

Made in the Mid-Willamette Valley: Willamette Valley Fruit Company

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Company Name: Willamette Valley Fruit Company

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Business Description: Local berry processor and pie manufacturer with a new Farm Store

Employees: About 60 year round and as high as 200 in peak months

Business History: Willamette Valley Fruit Company was started in 1999 by the Gerald Roth family, who has been growing berries locally in Salem for three generations. What began in 1999 as a small cannery-style operation in a backyard warehouse has quickly turned into WVFC being one of the Northwest's leading processors of high-quality berry products. WVFC is a family-owned business, not a cooperative, but we work closely with an additional 20-30 local growers each year in order to supply all of our markets. Each summer we process, on average, 15 million pounds of fruit. We do strawberries, raspberries, boysenberries, blueberries, a large variety of blackberries, cranberries and the local favorite, Marionberries.

In 2001, WVFC purchased a pie company from a neighbor just down the road. We'd been supplying LaSuisse Specialty Foods the fruit for their pies, and when they decided to sell their business we jumped at the opportunity, not only because it was a natural fit for us, but because the company had notoriety with the locals for having pies "as good as Grandma's!"

We added another layer to our business and opened a Farm Store in February of 2009. Located on the same property as our processing plant and bakery, we provide a unique learning experience for audiences of all ages. You can tour our facilities and even our berry fields in the summer months or simply swing by to shop in our store and enjoy a fresh baked slice of pie a la mode.

Business Specialities: Not only do we feel we have great products we can stand behind, but we take pride in our relationships with our customers. We have an excellent staff that



Special to the Statesman Journal

SEDCOR, the lead economic development agency for Marion and Polk counties, is pleased to offer you a glimpse of the multitude of products and services being manufactured and provided by local area companies. SEDCOR's membership is composed of more than 500 business and community leaders who support our mission to enhance and diversify the economy of the Mid-Willamette Valley.

understands and exemplifies customer service.

What is biggest advantage of doing business in the Mid-Willamette Valley: We've seen the people in the Willamette Valley really embrace local business. In our case, they want to have a connection to their food. They want to know where it comes from, who grows it, what farming practices they use. They want to meet us, see where we work. Before we even opened the Farm Store, we'd get a handful of people out each week who were just curious to see where the pies were made and if they could buy direct. We love that our customers are so educated and committed to supporting the community.

Essential Business Philosophy: We strive to meet and exceed the needs of our customers and each other. If you can successfully do that, then the wheels on the bus are going round and round.

Best Way to Stay Competitive: Because our business is so vertically integrated, we don't have all of our eggs in one basket. If the commodity market has a bad year, we can leverage out our retail business to compensate. Also, because we are on the small side for a manufacturing business, we are flexible and quick to move on new projects and ventures that make sense.

What is most Challenging in Work: We've always been very deliberate with trying to maintain controlled growth. We want to be sure we have the infrastructure in place to be able to handle the additional business we gain. We're not a Kraft or ConAgra, so going national with our products requires a lot of resources for a business our size. It doesn't happen overnight.

Best Business Decision: Purchasing LaSuisse, which led to an entire value-added product line and more recently the Farm Store. These added ventures have essentially become our insurance policy for when commodity market sales are tough and go to the lowest-cost producer. One year you get the business, the next, your customer is buying from Chile. We want to be here a long time.

Toughest Business Decision: It seems our toughest decisions always revolve around ethics and our beliefs. How will this action affect our neighbors, employees or customers? It may make business sense, but is it the right thing to do? We genuinely want what's best for the company, but also our employees, our neighbors and our customers. Our loyalties run so deep that what may be a no brainer at one company, can be a real struggle for us.

What trends do you see Happening in your Industry: We're involved in the berry industry at many levels. But we can now say that we're also involved in the tourism industry — agri-tourism, that is. The new Farm Store has helped us bridge the gap to learn more about who our customers really are. What we've found is that many people these days don't get to experience what it means to grow up on a farm. They come out to our Farm Store and take a tour of the plant and the property — you can see by the look on their faces that there's a little bit of magic going on.

Company Affiliations: EarthWise Certified Business, Salem Area Chamber of Commerce, SEDCOR, Travel Salem, NW Food Processors Association, American Frozen Food Institute

Named Salem Chamber's 2010 Agri-Business of the Year

Major Clients: Commodity sales — Dole, Sara Lee, Bonert's Slice of Pie, Knouse, and TCBY.

Value-added sales — Whole Foods, Harry & David, New Seasons, Market of Choice, Haggen, Wizer's, Zupan's and Thriftway stores. Also featured locally in Roth's, EZ Orchards and Aspinwall's.

For additional information contact SEDCOR at 503-584-7303 or email sappleby@sedcor.com.