

THE ROADSIDE DIARIES

Wickham's Fruit Farm choreographs a fruity dance.

CUTCHOGUE—Just before World War II, John Wickham, a Cutchogue potato farmer, went to Argentina as a representative of the United States Department of Agriculture to share the latest spud-growing innovations with that country's ministry of agriculture. The trip lasted just a few weeks, but the consequences have become legendary.

"He tried his first nectarine," said Prudence Wickham-Heston, Mr. Wickham's granddaughter. "He thought this was just a wonderful thing."



It turned out that the area Mr. Wickham was visiting was the exact same latitude south of the equator as Cutchogue is north. As soon as he returned, he planted his first peach and plum trees and a cornucopia of fruit, from apricots and nectarines, to kiwis and gooseberries, would follow. In the 1950s, the family became the first on the Island to grow hothouse tomatoes, and still grows them in a 100-year-old glass and cypress greenhouse moved from a farm down the road. In the late-1950s, Mr. Wickham started to grow table grapes as an experiment with Cornell University. (Several decades later, he would advise Alex and Louisa Hargrave and other wine country pioneers that there was no need to go to the Finger Lakes.)

"No one was growing fruit out here, let alone selling it from the road," said Mrs. Wickham-Heston, who manages the stand at Wickham's Fruit Farm on Route 25. Nearly 60 years earlier, her grandmother drove a trailer of peaches to the side of the road to make the family's—and probably the East End's—first retail sale. "We were the first to have a crop that didn't ship," said Mrs. Wickham-Heston.

Tom Wickham, John's son, who manages the crop production

with Mrs. Wickham-Heston's husband Dan, offered a more systematic explanation for the farm's evolution. "Forget about growing for the wholesale market on Long Island," he said, as he drove around the 200-acre farm that has been in the family since the 1600s and stretches to the south shore of the North Fork, across the water from Nassau Point and Robin's Island. "The costs are too high. The margins are too tight. It's just about impossible. But if you can sell it retail, there's business to be made."

So, instead of growing just a few crops, the Wickhams choreograph an elaborate dance that begins with cherries, raspberries, and

WHAT: Wickham's Fruit Farm

WHERE: Rte. 25, Cutchogue, 734-6441

WHEN: Mon–Sat, 9 a.m.–5 p.m. Closed on Sun.

MUST TRY: Nectarines, peaches, sour cherries.

blueberries in July and gallops through Labor Day with peaches, sweet corn, melons, apples, pears, and grapes. "It's very rhythmic, actually," said Mrs. Wickham-Heston. "You just know which season is coming along, and you just roll into the next." The farm offers customers a new u-pick crop every week or so, and uses roadside signs, the Web, and ethnic language newspapers to make sure the right customers know the crop is in. "When sweet cherries are ripe"—around July 4th—"you want to make sure Asian communities know," she said. "For sour cherries"—which ripen a couple weeks later—"folks from the Middle East want them for curries or to put over rice. It's the difference between selling two pounds or 100 pounds."

For Mr. Wickham, the routine on one particular day in early summer included picking strawberries at dawn, cutting rhubarb, thinning hundreds of apple trees, going to the dump, and planting melons, all before having to turn off a series of irrigation pumps at noon. Multitasking comes naturally to Mr. Wickham, who holds a degree in agricultural engineering, a PhD in economics from Cornell, and spent two decades in Cambodia, Vietnam, and Sri Lanka helping

Left: Tom Wickham inspects a ripening peach crop. **Below:** Some of the farmstand's offerings. **Opposite:** The three generations of Vicki's Veggies.



small farmers with plant breeding and irrigation. His worldly background still surfaces in the soy sauce that sits next to Hellman's mayonnaise on his condiment tray, and the *New York Times* he reads every day during lunch.

The farmstand, which only sells fruits and vegetables grown on the farm, reflects the evolving nature of the family business. Jars of raspberry salsa, watermelon rind pickle, apricot-blueberry jam, and other farm-raised edibles cram the shelves. A cold storage locker that used to be used primarily for crops now serves as a cheese room—and provides a refreshing blast of icy air on a hot summer afternoon. In fact, the farm doesn't use much cold storage. "90 percent of what we sell is picked the same day," Mr. Wickham said.

