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JUST PEACHY!

*In Palisade, Colorado,
growing perfect peaches
is a family affair, p. 32*

THE BEST PLANTS FOR YOUR ROCK GARDEN p. 65

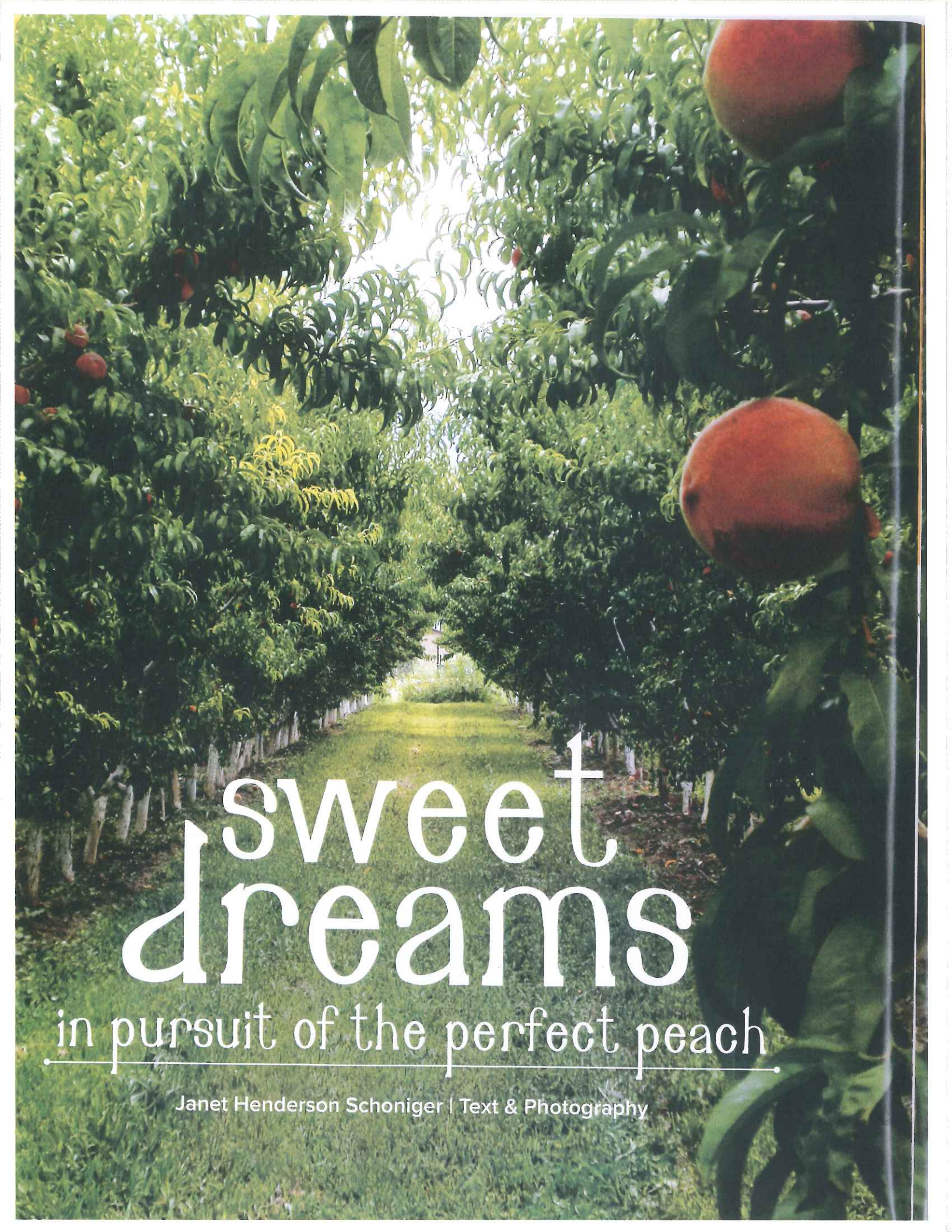
ROAD TRIP TO STEVENSVILLE p. 38

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Display until August 31, 2013
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sweet dreams

in pursuit of the perfect peach.

Janet Henderson Schoniger | Text & Photography



theresa High knows one thing for sure. The peaches harvested from her Palisade, Colorado orchards are the sweetest in the valley. And that's not by chance. But how she got started growing peaches, well that's another story.

"It's been a dream come true," says Theresa, who with her husband Scott, purchased a 10-acre peach orchard in 1999 in Palisade, with the vision of turning the land into vineyards. Today, the husband-and-wife team run High Country Orchards (HCO), a thriving peach orchard operation and retail store, plus Theresa manages the family's award-winning Colterris Winery and Scott owns the Denver-based Classic Wines wholesale distributorship. Over the past 14 years, the Palisade operations have grown to include 126 acres of land divided among 32,000 peach trees, 27,000 grape vines and 9,000 cherry trees.

Theresa jokes that when Scott proposed to her, he said he couldn't promise her a rose garden but he would buy her a vineyard. Back then Theresa was living in Denver and working as a sales representative for a wine company. Fast forward to 2004, three children and a successful business career later, Theresa decided the time had come to make a change. Scott and their children backed her all the way. "It was time for me to take a risk. This is what I wanted to do," she says, recalling her decision to leave the corporate world. With a degree in journalism from the University of Arizona and 15 years of marketing and sales experience under her belt, she launched a new career.

"It wasn't my plan to be a farmer," Theresa says. "It's very special to be considered a farmer. I didn't have respect for farming, and didn't understand what it took," says the Michigan-born doctor's daughter. "I had no idea what it would take to produce food and especially a premium product. It's an art. I love it. You must love it," she says with conviction.

Clearly, she does. She beams with pride when she talks about her decision to make it in the agricultural world. But that country lifestyle and love for the land came at a price. It's a tough



Scott and Theresa High of Palisade, Colorado, pose by a 12-foot, 2,200-pound outdoor art sculpture. Designed to depict a corkscrew opening the juice of a grape, the handle of the corkscrew is built from two 100-pound antique propane tanks welded to the worm of the corkscrew, a 10-foot antique tractor auger. When you visit High Country Orchards, be sure to ask to see Scott's impressive collection of corkscrews, or if machinery is more your style, check out his antique tractors.



Left: A white plastic tote, specially designed by Scott High, protects peaches from bruising during harvest, which in Palisade usually starts in late July and goes through September.

Below: Colorado produces 2.2 million pounds of peaches annually, with about 90% grow in Palisade. Because of the zone 7a growing conditions of Colorado's Western Slope, peaches thrive there. For details about the 45th Annual Palisade Peach Festival August 15-18, visit www.palisadepeachfest.com.



business. And Theresa knew that was the one thing that would make her successful.

GOING HIGH-TECH REAPS SWEET REWARDS

In 2004 Theresa got a commitment from King Soopers supermarket chain to buy her peaches. With that in hand, she began researching better packaging. In the spring of 2005 it all came together. She invested in a French-engineered, customized digital packing line that has allowed HCO to differentiate its peaches from the competition. In fact, the peaches can be picked in the Palisade orchard in the morning and in a Denver grocery store the same day.

Traditional mechanical methods of sorting require peaches to be picked before they're fully ripe, because then they're less likely to bruise in the process. With the HCO's digital packing system, the peaches can stay on the tree longer, up to seven to 10 days longer, allowing sugar photosynthesis

to continue, making for riper, sweeter peaches.

At HCO, the packing process begins by emptying crates of freshly picked peaches onto a conveyor belt where workers

'We have an added advantage in Colorado of being at 4,800 feet above sea level. We have more intense sunlight than, say, Georgia.'

manually weed out the fruit that's too ripe or that has defects. The good peaches then pass through a digital photo booth, which

provides a 360-degree view of each peach by taking seven photographs. They're viewed on a control room computer screen and the weight, size, color, and condition of each peach is analyzed, graded, and sent to the appropriate bin for packing. This high-tech system catches any bad peaches that may have gotten by the manual sorting and ensures each box will have peaches of a consistent size and premium quality. From the bins, workers swiftly pack the fruit into boxes and place them on a conveyor that rolls around to another worker who stacks them on pallets. A mind-boggling 600 peaches a minute pass through the digital process and a pallet is loaded in less than 10 minutes.

During peak summer harvest, when some 20 seasonal workers are picking and packing, everyone hustles, including the High family. Almost 98% of the peaches picked end up in Colorado grocery stores, either at Whole Foods or King Soopers. If you're shopping in a Whole Foods store

during peach season, you may see Theresa's picture in the produce department as part of the store's campaign to feature local farmers.

Of course, if you visit HCO's country retail store during peak season you will likely run into Theresa. A hands-on manager, she keeps a quick pace, moving between the retail store, packing line and office. At the store, you can buy fresh peaches along with Theresa's specially prepared products. About 2% of the peaches each season have some kind of minor imperfections and don't pass the test to be delivered fresh to the consumer. That 2% goes into a variety of tasty preserves and salsas.

OPTIMIZING MOTHER NATURE'S GIFTS

While Theresa is the mastermind behind marketing, keeping the orders coming in, and the packing line running smoothly, Scott's the one who has immersed himself in horticulture, viticulture, and ways to use science to boost Mother Nature's bounties. As we drive a golf cart through the orchards and vineyards, he explains their sustainable agriculture philosophy and details the improvements they have implemented.

Unlike some peach-growing areas where warm night temperatures can zap a plant's sugar, the cool nights along the river and hot summer days make the sugar levels rise. "That's why we pick in the morning here," says Scott. "They're much sweeter than those picked in the late-afternoon heat. The tree goes into survival mode and draws moisture out of the leaves and peaches," Scott says, as he stops at one of orchards where workers are picking. They're carrying white plastic totes to store the gathered peaches instead of bags. Scott designed the totes to protect the peaches from bruising. Then we hop back on the golf cart and he's off, now pointing out the two wind machines used in the spring to prevent frost damage. The wind machines circulate the air and raise the temperature by an incremental 4° to 5°F.

Their orchards extend to the rugged cliffs overlooking the Colorado River that winds through Grand Mesa Valley. "We have an added advantage in Colorado of being at 4,800 feet above sea level. We have more intense sunlight than, say, Georgia," he says.

Scott estimates that because of all the



peaches in your yard?

Many readers wonder whether they can grow peaches in their Rocky Mountain location. The answer is: perhaps. It depends on your specific growing conditions. While the southwestern slopes of the Rocky Mountains in Colorado are an important peach-producing area, you probably shouldn't rush out and purchase a peach tree for your yard without doing a little research on your location.

Check with your local extension office and nursery to see what varieties they recommend you try growing. Some varieties are hardy to USDA zone 5, but remember, that only tells you the average minimum winter temperatures of an area, and has no bearing on the length of your winter season.

Soils alone can limit peach-growing locations as many of us do not have moist, acidic, well-drained soils that produce the best peach trees.

Peaches are not cold-hardy fruits, and the cold temperatures of winter limit the locations they can successfully produce fruit. Flower buds form during the previous growing season, and temperatures of -10°F will usually kill at least some, and maybe all of them. Temperatures of -20°F will often kill trees, depending on the variety. Hardiness can be moderated by a slow cooling fall that enables the plant to enter dormancy prior to sudden temperature drops. Warm weather prior to temperature drops will exacerbate the situation, particularly if the chilling period has been satisfied and the buds have started to develop.

Peach trees require a rest and chilling period between the time the leaves drop in the fall and when the flowers appear the next spring. Variety requirements differ, ranging from 600 to 1,200 hours at or below 45°F, with those requiring the least amount of rest being first to flower in the spring, and therefore more susceptible to cold damage. Flower buds that have had their rest requirement satisfied can begin to develop, putting them into a stage with higher risk of cold damage.

Of course, many of us have microclimates in our yards in which we can grow plants that would not make it in other locations, so if you'd like to give it a try, be smart about it and do your research! Or stick to more reliable, cold-hardy fruits like apples and raspberries.

—Cheryl Moore-Gough

Right: Theresa High pitches in on the packing line. High Country Orchard peaches are extra sweet, in part, because of their French-engineered, customized packing line that uses a digital camera to sort and select the highest quality peaches.

Below: A visit to Palisade's High Country Orchards often starts by browsing in the country store, followed by a guided tour of the orchards and vineyards and then a final stop at the Colterris tasting room.



things they do to maximize the growing season and protect the peaches during picking and packing, their peaches are 10% to 15% sweeter than peaches picked at other orchards in the valley.

