

Sweet Success

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LACOMBE, ALTA.

Orchard Palace has the ring of California or the Okanagan in its sweet-sounding name. It's berry patch, not oilpatch, right?

But there it sits near Brosseau, Alta., a 90-minute drive northeast of Edmonton, a jewel more than 20 years in the making, the vision of Victor and Elizabeth Chrapko.

"It's not like growing radishes," says Victor. "You usually have to wait five to seven years before fruit trees produce."

The Chrapkos know patience. The Chrapkos know fruit. But little did they know as they started planting fruit trees on their family farm two decades ago that the operation would flower into the organic U-pick fruit farm that it is today.

Orchard Palace has more than 65 varieties of apples and 13 varieties of other fruits under cultivation. A list of some of the lesser-known Alberta-grown fruits at the U-pick orchard reads like a California fruit stand menu: pears, plums, cherries, grapes, honeyberries and sea buckthorn.

The Chrapkos are a detail in the colourful and growing Alberta fruit industry. With more than 2,600 acres devoted to fruit production, the sector produces more varieties of fruit than many people realize.

"Fruit is a significant part of the agriculture industry in Alberta and will continue to play a larger role in the developing agriculture industry," says Robert Spencer, Alberta Agriculture's irrigated and specialty crop expert.

"Value-added products or direct marketing, as well as expansion of the whole-farm experience, including agri-tourism, all have strong connections to the fruit industry."

This also benefits consumers who, in increasing numbers, are asking for fresh, local product.

"The addition of new varieties or types of fruit allows producers to spread out their harvest season and reduce risk, as well as offer a better, higher-quality product," Spencer says.

"This results in more fruit being available to consumers."

But, let's call a garden spade a garden spade: Running a fruit farm in Alberta, despite a growing market for grown-in-Alberta fruit, can still be a challenging enterprise.

"An early or late frost can really set an orchard back, so it takes a lot of hard work and patience," Victor Chrapko says. "My wife and I work at it together and enjoy the challenge."

"We've been farming for a long time and we don't give up easily."

That indomitable spirit is part of the reason the fruit industry continues to grow despite Alberta's sometimes harsh climate.

"We're really enthused about fruit farming and have added a cottage winery called En Sante to our operation," says Chrapko. "We're always up for a new challenge and we're very excited about this project, because it will be the first certified organic winery in the province."

With enthusiastic fruit producers at its core, the industry will continue to grow and find the sunny markets — and that's sweet music for consumers of Alberta fruit.

Alberta's cottage wine industry

Take a trip to Strathmore and you'll find yourself in the middle

of Alberta ranch country.

Look a little closer and you'll realize you are also in the heart of the province's cottage wine industry.

Of course, steer brands have had more attention than wine brands in Wild Rose Country, but don't tell that to the pioneers who are patiently breaking ground, and berries, in the province's wine land. Among the leaders is Fieldstone Fruit Wines at Bumbleberry Orchards near Strathmore, about 45 km east of Calgary.

"It took about four years to get the licensing and equipment in place and we hired a renowned wine master to ensure the quality of our finished product," says one of the Fieldstone partners, Glen Ellingson.

"Under the direction of wine master Dominic Rivard, we produce four dessert wines and two table wines."

Their work in becoming the province's first cottage winery is held up as the colour of the future.

"People are quite excited about this new industry and it has great potential for fruit producers in the province," says Sharon Faye, a market researcher with Alberta Agriculture.

"There have been several growers that are interested in becoming involved and there's a growing interest in alternative wines in Canada."

Cottage wineries are small wine productions at an orchard or farm. Key to the process and quality is the use of locally produced fruit to make fruit wines. Honey wines might also be produced.

"Seventy-five per cent of the fruit that goes into our wine comes from our berry orchard

and we do wine tasting on site throughout the year," says Ellingson.

"We've made wines from saskatoon berries, raspberries, strawberries and wild black cherries. At present, there are also about 10 wine and liquor stores in Alberta that carry our dessert wines and our signature Bumbleberry table wine."

The whole picture is so new to the province that regulations and licensing were framed only a year ago.

Ellingson, along with partners Lorraine Ellingson, Marvin and Elaine Gill, and Lynden Gill, trust that their patience and time spent in the initial research for the industry will pay off.

For now, word-of-mouth reviews of the industry's potential are positive.

"We've been approached by other people who are also interested in getting into the wine industry," says Ellingson.

"The cottage wine industry is a good fit for the new vision of Alberta agriculture. It adds value to the fruit industry and provides a unique agri-tourism opportunity for Albertans and visitors."

Go local, go home

- **Farmers markets:** Great places to root out locally grown fruits. To find a farmers market near you, visit: www.sunnygirl.ca.
- **U-pick farms:** The freshest vegetables and fruits are the ones you pick yourself. To find the location of U-pick farms and their growing seasons, visit: www.albertafarmfresh.com.
- **Regional-cuisine restaurants:** High-quality, locally grown ingredients can reflect the culture, history and geography of an area. To find restaurants taking part in the regional-cuisine initiative, visit: www.agric.gov.ab.ca/app68/dinealberta.

