FRUITS OF THEIR LABOR

Reed Valley Orchard, which planted its first apple tree in 1988 and now has some 5,000, is considered the region’s premier fruit provider.

By Jacalyn Carfagno / Photos by Mark Mahan
T

here is no hope of uninterrupted con-
versation with Dana and Trudie Reed on
an early June morning at their orchard
near Paris, Kentucky. A visitor, arriving
well before the farm store opens, can grab
a few minutes with them, but the calm and
birdsong are constantly punctuated with
questions from workers and calls from eager
customers.

By the 9:30 a.m. opening, the small parking lot at Reed
Valley Orchard begins to fill and Trudie is a whirl of mo-
tion, jumping up from a rocking chair on the store’s porch
to greet customers, hand them buckets, and point them to-
ward the fruit they’ve come for.

The first car is from Wheelersburg, Ohio, “two and a half
hours just to pick black raspberries,” Trudie said after telling
them where to pick.

Like so much else at this orchard, there’s a family story
behind those berries.

“They were planted because of my mom. Black raspber-
ries were her favorite fruit.”

Trudie’s husband, Dana, added, “They cost us to raise
them; the yields are terrible.”

But it’s a fact, not a complaint. “I’ve never seen a cou-
ple work so well together,” said Sharon Thompson, who as
a food writer at the Lexington Herald-Leader got to know the
Reeds and worked a summer in the farm store after her re-
tirement.

Reed Valley Orchard is a thriving business but it is, fore-
most, a labor of love.

Raising fruit goes so deep in both Dana and
Trudie’s families that it’s hard to believe this cou-
ples hasn’t always raised the near-perfect ap-
ples they are known for throughout Central Ken-
tucky and beyond.

Trudie’s family operated orchards in East-
ern Kentucky. She has
an early memory of rid-
ing horseback with her
grandfather as he in-
spected his orchard,
and she grew up peddling
apples with her mother.

Dana’s family in western
Massachusetts “support-
ed themselves on red
raspberries through the
Depression and the war,”
Trudie said.

But the two weren’t
thinking about fruit in
the early years of their
marriage. Dana worked
as a commercial printer and then joined Trudie’s family in a small
agricultural trucking concern. Trudie wrote Thoroughbred pedigrees,
first at The Jockey Club and then at Pedigree Associates.

In 1987 the family sold the trucking business just, Dana said, “as
farm real estate took a dive.” They considered, looked around, and found
117.9 acres (Trudie is emphatic about the decimal) with not much on it
but an old wooden barn.

The first year they planted alfalfa and soybeans, but their hearts and
histories pointed toward an orchard. “Well, let’s try this,” Dana said.

So in 1988 they planted about 500 apple trees.

“And” Trudie said, her voice rising, “He said that’s all we were going
to plant.”

Now there are about 5,000 apple trees representing over 50 varieties,
plus pears, peaches, blueberries, blackberries, red and black raspber-
ries, and pumpkin plots.

“We never wanted to be big,” Trudie moaned, but “we had to keep
expanding just because he keeps planting apples … He won’t quit!”

The Reeds produce about 168,000 pounds of apples a year. While
they sell to local supermarkets and public schools, almost three-quarters of their fruit is sold directly to the public, either at the Lexington Farmer’s Market or from the farm store that Trudie’s father and Dana built from that old barn.

The Reeds’ operation is big, by Kentucky apple growing standards, but they remain committed to quality and to their customers. “The Reeds know their product. No matter how you prefer your apples — crisp, sweet, tart, or mellow — you can simply explain what you like and they’ll pick the right one,” Thompson said. And they know when each fruit is best. Dana “can practically predict the exact day a variety will reach its peak.”

Both of the Reeds worked other jobs before the orchard began producing fruit and revenue. Trudie split her time between pedigrees and the orchard while Dana worked fulltime at Toyota, devoting his free hours to planting and cultivating trees.

And they studied, hard, both the business and the cultivation sides of the apple business.

“Yes, we grew up in it,” Dana said, “but there was a huge learning curve.”

They scaled that curve in the early years at meetings of the North American Farmers Direct Marketing Association, where, in a few whirlwind days, they learned about everything from how to track expenses and profit margins, to the best lighting in a farm store, to displaying produce. They learned from the produce managers at Randall’s markets, a small chain that has since left the market, and from their customers.

They joined the Midwest Apple Improvement Association, a group associated with Purdue University’s agriculture department that’s developing varieties that will thrive in this humid, sunlight-starved region. They joined the Kentucky State Horticultural Association (Dana is now president) and attended the winter meeting each year of the Kentucky Fruit and Vegetable Conference to talk with scientists and practitioners about how to solve
Much more than a classroom.

A degree in agriculture offers you more career options than you might expect. Earn a Bachelor of Science in Agricultural Sciences with a choice of options:

- Agribusiness
- Agriculture Education
- Agronomy
- Animal Science
- Equine Science
- General Agriculture
- Golf Course Management
- Horticulture
- Veterinary Science

MSU also offers two- and four-year degrees in veterinary technology.

For more information, call 800-585-6781 or visit www.moreheadstate.edu/agriculture.
fruits of their labors

problems and produce high-quality crops.

“This is not an easy place to grow fruit,” says John Strang, a fruit and vegetable specialist at the University of Kentucky College of Agriculture, Food, and Environment, which hosts the annual conference.

There are at least 50 different pests and diseases that attack fruit in Kentucky while “every customer wants a perfect-looking fruit,” said Strang. To get a high percentage of those perfect fruits, which command the best price, the grower must be ever alert, putting out traps to catch insects and spraying to prevent disease from spreading.

There’s also the work and art of pruning to allow both air, which combats disease, and sun, which gives apples that rosy blush, into the tree.