Vicki's Veggies is the last farmstand before Montauk.



AMAGANSETT—Last summer, during the August 14 blackout, when the IGA and other Amagansett food shops closed early, Vicki's Veggies on Highway 27 was the only place left open. The stand reverted to using a solar-powered calculator and hanging scale. The line of customers stretched to the road. In the middle of the chaos, radio DJ Howard Stern pulled into the stand and declared to the throngs of on-lookers, "You people are so lucky out here. I've got friends in the city stuck in

elevators." By the end of the day, the stand was picked clean.

Regular customers of Vicki's Veggies know they're lucky, and not just because of the juicy beefsteak tomatoes and complimentary herbs. As the last stop for fresh produce before Montauk, Vicki's Veggies is a preferred destination for both locals who don't want to go "uptown" to Amagansett Village and sunworshippers coming off the beach and looking for dinner.

It all began on a fateful July day 24 years ago, when an 11-year-old girl named Vicki started selling string beans on the side of the road. Her mother wasn't sure it was a good idea. "I was totally opposed to it," said Elaine Jones, as she weeded lettuce plants on a stifling June morning. "A little girl can't sell out in the road. It's dangerous." She paused to lean on her hoe, wipe her hands on the back of her "I'm not Vicki" t-shirt, and smile towards the bustling



"We pick stuff, we grade it, we bring it to the stand and sell it."

Or, consider the "seconds" table, where fruit that is less-than-perfect cosmetically is sold for half price. "It's sort of like our response to the affordable housing issue for fruit," said Mr. Wickham who, like his father, serves on the town board and has fought to preserve Southold's farmland and the way of life it holds. He is acutely aware that the rising cost of living on the North Fork means some of his oldest neighbors aren't always his most regular customers. But he glimpses in a table of weeping, discounted peaches just one more way to find common ground between newcomer and local. "We do a roaring business in seconds," he said. "It's the same stuff." □

WHAT: Vicki's Veggies

WHERE: Montauk Hwy, Amagansett

WHEN: Daily, 7 a.m.–8 p.m., May–Oct.

MUST TRY: Lettuce, beefsteak tomatoes

roadside farmstand. "It was an excellent idea. It really was."

More than two decades after Vicki Jones, now Vicki Littman, made her first sale, the family still grows lettuce, tomatoes, zucchini, cosmos, and zinnias, on two acres behind the stand. (The property served as the original turnaround for the Long Island Rail Road, before it extended to Montauk, and Mrs. Littman and Mrs. Jones still find bolts when they rototill.)

Over the years, on the urging of its steady customers, Vicki's Veggies did add olive oil, vinegar, anchovies, bread, fresh mozzarella, pasta, East Hampton Gourmet pies, and other provisions.

But, by staying small, the farmstand can focus on customer service. Consider lettuce, which Vicki's Veggies replants throughout the summer, even as most other East End farms let it bolt. "We pick to order," said Mrs. Littman, describing a sometimes harried process of shuttling baskets of green leaf, romaine, and red salad bowl lettuce between field and farmstand. Despite the demand, sometimes a head or two gets away. "One time, my husband came out with a head of lettuce as big as a bushel basket," Mrs. Jones added.

This will be the first year managing the farm without Mrs. Jones' husband, Les, who passed away in 2004. As the season got underway, Mrs. Littman and Mrs. Jones struggled to replant a failed basil crop and put hundreds of cosmos in the ground. They seemed overwhelmed, but resolute. "We run it as a family," said Mrs. Littman. "And I'd never want to get to the point where we can't."

Behind the counter, her four-year-old daughter Rose, stood on a chair, riffling through bills, tidying produce, and otherwise mimicking her mother. "We're training her as a cashier already," said the proud grandmother. "We're pretty strong-willed, so I don't think we're going anywhere." □