

Milburn Orchards



A Proud Tradition of Fresh Fruit and Family Fun for Over 100 Years and Counting

By Drewe Phinny

Milburn Orchards is a story of a family business that has continued to thrive for over 100 years. Cousins Nathan and Jay Milburn are the current two of a 4th generation of hard working folks who have worked the land and pro-

duced tree-ripened-peaches, blackberries, raspberries, grapes, sweet and tart cherries and apples for customers in Cecil County and the surrounding area. Besides the sale of fresh produce, there is also another important aspect to the operation known as “agri-tainment” or

“agri-tourism.” More on that later.

Nathan talked about the beginning stages of the family operation back in the 1960’s: “My father and Jay’s father were major wholesalers with a small retail... They’re third generation and we’re fourth...They sold across the country

and through the world...there was a lot of exporting...they also did a lot of in store service in a 50 mile radius...a lot of Acmes...that kind of thing. In those days there was a lot of wholesaling going on...They made a good living and they took care of us."

"We also sent out a lot of tractor trailers to the distribution centers," Jay added. "At one time, Acme had one not too far from the Philadelphia Zoo."

Wholesale was a large part of the success of Milburn Orchards during the 1960's, the 1970's and into the 1980's. Then in 1989, Milburn Orchards saw the addition of another side of the business that not only could generate income but could also provide enjoyment and education to the public. "That's when we had our first hay wagon," said Jay. Thus began the "agri-tainment" phase of Milburn Orchards' evolution. Nathan credits Jay as the man who got it all started with a simple hayride. "Agri-tainment" is a compliment to the retail side of things. "It's another egg in the basket," Nathan explained. Jay's brother David also



handles some of the activities. David runs outdoor events for the farm which includes, fall festivals, school tours, bonfires and hayrides. Their sister Melinda takes care of accounting and runs the farm bakery which anyone who has ever been to Millburn's knows that means Cider Donuts and pies, arguably the best in the county.

The prime ingredient of this "agri-tainment" or "agri-tourism" is public participation. "We start with pick-your-own-cherries, (by the way, this year, the cherry crop looks like a good one) and all our U-pick operations...are a part of that," said Nathan. "Because that's the person getting involved on the farm...not just purchasing cherries or raspberries, for instance. When Jay brought in this "agri-tainment," from that point on, I guess it was just coincidence but the wholesale market hasn't been as intense as it was, and that (agri-tainment) was a very good supplemental thing...It got people here to know who we are and

return customers will come back for our produce...They might have come for a hay-ride or for baked goods or to see the animals...then once they get to know us, they see that we are a working farm and they'll come back for actual crops so the two go hand-in-hand."

Families like to combine the "U-pick" activities and other entertainment to make it a full day. "You can come pick apples for an hour, then go for a hay-ride or see the animals," Nathan explained.

Although this "agri-tourism" didn't intensify until the late 1980's, Jay Milburn actually remembers when the seeds for this movement were actually sown years ago. "In the late 60's my grandmother started a few school tours and then his (Nathan's) mother did it for a while." Now in 2008, Nathan estimates the number of children who tour Milburn Orchards runs somewhere around 10,000 per year. And some of those kids' parents went on tours that Jay's and Nathan's



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Continued from page 5

grandmother gave years ago. So it's clear that Milburn Orchards' customers go back in time just like the Milburn family does.

I asked Nathan and Jay if they ever get any time off. "We don't get vacations when everybody else takes vacations," answered Nathan. "Two months out of the year, we go back to a 40 hour week...Let's put it that way...People don't understand that." Sounds like those other ten months are pretty hectic.

The harvest season begins in June with cherries...sweet, black cherries...then peaches, blackberries, raspberries, grapes and summer apples in July and August. Milburn's pumpkin harvest usually starts mid-September, through the end of October. The largest crop at Milburn Orchards is apples, with the fall varieties available starting in September. Oh, and speaking of apples, there are plenty to choose from: Reds, Golds, Jonagolds, Galas and Fujis, just to name a few. Just check their website for the weekend

your favorite will be featured The market is open until the middle of January.

As if locally grown fruits and vegetables weren't enough,



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you'll also find baked goods, including Milburn's famous apple cider donuts, jams and jellies, honey and syrups, apple butter and other gourmet items. One of Milburn Orchard's signature products is their fresh apple cider, which is made from three to four varieties of tart and sweet apples, then pasteurized for safety.

Although they both switch off from time to time, you'll usually find Jay at the indoor market. Nathan does most of his work in the field. Both men know what it means to work a full day.

For Nathan and Jay Milburn, and Jay's brother David, the advantages of working outdoors are obvious. "You wouldn't catch

any of us three sitting in an office all day," said Nathan. And they don't have to worry about traffic jams on the way to work. Nathan's and Jay's homes (and farms) are about two minutes away.

So, what does the future hold for Milburn Orchards? Will the generational theme continue? "Well, he has kids," said Nathan, gesturing towards his cousin Jay. "I have kids...My other cousin has kids..." Without actually saying anything specific, both men made it pretty clear that they expected their working farm to be a family operation for quite a few years down the road. Sounds like a 5th Milburn generation of working farmers is not too far off. And for lots of folks in Cecil County and beyond, that means plenty of fresh produce and family fun.

Milburn Orchards is located in Elkton, at 1495 Appleton Road. Call 410-398-1349 or 800-684-3000. For more information, visit their website, www.milburnorchards.com.

