

Polk TODAY

NEIGHBORHOODS, SCHOOLS, EVENTS

Cherries, chocolate become a family affair

Rickreall business is featured on a Food Network program

BY GEOFF PARKS

Special to the Statesman Journal

Mike, Marsh and Celeste Shadbolt's Cherry Country Orchard and Chocolate Factory products were Road Tasted over the summer.

The family-run enterprise, which pumps out innovative cherry-centric candy products such as Triple Cherry & Pistachio Dark Chocolate Bark, Cherry Chipotle Pepper Jelly, and Dried Tart Cherries, recently was featured on the Food Network television show, Road Tasted with the Neelys.

The show features Memphis, Tenn., restaurant owners Pat and Gina Neely, who travel around the country showcasing, they say, "foods made by home-grown local businesses like our own." The couple shot video



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Celeste, Mike and Marsh Shadbolt are the owners of Cherry Country Orchard and Chocolate Factory in Rickreall.

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segments in Portland at a coffee house, a gourmet tart business and a handmade chocolate shop before their late-July visit to the Shadbolt's orchards and production building just off Highway 99W.

Despite Gina Neely's on-film evaluation of cherry picking as "fun, not like work," the Shadbolts' story of how their business was created includes more of the latter than the former.

Mike and his wife, Marsh, purchased the orchard — Royal Anne and some dark, sweet varieties of cherries — in 1991 for no other reason than that "the idea of owning some agricultural property made sense to me," Mike said.

Now 65 years old, Mike retired in 2001 from a 16-year career with the Oregon Economic Development Department to go into the cherry/chocolate business full time after 10 years of trying to make his organic crop a paying concern.

Marsh, also 65, was an instructor at Oregon State University and later the real estate agent who put the family onto the available cherry orchard land.

Daughter Celeste, 31, who had just graduated from college with a degree in Spanish, promised to "give them a year, which has turned into six."

Referring to the several wineries and vineyards now dotting the Polk County area, Mike said, "I couldn't think of anyone who had successfully capitalized on the cherry industry."

Mike learned about the business while working in a cherry packing plant in Montana. He and Marsh took advantage of her work with the food process-

Learn more

WHAT: Cherry Country Orchard and Chocolate Factory, 6200 Oak Grove Road, Rickreall

CONTACT: Owners Mike, Marsh and Celeste Shadbolt at 1-877-324-3779; e-mail, info@thecherrycountry.com

WATCH THE VIDEO: "Road Tasted with the Neelys" featuring the Shadbolts and their company will be repeated on the Food Network (Comcast Cable Channel 66) at 2:30 p.m. on Dec. 7. The video can also be found on the company's Web site.

WHERE TO BUY: A list of retail outlets is available online at www.TheCherryCountry.com. Prices range from \$3 for a bar of the chocolate bark to \$53.95 for a Bountiful Cherry Gift Basket. Products also are available at the farm.

business.

The Shadbolts dry their fruit before turning it into finished candy and other products, "a natural way to concentrate the fruit's flavor and keep it fresh longer," Celeste said.

Contrasting their products with the familiar chocolate, cherry and syrup concoctions found in retail stores, she said, "We have a saying here that goes, 'always chewy, never goeey.'"

She said the family believes it was a bi-monthly food magazine called Edible Portland that might have put their name in with the Food Network show as a possible place to visit. An article appeared in April and things started heating up towards the summer.

"We had several phone conversations and e-mails with the



David Lopez and Mariah Keuler work in the chocolate room at Cherry Country Orchard and Chocolate Factory. Below, Keuler places dried cherries into chocolate molds for further processing into chocolate cherries.

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week before they came.

"When they did come, it was on a Wednesday at the end of July and we were supposed to start harvesting on the following Monday, the busiest time of the year for us."

The Neelys gushed in the seven-minute-long video segment about "how green, lush and gorgeous" it was in the hills and valleys of northern Polk County, and the Shadbolts agreed the crew seemed to enjoy the six-hour visit — even though they had to come back the next day to shoot it all over again (a videographer had his film stolen in Portland).

"This business is definitely a process, a journey," Celeste said. "It's on-the-job training, but a fabulous learning experience for us."

