

Joe Nicholson Jr. Grows Apples, Gooseberries, and the Future

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Joe Nicholson Jr. is an innovator with an ancient career—he’s a farmer. At Red Jacket Orchards, his 600 acre farm along Seneca Lake in Upstate New York, he grows apples, berries, cherries, and peaches.

After college, Joe worked on Wall Street. He took a personality test during an interview at a brokerage firm. He didn’t get the job, but he got the test results—they said he was adventurous, entrepreneurial, and thrived off change. “I didn’t believe it at first,” Joe said, “but a year later I knew that guy nailed me.”

Joe went back to his family farm at the age of 29. That’s where he’s been for the last 35 years. “I have a passion for this business,” Joe says. “If I won the lottery tomorrow, I would probably take the money and plant an orchard.”

Red Jacket Orchards grows, packs, processes, ships and distributes quality fruits and juices. Their gooseberries and apricots can be found at the fanciest grocery stores and markets—and also in hospitals and in jails. (Joe explained that the fruit that grows in the interior of a tree gets less sunlight and therefore has less vibrant color and less shelf appeal. But it still tastes good. Those become the inmate apples.)

“I made as many mistakes as you possibly could...and now, finally, I’m getting it down.” Fruit farming is an amazingly challenging venture. Because trees grow from seeds, and because there is no rushing that process, the timeline to try and test new things is a long one. It takes a year or two to acquire and plant a seed, and three or four years for a tree to start producing a crop. A farmer has to wait three or four years after that to assess the quality of that crop. Growing fruit is investing in the future.

That means Joe must look ten years down the road when he orders a seed. He is constantly changing what and how he’s growing. How can he see the future so well? “If we think we find something interesting we plant a very small acreage of it.” Then they see how the plant grows, and how the consumer responds. If the reaction is promising, they grow more and more.

The Greenmarket is a great testing ground; Joe gets to talk directly with his customers and see how they react. When they're excited, he's excited. "That's our intelligence." If they get "evangelistic" about his plums or currants and start telling their neighbors, he knows he is onto something.

Of course that doesn't always happen. Joe's list of challenges is long and daunting. The soil has to be just right, "the root stock has to survive the weather, maybe getting 3 inches of rain and sitting in water for a week." Joe has learned how to farm the hard way. He's planted trees too close together—they had to compete for sunlight, and the crop ultimately failed. That's a lesson that cost a lot of time, work, and money.

There's also a turbulent market to contend with. Consumers are looking for the next delicious fruit. Overproduction can cause prices to plummet. In previous years, the market has been saturated with apples and tart cherries.

It's an exciting time to be growing fruit. People are paying more attention to where their food comes from—which gives Red Jacket a big advantage on the east coast. Their strawberries are picked and brought to the warehouse that very night, or to market the next morning. West coast strawberries might spend a week travelling to a grocery store. That means the fruit has to be picked much earlier. Joe's fruit ripens longer on the trees, which means it is juicier and significantly more flavorful.

The recent spotlight on organics has brought new opportunities, and with them new difficulties. Red Jacket Orchards sprays less than they used to, and uses more environmentally friendly chemicals when they must. But unlike the arid west coast, farming in New York brings a host of challenges: "fungi, mildews, apple scab—we have diseases they don't have out west." Joe monitors his orchards so they can spray their crops only when they absolutely have to.

"Planting an orchard is like getting married, you have to stay in the game." There will be ups and downs, unpredictable weather, and surprises. But Joe is in it for the long haul. Because growing crops is such an enduring commitment, "in the end you're a steward for the family and for the next generation."

Joe's sons work with him at Red Jacket. So when he says, "As you grow these crops, you have to grow family members for the future," he is speaking literally as well as metaphorically. The dream is to have his life's work be carried on for generations to come. "Good thing my sons really know what they're doing."

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