nearest is in Sandy, Oregon. "But the drive traumatizes the animal," she said. "On the farm, I take responsibility for the animal; it is born, fed, and killed on the ranch."

The mobile unit takes Paulette's meat to the Sandy USDA processor, where she picks up the packages and meets her customers in Portland at Grand Central's Fremont Bakery. "I'm more fragmented than I would like to be, but I can't imagine anything else," Paulette said. "When I wake up I'm excited. When I go to bed I'm tired but I'm excited by this life."

Farming: East versus West

It's a challenge to support a family on 240 acres in dry east Klickitat County where Paulette farms. But in Hood River County just an hour west, it takes only 50 to 80 acres. Water and soils control



Top: Late winter and early spring sheep because they are easier for her

Middle: Gorge grown veggies

Bottom: Sam Asai, right, son Aron Asai were in the midst of pruning their fruit t



is lambing season. Paulette raises sheep, which is easier to handle than cattle.

Asai, center, and nephew Seth Sakraida inspect cherry trees in late January.

what a farmer or rancher can grow.

Klickitat and Wasco Counties are mostly dryland farming: wheat, barley, and oats, and in forage land for livestock, except around The Dalles and Mosier, where irrigation provides the water for the cherry orchards. In Hood River County which average over 30 inches of rain a year, orchards predominate—winter pears mainly. While Skamania County receives the most rainfall, it contains the least amount of land in farms.

“Agriculture is an important part of the Gorge economy; it helped mitigate the impacts of the recession,” said Brian Tuck, the OSU Dryland and Irrigated Field Crops Agent at the Wasco County Extension office. Gross farm sales in the four counties totaled over \$250 million dollars in 2007, the most recent USDA data.

Unlike other economic sectors like manufacturing or finance, agriculture is primarily a family business. According to the USDA, 98 percent of U.S. farms are family owned.

People care about family farms right now. A 2009 survey by the National Restaurant Association asked 1800 chefs to rank food trends for 2010: number one: locally grown produce; number two: locally sourced meats and seafood.

The Restaurant

“Farms are getting branded,” says Ali Adams owner-operator of South Bank Kitchen in downtown Hood River. “Our customers are concerned about where we get our produce and meat. They ask what farms the meat came from and ‘Is that cheese from Oregon or California?’ ”

“And OG is like a religion. OG they call it, organic goods. We sold organic Hood River blueberries last summer and they flew off the shelf,” she said. “We used the second harvest for jams.” But because organic products tend to be more expensive she sells them in the retail portion of the store, but not exclusively in their prepared food.

Local farmers come to see if she will carry their products. The cases and shelves are filled with local goods: wines, cheeses, chicken, beer, baked goods, juices, even chocolate at the holidays.

She seeks out local produce, too. “I go to Gorge Grown Farmers’ Market every week it’s open. Last summer I was looking for tomatoes. I took my chef up the day the market was holding a tomato contest. We tasted them all and picked ones we wanted to sell in our restaurant.” They chose ones from Idiot’s Grace farm in Mosier, Oregon and from Raisin Hill Farm near Lyle, Washington.

Farmers’ Markets and CSA’S

“Farms now have a brand,” said Sarah Hackney, Executive Director of Gorge Grown Food Network. “It’s a way to compete. The farmer has an identity and people develop a relationship with the farmer. You are more likely to stick with a farmer if you know your dollars are supporting a family.” The not-for-profit organization provides a way for Gorge farmers to sell locally.

“A small farmer,” Sarah said, “must be diverse: selling their products at farmers’ markets, directly to restaurants and grocers, producing value added products like dried fruits and jellies, and through community supported agriculture.” In CSA’s consumers buy directly from farmers. The farmer gets a stable income and the consumers share part of the farmers’ risk, because they pay in advance for a portion of the farmer’s crop.

Some 45 Farmers, backyard gardeners, school kids pay \$12 for an open air space at the Gorge Grown Farmers’ Market (\$15 for non-members) to sell their produce, bakery goods, fish or meats every Thursday 4 to 7 p.m. June to early October to the Hood River Middle School.

Gorge Grown also takes their Mobile Market truck, a farmers’ market on wheels, to Mosier, Dufur, Maupin, and Stevenson weekly. The Dalles, Goldendale, Trout Lake and Husum have their own Farmers’ Markets. Hood River Saturday Market celebrates its twentieth year this summer.