“I would rank them up toward the top; they continue to improve all the time” said Strang, who has worked with the Reeds since they bought the property. “They’ve specialized in high-quality produce, and that’s what brings customers back.”

While quality was always the Reeds’ focus, Dana’s years at Toyota honed and improved his understanding of how to achieve it. “I got quality just drilled into me there, and I saw that it worked for them.”

At Reed, the drill involves keeping the orchards free of rotted fruit or other debris and hand-thinning early in the season to get the biggest, best fruit. Dana has studied pruning (and also worked with Strang to produce a video on it for other growers), experimented with new varieties, and been out in the field spraying in the middle of the night to catch the right moment — too early and the spray can lose its punch before rain spreads the fire blight spores; too late or haphazardly, and the damage is done. “A halfway job of spraying creates resistance; you always want to do a good job.”

Doing a good job is not easy. “The work is tremendous during growing season. It’s truly a dawn-to-dusk operation,” Thompson said. Still, the Reeds are hesitant to raise prices, despite the best advice of the experts and, sometimes, even their customers.

Trudie remembers well the people close to starvation she encountered traveling the roads of Eastern Kentucky with her mother. They gave away fruit and often just took something in exchange, including a goat one time. “Oh, boy, that was the worst mistake we ever made in our lives,” Trudie re-
celebrating bluegrass traditions

William Strode
Summer 2015
Keeneland.com

THESE WALLS …

If you're a horse lover, you already know that the Bodley-Bullock House on West Main Street is a must-see location. Not only is it one of the city’s oldest homes, it has been a part of Lexington’s horse racing history. The house was built in 1804 as a residence for Thomas Bodley, a lawyer and politician who was instrumental in the development of Lexington’s horse racing industry. Bodley was one of the first to breed horses on his estate, and the house became a hub for the racing community.

The house’s most famous owner was William Clay, a Virginia-born lawyer who moved to Kentucky in 1814. Clay was a key figure in the establishment of the University of Kentucky and the first mayor of Lexington. He was also a prominent horse breeder, and his operations contributed significantly to the growth of the Bluegrass region as a breeding hub.

The Bodley-Bullock House has been preserved and is now open to the public. Visitors can explore the home’s period furnishings and tour the grounds to see the property’s historic barns and outbuildings. The house is a reminder of Lexington’s rich horseracing history and the role it has played in shaping the city as it is today.

By Maryjean Wall / Photos by David Stephenson

To appreciate this lengthy existence, consider that Bodley and his wife, Catherina, entertained when socialites in Lexington still clung to the Colonial custom of piling their powdered hair in towering arrangements atop their heads. This was the social life that shaped the house.

The Bodley-Bullock House has history. It also has a ghost. This year marked its 200th birthday, and some say the spirits of former residents still linger. Legends tell stories of ghostly figures haunting the halls, and some claim to have seen them as they walk through the home.

The Bodley-Bullock House is located at 200 West Main Street in Lexington, Kentucky. It’s a must-visit for anyone interested in the city’s history, horse racing, and ghost stories. Whether you believe in ghosts or not, stepping into this historic home is an experience you won’t soon forget.

By John Eisenberg

FALL 2015

Adena Springs’ Kentucky base near Paris already was on track for a Breeders’ Cup World Championships record. In acknowledgment of its accomplishments, Adena was honored with an unprecedented 11 years of global powerhouse Coolmore sponsorship.

While the Austrian-born billionaire entrepreneur had a hand in many of Adena’s most impressive credential, as Stronach amassed the farm’s outstanding breeder, collecting an unprecedented five consecutive trophies in that category from 2004 to 2008. Thus, it’s no wonder that even before the flowers of spring were fully in bloom this year, the team at Adena Springs outpaces all others as the leading breeder of Breeders’ Cup winners.
fruits of their labors
called. “The thing chewed the clothes off the line, chased the cows. My dad said this ‘thing has got to go.’ ”

The commitment to quality and customers hasn’t come cheap. They planted 200 Scarlett O’Hara trees only to find a few years in that, in Dana’s words, “it had a bad habit of a moldy core.”

“Beautiful trees, beautiful fruit, wonderful tasting,” Trudie said, but “there’s no way I’m selling this to any of my customers … bulldoze!”

The customers are Trudie’s customers. She knows them; she’s committed to them. For 14 years Trudie’s been partially blind, a condition that keeps her close to home on the farm, running the store, talking and listening closely to customers. “I listen all the time.”

Many things customers want they get — like Gatorade to restore people who have been picking out in the sun.

What most don’t like is any kind of change. “We even had people get upset when we blacktopped our driveway” to keep the dust down, Trudie said.

Reed Valley Orchard, which straddles the Bourbon and Harrison county line, is a bit of a drive from most places. But, like Thompson, people are “happy to make the 40-minute drive to spend a day at the farm.”

The final few hundred yards of driveway are gravel, ending in a small hill that, when crested, reveals the perfectly maintained orchards and rustic store with a wrap-around porch where rocking chairs give visitors a place to sit in the shade and enjoy the scene.

People are drawn to Reed Valley Orchard for the exceptional fruit, the peaceful country experience, and the couple who make it all happen. Customers “consider the Reeds friends and neighbors,” Thompson said.

In their late 60s, Trudie and Dana are doing what they want to do, what it seems they were meant to do. And they intend to keep doing it.

People who talk about retirement are often eager to leave work, said Dana, “but that’s not us; we’d do what we’re doing if we did it for free.”

“We love what we do,” Trudie agreed. “We’re tired a lot, but we don’t want to retire; we just want to drop over here. That’s the way we want to go.”

Rocking chairs on the porch of the farm store beckon customers after a day spent picking fruit in the orchards.

Whether it is apples, berries, or pumpkins, Reed Valley Orchard wants to please customers of all ages.