As we finish the tour, Scott swings by the HCO's state-of-the-art, top-of-pole solar panels. He explains that the dual tracking solar panels move with the sun and generate all the energy to run the peach-packing facility, plus an additional 20% that goes back to the grid. It's another bonus from Mother Nature.

KEEPING IT ALL IN THE FAMILY

The Highs grow some 24 different peach varieties that all ripen at different times. But there's one that holds a special place in their hearts. It's the Yakima Hale, an older variety and the one that populated those original 10 acres of land the husband-and-wife team purchased years ago. It's the biggest and sweetest of all the varieties they grow.

When the Highs bought that first parcel, the peach trees were 20 years old and at

*'What started as
a marriage proposal
and promise developed
into a lifelong love,
collaborative business
partnership, and
family tradition.'*

their peak; the time was right to replant the orchard. However, in this case the plan was to replant with grapes, not peaches. But, then they tasted the peaches and the dream of a vineyard took an unexpected turn. They took clippings and propagated 1,000 Yakima Hale trees. Today, about 600 to 700 of those trees are producing fruit. "They're

an heirloom variety and have personal family meaning. They are the grandkids from the other trees," Theresa says. "By the time they mature, our kids will be 40, the age Scott and I were when we started."

The Highs began growing grapes in 2001, and have continued to buy land, replant it, primarily with cabernet grapes, to expand their wine production. It's always been a family affair. Their children, Katie, Matthew, and Keenan, have all worked in every aspect of the farming operations, from the packing line to the retail store to giving vineyard tours. The kids got in the vineyards, too. Matthew, now at Notre Dame studying chemical engineering, years ago came up with the winery's name, Colterris Wines, which is short for Colorado and the Latin word terris, meaning "from the land."

Scott notes that the same unique growing conditions that favor other fruits bode well for grapes. It's the volcanic soils of the Grand Mesa, high-elevation sunlight and cool river nights that produce bold, red wines rich in color and flavor.



Top: Fresh peaches along with Theresa's handmade preserves and salsas can be purchased online at www.highcountryorchards.com.

Left: High Country Orchard's state-of-the-art, top-of-pole solar panels generate all the energy needed to run the peach packing facility.

Always with an eye to the future, Scott laments, "I wish I would have started this 20 years ago." They have been adding other grapes and he's planning for their first Malbec harvest in 2017. "I get stimulated by what we can do next," he says enthusiastically.

The Highs liken Palisade to Sonoma, California, 10 years ago. In fact, it's where the dream of owning a vineyard began. Their travels to wineries in California and France inspired them to buy land on the picturesque Western Slope.

PUTTING PALISADE ON THE MAP

The Colteris tasting room is right around the corner from the HCO retail store. When you step into the HCO retail store, you feel welcome. The rustic, country décor and cozy space pull you in and every corner tells a story. Taped to the walk-in freezer are newspaper clippings chronicling the growth and success of the family run operation. One article catches the eye. It's about First Lady Michelle Obama, her daughters, and their trip to Palisade in the

summer of 2009. While President Obama was making a speech on health care in a nearby gym, the rest of the first family was touring HCO. The orchard visit came after Theresa had sent a basket of peaches to the Obamas during the 2008 Democratic National Convention in Denver.

That's Theresa's marketing talent at work. She wants to put Palisade on the map, not only because it's good for her family business but for the whole community. She doesn't just want tourists to come to town for a visit, she wants to attract other entrepreneurs who want to make Palisade their home. Perhaps that's why she was recently named to the board of directors of the Grand Junction Economic Partnership.

Still, success did not come easy, even to this high-energy, bright businesswoman.

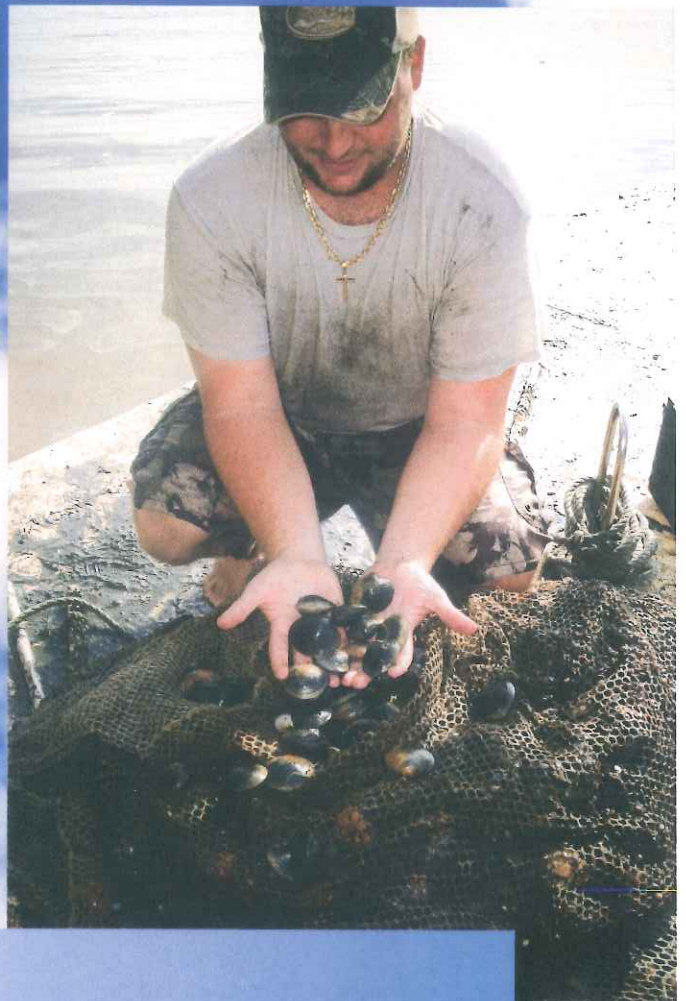
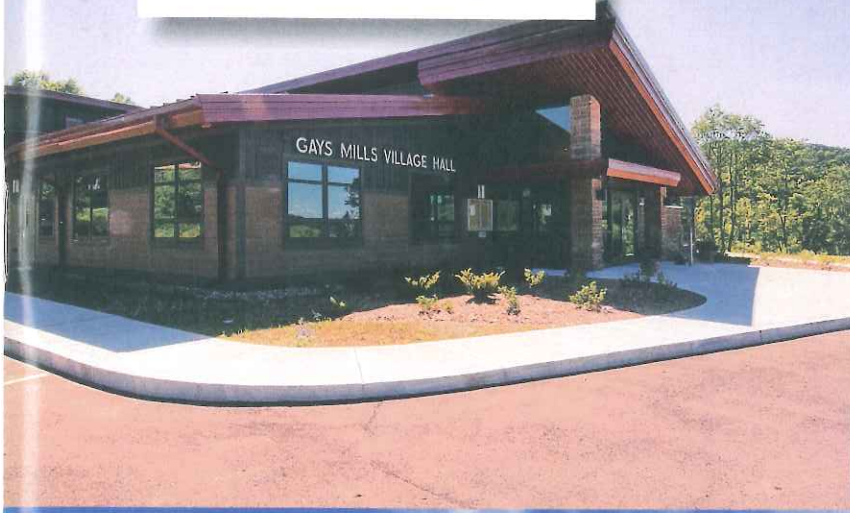
"The most challenging thing for me was fitting into the farming community," Theresa relates. "It's a different culture from any business I had been in. It takes a long time for the agricultural community to accept someone new, from the city and

especially a woman." She acknowledges that it was a struggle. "It was hard initially. It's a learning curve. I had to learn everything from the ground up. Most people don't have the stamina. It's hard to make it. You don't just get respect; you have to earn it."

Receiving that respect and making friendships in the community top her list of new career accomplishments. She attributes her success to her tenacity, business experience, love of family, quest for quality, focus on the consumer and her people skills.

She emphasizes that her husband and children gave her support when she needed it most. What started as a marriage proposal and promise developed into a lifelong love, collaborative business partnership, and family tradition.

"When you look at the big picture, 2012 was the best year ever," Theresa says. "Diversification is the key." With a confident smile, she adds, "I'm still here 10 years later. It all started with a dream and not taking no for an answer." 🍷



USDA Rural Development

2012 Progress Report



A photograph of a woman standing in an orchard. She is wearing a white floral-patterned short-sleeved top and dark pants. She is smiling and looking towards the camera. The background shows rows of trees with green leaves and some red fruit hanging from the branches. The lighting is bright, suggesting a sunny day.

Colorado
**USDA Investments Pay
Dividends for Rural
Communities**

is world-famous for its peaches, and High Country Orchards has been recognized not only for its peaches, but also for its innovative production and shipping methods. In the summer of 2009, First Lady Michelle Obama and her daughters toured the orchard and sampled the peaches. The business has also been featured in the New York Times and in other media.

The orchard includes 71 acres of peaches, 35 acres of wine grapes, 15 acres of cherries, a processing facility, and a country store. The Highs offer orchard tours, host events, and also sell their



products online to customers all across the United States.

With the business going well, Theresa High began to research sustainability and ways to make her operation more energy- and cost-efficient. At a horticulture event, she learned about USDA Rural Development's Renewable Energy for America Program (REAP). The family later applied for and was awarded two REAP grants for energy-related improvements.

The first grant was used last year to install a series of solar panels on a 1-acre parcel at the orchard. The second grant of almost \$26,300, awarded in 2012, will be used to improve the country store's cooling and lighting systems.

Energy Savings for High Country Orchards

For the last 12 years, Theresa High and her husband have owned and operated the successful High Country Orchards in Palisade, CO. Palisade

THE DAILY SENTINEL

Sunday

GJSentinel.com

August 16, 2009 ~ Grand Junction, Colorado

First family visits Palisade peach orchard

By KENT MINCER and PATRICK BAHR

Kent.Mincer@gjsentinel.com

Patrick.Bahr@gjsentinel.com

While President Barack Obama was in the Central High School gymnasium Saturday explaining his health care reform package to concerned citizens, the rest of his family was visiting another part of the Grand Valley.

The president's wife, Michelle, and their two daughters, Sasha and Malia, continued their Western vacation with a tour of a Grand Valley peach orchard.

The three were given a tour of High Country Orchards in Palisade by the High family, who own and run the orchard.

"Special guests made a request. We provided that," High Country Orchards owner Theresa High said.

High and her family gave the first family a quick tour of the operation. The Obama motorcade used C 1/2 Road off 32 Road to reach and exit the orchard.

High's son Matthew said the Obamas were given the same type of tour any other visitor to the orchard would be given.

"There was nothing different about it," he said.

The idea, he said, was that the family wanted to continue their vacation and enjoy a visit to one of the amenities western Colorado has to offer.

"They wanted to get away," he said, joining other family members in saying they wanted to respect the Obamas' privacy concerning details of the tour.

It was brief, although none of

the Highs took note of how long the tour lasted.

"I think they had a really nice time," Theresa High said.

Asked if the Obamas picked any peaches, she said, "I think they did.

"I think it's a good thing to have Palisade peaches in Washington, D.C.," High said, although the Obamas were headed to the Grand Canyon after their brief stop in the Grand Valley.

"It was an exciting day," she added. "I think we represented Palisade well."





The New York Times

October 5, 2008

Biking Colorado's Wine Country

By STEFANI JACKENTHAL

On our second day of the trip, the first being spent getting a feel for the area and the various vineyards, we started out in the East Mesa Orchard, a rolling farmland area on the outskirts of town, peppered with fruit farms and vineyards, sandwiched between the towering Book Cliffs and sprawling Grand Mesa.

The cool mountain air warmed as the sun peeked over the massive caramel Book Cliffs, which appeared chocolate brown in the morning shadow. The range seemed to follow us as we pedaled weather-worn gray roads past bushy cottonwood trees, pastel wildflowers and fruit farms. Sweet stone fruit aromas lingered and the clear cobalt sky promised a beautiful day ahead. We zigzagged undulating one-lane country roads, passing an occasional sluggish tractor humming between farms or an unhurried car. (Although infrequent, some hills require rigorous biking, but the view of the sprawling Grand Valley is well worth the effort.)

About 15 minutes into our ride, we spotted High Country Orchards in the distance. A tidy checkerboard of neatly aligned peach trees — 19,200 in all I was later told — was clustered along the glistening Colorado River, with the Book Cliffs as backdrop.

