

Blueberries and pie... oh my!

McKay's Wild
Blueberries

by Janet Wallace



COURTESY OF MCKAY'S BLUEBERRIES

THE AROMA OF fresh-baked pie and the sound of laughter radiate from the bright blue farm stand.

"They call me the Energizer Bonnie, because I just keep going and going." Behind the counter, Bonnie Weir is serving muffins to a customer and joking with her workers.

Bonnie and her family own McKay's Wild Blueberries near Pennfield, NB, off Highway 1, halfway between Saint John and the Maine-NB border.

The business is a labour of love and a lot of hard work.

"We've always had a farm spirit," says Bonnie. When her husband, Russell Weir, worked as a special education teacher, the couple would spend much of their summers outside together collecting dulse, fishing and digging clams.

They eventually bought a piece of rough land near New River, in southwestern NB, in 1988. "We cleared many



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Clockwise from top right: Bonnie Weir, one of the owners of McKay's Wild Blueberries; fresh-baked pies cooling on a rack; Kennedy Weir, Bonnie's granddaughter, shows off her culinary skills.

acres," she recalls, "with no equipment, no expertise, just hard work. We couldn't afford good land."

After Russell would finish teaching for the day, Bonnie would meet up with him out in the field, their dinner packed in a cooler. Russell used the chainsaw while she used the brush cutter.

"I know every footstep of some of our fields," she adds.

Growing the business

The hard work paid off in blueberries. Bonnie and Russell's sons, Graeme and Chris, helped with the harvest. As the business expanded, Graeme mowed and sprayed the fields while studying forestry at the University of New Brunswick, in Fredericton.

"As things got bigger," explains Graeme, "the four of us and my



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Above: Jams and jellies, along with local syrups and honey products, for sale at McKay's little blue farm stand in Pennfield, NB, off Highway 1.

brother's wife, Shelley, sat down as a family and decided to buy Gordon McKay and Sons Ltd." The McKay family had run a blueberry farm since the 1950s. They also did contract field work and bought and brokered berries from the Weirs and other farmers. After the Weirs bought McKay's, in 1996, Graeme started working full-time and is now vice-president, overseeing the mechanical end of the business.

The Weirs grow 1,000 acres of blueberries and act as a broker for berries from other producers. Some berries are sold wholesale to bakeries but many are sold fresh or frozen from the farm stand, or made into treats. Bonnie and her team make a dozen pies, including blueberry-raspberry, 'pioneer' (cranberry-blueberry) and Gravenstein apple pies. They also make blueberry shortcake, crumble, muffins, jam and sundaes.

Almost everything in the farm stand is berry-based—jams, jellies, pies, juice and wine. But there are a few other local products, such as maple syrup, honey and dulse.

Wild blueberries 101

The Weirs sell wild or lowbush blueberries, which are a different species from highbush blueberries and grow as larger berries on tall plants.

When it comes to commercial production, the term 'wild' is a bit

misleading. The blueberries are not planted but rather wild plants are coaxed into high production. Whereas a truly wild plant might spread two to three inches a year, a cultivated one can grow 15 inches.

The extra growth is largely the result of more nutrients and reduced weed competition. Fertilizers and herbicides are usually used, although there are a few organic wild blueberry producers in Atlantic Canada. To increase yields, farmers push the plants into biennial production by mowing or burning the fields one year to get berries the following year.

Working with bees, and other critters

Bees and other insects are needed to take pollen from one plant (called a clone) to another. "For a maximum yield of 5,000-8,000 pounds per acre," explains Russell, "you need three to five strong hives of honeybees per acre."

Blueberry clones are often 20 feet across; one plant in Maine is reported to be a half-mile long. If a bee does its pollination work only within a single clone all day, the berries will be self-pollinated and small. But if the bees go back and forth between clones, cross-pollination will lead to higher yields and larger berries.

The Weirs have hives of honeybees, leafcutter bees and bumblebees in

the fields, which they lease from beekeepers in New Brunswick, Quebec and Ontario. They have to bring in hives from other provinces because there aren't enough hives in New Brunswick to pollinate all the blueberry fields. They also create habitat for native bees by, for example, drilling holes in tree trunks for mason bees.

Larger wildlife is also "beneficial to some extent," says Russell. Animals help the plants reproduce as blueberry seeds germinate best after passing through the digestive tract of an animal.

