



ADDING THE TASTE OF HISTORY: Darrel Oakes and son Chris will open a 300-variety heirloom apple orchard to the public next year for U-pick.

From survival to success in apple biz

Key Points

- Struggling apple wholesaler becomes a prospering retailer.
- LynOaken Farms' rejuvenation has grown with next-generation innovation.
- Family aims to make farm a destination market with wine and heirloom apples.

By **TOM RIVERS**

TEN years ago, Darrel Oakes couldn't, in good conscience, encourage his children to follow his footsteps at the family's apple farm. LynOaken Farms, which started in 1918 near Lyndonville, N.Y., was suffering in a market that Oakes says "fell to hell."

Oakes was unsure how much longer his 300-acre fruit farm would last after a few unprofitable years — but wasn't ready to quit. Instead, LynOaken chose to move away from its core business of growing wholesale apples.

In the decade since, this farm morphed into a business that now grows grapes and bottles 10,000 cases of wine, produces cider, runs a retail apple business serving 80 stores, manages a U-pick apple orchard featuring 300 heirloom varieties and embraces popular apple varieties, such as Honeycrisp and SweeTango.

"We can't be dependent on one crop and one income stream any longer," Oakes reflects over a glass of wine at the Leonard Oakes Estate Winery, which was named for his grandfather, the farm's founder.



A WINNER: Darrel Oakes prizes an ice wine that won state and national awards for Leonard Oakes Estate Winery.

Next generation bearing fruit

Today, Oakes, 60, has a reduced role at the farm. His son Chris, 26, is now the orchard manager. Son Jonathan, 30, grows the grapes and produces the wine, including a state and national honor-winning ice wine.

Ten years ago, Darrel's sister, Wendy Wilson, left an import-export career in Miami. She now runs the winery, and spearheads marketing and customer contacts for the wine and store delivery businesses.

Cousin Jeff Oakes manages the farm's 250,000-bushel apple cold storage. Darrel's wife, Linda, runs the packing lines and

the farm market and gift shop. Nephew Jerod Thurber manages the farm's cider production and wholesale wine sales.

The farm's workforce has grown with all the new ventures, going from eight full-time and 25 part-time employees in 2000 to 25 full-timers and 90 part-timers today.

Darrel is confident this business will carry on. "In 2000, I wouldn't have welcomed any of these people back. The economics of the fruit business didn't make sense."

How times have changed

LynOaken benefited from timing with a stronger marketplace for apples, especially for Honeycrisp, Gala and Fuji. The farm launched its own retail brand to tap the local foods movement, packing 3-, 5-, and 10-pound bags of apples with a photo of the farm and its employees plastered on the package front.

Sales of those bagged apples grew from five or six stores a few years ago to 80 stores within a three-hour radius of their Lake Ontario business. Retail apple sales now account for about 25% of sales.

Jonathan Oakes, the vintner, praises his father for embracing change and

empowering the younger generation. "None of us came back because we were forced," smiles Jonathan, who studied grape-growing and winemaking in Canada.

"We were all nurtured and allowed to make it our own [decisions]. There was stability here with an established business. But it's an area where we can create new."

Constant innovation

Darrel hasn't left all the adventure and experimenting to the youngsters. He partnered with a local Amish horticulturist, David Schlabach, to create a living museum to antique apples, including the Winter White Permaine, with 13th-century roots.

LynOaken planted the 5.5-acre heirloom orchard five years ago and expects to open it as a U-pick operation in fall 2013. Customers can taste a Ben Davis, an apple popular more than a century ago mainly because it could endure being shipped across the ocean in a barrel.

Many antique varieties were grown for their hard cider qualities; they're small, with a bitter taste resembling crab apples. Some have rugged skins, while others are red-fleshed, with red soaked to the core. When the orchard blooms in the spring, there is "so much diversity" with red and pink blossoms, Darrel says.

Oakes marvels at how the farm has been rejuvenated the past 10 years. "We hope to become a destination, and a little less dependent on just one crop from the field," he says.

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