Ten minutes later, we rolled through the log fence entrance and leaned our bikes against the High Country store, where we were greeted by the owners, Scott and Theresa High. Veterans of the wine import business in Denver, Mr. and Mrs. High bought their first 10-acre orchard in 1999, intending to rip out the nearly 3,200 old Topaz and Elberta peach trees after harvest and replant the land with grapevines. “But when those first peaches were ripe, we stood among the row of trees tasting the peaches with sweet juice running down our chins,” recalled Mr. High, clad in jeans, work boots and blue-collared short-sleeve shirt with the High Country Orchards logo over the left pocket. “We couldn’t bear tearing out the orchard, and it became clear the vineyard would have to wait.”

Since there were just two of us, we took golf carts, rather than the trolley that is used for larger groups, to explore the peach orchard buzzing with busy workers pruning and plucking unripe fruit from fluttering branches. By what could have been the 18th hole, I was in peach overload and overwhelmed by the staggering size of the estate. Before leaving, we stopped into the country store to peek at the jams and fruit salsas made from unsold fruit, before heading to our first winery of the day.

IF YOU GO

A map of the local wine trail is available at the Palisade Chamber of Commerce and most Palisade wineries.

THE ORCHARDS

High Country Orchards sells peaches, plums, apricots and cherries, as well jalapeño peach and amaretto preserves. Country store open 11 a.m. to 5 p.m., Wednesday through Sunday; tours by appointment; 3548 E ½ Road, Palisade; (970) 464-1150; <http://www.highcountryorchards.com/>.

STEFANI JACKENTHAL is a New York-based journalist who frequently writes about wine.

THE DENVER POST

MONDAY, JULY 27, 2009



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★★

LABORS OF FRUIT



Francisco Ramirez, a migrant worker from Manawatu, Mexico, picks a ripe peach this month at the High Country Orchards near Palisade. Below, peaches are sorted via digital imaging. *William Woody, Special to The Denver Post*

Peach orchard keen on high-tech packing

By Nancy Lofholm *The Denver Post*

PALISADE»

As south-of-the-border music sets a lively rhythm in the High Country Orchards packing shed, colorful boxes spin around a carousel and peaches roll down a conveyor belt and into — a digital photo booth.

In the moment before each peach emerges from that booth, its juicy essence has been analyzed and recorded.

Its photo has been snapped seven times from different angles. Those pictures and its weight and girth show up on a control-room computer screen. Even its color and any imperfections are noted before it is gently nudged into a pad-

ded bin with peaches of the same grade.

This is the gee-whiz method of getting peaches from branch to grocery store in a ripe, sweet state. It's the only such digitized peach-packing system in Colorado and one of only a few in the country.

Shoppers who have purchased hard peaches only to be disappointed in the taste once they soften up

can appreciate this high-tech approach. Peaches picked in a Palisade orchard can be in a Denver grocery-store produce aisle the same day.

Old-style mechanical methods of sorting peaches for supermarkets involved dropping the fruit through sorting holes. The fruit had to be picked harder so it

PEACHES » 11A



Slice of peach orchard system

Here's a look at the High family's high-tech approach to local peach-packing.

Before a peach is packed and shipped, the machine:

- Has snapped seven photos from multiple angles.
- Shows weight and girth on a control-room computer screen.
- Notes the color and any imperfections.

PEACHES: Family members all have duties at orchard

◀◀ FROM 1A

wouldn't bruise so easily. And once a peach leaves the tree, the sugar photosynthesis that makes that sweet taste stops.

"This is better. It's good for the peach," says Jose Luis Gonzales, one of the workers who an hour earlier were picking these peaches and now are resting them in boxes.

High Country Orchards added this system about five years ago after the High family moved to Palisade from Denver. They initially bought a 10-acre peach orchard with plans to remove the fruit trees and plant wine grapes.

Until they tasted the peaches, "We got that first crop of peaches, and they were just too good," explained Matthew High, 10, who helps run the orchards during his college breaks.

Matthew is the whiz with the digitized packing while his brother Keenan, 11, escorts orchard visitors on tours through the farm, which has grown to 126 acres and includes vineyards and cherry trees.

Mother Theresa High prepares jams and salsas from imperfect fruits and keeps tabs on the whole operation. She is the one making the rounds of the packing shed with a clipboard as workers hustle to fill boxes before the cashbound semi-truck rolls in at 5 p.m.

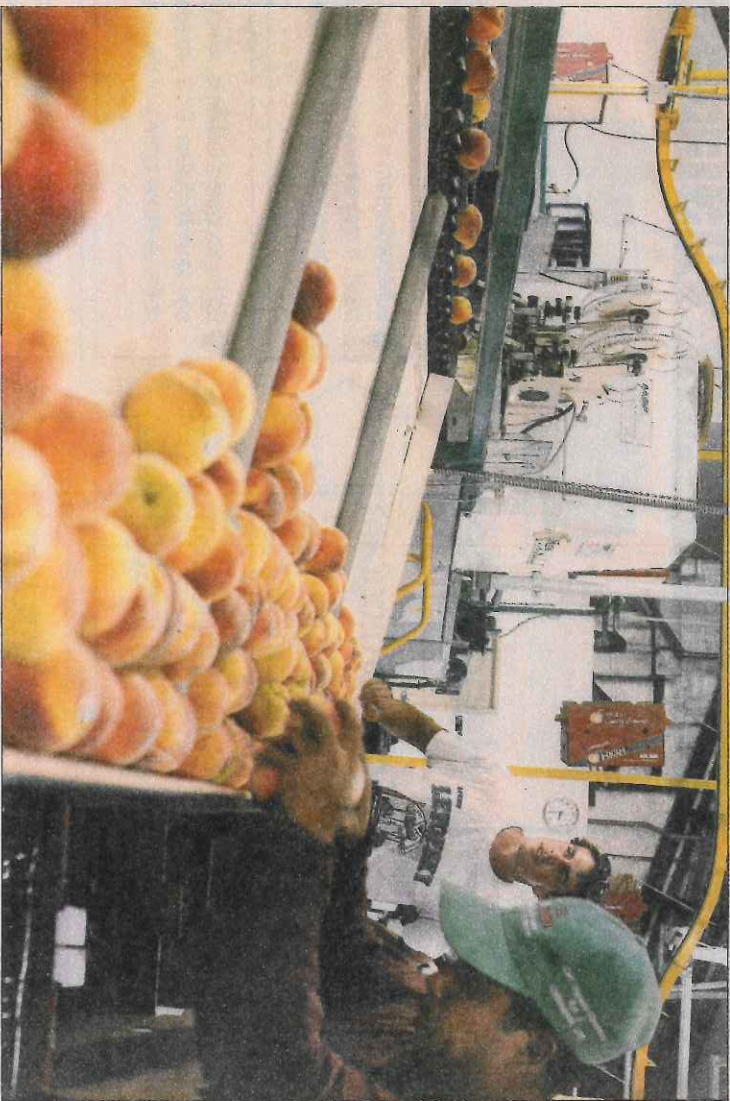
Ninety percent of the Highs' peaches go to Vail, Aspen and the Front Range, where they are sold in Whole Foods and selected King Soopers stores.

Whole Foods shoppers might see Theresa High's photograph dangling over the produce aisles as a "Featured Farmer." "Buying local allows you to eat fruit picked fresh from our trees the very same day," reads the message under her photos.

Of course, there is a higher price for these digitally handled, premium-grade peaches.

"It was a huge financial investment. It's the most expensive piece of equipment this orchard has acquired, but it's the sole reason we can produce such a premium peach," Theresa High said.

The system was designed in France, built in California and shipped in pie-



As Eduardo Delgado Gonzales, foreground, puts peaches in boxes, Matthew High oversees the packing operation. William Woody, Special to The Denver Post

ces to Palisade, where the Highs constructed their packing shed around it. High patriarch Scott High, who also owns and operates the Classic Wines wholesale distributorship in Denver, helped design the system to coddle a Palisade peach.

Peaches flow in one end to two workers who pluck out any obviously bad ones before they go to the digital booth and are sent to appropriate bins. Workers pack them in boxes they pull down from the overhead carousel. The full boxes are placed on another conveyor that glides around to a worker who stacks them on pallets.

When all is right, 600 peaches a

minute spin through the booth. An entire pallet is loaded in less than 10 minutes.

And the Highs' website, www.highcountryorchards.com, reports which variety of peaches is headed for super-markets.

"We built this with the future in mind," Theresa High said as she presented a computer-generated graph showing her how many peaches of what size and weight will be Denver-bound within the hour. "This is going to be my dad's future."

Nancy Lofholm, 970-356-1977 or nlofholm@denverpost.com

90 percent of the Highs' peaches go to Vail, Aspen and the Front Range, where they are sold at Whole Foods and selected King Soopers stores.

"It was a huge financial investment ... but it's the sole reason we can produce such a premium peach."
Theresa High, mother of the High family

Palisade's Official Newspaper for 105 Years

50¢

Palisade Tribune

Volume 108 No. 05

Thursday February 4, 2010

www.palisadetribune.com



A tour group at High Country Orchards admires Palisade peaches as if they were rare jewels during one of last summer's agritours. Photo courtesy of Palisade Chamber of Commerce.



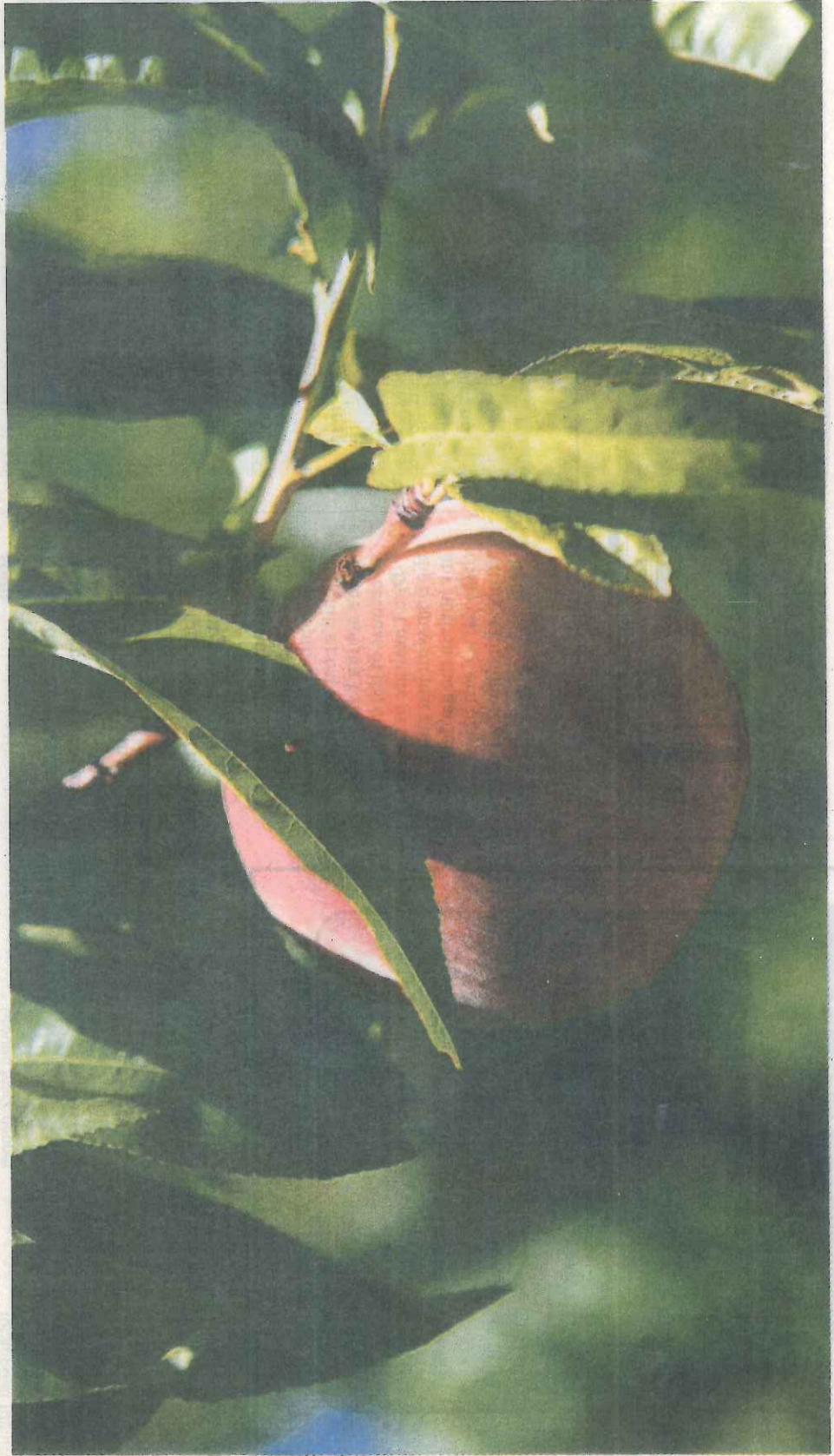
MENTAL HEALTH:
Tips to help you
help others *118C*

OutWest

Colorado Peeks

A ripened peach hangs ready for picking and packaging at High Country Orchards near Palisade. The town is home to the Palisade Peach Festival, which will be held Thursday-Sunday (970-464-7458, palisadepeach-fest.com).

