

Not your average berry

A rural family grows the prairie berry with a rich history.

by Andrea Danelak photography by LVB Photography

You've likely seen clusters of them dotting riverbanks or forests, their dark purple colour standing out among the sea of greens.

Indigenous to the Canadian Prairies, saskatoons have played an important role in our country's history. Aboriginals and early pioneers ate the berries fresh and as a staple in pemmican, a concentrated mixture of dried meat, fat and fruit. While most saskatoons are still consumed domestically in Canada, a family in Petersfield, Manitoba has helped the fruit (which is actually a member of the apple family) go international.

After researching and looking into different fruits, Kim Ritz and her late husband, John, planted a five-acre saskatoon orchard in 1991. Eight years later, they founded Prairie Lane Saskatoons, converting their U-pick berry farm into a processing venture and investing in several aspects of the infant industry in order to bring it to a commercial state. As a result, Prairie Lane became the first exporter of saskatoon products to regions like the United Kingdom.

"There were more opportunities available further abroad," says Kim, who now runs the company along with daughter Cheryl and son John Jr. "We ship our products to a broker who exports them for us."

Though the versatile berries are considered a delicacy across the pond, they are also gaining popularity here in Manitoba, with many people revisiting the fruit they used to find in the wild or enjoy during their childhood. "People are starting to realize that saskatoons are still here and people are still producing them," says Cheryl.

Saskatoon season officially starts in mid-July, but that can vary given the unpredictable nature of Manitoban weather. "When we have proper weather conditions, moisture and heat, they usually come around the middle of July and can last for two or three weeks," says Cheryl. Every season, thousands of pounds of saskatoons are cultivated, with each of the five acres yielding an average of between 1,000 and 1,500 pounds of berries. "When you start an orchard, it takes about five years before they are in full production," reveals Kim.

The Ritzes first shied away from the U-pick component of their farm when they realized the majority of their clientele wanted pre-picked berries. And

with help from provincial and federal grants, as well as the expertise of the University of Manitoba, Prairie Lane also installed a specially designed blast freezer so the berries can be frozen nearly immediately after picking and offered throughout the year. "We sell fresh berries in five-pound pails or frozen ones in 30-pound boxes or five-pound bags," says Kim, who sits on the board of the Prairie Fruit Growers Association. "The frozen ones taste just like popsicles!"

When the Ritzes incorporated their company in 1999, they also decided to expand their repertoire. With the assistance of the province's Food Development Centre in Portage la Prairie, they began testing and developing saskatoon topping and syrup products. "We went to them with a recipe and they helped us further develop it into larger quantities," says Kim. "Now, we rent space and do our processing there."

The current Prairie Lane line-up includes the aforementioned fruit topping, which, according to Kim, is a great complement to meats and wild game; saskatoon honey created by the John Russell Honey Company; saskatoon pies and tarts; and, of course, the berries themselves. A number of specialty stores like Cornelia Bean and Chocolatier Constance Popp carry the products, and fans can also find them at the Selkirk Farmers Market or FortWhyte Alive, which sells the products and also uses the topping in its restaurant.

And customers are not just raving about the berries' sweet taste. Often referred to as a nutritional powerhouse, the saskatoon is known for its high number of antioxidants and nutrients, including iron, manganese and vitamin C. "They have really, really high antioxidants compared to other natural fruits grown in Manitoba," explains Cheryl, adding that interest in the berries has climbed as the public becomes increasingly health-conscious.

The family has already seen a steady stream of repeat customers seeking more of the berries, and demand is showing no signs of waning. "A lot of people are coming back year after year and introducing the saskatoon to their kids. They know it's healthy and they know it's good to serve to their children," says Cheryl. "It's not just your average berry."

For more information about Prairie Lane Saskatoons, visit www.prairielinesaskatoons.com. ☒

