

Legacy Spotlight

Tait Farm: Growing like a shrub

BY R. BROCK PRONKO

Brie and spiced pear chutney canapés, roasted carrots with fig and honey conserve, shiitake mushroom pâté with ginger mustard, pumpkin butter crème brûlée and spiced pear shrub are just some of the unique, handmade food specialties you'll find at Tait Farm Foods' Harvest Shop during its fall festival events. You will also discover unique plants and garden accessories for the kitchen and cottage gardener at the seasonal greenhouse, crates of pumpkins and festive colored gourds and a wide variety of organic vegetables from the farm.

"We grow food, we sell food, we manufacture food, so we're very attuned to foods and how they are tied to the seasons, and now we're having a celebration of some of our favorite fall foods," said Kim Tait, who oversees the shop, greenhouse and farm produce.

Tait Farm, which was also the 2017 CBICC Small Business of the Year, is located in Centre Hall, Pennsylvania, and includes eight acres of certified organic vegetables, fruits and greenhouse production that serve the farm's Community Supported Agriculture program known as Community Harvest, where people can buy a membership that entitles them to a share of fresh, organic produce grown on the farm.

In 1950, Marian and Elton Tait, were Penn State graduates working for Agricultural Extension, purchased the land as a hobby farm. They raised their three children (Sandy, David and John) on the farm along with sheep, chickens, hogs, horses and some Basset Hound dogs and Christmas trees.

In the late 1970s, the two sons returned to their parents' hobby farm and turned it into a family farm business by growing perennial crops of raspberries, asparagus, apples and more Christmas trees to sell locally. By the mid-1980s, Tait Farm was known as the place for pick-your-own crops, Christmas trees and Basset Hound puppies.

In the summer of 1986, a bumper crop of raspberries was left hanging on the canes while it rained for nearly two weeks. Rather than let the fruit rot, they picked it and froze it for winter sales. What came next put Tait Farm on the path to becoming a regionally-known specialty food store.

"After several unsuccessful attempts to sell the frozen raspberries, a family friend reminded my brother David of an old

colonial beverage called Raspberry Shrub, which is made by preserving fresh fruit in vinegar and sweetening it with sugar," said Tait.

"The raspberry shrub was our first product, we've been making it for over 30 years, and we've added other fruit shrubs."

The fruit concentrate is mixed with water (or spirits) to make a delicious sweet, tart beverage. The first bottles of raspberry shrub were made in David Tait's kitchen on the farm in 1987, and since then Tait Farm's shrubs have grown into a line of more than 50 premium products.

Three and a half years ago, Tait Farms opened a facility in Boalsburg to manufacture their specialty food products.

"Boalsburg has been a great place for us, and we've been growing our retail business at about 10 percent a year," said Tait.

"Our goal is to continue growing steadily but not to outgrow our ability to make handmade products ourselves.

"If at some point you get too big, you need to go to a co-packer to make your products, and that would not be in the spirit of what we're about, because mass production would compromise the quality and taste of our product, and we pride ourselves on our pure ingredients and that everything is made by hand in small batches."

Tait Farm started out growing all the ingredients for its products, but as sales grew, the volume of fruits and other ingredients for its shrubs and other fruit products began to outpace the farm's ability to grow enough, so now Tait also uses other growers' ingredients in its products.

"Wegman's sells our shrubs, but that's an exception since our products are mostly sold in specialty shops, including gift shops, cheese shops, farm markets and natural foods stores," said Tait.

"The largest number of our customers are in Pennsylvania, but we also have a good-sized customer base in other mid-Atlantic states.

"We deliver to Philadelphia about every five to six weeks, and we go to Pittsburgh, Lancaster, and we have customers as far away as California."

Distilleries also buy Tait Farm's shrubs and use them to make their cocktails.

"Our shrubs are non-alcoholic, but the mixology of shrub cocktails is a growing trend," said Tait.

"There are lots of bartenders in Pennsylvania and in the mid-Atlantic region who are making special concoctions



Mass production would compromise the quality and taste of our product, and we pride ourselves on our pure ingredients and that everything is made by hand in small batches. Photo by Matt Fern/State College Magazine

using shrubs such as vodka, shrub and bitters."

To allow people to get to know Tait Farm Food's Harvest Shop offerings, the farm holds several events each year, so people can sample the products. On October 6, the farm held its annual Fall Food Festival, which featured the farm's best recipes of the harvest season, from vegan and vegetarian dishes to dishes for meat lovers. That event is followed by Tait Farm's October Fest on October 20, which honors the German tradition of celebrating locally brewed beers and seasonal foods each autumn.

On November 3 and 4, Tait Farm will hold its annual open house to usher in the upcoming holiday season. The festive weekend will be filled with delicious food and drink, new holiday recipes, inspiring finds for the season and fun ideas for gift giving. On December 15, Tait will have a holiday baked goods sampling.

"Our name's out there, and we've been at it a long time, and we have a really good sales and marketing director, Karen Addenbrook, who helps organize and promote these events," said Tait.

On October 6, Tait Farm was one of 11 farms on the Centre County Farm Tour, which was hosted for 11 years by the Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture and taken over last year by the Centre County Farmland Trust.

"Centre County is blessed with wonderful farms and wineries, and the farm tour is a great opportunity for people to get out and

visit them," said Tait.

"You can start with any of the farms and buy a \$20 pass per car load, \$15 in advance, or \$5 for a single farm, and you can visit any of the featured farms between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m." ✦

The 2018 Centre County Farm Tour included:

- Goot Essa Grocery Store, Howard (natural Amish cheeses)
- Mount Nittany Vineyard and Winery, Centre Hall (check website for tasting room hours)
- Spring Bank Acres, Rebersburg (eggs from free-range hens and raw milk products)
- Student Farm at Penn State (grew out of the university's Sustainable Food Systems Program)
- RE Farm Café, State College (committed to healthy food, grown with responsible intentions)
- Wasson Farm, State College (a fifth-generation farm, family owned and operated since 1922)
- Way Fruit Farm, Port Matilda (fruits, local vegetables, meats, cheeses, milk, canned preserves, apple butter, bakery and café)
- Triangle Organics, Aaronsburg (Amish farm specializing in meat, eggs and raw dairy products)
- Bear Meadows Farm, Boalsburg (raw milk and eggs)
- Rhoneymeade Sculpture Garden & Arboretum, Centre Hall
- Tait Farm, Centre Hall ✦