



The *New* Cherry Farmers

These young talents run some of the North's most thriving cherry farms.

So what does it take for the next generation to get their piece of the pie?

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Patrick and Sara McGuire

ROYAL FARMS, ELLSWORTH

The enticing scent of cherry coffeecake baking inside the darling red farm market off coastal highway U.S. 31 in Ellsworth is a nice foil to the cool, gentle rain outside. Erin Veliquette, Royal Farms' in-house baker who trained for five years in Denmark, adds a little Euro flair to the classic Midwestern pies and pastries the market sells alongside fresh-picked and dried fruit and bottled cherry juice.

While Royal Farms owner Sara McGuire, 35, meets with a bride about a wedding cake, her husband Patrick McGuire, 38, lanky and already tan in May, jumps in his truck to go check some of their in-bloom orchards for damage. As he maneuvers down the



THE CHERRY POSSE

PREVIOUS PAGES, FROM LEFT: Sara and Pat McGuire and their children at Royal Farms; Matt Gregory of Cherry Bay Orchards with his fellow second-generation farmers, brother, Andrew Gregory, and cousin, Mark Miezio; John Kroupa at Peninsula Cellars tasting room, a one-room school house where his ancestors attended. ABOVE: The next next generation at Royal Farms, Ryan and Emma McGuire.

muddy ruts, bottles of Water Babies sunscreen and Aleve vibrating on the dash, Pat explains he's not concerned about today's rain, even though bees—pollination's magic wands—don't fly in the rain. Unlike the sweet cherries, which need bees to make them bear fruit, the tart cherries, in bloom now, are self-pollinators. And thankfully, when the sweets were in bloom last week, it was sunny. The bees were busy.

His concern is a fluke cold spell over the weekend and what it did to the cherry blossoms' tiny pistils—what his nine-year old daughter, Emma, calls the "baby cherries." That blossom is dead, he says, pulling apart the pale petals to reveal a browned pistil. Blossom days, the scenic glory of spring in fruit country, are touch-and-go time for Pat. "It's like worrying about a mother who's pregnant with a child, only there's 10 million of them," he says. He jostles the truck over to another orchard to check on his crew, who are wrapping white tree-guard around the base of the newly transplanted trees to keep mice, rabbits and deer from eating their tender leggy trunks.

Pat was working at General Motors in Pontiac in a corporate office when he proposed to Sara, his girlfriend since high school. She was graduating from Michigan State University with a merchandising degree and finishing her year reign as the National Cherry Queen. The couple decided that they wanted to live Up North and be farmers.

Pat, son of the Elk Rapids barber and an English teacher, grew up working on local cherry farms, first skimming leaves off tanks of cherries, then pulling tarp on shaking crews and finally managing crews while he was home from Ferris State University in the summer. Sara was raised on the processing side—her parents operate Great Lakes Packing Co. in Kewadin, where she sorted perfect cherries from the pits, stems and damaged fruit. "Anything you wouldn't want in your pie, my mom always said," says Sara.

They established Royal Farms as newlyweds, leasing their first orchard. Besides one terrifying blip in 2002, when a total lack of a crop nearly sunk them, they've grown the business each year by buying or leasing orchards. Today they lease more land than they own, farming land as far south as the Torch River Bridge and as far north as Ferry Road near Charlevoix.

Financing the farmland is one thing, marketing the fruit another. Sara knows quality from her days in the processing plant, but she's realized that no longer can the fruit just speak for itself; to stay viable in a modern marketplace, they needed creative ways to get the most mileage out of their harvest. So she's called on her merchandising skills and spokeswoman talents. Sara is fresh-faced, poised, genuine, just as you'd expect from a former National Cherry Queen, and a natural at spreading the gospel of the Balaton. Pat and Sara have 10 percent of their orchards in the trendy Balaton tart, a cherry they make into a deep-hued, antioxidant-rich super-juice they promote in the market and online. And Sara jokingly calls the market she's created on U.S. 31—with its antique pie safes, red Radio Flyer wagons holding flower baskets, adorable smoothie stand and goldfish pond—the Hollywood version of the farm, especially when compared to the weathered red, bare-bones barn just a quarter-mile around the corner, where Pat and his crew park their equipment after a day out in a hot orchard.

But the marketing finesse has paid off. Today, a sun-soaked morning two weeks into sweet cherry harvest, the Royal Farms market is packed with tourists all clamoring for that certain rosy-cheeked feeling. Emma is running in the mushy, fresh tilled earth of the corn maze, shouting behind her that it feels like quicksand. A downstate couple, in lieu of a big faraway summer vacation, is riding motorcycles up the Michigan coast and picked Royal Farms as a pit stop for some simple, fruit-laden pleasures.



