

Chester County Orchardist Moves Focus Away From Strawberries, Onto Tree Fruit

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home to fill the freezer, bake pies, or make jams and jellies. Now, "people want the quarts picked for them.

"The thinking is, I want it yesterday, and I want it cooked," said Johnson.

Time has become an issue. People have less and less of it, apparently, and don't devote a lot of time to preparing meals, even portions of meals such as desserts.

Because of a changing consumer landscape, growers such as the Johnsons have had to "retool" the business. That means planting more apple and peach trees.

It also means, according to Alan Johnson, taking time and thinking through what they will do with the more than a dozen acres no longer devoted to strawberries.

The Johnsons care for 128 acres of orchard in the Brandywine Valley region southwest of West Chester, near the town of Unionville. The farm is only about a

quarter of a mile from the Brandywine River.

Altogether there are about 15 acres of apples, 10 acres of peaches, and about 15 acres of pumpkins.

The primary focus of Northbrook Orchards is pick your own.

The goal of the orchard is to provide customers with "tree-ripened fruit — something that can be eaten right from the tree," said Johnson. "My goal is to provide a crop that people want. And the more tree-ripened, the better it is."

The Johnsons don't sell fruit or vegetables on the wholesale market, avoiding the labor challenges and other headaches associated with picking and shipping fruit. When they first purchased the farm from Robert Hayman in 1982, most acreage was in apples (about 80 altogether). There were a couple of acres in peaches.

Northbrook was once a hamlet near the banks of the Brandywine River near the orchard. That's how the orchard got its name.



Alan Johnson's Northbrook Orchard farm store includes meats and cheeses, baked goods, fresh produce, flowers, and other items.

"As the market changed, we changed," said Johnson, who grew up 15 miles from New York City. He moved to central Jersey and worked for an orchard, Battleview Orchards in Freehold, N.J. His wife was a teacher in Monmouth College and lived on an orchard.

Alan was graduated with a horticultural degree from Delaware Valley College in Doylestown in 1975.

Johnson was involved in the strawberry business since 1976.

Additional acres of strawberries were planted on the farm. For a while, the strawberry business thrived. Then, as more and more supermarket and even the smaller stores obtained strawberries year-round, customers were drawn away. And now the tide has changed to more "ready to serve" types of fruit.

"People want to pick big fruit that jumps in a box," said Johnson. "And size is always an issue."

There are about 20 varieties of apples on the Northbrook Orchards, including Red Delicious, Stayman, Golden Delicious, Jonathan, Empire, Jonagold, and others. Peaches total about 22 varieties, including Loring, Crest Haven, Late Summer Haven, New Haven, and others. The peaches include four varieties of nectarines, four of white peaches, and 15 of the yellow varieties.

There are a couple of varieties of pumpkins, all pick your own.

The apple picking season begins in September and runs through to the end of October. Pricing is a two-tier structure, from 49 cents to



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69 cents or so per pound, depending on the season.

The peach-picking season begins the second week of July and lasts to mid-September. Depending on the overall season and availability, the price is anywhere from 89 cents to 99 cents per pound.

Pumpkins are about 30 cents a pound. The season begins Sept. 20 and lasts until Halloween.

Like many orchardists with pick-your-own operations, the Johnsons also make use of "entertainment" farming, including hay wagon rides. Also included is a small animal petting zoo with sheep and other animals.

The farm store includes meats and cheeses, baked goods, fresh produce, flowers, and other items.

The profit margins continue to narrow over the years, noted Johnson. While his customers are loyal, most are still price-conscious and worry about increases in price of what he sells.

But like all growers, Johnson is dependent on the weather.

He learned a long time ago that you should "hold your breath until you got it in the box." He's since learned that you have to "hold your breath until the money is in the bank," he said.



Peaches total about 22 varieties, including Loring, Crest Haven, Late Summer Haven, New Haven, and others. The peaches include four varieties of nectarines, four of white peaches, and 15 of the yellow varieties. This stand weathered the cold weather in mid-March.



The farm is only about a quarter of a mile from the Brandywine River. Here, Alan Johnson inspects the apple trees. Behind him lies the Brandywine.