William Woody,
Denver Post file





GRETEL DAUGHERTY/The Daily Sentinel

GUBERNATORIAL CANDIDATE AND Denver's Mayor John Hickenlooper savors a bite from a ripe Palisade peach during a brief stop at High Country Orchards, 3548 E 1/2 Road, on Sunday. Hickenlooper said he's touring the state for two weeks to find out the concerns of Colorado residents.

Oh, that I could have such
a peach TODAY!!!
John Hickenlooper 7/11/13

THE WHITE HOUSE

August 20, 2009

Scott and Theresa High and Family
High Country Orchards
3548 East 1/2 Road
Palisade, Colorado 81526

Dear Theresa and Scott:

Thank you for your warm welcome during our visit to High Country Orchards. The care and attention you put into our visit was obvious, and I thank you for taking the time out of a busy business day to show our family the orchards.

From picking peaches among the trees to gazing at the Colorado River from the gazebo to tasting all the different types of peach products, we all really enjoyed the visit. Also, I thought you should know that everyone on Air Force One ate your peaches on the way to Arizona – to rave reviews, of course, especially from the President.

Again, thank you both – and of course Keenan, Matthew, and Katie – for showing us such a wonderful time at your orchard. I wish your family all the best.

Sincerely,

Michelle Obama

6 NEW WAYS WITH TOMATOES

Sunset

Last-Minute Escapes

Local's Guide to
LAKE TAHOE
P. 15

5 PERFECT ROAD TRIPS

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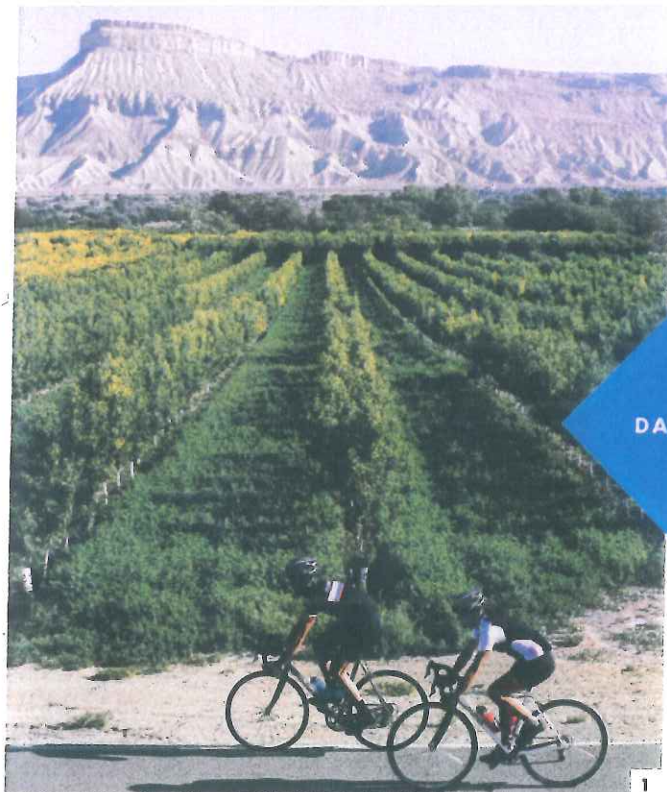
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PEEL & PLANT

FREE CARROT SEEDS

SEE BACK FOR DETAILS

PEEL HERE



DAY TRIP



2



3



4



5

1. Pedal past vineyards on the Fruit & Wine Byway.
2. Savor tree-ripened peaches at Aloha Organic Fruit.
3. Peach Street Distillers serves a potent, veggie-laden Bloody Mary.
4. Pick up English lavender at Sage Creations.
5. Colterris Cabernet Franc is a standout among Palisade wines.

WHY YOU'LL LOVE

PALISADE, CO

In the red rocks of Western Colorado, bike across a mesa, sip some Cabernet, and savor the world's juiciest, tastiest peaches. *By Elisa Bosley*

Its peaches are nonpareil

All winter long, Coloradans pine for the summer months when they can feast on Palisade peaches, which they celebrate as the nation's best (take *that*, Georgia). The season's in full

swing in August—the perfect time to pick up juicy Suncrests and Elegant Ladies at most farmstands along G and F Roads. Stop at Aloha Organic Fruit for a free agritour from farmer Steven Sherer, a transplant from Hawaii; the island-

themed farm store sells just-picked, certified-organic peaches, local foodstuffs, and, yes, Hawaiian treats. For a complete peach-a-palooza, hit this month's Palisade Peach Festival, with music, tours, and peaches starring in cobblers, ice

cream, and salsas. *Aloha Organic Fruit: 3525 G Rd.; alohaorganicfruit.com. Palisade Peach Festival: Aug 15–18; palisadepeachfest.com.*

It makes great wine

Palisade lies at the east end of the Grand Valley wine region,

Travel



GETTING HERE
Via I-70, Palisade is 230 miles west of Denver and 12 miles east of Grand Junction.

and its relatively high altitude (4,700 feet), sunny summer days, and cool nights have proven hospitable to Rieslings and to Bordeaux varietals like Cabernet Franc. Today, the area produces 80 percent of Colorado's wine grapes and hosts more than a dozen wineries. Good tasting bets include **Mesa Park Vineyards'** Bordeaux blends, **Plum Creek Winery's** Rieslings, and the Cab Franc at Theresa High's **Colterris Wines** (where you can stop next door and buy more peaches at her **High Country Orchards & Vineyards**). Or pair local wines with Asian-influenced food at downtown Palisade's **Inari's Bistro**. **Mesa Park Vineyards**: 3321 C Rd.; mesaparkvineyards.com. **Plum Creek Winery**: 3708 G Rd.; plumcreekwinery.com. **Colterris**: 3548 E 1/2 Rd.; colterris.com. **Inari's Bistro**: \$\$\$; 336 Main St.; inarisbistro.com.

It's cyclist heaven

Colorado's famously fit populace demands outdoor recreation with stunning natural beauty, and Palisade delivers. Rent a bike at **Rapid Creek Cycles & Paddle Boards** and follow signs for the **Fruit & Wine Byway**, three gorgeously scenic loops of varying length and difficulty, with orchards, farmstands, and vineyards all along the way. "You don't have to be athletic or talented," reassures Rapid Creek co-owner Rondo Buecheler. "You just show up and get on a cruiser." Feeling hard-core? He recommends the Palisade Rim Trail, a hilly 12-mile trail of single-track that passes ancient Ute petroglyphs and offers killer views. **Rapid Creek Cycles**: 237 S. Main; rapidcreekcycles.com. **Fruit & Wine Byway**: Pick up a map at most wineries and downtown shops.

You can sip local booze and brews

Most of Palisade rolls up early. One notable exception is artisanal **Peach Street Distillers**, serving spirits (and cocktails made from them) at its long copper countertop until midnight. This small-batch operation turns out bourbon, vodka, grappa, and more, made with fruits and grains



6



7



8



9

6. Sage Creations' fields stretch over 3 acres. 7. Palisade fruit becomes preserves at High Country Orchards. 8. The peach mojito stars on the Inari's Bistro menu. 9. Shoppers wait to buy lavender at Sage Creations.

THE LOCAL LOWDOWN

"Peaches have been grown here for over 100 years. But there's also a new energy with the wine industry and an influx of young, talented people."

—THERESA HIGH, OWNER, COLTERRIS WINES

sourced within a 5-mile radius—drinking doesn't get much more locavore than that. For suds, belly up to a **Palisade Brewing Company** High Desert Red or Laid Back Blonde beer—plus outstanding smoked beef brisket and live music. **Peach Street Distillers**: 144 S. Kluge Ave.; peachstreetdistillers.com. **Palisade Brewing Company**: \$; 200 Peach Ave.; palisadebrewingcompany.com.

It loves lavender

Like a page from a Beatrix Potter book, **Sage Creations Organic Farm** radiates bucolic charm. Owner Paola Legarre cultivates more than 30 varieties of lavender. Visitors can gather stalks in the fragrant U-pick areas, or pick up some handmade soaps and oils from her winsome country store. 3555 E Rd.; sagecreationsorganicfarm.com. ▾

Gourmet Escapes Colorado's Best Road Trip Restaurants

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Denver's Mile-High Magazine | August 2006

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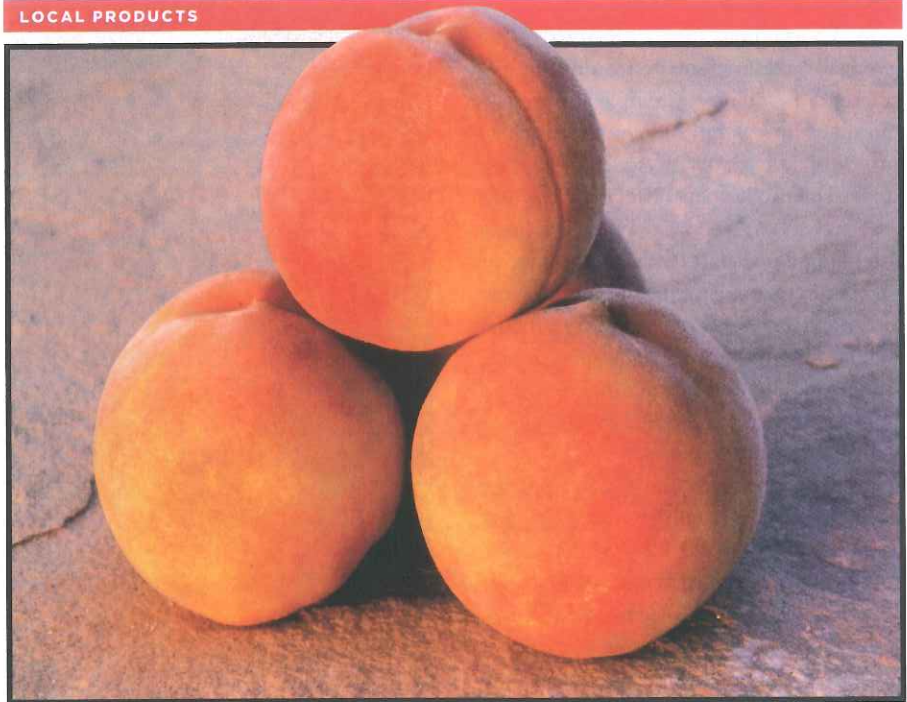
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A Memorable Feast

Colorado peaches spell summer—here and afar.

BY KAZIA JANKOWSKI

MY DAD ISN'T a Colorado native. He's a water lawyer, which, in a state whose livelihood is dependent on water, means he's an almost native. He regularly calls up farmers and eats lunch with ranchers, and in the August heat of my childhood he knew just the water engineer, with family in the Grand Valley, to call to make sure a long, flat box of local peaches crossed the threshold of our Park Hill home. It was a moment we awaited every August. My sister and I would jostle open the box, and out wafted pungent sweetness. For two weeks we ate little else: peaches and cream for breakfast, peach fruit salad for lunch, and homemade peach ice cream for dessert. It was the climax of summer in Colorado.

Then I went off to college on the East Coast, and I learned, from my nationally diverse classmates, that Colorado peaches signified the height of summer in Minnesota, Wyoming, and New York. And I started to wonder what made our peaches so addictive, if not outright famous? Colorado, it turns out, is the seventh largest producer of peaches in the nation. On 2,100 acres of orchards, the majority of which are in the Grand Valley, the state produces about 12,000 tons of peaches annually. In Colorado, those production numbers are second only to apples. But it's peaches, more than any other fruit, that particularly benefit from the Grand

and Delta valleys' ratio of cold winters to long, hot growing seasons. They produce intensely sugary and, at an \$11.8 million production value, extremely profitable flesh.

