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Thursday, October 2, 2008

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GONE PICKIN'

Orchard owners turn hobby into family-run business

BY JULIA HANSEN
Staff Reporter

An apple a day keeps the doctor away — at least that's what Dan West thinks.

West's hobby used to be growing apples. These days it is no longer his hobby, it is his job. Along with his wife Mary, Dan West owns and manages West Orchards, just north of Macon, Mo. Although it is their means of living, West said he doesn't consider the orchard the daily grind.

"It's not really work to me because I enjoy it so much," West said. "I don't really treat it as a job — never have. We started the orchard in 1995 as a hobby, but obviously after a couple of years it became more than a hobby."

West Orchards is family-run with more than 1,300 trees on the 175-acre farm. The orchard covers about 10 acres and has 17 varieties of apples, including Arkansas Black, Honeycrisp, Jonagold and Gala apples. The orchard also has pear, plum, peach, apricot and nectarine trees.

West said the orchard is considered a low-spray orchard, because they only spray the trees a few times a year. He said being more environmentally friendly presents its own problems.

"Our apples are not the most beautiful, like you may find in a grocery store," West said. "However, they are not loaded with pesticides, and they are extremely tasty."

Also on the farm is West Winery, which opened this year. Open Friday through Sunday, the winery offers wine tasting, light snacks and live music.

"We are making wine as we speak back in our winery right now," West said. "It is our oldest son and daughter-in-law's project. We are in the process of fermenting apricot, peach, plum, some pear — and we're getting ready to start doing a Norton Grape wine."

West said the yield of the

trees varies from year to year, so it is hard to know how many pounds of apples they produce each year.

"Last year was zero," West said. "We had the warmest March on record and the coldest April on record in northern Missouri, and it froze out every bud that was in the trees — of all varieties of fruit."

West said he and his family have plans for the future of the orchard.

"We will be doing value-added items in the years to come," West said. "We are already doing jams and jellies and apple butters. We will be doing pies and more items along those lines as well in the very near future."

Although the orchard soon will be producing other apple products like pies, West said his favorite way to eat an apple is fresh off the tree. He said he lives by the famous motto:

"An apple a day keeps the doctor away, but if you eat two or three you really don't have to worry very much," West said.

Last weekend Truman's Environmental Campus Organization traveled to West Orchards to enjoy the pleasant weather and go apple picking. ECO president senior Kelly Hall said the organization has made the trip to the orchard before and plans to keep it an annual event because of its popularity with students.

"A lot of people had expressed interest in going apple picking," Hall said. "... [Also] there were a number of students that weren't in ECO who heard about [the trip] and just came along. We had a humungous turnout."

Hall said ECO was unaware that West Orchard closed early on Saturdays, and when they arrived the orchard was closed. She said West's son was nice enough to give them a tour of the orchard and he allowed them to pick apples. ECO members also visited the new winery at the orchard and listened to the musician of the evening who played blues guitar.

Hall said patronizing local farmers is important to ECO members.

"[Buying locally] is another major thing we advocate," Hall said. "We always advertise the farmers market every weekend and we encourage buying Weiler Dairy Milk. Supporting this orchard was one of the things we wanted to do."

Hall said being hands-on in one's knowledge and experience with food is best as a consumer.

"There is something about picking your own fruit that gives you more of an appreciation for food and where it comes from and more knowledge about how it's grown," Hall said. "I mean, obviously people know apples grow on trees, but just to have more knowledge of the land and connection to your food [is important.] ... Not only does [fresh produce] taste better, I find that it lasts longer."

Just outside of Kansas City lies Weston Red Barn Farm in Weston, Mo. Started by Steve and Cindi Frey in 1989, the farm originally was bought as a place for people to get away from busy city life and to enjoy wide open spaces, Steve Frey said.

"Everybody [could enjoy visiting]," Frey said. "We've gone to a lot of trouble to restore our farm to look like a turn-of-the-century farm, so we have grandmas and grandpas that come out and reminisce about growing up on the farm, and we have young kids that come out that like to see farm animals, then we have families that just like to come out and do things together."



Frey said countless activities happen at the farm, including apple picking, pony rides, horse-drawn hay rides, tractor hayrides to the pumpkin patch, bonfires, company picnics, weddings and even a maze in the shape of the presidential seal. Frey said the maze is free for military families and first-time voters who show a voter registration card. Otherwise, the maze costs \$5 to enter, but the profits go to an autism foundation for kids.

"We did a 'Vote 2008' maze this year, and we've written letters to the presidential candidates, but we have not heard from them yet; they're pretty busy I think," Frey said. "We invited the candidates to come out to the farm and discuss issues such as agriculture and education and things like that, but we haven't had any takers yet."

Frey said he would like presidential candidates to speak about education at the farm because that is another important part of the farm.

Frey said Weston Red Barn Farm

is considered an educational farm and that more than 18,000 schoolchildren visit the farm every year on educational field trips. There are a variety of tours students can participate in including a tour of the barnyard and a hike to the apple orchard to learn how to pick and grow apples. Other tours include explorations of a pumpkin patch, observing a bee hive and a tractor-drawn countryside hayride to observe wildflowers and wildlife.

The Freys' hard work was recognized last year when the farm received a prestigious award.

"We were voted 'Farm of the Year' for North American Farmers' Direct Marketing Association, which is a group of farms like ours all across the United States and Canada," Frey said. "We were privileged to have the honor. ... We put a lot of heart into [our farm.]"



Photo Submitted

A group of ECO members and other students visit West Orchards and Winery in Macon, Mo., Saturday. West's also features musical acts and the next performance is Oct. 4 by Kevin Bilchik at 3:30 p.m.

Apple Facts and Picking Tips

- Apples originated in the Middle East more than 4,000 years ago
- English Settlers brought them to America in the 1600s
- Johnny Appleseed was a real person who planted countless apple orchards
- When picking apples select firm, bruise-free apples
- Ask a farmer for advice on which apples are appropriate to pick at the time
- Apples will keep longer if they are refrigerated
- The average American consumes more than 42 pounds of apple products each year
- Apples float in water because they are made up of 25% air
- The top five apple producing countries are China, United States, Poland, Turkey and Italy

<h3>Around the 'Ville</h3>		
<p>Oct. 3 8 a.m. to 9:30 a.m. Networking Join Truman alumni for coffee and make career contacts, dress business casual SUB Down Under</p>	<p>Oct. 4 9 a.m. Homecoming Parade This year's parade celebrates purple pride while going green Franklin Street Free</p>	<p>Oct. 2 to 5 11 a.m. to Midnight Oktoberfest Ottumwa, Iowa, hosts its 35th annual Oktoberfest with a carnival and live music Take US-63 north through Bloomfield</p>