

***** velarde, new mexico *****

freshies

of New Mexico's Christopher Bassett
Fulfills His Dream in Bucolic Velarde

By JUANA POAREO, Health & Wellness Writer/Blogger and La Montañita Co-op Member Since 2018

It was a perfect day to drive up to Freshies of New Mexico near Velarde, a small farming town 45 minutes north of Santa Fe on Road 68. Velarde is in the Rio Grande rift, which stretches from central Colorado to Chihuahua, Mexico.

By the time I arrived at Freshies to meet Chris Bassett, the heat had already descended on Espa  ola Valley, with scant clouds overhead.

I soon found company with skittering lizards, nickering horses and grazing cows. The quiet setting belied the scene of farmworkers carrying boxes on their backs into the high tunnels that Freshies grows much of their produce in. You can hear the quiet rush of the Rio Grande as you drive over the bridge into Lyden, where Freshies is located.



ABOVE: Freshies high tunnels in a field of corn, grapes and other organic produce. There are twelve tunnels in all and they are a marvel, standing 16 feet tall, 300 feet long, and housing 2700 fruit trees. PHOTO by Jonathan Loth, Staff Photographer/ La Montañita Co-op

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Freshies of New Mexico is a three-acre farm with high tunnels housing a variety of fruit crops. Freshies is an extension of Bassett's main orchard located a mile away, formerly known as Cottonwood Lane Orchards.

Lyden, population 245, is just down the road from Velarde. Sitting on the west bank of the Rio Grande, this community of farmers is happy to keep an eye on each other's properties. "If somebody's gate is left open, you'll get a phone call saying, 'Hey, it was Sunday, your gate was open, what's going on there?' Just like neighbors," Chris says.

Chris is tall, lean and amiable, with a ready smile. He shakes my hand, ready to talk about the high tunnels and his crops. First it was peaches and apples, and now he grows a wide variety of fruits.

Chris was 12 years old when he got his first taste of farm life, working on the family orchard in New Hampshire. He left his home state at 18 to work on organic farms in California. His first in-the-trenches experience as a farmer was at Laguna Farm.

"I worked at a really large farm in Sonoma County, in California. It was called Laguna Farm, a 500-member CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) with 50 different crops on 50 acres and year-round production. And so that was my experience of where I really learned what it was going to take to run a farm," he says.

Chris and his wife Taylor founded Cottonwood Lane Orchards when Taylor worked as a schoolteacher in Española. After buying Cottonwood from Walter and Betty Lee in 2008, the Bassetts set out nurturing the 350 peach trees and 350 apple trees on the property, which abuts the Rio Grande. They sold their entire first peach crop in 2009 to La Montañita Co-op, and have had a strong relationship with the Co-op since then.

It wasn't always easy though. While peaches are a hardy stone fruit, the Bassetts lost entire peach crops in 2011 and 2013 to spring frost. After losing the first crop, they received an NRCS grant to build a 2000-square foot high tunnel to grow tomatoes, carrots, basil and cucumbers.



ABOVE: The Bassett family – Christopher, his wife Taylor, and their kids Luna and Beau – enjoying a beautiful day at their main farm in Velarde, NM, August 2019. PHOTO by Jonathan Loth, Staff Photographer/ La Montañita Co-op

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Even before harboring a thought of diversifying his crops, Chris focused on experimentation to see what could flourish in the orchards. "We just started planting all sorts of pollinator habitats, different flowering bushes, and weird trees, and just started experimenting to see what would grow well and what we liked doing."

After losing the second peach crop in 2013, Chris started growing oyster mushrooms in a 16x16 high tunnel on the main orchard, using shade cloth to keep them cool. Oyster mushrooms usually flourish wildly in a moist environment, so our arid Southwest climate meant there was plenty of eager interest for locally grown mushrooms among restaurants in Santa Fe and at the Santa Fe Farmers' Market. When he built the high tunnels, Chris said he knew he and his family would be staying in New Mexico. When he bought the Cottonwood Lane Orchards, he said he had a goal to stay for five years to see how it worked out. The high tunnels were a commitment to staying on and working in the breadbasket of northern New Mexico. His two children, Beau age seven and Luna age nine, were born in Taos, and he's proud to call them New Mexican.

You have to crane your neck to take in the height of these high tunnels—they are a marvel. He built the tunnels in two phases: the first phase was in spring 2016 with five high tunnels and 1500 fruit trees. The second phase came in fall of 2017 with the remaining seven tunnels; an additional 1200 trees were planted in 2018.

