

FROM THE LAND

WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY FRANK MENTESANA

LIVIN' THE JERSEY BLUES

As one writer discovers, blueberries can be a delicious family affair.



into commercial varieties in the early 1900s. Fast-forward to now, and the New Jersey blueberry crop brings in over \$50 million annually, making New Jersey the second-largest blueberry-producing state in the country, just after Michigan.

I had spoken to a number of blueberry farmers over the course of a few weeks—busy spring weeks in the life of a farmer, and I was grateful for their time—but it was Big Buck Farms in Hammonton that caught my interest. Their label, printed on every one of their pint boxes, reads "Little Buck Organics," after their firstborn son, Louie, so I knew right away this was a family affair.

At work one day in 1997, Elizabeth Condo got "the call" from her husband. Louis had happened upon a farm for lease. "What do you think about taking over a farm?" he asked. Coming from "out of the blue" (excuse her pun), the question could only be responded to with another question: "What? ... A farm?" At the time, she was a physical therapist's assistant (she has since received her doctorate in physical therapy) and Louis was working at his father's garage as a mechanic.

Louis suggested trying it for a year to see how it went. They leased the farm for two years, and in 1999 got the



Wisteria grew wild on both sides of the road and the farm stands were plentiful as I headed deep, deep into blueberry country. Although I don't often take the opportunity to exit the New Jersey Turnpike (it generally being the means of getting to some final destination south of the state), I had recently discovered that New Jersey's state fruit is the blueberry and the place called the Blueberry Capital of the World lies within an easy drive. So, I had decided to get off the highway and take a look for myself.

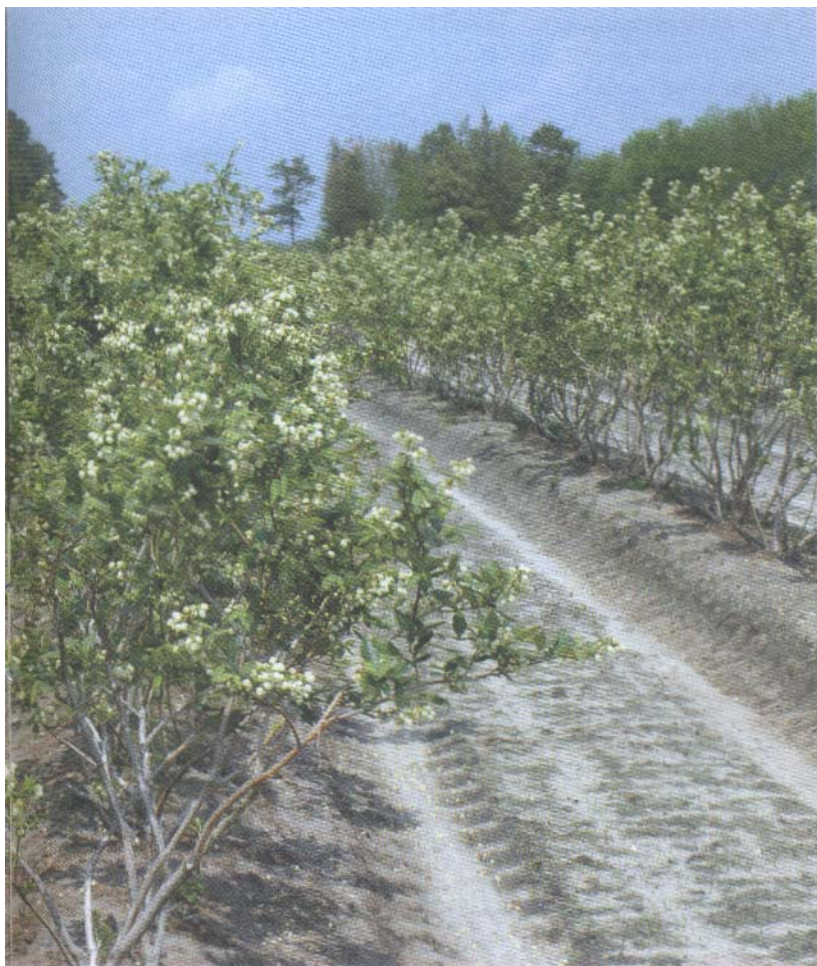
It was here, in the Pine Barrens area situated almost equidistant between Atlantic City and Philadelphia, that Elizabeth Coleman White, the daughter of a cranberry farmer, and Dr. Frederick Coville were responsible for domesticating wild blueberries and transforming them

Above: Louie Condo of Big Bucks Farm.

money together to buy this 116-acre overgrown blueberry farm in Hammonton, New Jersey, the aforementioned Blueberry Capital of the World.

