
THE ROADSIDE DIARIES

OYSTER PONDS FARM

*With berries hanging from the rafters,
the future is now.*

BY JOAN BERNSTEIN

From the road, Oyster Ponds Farm, just southeast of the Orient Gas Station on Sound Avenue in Orient, looks like an ordinary North Fork scenscape. There are rows of hoop houses punctuated by a bright red tractor. But driving closer to the plastic-enclosed arches—combined, they span an acre and a quarter and stretch longer than seven football fields—it rapidly becomes apparent that these aren't your everyday horticultural enclosures.

Taller, raised on legs, with steel infrastructures (like erector sets with an agenda), they shelter row after row of multi-level towers dripping strawberry plants and neat lines of young brambles (raspberries and blackberries) embedded in black plastic. The gravel drive leads past the futuristic shelters to the home of Tom and Jill Stevenson, their new son, Nathaniel, and Jill's parents, Ron and Linda Apostle.

Oyster Ponds Farm is a young venture, equally owned by the early-30s couple and the “retired”

Apostles. Tom and Jill, sweethearts since high school in Ridgewood, New Jersey, married five years ago in the Orient Methodist Church. Ron and Linda, once high-powered sales execs living in Michigan, now contribute their enormous talents and energies to building the next generation's future. Their baby, Jill says proudly, is “a native Long Islander.”

When Tom and Jill graduated from the University of California at Davis, Tom's degree in Agricultural Systems, emphasizing viticulture and fruit and nut propagation, led them to Long Island. Ron negotiated for the Orient land four years ago, with a family farm in mind. Ron and Linda are enthusiastic: “We just have fun supporting the kids. They know what they're doing. Tom is so smart!”

Tom quickly escalated from “apprentice” jobs at other wineries to

vineyard manager at Osprey's Dominion Vineyard, where he works with winemaker Adam Suprenant; the team achieved New York's Winery of the Year award in 2005. Jill taught elementary school until the recent birth of their child. Meanwhile, they planned, projected, and started to work the soil. Ron and Linda prune and weed. Jill is as capable driving the tractor, weeding, picking and selling at their blue-striped awninged roadside stand as she is at running the large modular farmhouse the family built three years ago. Tom grins: “I put Nathaniel on the tractor; his feet don't reach the pedals, but he likes farming!”

In 2003, when they planted strawberries in the traditional manner—matted rows in the fields—they quickly discovered that the process is “a labor nightmare,” with little yield the first year. Undeterred, Tom, who had read about contained system farming—and knew that tests at Cornell and the University of Pennsylvania



Above: Combined, the plastic-enclosed arches span an acre and a quarter and stretch longer than seven football fields. **Opposite:** Strawberries thrive in these hanging containers.

showed it was particularly suited to organic farming—found out that the technique would be on display at a large horticultural/agricultural expo in Grand Rapids, Michigan. The Stevensons and Apostles attended and talked with the Haygrove Systems United States distributors.

Buying into the new technology would be an immense risk and demand substantial capital, but the potential was intriguing. With the support of Jill's parents and Tom's parents and brothers, they decided to build their dream on the new technology. Tom says, “Farming isn't a short-term commitment. It's a lifetime commitment. We're young, and it's what we've always wanted.” Paraphrasing Hilary Clinton's book title, Ron states: “It takes a family.” It also takes talent and dedication.

NORTH FORK

Tom adds, “We want to lead, and show people you can do it.”

The High Tunnel System is manufactured by Haygrove Fruit Co. in the United Kingdom. Tom describes the tunnels as “hoop houses on steroids.” Air circulation is excellent because of the high legs. The area within the steel superstructure, which supports heavy plastic that can be raised or lowered, awning-style, or completely contained by attaching sides, is accessible to within a few inches of the perimeter, utilizing 20 percent more space than in a standard hoop house. Alternately, wire mesh helps Lucy, the family dog, protect the vulnerable plants from deer and rabbits.

The 1956 Ford tractor Tom has restored to “better than new” fits easily inside the tunnel and prepares the soil before it is covered by black poly (polyethylene film), where young plants will be set directly into the ground. Weed webbing is laid under the Agrotowers-stacked containers which come from California—in which the strawberries are grown from dormant bareroot stock in a primarily compost and peat moss mix.

On the first windless spring day, just one season after the tunnels rose, the Stevensons and Apostles proved the system’s efficiency with an audacious crop of the new varieties of strawberries and brambles they planted that year. Fewer workers were able to harvest three times the standard yield of field-grown Class 1 quality fruit—raised without synthetic pesticides, and without first fumigating the soil.

There are some disadvantages, according to Tom. The upfront cost is high, and closer management is required to control interior temperatures. He must raise or lower the top and sides when the wind blows. Careful venting is necessary to keep the plants from “cooking.” But the plastic diffuses the light evenly, and blocks some of the infrared wave lengths to maintain a temperate environment.

But such logistics are a small price to pay for the extension of the season, both earlier and later, that the tunnels afford. Not to mention the reduced risk of loss to bad weather, storms or drought. A drip irrigation system is laid under the black webbing or poly plastic. Each tower is fed and watered by a gravity tube system. Hardier varieties of strawberries—Seascape, Aromas, Albion, Ozark Beauty—grow side-by-side with fragile Fern. Red, black, yellow and purple raspberries, which will bear on this year’s growth after last year’s canes were pruned in early spring, are trellised or staked.

The family sells to grocery stores on the East End and is hoping to sell to restaurants this year. But the group also decided to grow only what they can sell. Their desire is “to be good land stewards, honestly growing what we sell at our farmstand.” If there is more demand, they will get bigger. They are also determined to be innovative, growing only everbearing berry varieties, for instance. Tom says that it’s necessary to grow the most perishable produce to compete, but he will continue to experiment with new varieties of strawberries and other soft fruits “to see what will grow best in this climate, has the most natural resistance and the greatest yield.”

Oyster Ponds Farm may be small, and in many ways the Stevensons and Apostles are just getting their feet wet. Jill and Tom still work full



time “off the farm.” The family intends to maintain a pesticide-free habitat, but because the regulations defining the term “organic” are so stringent, Oyster Ponds Farm fruit is cited simply as “all naturally grown.”

“We want people to trust us and not worry,” says Tom. “People know the difference, and they do care. If you want farmland, you have to support it. And I just love to grow things people can eat.” □

Joan Bernstein has been a newspaper and cable television restaurant reviewer, was the first female NASCAR photojournalist, and is president of Paumanok Cat Fanciers and Make Mine Mink Tonkinese Fanciers. She produces jams, jellies, compotes, marmalades and other preserves on her family’s original 1902 homestead in Center Moriches.

WHAT: Oyster Ponds Farm

WHERE: Sound Ave., Rte. 48, Orient

WHEN: Tues, Thurs, Sat, 9 a.m.–4:30 p.m.

SPECIAL EVENT: Haygrove High Tunnel Demo, Sept. 7, 6 p.m.