For ideal peach-growing, orchards need anywhere from 600 to 800 annual hours of chilling time, where the temperature falls below 45°F—this allows trees the perfect amount of time to rejuvenate and develop a healthy flower and leaf bud. At about 4,600 feet, Grand Valley orchards bake in the intense sun. More sunshine, according to viticulture-trained farmer Scott High of High Country Orchards, allows more photosynthesis and, subsequently, peaches with the potential for 8 percent to 11 percent more sugar than crops at lower elevations such as those from California, Georgia, or Virginia. And since most in-state peaches are tree-ripened—High's peaches are on King Soopers' shelves the day after they are picked—they have much more time to naturally develop sugars while still on the tree than do peaches imported from out of state, which are plucked approximately a week before they are ripe.

This summer, when my East Coast friends visit we'll eat peaches. I'll drag my visitors from farmers' market to roadside stand, looking for the biggest and best, and we'll abide by Sunday-morning peach season tradition: waffles, whipped cream, and peaches.

GRAND VALLEY

JULY 2009

GV

magazine

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High Country Orchards



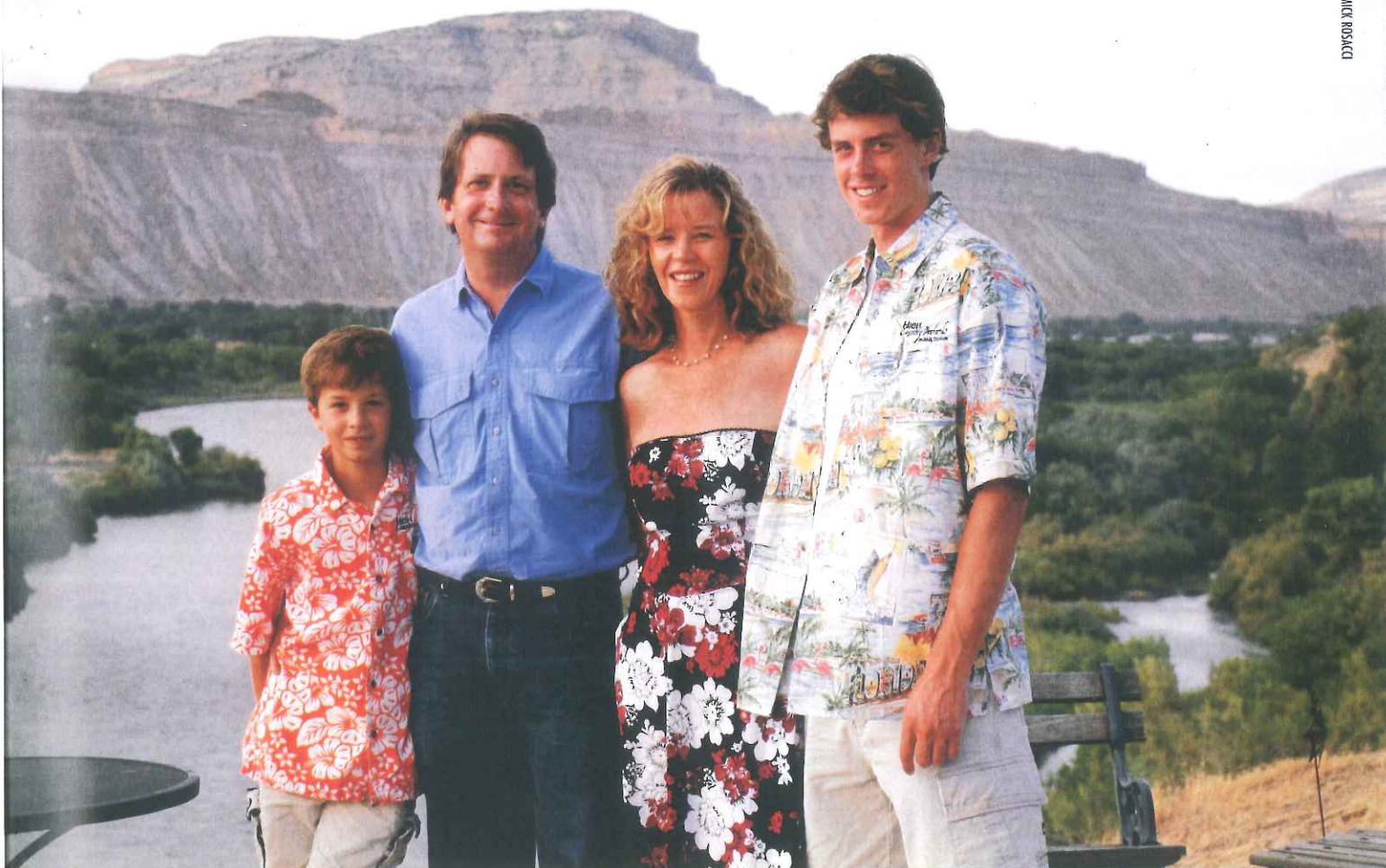
MMMMM ... PALISADE peaches. People travel hundreds, maybe even thousands of miles to sink their teeth into the sweet and juicy flesh of a perfect ripe peach. Lucky for us, it's just a short drive to Palisade and its famous fresh-picked peaches.

High Country Orchards, located at 3548 E½ Road in Palisade (via C½ Road from Clifton or 38 Road from Palisade), is striving to bring back the world-famous Palisade peaches of a hundred years ago. They use old-fashioned

farming techniques, limited equipment, and pick their peaches ripe from the tree and go to market within 24 hours. Orchard owners Scott and Theresa High strongly believe in growing the best peaches possible, and they've worked diligently to expand and improve their orchards.

In 1999, Theresa and Scott purchased ten acres of land on East Orchard Mesa in Palisade with the intention of planting a vineyard and having a place to retire. But those acres included peach trees, and after tasting the delicious fruit, Theresa and Scott

BY MELANIE MOORE



Keenan, Scott, Theresa, and Matthew High enjoy the river view from High Country Orchards.

decided not to get rid of the peach trees. Instead, they purchased more land.

The Highs searched for land that had all the qualities they were looking for: rich soil, beneficial air inversions, and proximity to the river. It was very important to have all the right ingredients, Theresa says, and piece by piece the Highs expanded their orchard.

During the next ten years, High Country Orchards has grown to 126 acres. The orchards hold approximately 25,000 peach trees, 5,000 cherry trees, and 23,000 grapevines. Now Theresa and Scott's intention is not simply to have a place to retire, but to have enough land to divide among their three children — Keenan, Matthew, and Katie.

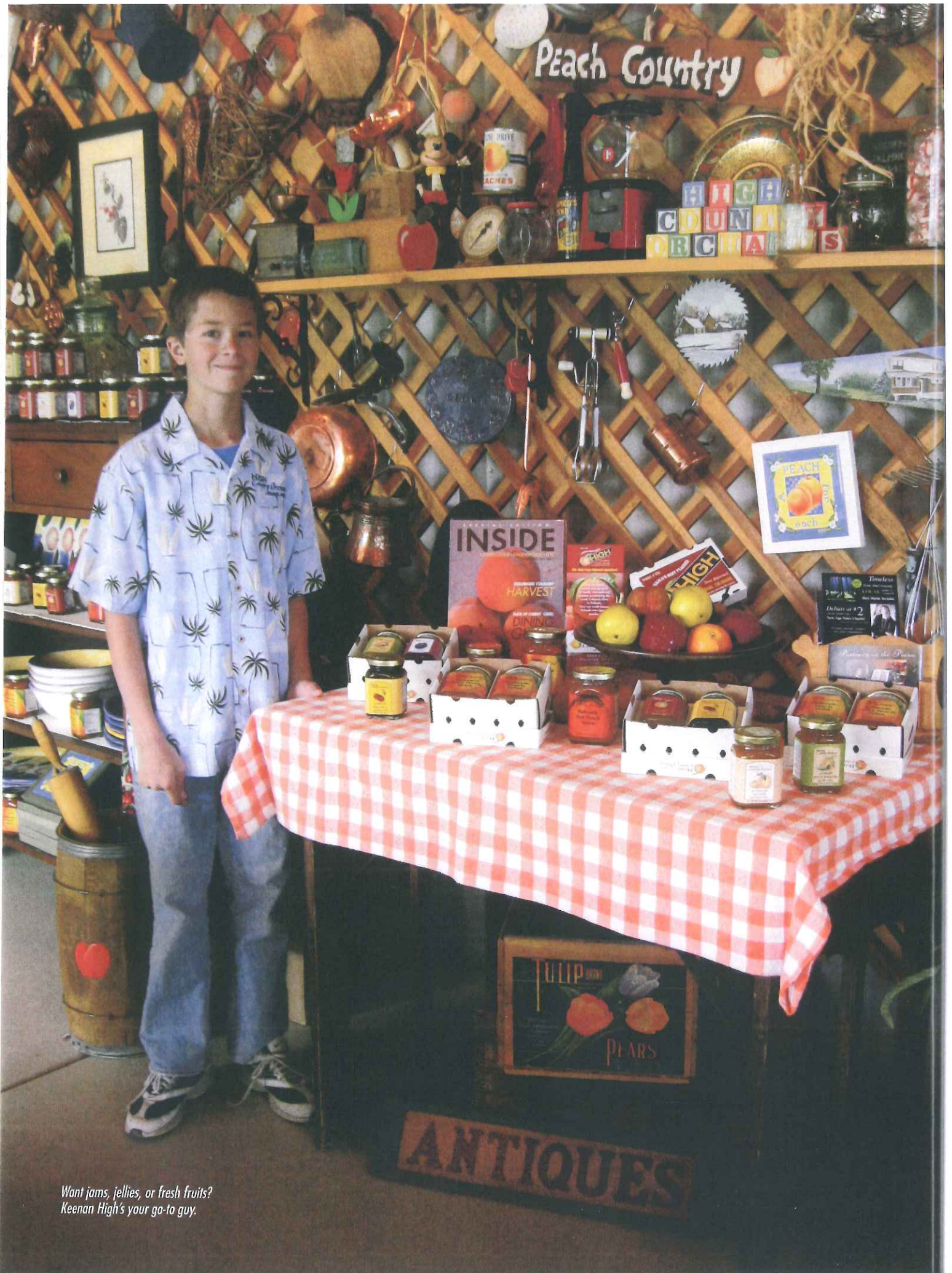
A tour of High Country Orchards shows the passion the Highs devote to their business. They're very hands-on, ensuring the peaches are of the highest quality. Theresa serves as

orchard manager, coordinates the marketing, works with buyers, and makes the salsas and preserves for the country store.

Scott uses his knowledge to make certain that the growing season is productive and successful. Scott also manages the Highs' other company, Classic Wines LLC, a wine distributorship headquartered in Denver.

The Highs' older son Matthew oversees the packing facility and the orchard workers. He also helps out with mowing, harvesting, packing, and whatever else needs to be done, along with seeing that the peaches are picked when ripe. Peaches, unlike other fruits, may ripen once picked, but they can get sweeter only while they're still on the tree, Theresa says.

Once the peaches are ripe, they are harvested by hand in the mornings when they're cool and firm, providing a better



*Want jams, jellies, or fresh fruits?
Keenan High's your go-to guy.*



flavor and texture. The peaches are then placed on a packaging conveyor, and after a visual inspection, they're processed using a sizing and sorting system that digitally sizes the peaches and sorts them for packaging.

High Country Orchards uses the high-tech, digital sorting process to prevent the peaches from bruising during the packing process, allowing the fruit to be picked at the peak of ripeness. Other orchards use a different type of packing system designed for apples, in which peaches must be picked while still firm to prevent bruising during the packing process.

Once the peaches are boxed, Theresa gives her final approval. They're labeled and shipped to be in groceries within 24 hours. The peaches are sold at Whole Foods stores, select Kroger stores, at the Highs' country store, and online at highcountryorchards.com. Theresa says about 90 percent of their peaches sell through at market because only the ripe peaches are picked, and the damaged ones are pulled. That means that only the best are being sold.

Imperfect peaches are pulled to use in the salsas and preserves Theresa makes for the country store, managed by their younger son Keenan.

The Highs also oversee their vineyards that produce Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, and Petit Verdot Vitis Vinifera red wine grape varieties. The first harvest has been barreled at Two Rivers Winery and will be bottled next year.

High Country Orchards is diversifying to include wine grapes and cherries, and they put the same work ethic, passion, and dedication into all their crops.