Despite its size, today the farm is almost fully planted in blueberries with only about 15 acres to go. Elizabeth finds amusing irony in owning a farm. Growing up in Hammonton, as a young girl she had "begged" her father to let her work at the local packing house with her friends and her brothers. But her father, a doctor, refused, and instead she worked in his office. Today, she takes care of payroll, runs the packing house, raises their two children, Louie and Dillan, and practices as a physical therapist (thus still fulfilling her father's wish as well as her own). Yet with all that, the most pressing issue currently on her mind is how to involve seven-week-old Dillan in the business ... perhaps a Baby Buck label will be seen in the markets soon.

Louis, on the other hand, had been around farms all his life. Although his dad was a mechanic, his family has always farmed in this area. His grandfather had a farm and Lou's mother worked the farm stand. His uncle owns a peach orchard down the road (following Lou's lead, he recently began growing blueberries). "I was one of the kids that had a garden in the backyard all the time," says Louis. Since he was always dreaming of a farm, when the opportunity to buy these • sandy acres came up it was a no-brainer, and, according to Lou, the next thing he knew, "10 years later I'm here." In the beginning, they



RECIPE

BLUEBERRY CRISP

By Frank Mentasana

3 pints fresh blueberries
3 tbsp unbleached all-purpose flour
2/3 cup sugar
1/2 teaspoon cinnamon
1 recipe crisp topping

1. Preheat the oven to 375 degrees.
2. Toss the blueberries, flour, sugar and cinnamon together in a bowl. Dump this mixture into an 8" x 10" glass or metal baking pan and spread it out evenly. Then sprinkle the crisp topping over the fruit, covering the entire surface.
3. Place the pan on the center rack in the oven and bake for about 30 to 35 minutes, or until the topping browns and you see the fruit juices bubbling up through the topping.

Crisp Topping:

1/2 cup unbleached all-purpose flour
1/2 cup packed light brown sugar
2 ounces (1/2 stick) cold unsalted butter, cut into cubes
1/4 cup rolled oats
1/2 cup walnuts, coarsely chopped

1. Dump the flour and the brown sugar into the bowl of a food processor fitted with a metal blade, and pulse until they're just blended together. Add the butter all at once, and use the pulse button to cut the butter into the flour. Stop pulsing when the mixture is the texture of moist crumbs.
2. Remove the blade from the food processor, and dump the crumbs into a bowl. Add the oats and nuts. Work them into the crumbs with your fingers until the topping begins to clump.

called it "the jungle," but through the years they have reclaimed and amended the land, restoring existing fields, and clearing and replanting the ones that were too overgrown. With Duke, Weymouth and Bluecrop varieties, and a few Berkeley left from the original farm, the planting is almost complete. It has been just over two years that Lou has given up his day job and is able to call organic blueberry farming his full-time gig.

The hours are long and the work can be hard, but in light of it all, the Condos and other Hammonton blueberry farmers (and there are many) fully appreciate the fact that they couldn't be growing blueberries in a better place. Hammonton is located in the Pine Barrens Zone, one of New Jersey's five climatic regions and the one best suited to blueberries. The porous, sandy earth presents not only ideal acidic soil for growing blueberries but has an effect on the perfect weather too. The low minimum temperatures are due to the fact that, on clear nights, solar radiation absorbed during the day is

quickly radiated back into space. In addition, the tremendous aquifer provides plenty of clean, fresh water. Blueberries need about one inch of water per week, and even when there is no rain there is still plenty on hand. One couldn't ask for more.