Sometimes, however, damage can outweigh the benefits. One year, recounts Russell, he chased 300 deer out of one field. Their 'mowing' cost him a year of production.

In the spring, bears overturn rocks in the fields to find grubs and sometimes rip apart beehives, looking to eat larvae, which are rich in protein and fat.

Bears can be a nuisance when the berries are ripe too. "They stomp on the berries, lie on them and sweep their huge paws, scraping off maybe five pounds of berries just to get a few ounces. You see streaks of blue where they've crushed berries."

Berry pickers and pie-makers

Elsewhere in Charlotte County, NB, many food processors complain that there aren't enough local people willing or able to work, so businesses have to



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I ask Russell if his workers are local.

"No," he answers. "Some are from Saint John."

Daily for several weeks, the company sends a 15-person van to the city, a 40-minute drive, to bring contract workers to the blueberry fields. Flat, rock-free fields are harvested by machine, others are harvested by hand.

"Clam diggers," Russell adds, "make wonderful blueberry pickers. They're used to working low to the ground."

The work is seasonal and often part-time. In late summer, the Weirs hire more than 200 people to pick, process and truck berries. The business operates from late April to early November.

In a warehouse-like building behind the farm stand, berries are cleaned, then packaged or juiced. Moving along a series of conveyer belts, the berries pass through screens—anything larger than a berry is caught by the top screen while smaller material falls through the bottom screen. A fan then blows off any stray bits of grass before the berries roll onto a tilted conveyer belt and down an angled table onto the next conveyer belt. Rocks, berry clusters and "stemmy" berries stay on the conveyer belt until dumped into a waste container. A team of workers inspect the berries for quality control.

"We have no need for foreign labour," Russell concludes.

Not your ordinary bakery

A dozen people work in the farm stand. It's so busy in the peak season, Bonnie says, "people are scared to drop by to say 'hi'.... They're scared I'll grab them and put them to work."

"It's not your ordinary bakery," says Penny Archibald, one of the baking staff, as she takes muffins out of the oven. "It's a bit like working in a Dr. Seuss book."

The other workers chime in with the names of the appliances. The freezer is Coolella, the Hobart mixer is Bart, the first oven is called Alf and the last one is Meg, short for Alpha and Omega, respectively. Apparently the Danby oven has a Newfoundland accent...

"We asked him his name and he said, 'I'm Dan b'y,'" explains Bonnie.

The atmosphere may be silly but the women take their baking seriously.

"We make each pie individually," Bonnie says, with pride.

"We've always striven for good crusts," she adds. The crusts are spectacular—crispy and delicious. No lard is used, just vegetable shortening.

"Everything is made from scratch, even the chocolate and raspberry sauce for sundaes," says Violet Jennings.

"And we use real whipped cream and real vanilla," adds Penny.

The serious talk is over and Bonnie explains how the team used to call themselves the 'Dough-go' girls. She

would 'play the pie racks', while others made music "using spoons, shakers, pie plates and you name it."

Facing new challenges

For years, all traffic heading between Saint John, NB, and Calais, Maine, went past the farm stand. After driving by flat blueberry fields—green in the summer, crimson in the fall, you would spot the blue building with its gangly 'blueberry people' off to one side: a pair of sculptures aptly named August and Myrtle for the two species of wild blueberries grown here.

Drive-by traffic took a hit in October 2012, after the highway was moved.

It's a common story—the cost of progress. A new divided highway is built and businesses that relied on drive-by traffic are left on a back road. In this case, the problem was exacerbated in that travellers can't simply take the old route. The old highway was integrated into the new one, which forces travellers to take the new highway for at least some sections.

The change has affected sales. The Weirs' first response was to erect signs.

"People are figuring out how to get here," concludes Bonny Weir. Demand for blueberries and blueberry juice is high as news spreads about the healthy properties of the berries.

They are also diversifying. Chris and Graeme acquired a cottage winery licence in 2013 and are now selling blueberry wine made from their own berries. Currently they have sweet and dry blueberry wines but plan to develop a cranberry wine from the cranberries they also grow. Although the business name remains McKay's Wild Blueberries, you can now buy cranberries—fresh, frozen or juiced—or pick your own.

Next time you're driving Highway 1 past Pennfield, take the off-ramp and head for McKay's. You can justify the detour by factoring in the high antioxidant levels of the blueberries you will no doubt eat... of course, the pie is just a bonus. 🍷