For all the demand for local food, these sales make up only a half a percent of Gorge farm sales. Virtually all the wheat, barley, oats, cherries and pears grown in the Gorge are exported.

The orchardists

“Cherries are worse than playing dice,” said Sam Asai. “The first year I was farming it rained just as we were ready to pick and ruined the entire crop. In a single day we lost \$100,000. Now our cherry crop can be worth a third to a half million dollars. We have chosen to deal with a high risk crop. We grow cherries on only 25 acres of our land, but if we hit a big year—almost impossible—it could be worth 60 percent of our gross income.”

The Asai family owns about 80 acres of pear, apple and cherry orchards and manages another 17 acres in the Hood River Valley. Sam and Karen Asai and son Aron run the family businesses.

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Idiot's Grace Tomatoes

Idiot's Grace farm's tomatoes won 1st place (Pink Sudduth's strain of Brandywine) and 2nd place (Cherokee Purple) at the Gorge Grown Tomato Taste Contest.

Idiot's Grace is a 52-acre organic vineyard, orchard, and market garden in Mosier, Ore. dedicated to producing food that is of superior taste and quality. Brian McCormick and Maria Czarnecki are the farm's proprietors.



Before he came back to take over his parents farm in 1980, Sam was a certified public accountant, a background that must be helpful, because while this is a family farm, it is a multifaceted business.

One segment, ACE HIGH Inc., grows the fruit on 45 acres. Its shares owned by Sam, his mother, brothers and sister: Sam is CEO; Aron vice-president, but not yet a shareholder. Aron owns 18 acres.

A&J Orchards LLC's is primarily the marketing arm, owned by Sam, Karen and Aron. Most of their fruit is sold through Diamond Fruit Growers, but the Asai's food service business has grown exponentially. "The buzz words now," Sam said, "are local and sustainable." The orchard is a member of both Hood River Saturday Market and Gresham Farmers' Market. They also sell pears and apples to Bon Appétit, a company providing café and catering services to corporations, colleges and universities, and specialty venues—putting Asai's fruit in most private Portland-area colleges.

Asai Properties LLC is a real estate holding company for 2.4 acres near the City of Hood River. There's friendly disagreement between Aron and Sam over the 2.4 acres. Sam would like to sell it for development to provide for his children and grandchildren.

"No, I'm replanting," Aron said. "I hope my kids will want to farm it some day."

Still Aron, 36, thinks the farming outlook is bleak for his generation. "Most farm owners here are now near retirement and the kids aren't going into farming," he said. He and Sam think money is the issue.

"To acquire a farm," Sam said, "you need a half to three-quarters of a million dollars. Say you bought an orchard in January; you'll have all the expenses without a cash flow." In a normal year the Asai's business expenses run about \$120,000 in payroll and chemicals. "For a new owner, income would start dribbling-in in October. You need a million dollars to start."

"It takes seven years to get a decent crop off new trees," Sam said. "Fifteen years to reach full capacity."

If their orchard is an example, farming takes education. Aron graduated with a degree in agriculture. Sam's nephew Seth Sakraida graduated from college last summer and now works with them full time. Ten plus months a year they employ a foreman and another worker. During peak cherry season they hire up to 55. December through April the work is pruning. In April and May, they plant trees, put in irrigation, and thin trees. Harvest runs from July to early November. Thanksgiving through end of December is paperwork time.

"I like the outdoors. I like being my own boss. If the kids get sick, I can take the day off," Aron said. "I like farming. I always wanted to farm."

And white dog? I ended my visit to Paulette's farm photographing the floppy eared lambs playing king-of-the-mountain, ewes munching dried alfalfa, pigs eating garden leftovers, the cattle in a far corral. By my side and nudging me to be petted was big white dog.

HOOD RIVER ORCHARD HISTORY

Nathaniel Coe brought to the Hood River Valley the first fruit trees in 1854 when he arrived to establish Oregon's first post offices and mail routes.

In 1876, E.L. Smith planted the first commercial orchard, 30 acres of apples (Newtown Pippins and Spitzenburg) and peaches. In time, apples became the dominant crop.

In 1919 the Hood River Valley had a disastrous freeze that killed many apple trees. With that, growers began planting pear trees to replace the apples. Today pears are the major commercial crop grown in the valley. In recent years many sweet cherry orchards and vineyards have increased in acreage.

Hood River County Agricultural Extension