The harvest season runs from about the end of June to the end of July. The Condos have contemplated adding Elliots, which ripen later and would extend their growing season. But even with this somewhat short harvest period, the work year begins in February and continues through November. There is no farm stand and a pick-your-own berries operation is not an option here (although many do exist in Ocean, Atlantic and Burlington counties), but they never turn away a car pulling into their driveway in need of a fresh pint. The bulk of their blueberries are sold directly to a distributor and their supply does not yet keep up with the demand. So, the farm's expansion continues.

In order to enlarge the farm and bring it to its full growing potential, Louis continues to replant empty fields. He explains the process like this. "First, you propagate by trimming a bush. Take new whips and

cut them into four- to six-inch pieces." Put into a bed with peat moss and sand, and kept moist, these pieces will begin to root. The next year, the rooted cuttings are put into a nursery or potted. The third year, "you go into the field with them ... cut 'em down for two more years and by the fifth year you have fruit." He makes it sound easy. After the fifth year, a mature bush can yield from 12 to 18 pints. But we all know about the birds and the bees and that this is not the end to this story of how blueberries are made.

In the spring, when the flowers on the bushes are plentiful (judging by this year's flowering, Louis says it will be a bumper crop), Big Buck Farms rents beehives for a two- to three-week period for pollination until the flowering ends. He needs about two hives for every acre, although some types require a bit *less*. Most blueberry farmers don't keep their own bees but rent them for that short period. Like those people who like your kids but are happy to give them back to you at

ENJOYING THE NEW JERSEY BLUEBERRY

1. Farm Stands and Farmers' Market

The garden state is chock-full of farm stands and farmers' markets. Find your local markets now and support the farmers through the fall. They are a great source for blueberries and other seasonal fruits and vegetables.

2. Pick Your Own

For the freshest blueberries the fun way, visit a pick-your-own farm. The pick-your-own season usually takes place between the last week of June and the middle of August depending on the weather (call ahead for hours and conditions).

* Lindsay's Pick Your Own
(organic)

418 Pleasant Mills Road
Hammonton, NJ 609-561-2474

Emery's Berry Farm (organic)
346 Long Swamp Road New
Egypt, NJ 609-758-8514

* Earth Friendly Organic Farm
17 Olde Noah Hunt Road Cream
Ridge, NJ 609-259-9744

* Worrell Blueberries
Route 563 and Panama Road
Chatsworth, NJ
609-726-9236

3. Red, White and Blueberry Festival, Sunday, July 1, 2007,

Hammonton. This yearly festival, celebrating its 21st year, is a tribute to New Jersey blueberries. Here you'll find blueberries in pies, turnovers, jams, coffee, ice cream, syrup, honey and, of course, fresh ripe from a crate. For more information, contact the Hammonton Chamber of Commerce at 609-651-9080, or visit Hammonton, NJ.US.

4. Red Barn Cafe After thirty years as a public school teacher, Evelyn Penza makes homemade pies including apple blueberry, mixed berry and ricotta blueberry at her grandfather's 150-year-old farm. She shares her recipe for Ricotta Blueberry Pie with *us*. You'll find it on ediblejersey.com. *Route 206 and Myrtle Street, Hammonton,*

609-567-3412, penzaspies.com

5. Jersey Blues Blueberry Iced Tea to support growers, Rutgers University, Garden State Blueberry Farmers and Herbalist & Alchemist joined forces to create this delicious beverage. Even the glass bottles are from New Jersey. You'll find it at Wegmans statewide, Whole Earth Center and Terhune Orchards in Princeton, The Bagel Cafe in Chester, Griggstown Farm Market and other health and farm markets statewide.

6. Blueberry Solid Extract Herbalist & Alchemist, Rutgers University and New Jersey blueberry growers created this dietary supplement to promote the health benefits of blueberries. Add this to your list of value-added products. *herbalist-alchemist.com*.