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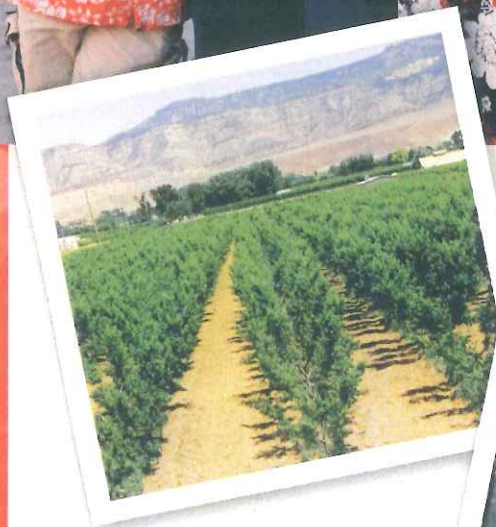
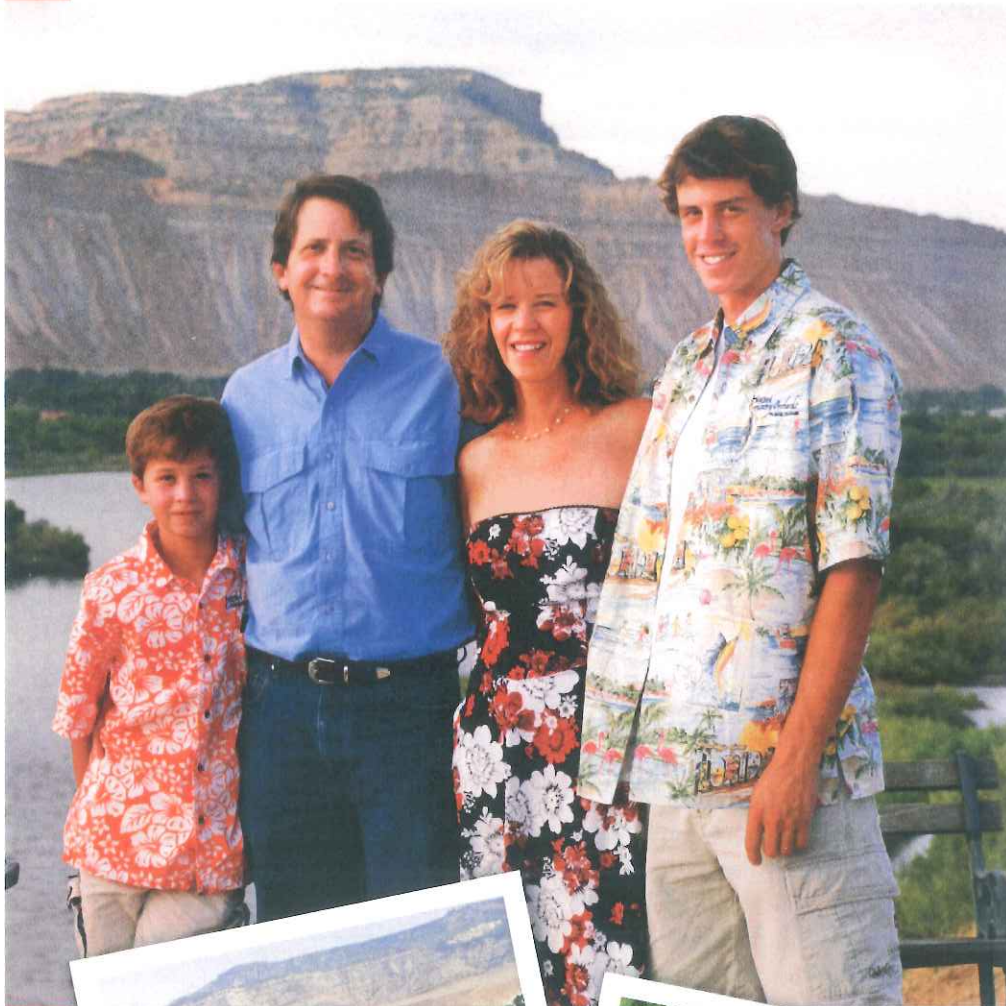
This time of year, everything is just peachy for Scott and Theresa High. They own and operate High Country Orchards in the Grand Valley of Mesa County, Colorado. Along with their two sons, Matthew and Keenan, daughter Katie, and a picking crew, the Highs harvest 15 varieties of tree-ripened peaches. They also grow sweet cherries, red and white wine grapes and vegetables, including tomatoes and peppers, key ingredients in a popular salsa they sell.

But for Scott, it's all about the Palisade Peaches.

"I grew up in Denver and it was an annual tradition for my parents, along with a lot of families, to get their box of Palisade Peaches every year from western Colorado. Then later, an opportunity arose for Theresa and me to go to Palisade and view the area with some friends.

"Both Theresa and I wanted to reconnect to the country life. We visited Palisade on a lark and found a 10-acre peach orchard that looked just fabulous. And like everyone else, we fell in love with the area. We bought the orchard in 1999 with the sole intention of taking out all 10 acres of peach trees, ripping up the land that had sat fallow for a year and then planting the vineyard that I had always dreamed of," explains Scott, who also owns a wine business.

"So we bought the orchard in the fall and tasted the peaches and I've never tasted anything better. I decided I couldn't tear out the peach trees—they were just too good. So we got into the peach business by default. We started with a 10-acre parcel and added on little by little. Now



The Highs feel right at home in Palisade, Colorado. Above, from left to right, are Keenan, Scott, Theresa, and Matthew. Acres of fruit trees in their orchards yield a bountiful crop. Palisade Peaches are the sweet reward for all of the hard work.

we have about 115 acres.

“There’s a battle in this part of Colorado,” adds Scott. “There’s an influx of 18-20 new wineries in this area and a need for wine grapes because of that. Some peach growers are converting orchards to grapes. It reminds me of the cattle and sheep ranchers over 100 years ago, fighting over the land. That’s what’s happening here with peach growers and grape growers.”

There’s no such battle going on in Theresa’s kitchen. “I love to cook—and mixing and matching food with wine is the most fun of all,” she says. “What I like most about cooking is the freedom to create something great out of whatever it is that I happen to bring in from the fields that day—sort of the way people used to do it. It’s the way I think cooking was meant to be. I try to bring into my kitchen the fish or meat of the day that is in season for the main course and build a meal around that with whatever fresh fruits, vegetables and spices I can gather up.

“Cooking frees me up from the rest of the organization of my busy life. It is therapy, like music, the smell of fresh flowers, and a great glass of wine!”

It is also the tie that binds her family together. “I grew up the middle of seven children,” she notes. “My sister Mary lives in Steamboat, Colorado, and we try to get together each harvest season to share some sister time with our families. Each summer I arrive on her doorstep with fresh fruits and vegetables from our orchards for us to feast on while we talk and relax for a few days at her beautiful home. My nieces, Emily, 19,



Aunt Mary Stockdale's Palisade Peach Cobbler

The pinwheel slices in this cobbler give a traditional recipe a nice twist.

Cobbler:

- 2 Cups flour
- 1 tsp. salt
- 2 tsp. baking powder
- $\frac{3}{4}$ Cup shortening
- $\frac{1}{2}$ Cup milk
- $2\frac{1}{2}$ -3 Cups diced peaches (5 or so peaches)
- $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp. cinnamon

Syrup:

- 2 Cups sugar
- 2 Cups water
- $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp. cinnamon
- $\frac{1}{4}$ tsp. nutmeg
- $\frac{1}{4}$ Cup butter

Preheat oven to 350°. Mix together the flour, salt, baking powder and shortening. Add the milk and mix well. Roll into a dough ball. Flatten and roll the dough to $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch thick rectangle. Cover the dough with peaches and liberally sprinkle with cinnamon. Starting with a long end, roll the rectangle up like a jelly roll. Cut the roll into 12 $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch thick pinwheel slices and place the slices flat in an ungreased 9x13 pan, 3 to a row. Place any leftover peaches in the pan amongst the slices. Combine the syrup ingredients in a medium saucepan and heat over medium. Bring the syrup to a gentle boil and immediately remove from the heat. Pour the syrup over the pinwheel slices and bake at 350° for 35-40 minutes. Serve with a big scoop of ice cream.

Prep. time: 25 minutes

Baking time: 35-40 minutes

Serves: 8



Peach Pie à la Mode

What could be better than peach pie? Well, you could try it with ice cream!

Pie Crust:

- 3 Cups flour
- 1½ Cups vegetable shortening
- 1 tsp. salt
- 1 tsp. sugar
- 1 large egg
- 1 tsp. vinegar
- 3 TB milk

Pie Filling:

- 10-12 good-sized peaches
- 1 TB lemon juice
- 1 tsp. vanilla extract
- ¼ Cup instant tapioca (helps thicken the peach juice during baking)
- ¼ tsp. ground nutmeg
- ⅔ Cup sugar
- 1 egg white, lightly beaten
- 2 TB butter, cut in small pieces

Preheat oven to 375°. In a large bowl combine flour, shortening, salt and sugar and blend with a fork or pastry blender until the mixture resembles coarse meal (peas and sand texture). Don't use a food processor or it will over-mix instantly. In a separate small bowl whisk the egg, vinegar and milk. Add to the flour mixture, and mix with a spoon until it just holds together in a ball. Shape into 2 discs, one a bit smaller

than the other. Wrap in plastic wrap and refrigerate while preparing the peaches.

Peel the peaches, cut in half, remove pits and thickly slice. Toss in a bowl with the lemon juice and vanilla. In a separate small bowl combine tapioca, nutmeg and sugar. Add to the peaches and toss to combine. Let sit while rolling out the pie crust.

Sprinkle table with flour, remove the larger disc from the fridge. This will be the bottom crust. Roll gently and turn twice, adding more flour to the table as needed to keep it from sticking. Place gently in pan, brush with egg white and let the egg white dry while rolling out the top crust. Repeat the rolling process with the smaller top crust. Add the peaches to the pie. Distribute the pieces of butter over the filling. Gently place the top crust on top and crimp the edge. Poke a few decorative holes in the center of the crust with a fork or a knife.

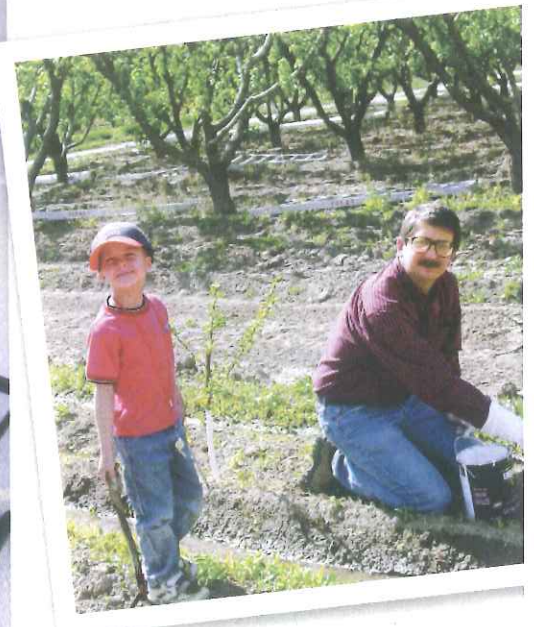
Bake at 375° for 15 minutes, then turn heat down to 350° and bake another 50-60 minutes, until the crust is brown and filling is bubbly. If the edges get too brown, cover with foil. Remove from the oven. Let cool at least 2 hours before cutting.

Prep. time: 30 minutes

Baking time: 60-70 minutes

Serves: 8

Visit penzeysone.com for 2 of our favorite homemade ice cream recipes.



Scott and Keenan paint the baby trees with breathable latex paint to protect their sensitive skin from the sun and other elements.

and Grace, 17, carry on the tradition of making their mother's famous peach cobbler made only from our Palisade Peaches."

Theresa shares the recipe for Aunt Mary Stockdale's Palisade Peach Cobbler, along with one of her own colorful salsas. "Palisade 'Color-ado' Spicy Peach Salsa has lots of colorful peppers," says Theresa. "There's a story behind the name. The pioneers named Colorado for its very blue skies, white puffy clouds and many shades of greenery."

Scott adds that while Georgia and California are the two largest peach growing states in the U.S., Colorado has a long and fruitful history of its own.

"It's been a peach growing state for at least 100 years now. The Palisade Public Library has all sorts of information about Palisade Peaches being shipped to Buckingham Palace, and being shipped to the White House and served at state dinners. Ronald Reagan even had crates of Palisade Peaches delivered to Air Force One when he was President."

A sweet experiment in taste-testing helped pave the way to marketing success for the Highs' Palisade Peaches.

