



Fruitful Labor

STORY BY BETH JUDY | PHOTOS BY GORDON & CATHIE SULLIVAN

For generations,
Bitterroot family
farm has produced
a bounty of apples

The road to Mountain View Orchards, northeast of Corvallis in the Bitterroot Valley, narrows as it winds east into the foothills of the Sapphire Mountains. At 15 acres, the orchard is the largest in the valley. One “block” or section of it produces more apples than any orchard in the state—a thousand bushels per acre. Yet it doesn’t look as big as you’d expect. Several groves on either side of the road cluster around a handful of houses. A small white work building nestles at the center. Cattle graze in outlying fields; the Swansons run about 100 head. Each year, Mountain View



produces 7,000 to 10,000 bushels of apples. Half are McIntosh; the other half includes such varieties as Fuji, Red Delicious and Winter Banana.

Big-framed Charlie Swanson swings off a tractor and starts talking about McIntosh apples. “Cold frosty nights and warm days. Macs love that,” he says, explaining the apple’s affinity for the Bitterroot. He reels off the variety’s charms: crisp; juicy; eye appeal; aroma and flavor unique to themselves—“so many good attributes,” he says, “they’re known as the lazy man’s apple.” ▶

This page: Charlie Swanson picks Golden Delicious apples. Facing page: Apples soak in the last few rays of sun before being picked.

Lazy doesn't fit Charlie and his wife, Julie. The only times they're at home are early, lunchtime and late. Twice, Charlie conducted conversations for this article from the cab of his swather, on his cell phone, while haying. Charlie, Julie, Charlie's 88-year-old father, Carl, and one guest worker with the federal H-2A program prune and thin thousands of trees and battle millions of pests. When temperatures drop, they fire up wind machines, propellers on tall shafts, to pull warm air down and circulate it. "Just during inversions," Charlie explains. "If it's a cold front, there's nothing you can do."

The harvest begins in August. "That's when you feel the pressure," Julie says. The work is intense—picking, sorting, washing, polishing, grading, packing, and depending on the crop, cider-making and/or apple-drying. But the biggest pressure is finding good seasonal labor.

"The illegal alien thing is a nightmare," Charlie says. "Also, people don't work as hard as they used to. And they want more money."

"Most people today have full-time jobs," Julie adds. "They used to close school in the valley and the kids helped harvest. Not anymore." The Swansons' two children grew up helping, but they're grown and gone. As the season approaches, the Swansons scramble, assembling a crew of H-2A workers and the occasional college kid. "We have equipment for 12 pickers. We're happy if we get seven or eight fulltime."

Macs have thin skins. That's good for eating, but challenging for packing, so the Swansons pack and deliver the apples themselves. Twice a week Charlie heads to supermarkets, the state prison, and schools—23 accounts in all, each within 200 miles of his home—with a trailer hooked up to his pickup. People also come to the orchard to buy. They bring their kids and linger, watching the work and chatting. "The same people come back," Julie says. "That's when we see them. They're good friends."

Charlie Swanson's grandfather emigrated from Sweden at age 18. He worked as head lathe man in a piano factory in Illinois, but inhaled so much dust at work, a doctor told him to change occupations or die. In 1907, he traveled through the West, checking out opportunities. In 1909, at age 23, he returned to the Bitterroot, bought the property his grandson farms today, and planted its first orchard a year later.

One original tree remains, a Duchess in a small block next to the house Charlie's grandfather built ▶

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Charlie Swanson





This page, top: Three generations of the Swanson family pose for a moment at their orchard in the Bitterroot Valley. Below: Julie Swanson bags apples to sell at various locations. Facing page: An old apple box retains its original label.



and Charlie grew up in. "My mother, Lois Brooks, was a culinary artist," he says. Her parents ran the Brooks Hotel in Corvallis, famous for its cooking. "Her pies from that Duchess always won first place at the county fair." In the same block, Charlie points to some trees he tried grafting. It was after he'd returned from Vietnam-era military service and had taken a few classes in horticulture. Soon after, his father offered him the ranch. His brother wasn't interested. Charlie was conflicted, but decided to take

it. Around the same time, he married Julie, a teacher and librarian headed to graduate school in math. To her surprise, she became a farmer's wife instead.

Unlike his father, whose interest lay in cattle, Charlie focused on the orchard. Today, after raising fruit for over 30 years, he maintains farming is just like gambling, and says the learning curve never stops. "The fruit doesn't make us rich. It just gives us a reason to stay here." He's not sure the ranch will stay in the family.

Around him in the valley, he sees development favored over agriculture. "There aren't enough agriculturalists any more to have any say." He's thought about moving to eastern Montana, where "it's still all ag." Or New Zealand. He's never been, but he's fantasized about a piece of land there with a trout stream on it. But at 57, Charlie's still at Mountain View. "My roots are here. I'll stay as long as I can."

The rewards of their life are largely visceral. Julie is from eastern Montana—"Glasgow, where you're lucky to have a crab apple tree. I don't have a green thumb." Yet she likes working the orchard with Charlie. Ten years ago, when finding help became hard, she left her job and became his "hired man." She's glad she raised her kids on the farm, and says they're glad too. As a former teacher, she always hosts visits from schoolchildren during harvest, no matter how busy she is. "They love learning to shine apples on their clothes." Harvest is her favorite time. "Charlie brings the bins in three or four at a time on a bin mover. All these bins filled with apples sit on the grass and cool in the evening. That's when you go out and taste one."

Charlie takes an ATV to the top of their newest block of trees, a dwarf orchard that slopes up toward the Sapphires. At the very back, he and Julie have an apricot and two peach trees. The trees stand apart from the apple rows, a little oasis. Across the valley, you can see into the hazy reaches of Fred Burr Canyon and the Bear Creek drainage and look straight at the faces of the Swansons' oldest neighbors, the Bitterroot Mountains, shining, timeless and tough. "This view," Charlie says. "This is the best thing about what I do." **M**

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