

Cherry Industry Couple of the Year have both spent a lifetime in agriculture

BY LINDSAY VANHULLE

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Alton Wendzel grew up on a cherry farm, back when fruit growers still hand-picked the cherries from the trees.

Since purchasing the 150-acre farm from his father after he graduated from high school, Wendzel, now retired, has turned the farm into a 1,200-acre corporation and has watched the cherry industry become more mechanized.

"I guess you'd almost call it a love affair," he said. "I just liked the challenges and the excitement of the food industry. If you're not afraid of work, it's really an exciting industry to be in."

Wendzel and his wife, Millie, of Watervliet, have been named the 2005 Cherry Industry Couple of the Year. The couple will be honored at the Cherry Industry Program, held at 1:30 p.m. July 5 at the Northwest Michigan



Millie and Alton Wendzel are 2005's Cherry Industry Couple of the Year.

Horticultural Research Station.

The Cherry Industry People are chosen by a committee and either can be an individual or a couple, said Judy LaCross, director of cherry promotion for the National Cherry Festival.

The majority of the nominations

come from the Michigan Cherry Committee, a group that works with farmers from the entire state, LaCross said.

"They have their finger on the pulse of the industry and they know who needs to be recognized," she said.

The Wendzels were chosen because of their years of service, LaCross said.

"I never perceived myself to be a cherry man, or my wife and me to be the cherry couple of the year, even though we've been involved in the cherry industry all our lives," Alton Wendzel said. "It's a little bit shocking, to be honest about it."

In addition to cherries, strawberries, peaches, apples and asparagus also were grown on the family farm, he said.

Besides the farm, Alton Wendzel served as president of Coloma Canning Co. before forming a

spinoff company, Coloma Frozen Foods, in 1978.

He also served as president of the Michigan State Horticultural Society, on the Watervliet school board, as director of numerous banks and as a marketer of tart cherry juice concentrate.

"There were people that were marketing cherry juice concentrate on a farm market-type of operation," Alton Wendzel said. "We were amongst the first to go out and attempt to ... market in a broader market than just out of our back door. Today we market in about seven states."

Millie Wendzel has served as president of the Michigan State Horticultural Society Auxillary and on committees for different state festivals.

First involved in the cherry business when she got married, Millie Wendzel grew up on a small farm in the country.

Her love of the cherry industry comes from the hard work that goes into it, she said.

"The fast pace — it's kind of like 24/7 during the season," Millie Wendzel said. "It isn't any more because we've retired, but that's what it used to be."

The Wendzels' farm primarily grew tart cherries, but they did grow small numbers of sweet cherries, she said.

"I love to cook with cherries," Millie Wendzel said. "I think they're a very versatile fruit. Lots of things to use them for."

The Wendzels will attend this year's Cherry Festival, Alton Wendzel said, adding that he is surprised he and his wife were named the Cherry Industry Couple.

"I just liked what I was doing," he said. "I can honestly say I never regretted a day of getting up and going to work in the morning."

Cherry Connection shows new products, processes and more

BY LINDSAY VANHULLE

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The cherry industry, like many others, is rapidly changing.

There are new products on the market, new processes and technologies being developed and new methods of marketing and promotion.

The National Cherry Festival Cherry Connection, in conjunction with the Northwest Michigan Horticultural Research Station in Traverse City, aims to, as its name suggests, connect the festival with the industry through a variety of activities and tours.

The event will run from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. Monday, July 4 through Friday, July 8 at the research station.

"There was a desire to have an event that featured the cherry, that provided a venue for folks to learn about cherries, to taste cherries," said Jennifer Berkey, director of the Cherry Connection. "It is the Cherry Festival, so let's bring the cherries into the festival."

The event, which began more than 10 years ago, features differ-

ent activities and products to taste each year, something Berkey said she aims to achieve.

"Every year, we always try to feature a new food item that is a great use of our local cherries," she said. "We have some of our old favorite food items to taste, but we always try to bring some of the cutting-edge food."

It started off on a more basic level, with salsas and preserves, before escalating into cherry bread, cherry honey and even cherry body products, Berkey said.

"People are always wanting to know different ways to integrate cherries into their eating habits, because they are healthy and they are good for our bodies, and that's important to me," she said. "People get bored doing the same thing every day."

Revisions to current exhibits and the introduction of new ones will be part of the event this year, Berkey said.

"We're just enhancing what we typically do," she said.

A new groundwater exhibit will be inside the research station, where the event begins, Berkey

said. People can learn about safe groundwater practices by putting on a golf green.

Also new this year will be additional children's activities, she said.

Highlights of the event already include a 4-H petting zoo, a children's coloring contest and orchard tours with MSU Extension horticulturalists that teach about the cherry industry, Berkey said.

"Those are definitely the feature of our display," she said. "Our goal is to get people to eat more cherries, and to educate families in the region about cherries."

The tours teach about why the industry in northern Michigan has been so successful, said Jim Nugent, coordinator of the Northwest Michigan Horticultural Research Station.

Tour guides also discuss some of the research the station has done, Nugent said.

"Our work is really aimed at trying to answer questions that need to be answered to keep the industry competitive," he said. "It's an interesting story, so we really tie the science of the production with

the economics."

Education about the industry — even among non-growers — helps others learn about how healthy cherries can be, said Judy LaCross, director of cherry promotion for the Cherry Festival.

"Any time you educate people, they do a better job of using your product and spreading the word about the health benefits," LaCross said. "That's why we, along with Michigan Cherry Committee and Cherry Marketing Institute, want to educate people. The more you educate people, the more they realize why they should eat cherries and why they should support the agriculture in this area."

Word of mouth about the cherry industry would bring more people to the area, she added.

"The agriculture industry is a big reason why northern Michigan is a

tourist area," LaCross said. "We think that it contributes to the whole economy of the area."