The high tunnels stand 16 feet tall, are 300 feet long and are arranged in four three-tunnel blocks, with each block housing the same fruit type. The apricot trees live in the first tunnels because they flower first, followed by three cherry tunnels and three tunnels for

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plums and nectarines. The last three tunnels house the tomatoes, chile peppers (green chile, poblano, serrano, jalapeño, guajillo, habanero, sweet peppers) and melons for annual production.

With an eye toward conservation and protecting the earth, all fruit in the high tunnels are organic and treated only with organic pesticides. Bassett uses what's called a Pak Blast sprayer that attaches to the back of a tractor. The sprayer is used to control coddling moths, which you might know as the "worm in the apple." It's Bassett's biggest foe on his farm, alongside the peach twig borer. He extends his creative thinking to minimize any impact on other insects by spraying at night, "when there's less pollinator-insect activity. It has all night to rest and diffuse in the air before the insects really fly in the next morning. I have some conservation aspects of my pest control right here."

Despite his crops thriving, Bassett did have to give up on a popular fruit, the cucumber. This year is the first time there will be

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To help the trees replenish after a harvest and to keep them healthy, Bassett uses kelp tea and fish hydrolysate (liquidized ground fish).

no cucumbers at Freshies, because the cucumber beetle and the formidable squash bug (often mistaken for a stink bug, and similarly foul smelling) proved too pesky, so he cut them from the farm.

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"It's really high in potassium, which is one of the major elements that trees need ... for healthy living, especially replenishing themselves after a big harvest and whatnot. So it's a tea that we mix in with our pest control. We've done compost teas and fish hydrolysate and kelp teas for probably eight or nine years."

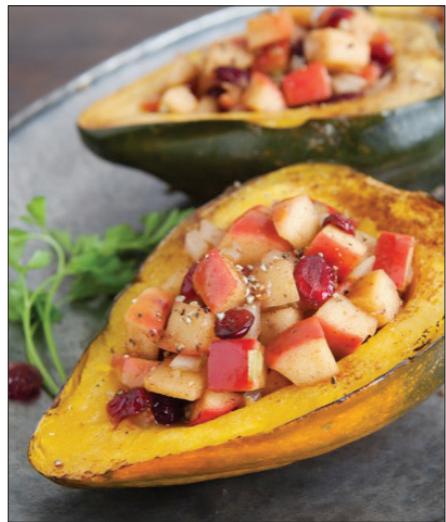
If you walk further down the dirt road past the high tunnels, you come upon the Acequia Madre, a thick branch of the Rio Grande river irrigating both the high tunnels and the main orchard. Behind the acequia is an old, abandoned adobe house shaded by low-hanging trees, and Mesa Prieta, a series of petroglyphs protected by the Mesa Prieta Petroglyph Project, a 2,000-acre private petroglyph reserve.

Before I leave, Bassett bids me a warm farewell and invites me to visit the main orchard one day and to visit his booth at the Santa Fe Farmers' Market.

Email Juana at: juana@juanawrites.com



ABOVE: Organic peach trees and vegetables growing side by side in one of Freshies high tunnels.
PHOTO by Jonathan Loth, Staff Photographer/La Montañita Co-op TOP RIGHT: Cinnamon apple and dried cranberry stuffing in acorn squash. PHOTO courtesy of National Cooperative Grocers.



APPLE STUFFED ACORN SQUASH

Total Time: 60 minutes / Servings: 4-6

INGREDIENTS

2 acorn squash, cut in half, seeds removed
3 T unsalted butter
3 cups yellow onion, diced
2 celery stalks, diced
3 cups diced apple, cored and seeds removed (about 2 large apples)
1/2 cup dried cranberries
2 T maple syrup
1/3 cup water
1/2 tsp cinnamon
Pinch each of salt and black pepper

PREPARATION

Preheat oven to 375°F. Place acorn squash halves face down on a rimmed sheet pan or baking dish and add 1/2 inch of water to the pan. Bake squash for 40 minutes. While the squash is baking, heat the butter in a saucepan over medium heat. Add the onion and celery and sauté for 5 to 10 minutes until soft. Add the apples, cranberries, maple syrup, water and cinnamon; stir well and cook another 5 to 10 minutes until the apples begin to soften. Season with salt and pepper. Remove from heat. After the squash has baked for 40 minutes, remove from the oven, turn them cut side up, and fill each with the apple stuffing. Place back into the oven and bake another 15 to 20 minutes until the squash is tender. Serve warm.

Slice the stuffed squash halves into wedges to serve as a side with ham, turkey or chicken, or serve each half as a vegetarian entrée.

Nutritional Information: 143 calories, 3 g. fat, 8 mg. cholesterol, 47 mg. sodium, 30 g. carbohydrate, 4 g. fiber, 2 g. protein

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