Yesterday, says Sara, their pie sales broke an all-time record.

Since Pat is in the sunup-to-sundown schedule of harvest, the McGuires make sure their kids, Emma and Ryan, age four, see their dad when the shaking crew breaks for lunch. The chuck wagon is a Honda station wagon driven by Patrick's mom, Martha McGuire, who brings a picnic of cucumber spears, dilled macaroni salad, chips and sandwich fixings to the barn. While everyone eats at the white picnic table, Sara takes a cell phone call from Eric Hahn at Cherry Capital Foods, a local foods distributor. She covers the mouthpiece: "He wants stem-on cherries, can we do it?"

Here in the North, we're used buying sweet cherries without their stems, but Hahn has clients—big stores like Whole Foods in the Detroit and Chicago markets—who like the stems left on for a sexier presentation. And they'll pay more for them. So even though it's not convention, and they will have to rally a special crew to handpick that way, Sara and Pat agree.

Even though it's time to get back to the business of harvest, and it's been two days since Ryan had an afternoon nap, when he asks to stay with Dad and ride on his lap on the forklift, Sara and Pat agree.

The About Us page on royalfarmsinc.com tells the fairytale version of their lives, high school sweethearts who lived and farmed happily ever after. And Sara is the first to tell you that yes, that is marketing, but you can take it at face value.

Matt Gregory

CHERRY BAY ORCHARDS, SUTTONS BAY

It's a beach day in Leelanau County—glorious sun, mellow breeze. Matt Gregory, 30, is at the Herman orchard near Omena, gently and swiftly using a forklift to load tanks filled with a sea of tart cherries and cool water onto a truck. He makes a quick call on his cell phone, clipped to his ear, and suddenly a group of teenagers on his staff run and roll down a prickly thistle-strewn hill next to the orchard, scramble onto the truck and skim the leaves

and other orchard flotsam off the top of the tanks. The second they're done, they run and disappear over the hill to another task in the orchard.

Matt drives the thousands-of-dollars-worth of fragile fruit to his family farm's headquarters on Jacobson Road in one of Cherry Bay Orchards' custom converted school-bus flatbed trucks, cab painted cherry red. At the cooling pad, farm staff members move at a delirious pace—unless you are working you are in the way. To get the fruit off the trees at its prime, they operate 24 hours during harvest. And to create solidarity and boost morale among their hardworking employees, every year Cherry Bay Orchards comes up with staff T-shirts ('04: The Fast and the Furious, ¡Ándale!, '08: Shake it up, baby). Even the iced tea is expected to work, steeping itself in a big jug in the noon sun.

Matt and his dad, Bob Gregory, talk to each other with their hands as they unload the fruit and get it to the hydro-cooler, maneuvering their forklifts so fast it appears as comically fast time-lapse photography capturing an entire day in a few moments.

"It's a controlled chaos," says Matt, who started on the farm at age 12 planting trees that they're now shaking, and, along with other Gregory siblings and cousins, is poised to carry on the family farming legacy.

Bob Gregory dreamed up a plan while at the Farm House Fraternity on Michigan State University campus in the late 1960's and recruited his brother Don. Instead of being dairy farmers like their parents, they would start their own cherry orchards in Northern Michigan. Fresh out of college, they didn't have the cash to purchase acreage, so they leased and managed orchards. They grew Montmorency tart cherries in the rolling-hilled microclimate of Suttons Bay and started their families. When Matt and his siblings and cousins were growing up in the 1970's and 80's, the Gregory brothers purchased an orchard base. They wanted to grow *and* process their cherries, so they started a sister business to pit and either freeze or dry their harvests of tart and sweet cherries. The Shoreline Fruit brand of dried cherries in grocery stores across Michigan is their fruit.

The next generation is adding their talent and expertise: Matt decided after some college to come to work on the farm, Matt's younger brother Andrew just followed suit. Their cousin-in-law, Mark Miezio, came after seven years as an engineer and off the bat developed a difficult to explain but magnificently innovative hydro-cooling tank system—a green way to recycle water on the farm and at the same time super-cool their fruit to 35°F within an hour of it coming off the tree for optimum quality.

On his way to Hansen Foods for a quick sandwich from the deli, Matt stops in at Black Star Farms winery in Suttons Bay, where his wife Megan pours wine. They give each other a little peck, and she gives him her paycheck to deposit. Like many young couples making a living in Leelanau County, they hold down a few jobs to make it work. Matt also runs an outdoor guiding service called Turkey Bay LLC.

Today he's going home at 3:30 p.m. for a little catnap, so he can stay sharp on the road tonight driving a truck of cherries down to their processing plant in Hart. He misses his wife this time of year. He'll try not to wake her when he gets home in the wee hours, but, he says, "the dogs always bark." After a couple hours of sleep, he'll pull on his "Shake it up, baby" T-shirt and get at it again.