7. Blackwell's Organic after being laid off from her dream job (she even got to bring her dog to work), Marcia Blackwell began Blackwell's Organic. Her philosophy towards life and the earth infuse the success of her business. Blackwell's Organic is now available at Whole Foods Markets throughout New Jersey. Organic blueberries from Little Buck Organics make blueberry just one of the intensely delicious flavors she offers in her gelato and sorbetto line. *blackwellsorganic.com*.

8. Get baking. In summer, I'm accused of being a one-trick pony, because, when a dessert is called for, I almost always make a fresh fruit crisp (see recipe page 29). It's a title I accept with pleasure because, hey, isn't the living supposed to be, well ... easy? I want to utilize ripe, delicious summer fruit and I don't want to spend a whole lot of time doing it. Without the need to make a crust or cook over a flame, there is almost nothing easier, nor surely better, than a fruit crisp. Serve it warm or at room temperature and, of course, don't forget to gild the lily with a big scoop of your favorite vanilla ice cream.

the end of the day, the Condos prefer this method. Once the bees are gone, the growing continues and the Condos and their staff nurture the fields until the harvest.

Though they have been farming the land for 10 years, the Condos have only been "on the farm" in their newly constructed home since last fall. They had always known they would raise a family here and the juxtaposition of bicycles and farm equipment shows they are living their dream. The chemicals used in conventional farming concerned the Condos when they thought about raising children here, so they made the decision to convert to organic farming. Nearly everything on this farm is done by hand. Although organic blueberries command a higher price in the market, their labor-intensive nature requires a full-time staff of 20, increasing to over 70 during the picking season.

The Condos find organic farming to be more challenging than conventional methods. NOFA (Northeast Organic Farming Association) inspects the farm on a yearly basis, usually in September or October, providing an update for the following year. Yet even with the challenges of organic farming, the Condos wouldn't have it any other way—and, with many blueberry farmers in New Jersey jumping on the organic bandwagon, they appear to be ahead of the curve.

Curious as to why the local organic movement seems to be a trend more specific to blueberries than, say, apples, I asked around and discovered a few possibilities. The obvious reason would be that the high-bush blueberry's proximity to its natural origin makes it more pest-resistant and gives it natural strength—reducing the need for chemical intervention. Then there's the fact that blueberries are harvested earlier in the season, when the weather is cooler and fewer bugs are active. Even though organic bushes produce less fruit than conventional plants (when Louis went organic his harvest dropped by

about 30 percent), farmers are able to charge more for organic blueberries, so losing some of their crop is not a setback. And lastly—as Robert Frost realized, as we see in his poem "Blueberries," which describes a berry patch that had been burned down—the blueberry is obviously a hardy sort.

I was originally introduced to Big Buck Farms by Marcia Blackwell, who uses their blueberries in her hand-packed blueberry sorbetto, one of the many flavors offered through her organic gelato and sorbetto company, Blackwell's Organic, based in Red Bank. After speaking with her, I got to thinking about the many uses for blueberries. I was convinced a blueberry farm family would come up with more things to do with blueberries than I could ever imagine. So, before leaving the farm, I asked Louis, Elizabeth and Louie for some suggestions and, after Elizabeth admitted she was not a baker, we all agreed that the best thing to do with fresh-picked blueberries is just to eat them. Big Buck Farms is one of many blueberry farms in this part of New Jersey. I encourage everyone to make a visit to this area — and to spread the word of the Garden State's Blueberry Capital of the World. □

Big Buck Farms
345 Columbia Road
Hammonton, NJ 08037
609-820-0964

It was two years ago—or no!—can it be
No longer than that?—and the following fall
The fire ran and burned it all up but the wall."

"Why, there hasn't been time for the bushes to grow.
That's always the way with the blueberries, though:
There may not have been the ghost of a sign
Of them anywhere under the shade of the pine,
But get the pine out of the way, you may burn
The pasture all over until not a fern
Or grass-blade is left, not to mention a stick,
And presto, they're up all around you as thick
And hard to explain as a conjuror's trick."

"It must be on charcoal they fatten their fruit. I
taste in them sometimes the flavour of soot.
And after all really they're ebony skinned:
The blue's but a mist from the breath of the wind,

(Robert Frost, "Blueberries")