"Theresa and I went and bought peaches from the grocery stores of all the different peach growers in Colorado and we tested them for sugar content," reports Scott. "And then we tasted one of our tree-ripened peaches that we felt was at the height of its ripening—and ours had about 16 percent more sugar than those other peaches on average. It was so sweet!

"We took boxes of our peaches to all the grocery store chains in Denver and we had the produce buyers taste them. And they said, 'Yeah, this is perfect. This is how I remember a Colorado peach. This is the way it should taste.'

"One of the buyers told us he took the peaches home and ate four that same night because they were sooo good. He called us and asked, 'How can I get these in my grocery store chain?' So Theresa said, 'We have to pick them when they're totally ripe and we have to get them to you so

you can sell them the next day.' "

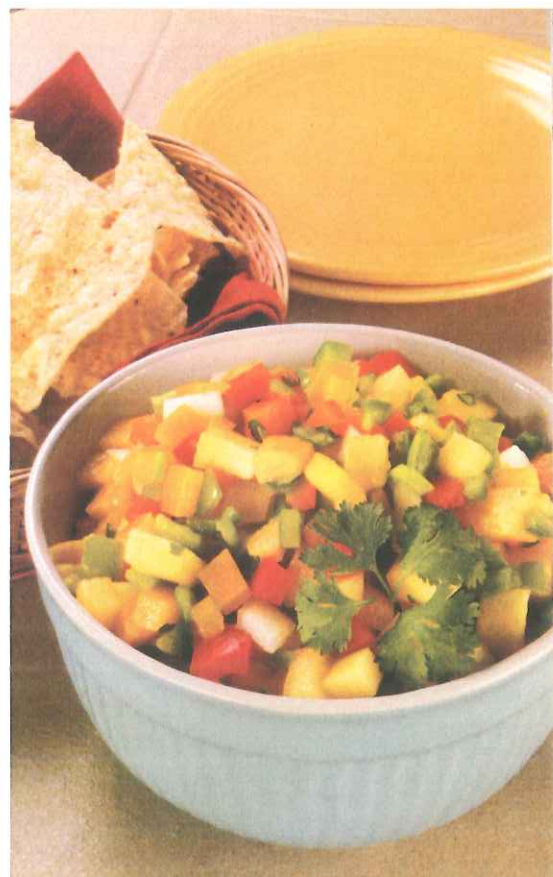
Packing the fragile fresh fruit without bruising it—up to 100,000 boxes over a few weeks (the Highs began selling their peaches online last summer)—proved to be a huge challenge until they decided to go high-tech. "We found a company that manufactured a digital imaging sizing machine," explains Scott. "We put all the peaches on a foam-backed conveyor belt. It's very gentle. The computer categorizes and sorts the peaches by size according to the digital photographs it's taken."

But for customers, it's all about the taste, according to Scott.

"We had a lady come by our fruit stands last year from Georgia. She said, 'I'm just curious. You're saying they're America's best peaches. That can't be.'

"My wife handed her a peach and the lady said, 'Well, I'm going to take it back to the hotel.' She was being cordial to us but she was clearly not convinced that it was a good peach. She came back the next day and bought a trunk load to take home to Georgia!"

Crew member Emeterio picks Bing cherries.



Palisade "Color-ado" Spicy Peach Salsa

This fresh, pretty salsa is the perfect marriage of spicy and sweet. Try it with chips or even over grilled chicken breasts.

- 2 Cups peeled, pitted and chopped peaches (4-6 peaches)
- 1/2 Cup chopped red, green, yellow bell peppers
- 4 Anaheim chili peppers, seeded and chopped (fresh anchos or pasillas or serranos would work as well)
- 1/2 Cup chopped onion
- 2 jalapeño peppers, seeded and finely chopped
- 1 TB honey
- 2 TB lime juice
- 1/4 Cup chopped fresh cilantro
- 1/2 tsp. salt
- 1 tsp. ground cumin

Combine all of the ingredients in a nice serving bowl. Mix well. Cover and refrigerate for up to 4 hours, stirring once or twice.

Prep. time: 30 minutes plus chilling time

Cooking time: none

Yield: about 4 cups



THE FURROW

MARCH 2010

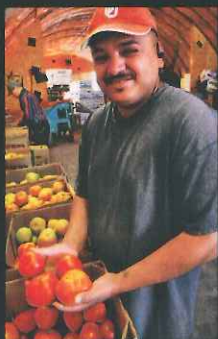
FARMING IN THE ZONE

■ Fragile world ■ Pumping gas

By Dale McDonald

Mesa County bounty

From alfalfa to zucchini, this high western valley produces an astonishing array of goods

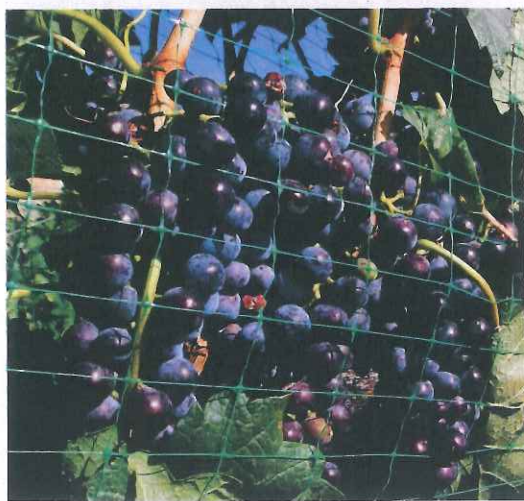


Traveling west on Interstate 70 through Colorado is an experience that celebrates diversity. The Eastern Plains reflect the Midwest, with endless views of wheat, corn, and cattle. Then there's Denver, a lively, modern city that serves as the gateway to the Rocky Mountains, whose vertical peaks form one of America's premier recreation areas. When the peaks recede, the highway traces alongside the Colorado River, until you burst from a slot canyon and enter Mesa County, filled to the brim with wine grapes and peaches, and produce and hay, a bounty made possible because of a perfect micro-climate and one of the nation's oldest irrigation districts. ◇

► **Top:** The view from High Country Orchards, at the west end of the valley near Palisade. ► **Left:** A worker at Okagawa Farms sorts tomatoes. During peak season they pick 1,000 boxes each day.

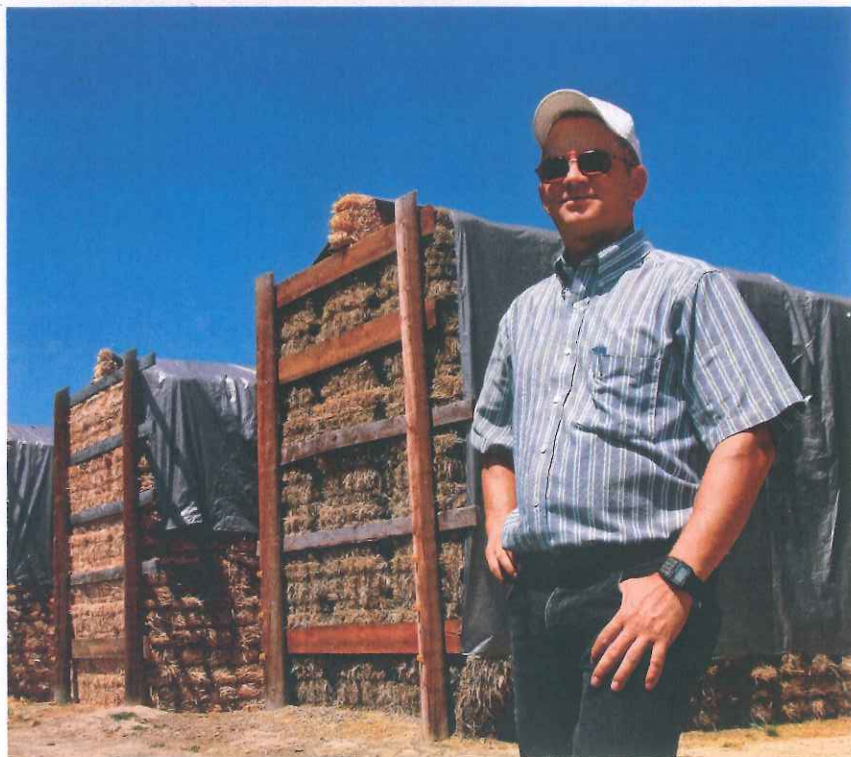
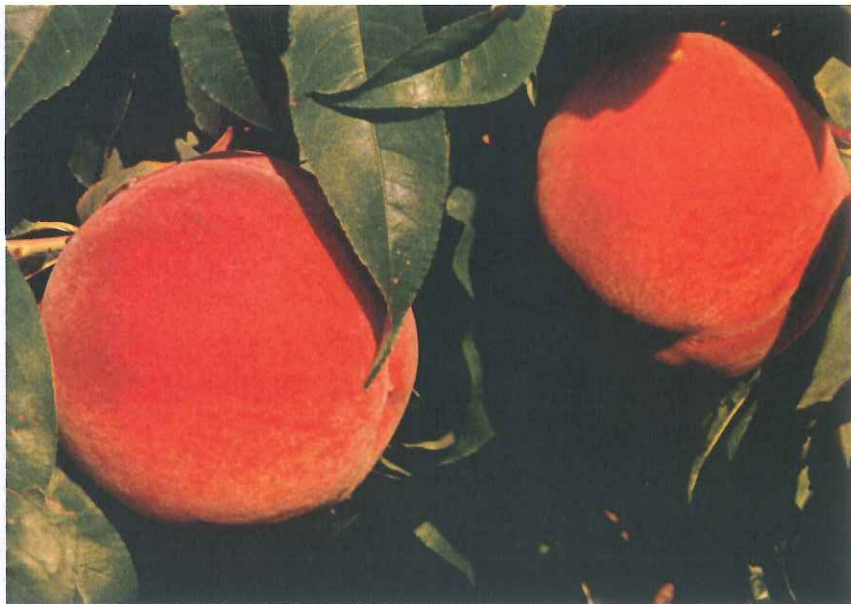
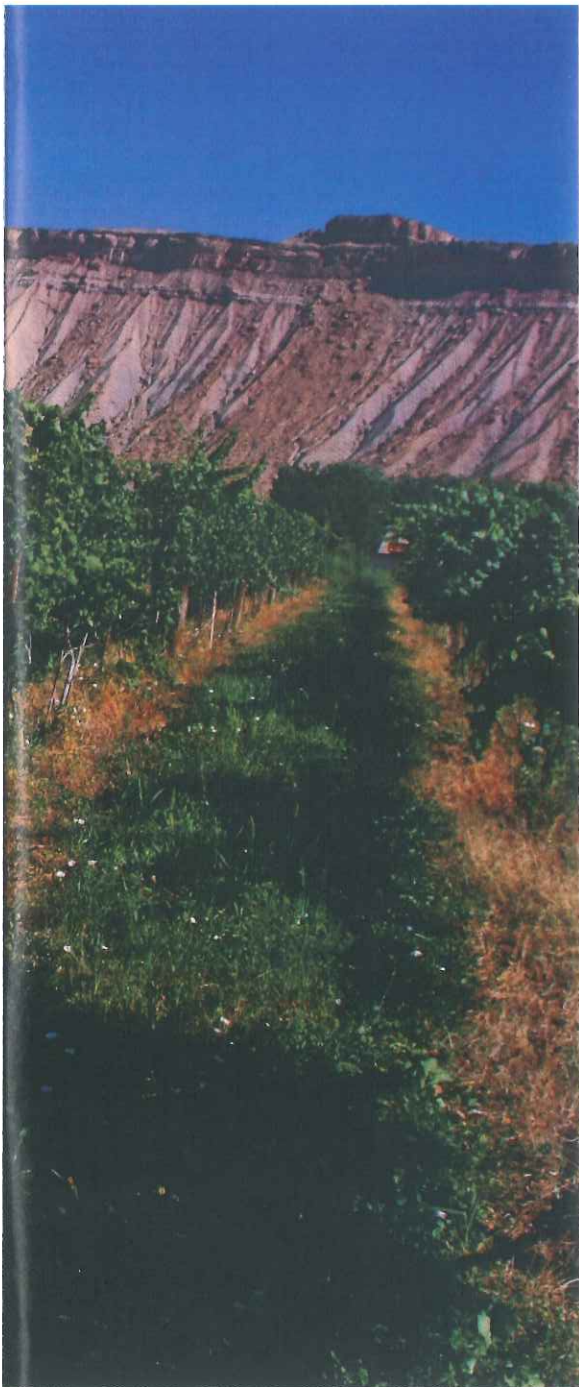


► **Above:** Jenne Baldwin-Eaton, the winemaker at Plum Creek Winery, shows off one of her award-winning wines. ► **Right:** Zinfandel and Sangiovese varieties are planted in the warmest locations.