John Kroupa

KROUPA ORCHARDS AND PENINSULA CELLARS,
OLD MISSION PENINSULA

Every workday morning farmer John Kroupa, 34, leaves his Victorian downtown Traverse City neighborhood and drives up the hauntingly beautiful glacial ridges of Old Mission Peninsula to his office inside a farm outbuilding on Kroupa Road. It's on the same farm where his young Bohemian great-great grandfather (son of a hat-maker, grower of potatoes, brother to 16) started his workday 149 years ago.

The 1860's John Kroupa did things the old-country way. He set cattle out to eat all the little shoots left from the freshly cleared old growth forest, so he could farm the curvy land. He didn't grow cherries, though the first cherry tree was planted on Old Mission in 1852. The fruit was still considered a bit of a luxury crop when his son, also John Kroupa, planted his first orchards in the early 1900's. Donald Kroupa and his wife Evelyn continued the trend in the 1930's.

Today, 21st-century John Kroupa and his dad, David Kroupa, raise 200 acres of active cherry trees. But for as much as he loves cherries and growing them, John is still adjusting to the financial wild card of the harvest. The gist: The processing plant sends their truck drivers to pick up the fruit as it comes off the tree, and the Kroupas send that tonnage away on a wing and a prayer, with no payment. Yet.



CHERRY DAZE

ABOVE: a historic and working Kroupa family barn on Old Mission Peninsula.

PREVIOUS PAGE, GRID:

The frenzy of harvest, from top left: ripe tart Montmorency cherries, seeing how the product will stack up, the pretty face of Royal Farms, Cherry Bay Orchards uses the fastest way to get cherries off the tree: the double-incline shaker; Kroupa Orchards headquarters; Cherry Bay Orchards final product; Gregory and his team use old-school tarp pulling for the old, giant sweet cherry trees; the behind-the-scenes barn at Royal Farms; tart cherry tanks; Emily Gregory Miezio forklifting.

John explains, "The processing plants publish a market price before harvest starts, based on some educated predictions. But if the crop comes up greater than they expected, they will either make the quality grading higher, because they don't need as much, or there is so much fruit that the price comes down, or they'll just stop accepting fruit. And then you're really in trouble."

Payment, whatever it may shake out to be, comes after harvest. So to buffer the unknowns of a volatile cherry industry, in 1991, the year John graduated from high school, he went out with his dad on their ancestral land and planted the Kroupas' first vineyard. Their first vintage came 3 years later. "At first we planned to sell the grapes to area wineries. That was what we knew—grow the fruit and sell it to someone else."

But with Northern Michigan wine country rapidly coming into its own, they took the risk to keep all the profits from the grapes in-house by starting their own winery. "It was a scary risk," says John.

He graduated in '98 from Michigan State University, with a horticulture degree ("I know more about poinsettias than any one should.") and in addition to helping his dad run the cherry farms, he now oversees Peninsula Cellars' 25 acres of vineyards and the winemaking. True to its cherry roots, Peninsula Cellars makes three cherry wines with the Kroupas' fruit, which they sample alongside their traditional grape wines in an 1896 one-room schoolhouse.

And though they've planted new cherry trees every year for the last six years, as old orchards die out, the best orchard land is going into grapes. (The vines are not necessarily getting favored, but babied, because they are far more fickle than cherry trees are.) Says John, "When the cherries perform badly the winery is a consistent source of income for us. You might not get rich—you won't get rich—but it will help you get by." ■

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The Fruits of Their Labor

Peninsula Cellars Taste a sweet Kroupa Orchard Cherry wine, a White Cherry wine made from Gold and Emperor Francis cherries and a Hot Rod Cherry, made with Montmorency tarts in their family-run winery on Old Mission Peninsula. The Kroupas also make award-winning Rieslings and will debut their first Pinot Noir Rosé this spring. 11480 CENTER RD., TRAVERSE CITY, 231-933-9787, PENINSULACELLARS.COM

Royal Farms Visit their rosy-red farm market for antioxidant-rich Balaton cherry juice concentrate, or a smoothie made with it and fruit right off the farm. In the bakery: fresh pie—this time of year go for the homemade strawberry-rhubarb—dried-cherry chocolate no-bake cookies, seeded baguettes, coffeecake and more. 10445 N. U.S. 31, ELLSWORTH, 231-599-3222, 866-224-4801, ROYALFARMSINC.COM

Shoreline Fruit The Gregorys sell their sweetened dried tart cherries, sweetened and unsweetened dried Balaton cherries, yogurt- and chocolate-covered cherries and tart cherry concentrate in area groceries or contact: 800-836-3972, SHORELINEFRUIT.COM