"Pioneers began settling here in the 1880s, and it didn't take long to start irrigating," says Richard Proctor, general manager of the Grand Valley Water Users' Association. "The first water diversion structures were wooden. Posts were set in the river, and timbers were stacked horizontally, one on top of the other. They would remove the timbers during spring runoff and let the river flow through, then replace them during the growing season. It was a very simple, very effective system."

Rapid growth. Because of the fertile soil and sheer size of the valley, Congress authorized construction of an irrigation project, and work started in 1912. The finished project consisted of the 55-mile long High Line Canal



and 150 miles of laterals. The project provides water for 23,340 acres of farmland, and also diverts water for three other irrigation districts and a hydroelectric plant. With only 8 inches of annual precipitation, the valley would be desolate without the Colorado River's water.

With it, the valley became a cornucopia of agricultural production.

"We can grow just about anything here," says Extension agent Bob Hammon, "but what separates us from the pack is quality. Because of the altitude we have very warm days with cool nights. That leads to high sugar contents in our fruit and sweet corn. It's also very dry, so hay doesn't get rained on, and peaches don't need

fungicides. The climate is also why people love living here. Winters are sunny and warm, and you can hike in every direction, ski on the Grand Mesa, and raft the Colorado River. Our valley is quite scenic, and it's not crowded."

New crops. The first peach trees were planted in 1882, but in the last few years, the wine industry has boomed. There are now 21 wineries located in the Grand Valley.

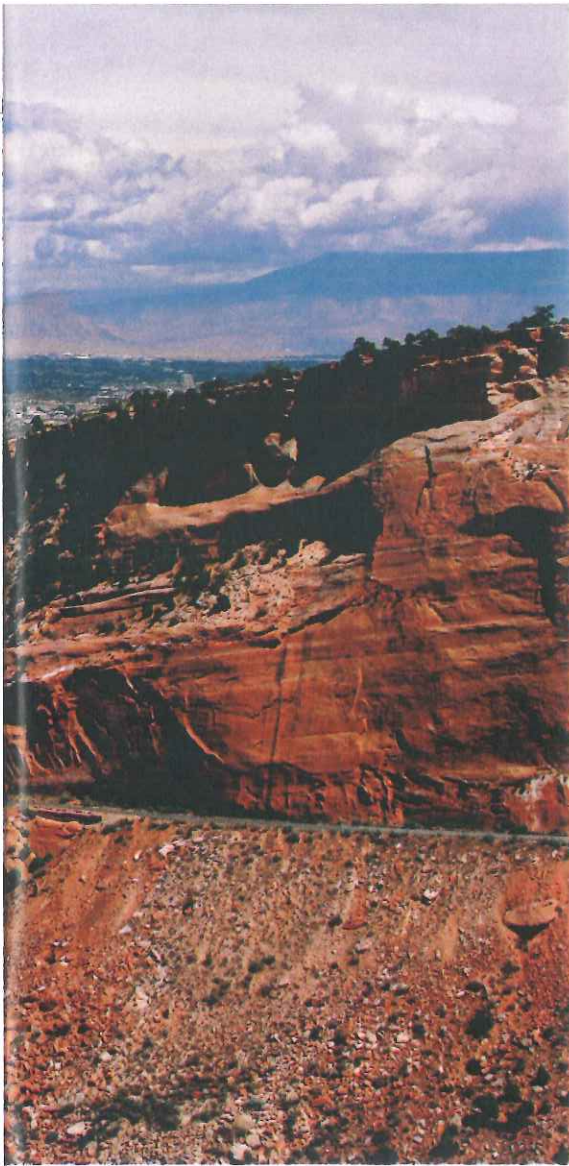
"Palisade is the center of our wine industry," says Jenne Baldwin-Eaton, wine maker at Plum Creek Winery, "and we are a designated American Viticultural Area. It's a unique place because we get a lot of air flow down the river, and we get a lot of solar radiation from the Bookcliff Mountains. If you go even 5 miles

►**Top:** At High Country Orchards, Scott High limits the number of fruit each tree produces. ►**Above:** Lynn Eby tarps his outdoor stacks, but keeps 20,000 of his best bales indoors.



►Above: Without the Colorado River, the valley would be desert. ►Right: Leta Nieslanik keeps the books and runs the retail store at Okagawa Farms.





from Palisade, it's colder. That really limits the area that is ideal for growing grapes."

However, even in the best areas, wine makers face challenges. Warm days can at times be hot, and cool nights can at times be cold.

"We have to be creative," Baldwin-Eaton says. "We focus on trellising, clone selection, and putting vines like Zinfandel and Sangiovese in the warmest places. Even so, you have to accept the fact that nature rules. Last fall, for example, we had some vines hit with 28 degrees for three days, so we had to harvest the grapes early. They came in with pretty good sugar but very acidic. So you blend and use every other tool that's available."

Good weather. According to Bob Hammon, hay is the valley's biggest crop, with production averaging around 100,000 tons.

Lynn Eby, who moved from Wisconsin to Loma, Colo., produces alfalfa, grass hay, and mixed hay that's a blend of orchardgrass and alfalfa. He says the valley is simply an excellent place to produce quality hay.



► **Above:** Top chefs give cooking demonstrations at the annual Peach Festival in Palisade, Colo.

"First," he says, "we have an abundant supply of water, so we never have to worry about a crop shortage. Second, we get just the right amount of heat. And third, because we are so dry, we just don't often get rain at the wrong time. Sunshine and low humidity combine to produce a top-quality hay crop."

Eby says he has steady, healthy hay markets that range from horse farms in Florida to dairies in California. He produces 6 to 8 tons per acre of alfalfa, with first cutting about May 20 and the final cutting near Sept. 20. For storage, he covers his outdoor stacks, and puts 20,000 of his best bales indoors in a storage barn.

"The move from Wisconsin was a good one," he says. "Compared to the Midwest we really have it easy. I mean they have to put up with hail and tornados and floods and still produce forage. We don't have any of that here. I really enjoy the climate and the community."

To get a feel for the diversity this valley offers, look no farther than Okagawa Farms. The main crops are sweet corn, tomatoes, and chile peppers, but Frank Nieslanik also grows green peppers, potatoes, onions, cucumbers, squash, egg plant, green beans, pumpkins, melons, and tomatillos. Four hundred acres of vegetables.

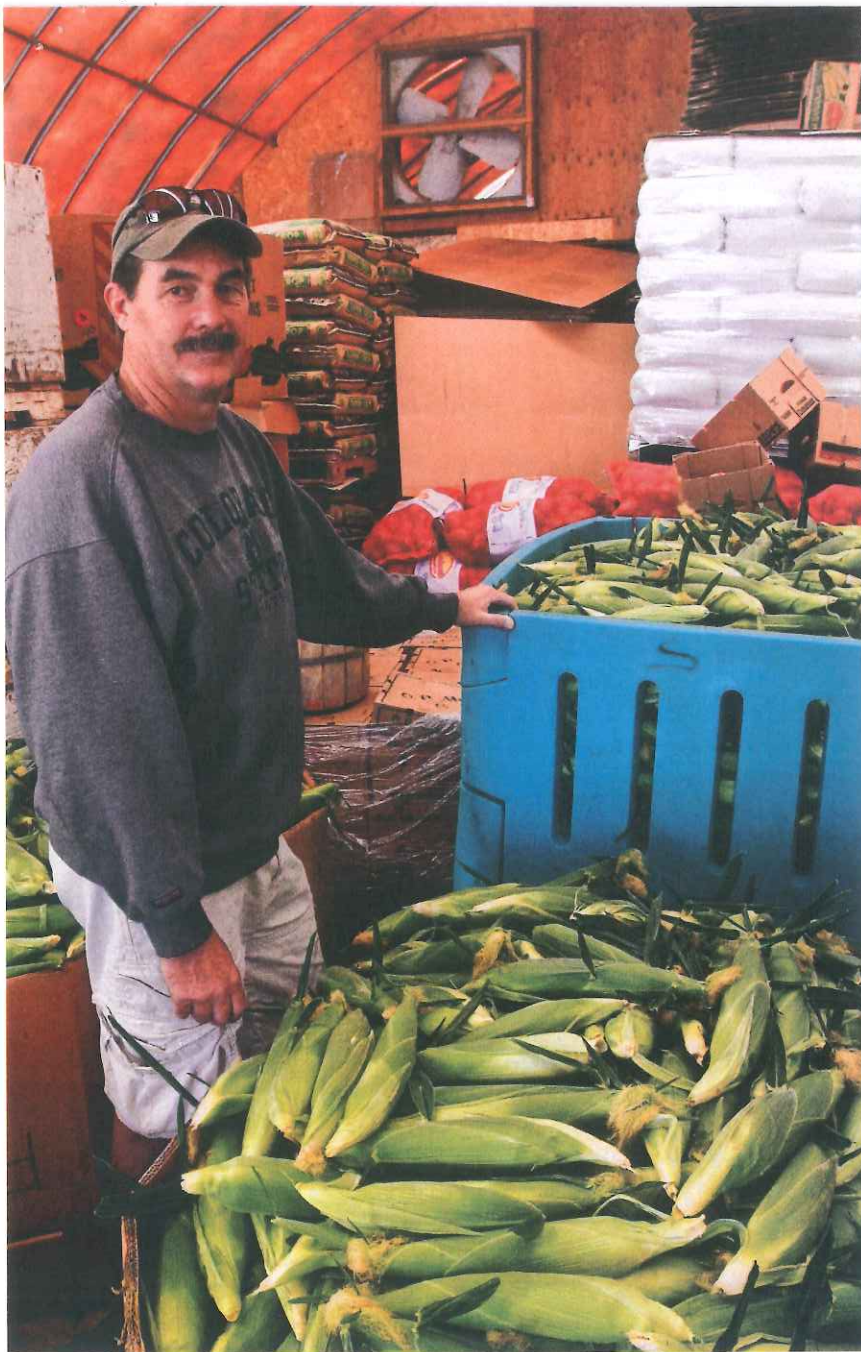
"Anyone who knows vegetables, knows what 400 acres means," he says. "During peak season we pick 1,000 boxes of tomatoes a day. With sweet corn, we plant 5 acres every five days so we can pick it from July 4 to Oct. 15. We plant tomatoes and peppers four different times. Believe me, there are times I feel like a big old rock is rolling downhill chasing me."

Frank's wife, Leta, knows the feeling. While Frank is in the fields, she's keeping the farm's books and running the retail operation.

"I started with three employees," she says, "and now I have eight. During April and May we sell bedding plants from the greenhouse,

"We were told everyone, including the President, was enjoying our peaches with ice cream."

—Scott High



►**Above:** The High Line Canal carries water that irrigates 23,340 acres of farmland. ►**Left:** Frank Nieslanic grows 400 acres of vegetables. Sweet corn is a specialty. ►**Lower left:** Scott High grows peaches that are so delicious they defy description. Many unique and time-consuming production techniques produce that quality.

all started from seeds. Then things really get going Memorial Day when I open the retail store. We are known for bulk sales, and people come all the way from Salt Lake City to buy by the bushel for canning. On peak days I'll sell 200 boxes of tomatoes and roast 100 bushels of chile peppers. One day, I had a single order for 80 bushels of roasted chile peppers. We fired up four roasters at 5 a.m. and ended up doing 175 bushels in a single day."

Last year Leta experimented with "day-old" baskets priced at just 60 cents per pound, and they were a solid hit for the retail store.

"Our customers responded to that," she says. "You really save some money. For just \$12 you can carry out four sacks of groceries."

High Country Orchards is another of the valley's class acts. If you don't believe it, just ask the first lady, Michelle Obama. When the President spoke in Grand Junction, Michelle and the girls were picking peaches at Scott and Theresa High's orchard. The view is stunning, but the peaches are the stars of the show.

"Everything we do is focused on producing the finest peaches in the world," Scott says. "That starts with the climate. Warm days, cool nights, dry air. There's continuous air movement up and down the valley, which peach growers called 'the million dollar breeze' 100 years ago. We aggressively prune, we thin blossoms, we pick only in the morning, and we chill the peaches before packing. And it works. A couple hours after Michelle left, we got a call from Air Force One, and we were told everyone, including the President, was enjoying our peaches with ice cream." ■

