



You'll find juicy blueberries just like these at Rush River Produce, a pick-your-own berry farm near Maiden Rock, Wis.

RUSH TO RUSH RIVER PRODUCE

JUICY BLUEBERRIES, SCENIC ROAD TRIP AWAIT YOU

By Becky Poss

You'll probably visit Rush River Produce for the blueberries. Come July and August, you'll find nine acres of bushes dripping with velvety blue orbs of juiciness at this pick-your-own berry farm near Maiden Rock, Wis.

But one of the many gifts you will discover along the way is the scenic drive along Wisconsin's Great River Road. Plus, the farm's spectacular vistas from the bluff overlooking Lake Pepin and the Rush River Valley rival any view you would find in the south of France or Napa Valley.

Many of the blueberries you'll gather will go into pies, cob-

blers, muffins and jams. Other berries, as they are picked, still warm from the sun, will be shoveled into eager mouths—or, as my kids call them, ironically enough, “pie holes.”

Rush River owners John and Terry Cuddy have nine acres of blueberry bushes. After 25 years of cultivating this piece of paradise into one of the largest berry farms in the region, the Cuddys still work year round to prepare for the thousands of visitors they welcome to their 100-year-old farmstead every summer.

The setting is truly idyllic. Children run about the hillsides with giddy abandon, their faces streaked with blue smiles. “It’s Middle-earth at its finest,” Terry says.

Photos courtesy Rush River Produce

STARTING THE FARM

When the Cuddys decided to move from California back home to the area 25 years ago, they were drawn to the bluffs, Terry remembered. “It reminded us of the landscape we had known and loved in the California bay area. We lived in [pick-your-own] heaven... we were always enjoying fresh picked peaches and berries, and realized we thought it would be fun to have a farm.” Fast forward those 25 years and thousands of hours of labor and love, and they still emphasize the word “fun.”

Early plans to grow ginseng stalled. Meanwhile, the couple realized that their scenic farmland was sloping and sending soil down their banks and into the Rush River. Their quest to find a way to hold the soil on the hillside led them to try blueberry bushes. They also had early help from the University of Minnesota, which had developed three hardy varieties of blueberries.

Berry farming involves cultivation and mulch. This discourages weeds and pests, and creates organic material to hold moisture. Plowing is not part of the farming process, so the hillsides have been saved by the roots of 10,000 blueberry bushes.

Additionally, berry farming involves a variety of other elements. For example, bees need to pollinate all of those bushes in the spring—bee hives from Maiden Rock Honey Hills Aviary help the farm’s resident bee population. Plus, the Cuddys put in hundreds of hours in the snow during the winter pruning and cutting back bushes.

The Cuddys put in their first acre in 1987, another one a year later. Within several years, along with some admitted failures, drought, trial and error, and a lot of hard work, they nurtured a thriving farm encompassing 14 varieties of high

bush and half highs. The number of varieties, many developed and grown in Michigan, help ensure a good crop every year. If one doesn’t do well, another one will. “It’s what we call our blueberry portfolio,” Terry says. “We’ve learned a lot, and one thing is that we have more money now to invest in better plants. It’s worth it.”

BEING PATIENT

If you are dreaming about getting away from the rat race and buying a tractor and a blueberry farm, consider the Cuddys’ first 10 years at Rush River. They were still working day jobs in the Big City. “We were distracted... farming on the weekends... things took a little longer than we had planned,” Terry recalls. Meanwhile they were raising their two sons (both now in college) to help on the hillsides and waiting patiently—oh, when will the berries come?—for years before the bushes came to maturity and were ready to pick.

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Terry Cuddy

“1991 was our first year to sell actual fruit to the public,” Terry remembers. But it took years of patient pruning, fertilizing and mulching to encourage their bushes to produce at the level they do today. “We learned something along the way,” she muses. It takes at least 10 years to get a mature plant to produce at capacity, and then if you take good care of it, a bush can produce for 50 years.

A SENSORY DELIGHT

No matter how many times you visit the Cuddys and Rush River in the summertime—and once you go, you will go often—your senses are overwhelmed. The views in all directions are stunning. The gardens bloom with wildflowers and buzz with bees. You can smell freshly cut grass used for mulch, and feel the cooling breeze blowing off the lake. Steam rises off the bushes in anticipation of another hot summer day. And don’t forget Terry’s hardy and heartfelt greeting: “Good morning, thanks for coming. Let me get you a basket.”

Cell phone in one hand and a smile perpetually on her grateful face (thankful for the fulfillment of hard physical work, and grateful for her good fortune to make a living on a hill overlooking paradise) Terry fields up to 100 calls from berry pickers daily, asking about what is ripe, and when they should come.

“We love people to call,” she says. “We want them to come when the berries are ready, and we don’t want them to be disappointed.”



How about using these beauties for a batch of scones? See recipe on facing page.

The farm is open in season Thursdays through Sundays, from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. Plan ahead and call first. Some customers want only certain varieties and wait until their favorite berries are ready to pick. Once you go, you, too, will become a connoisseur of the surprising differences in the berries. I love the smaller tart ones. My kids prefer the jumbo-sized sweet ones, which they find particularly fun to toss in the air before catching in their mouths.

IF YOU GO

Terry says people often want to know if they can bring grandma and/or a picnic. Yes, bring both. Terry will also tell folks to wear long pants and a hat with a brim and sun screen. She says kids are some of her best berry pickers.

Plan to spend extra time gawking at the view, and take the short hike to the edge of the world for one of the prettiest views of the Mississippi River you'll ever hope to find.

A trip to Rush River is family friendly, a great ladies road trip, an ideal first date, or a romantic getaway for busy couples looking for a short break from it all. Few things are as calming as the soft "plonk" of the berries as they fall off the branches and into your bucket.

"Eat as much as you like," Terry encourages all her guests. "Take home a recipe, try the honey made by our local bees." Some other seasonal produce and maple syrup are usually available as well as gooseberries and currents.

Rush River is located just a little over an hour from the Twin Cities. Follow Highway 35 down through Prescott, Wis. and hop onto the Great River Road. Be sure to bring your camera and plan to spend the day if you can.

Visit RushRiverProduce.com or call 715-594-3648.

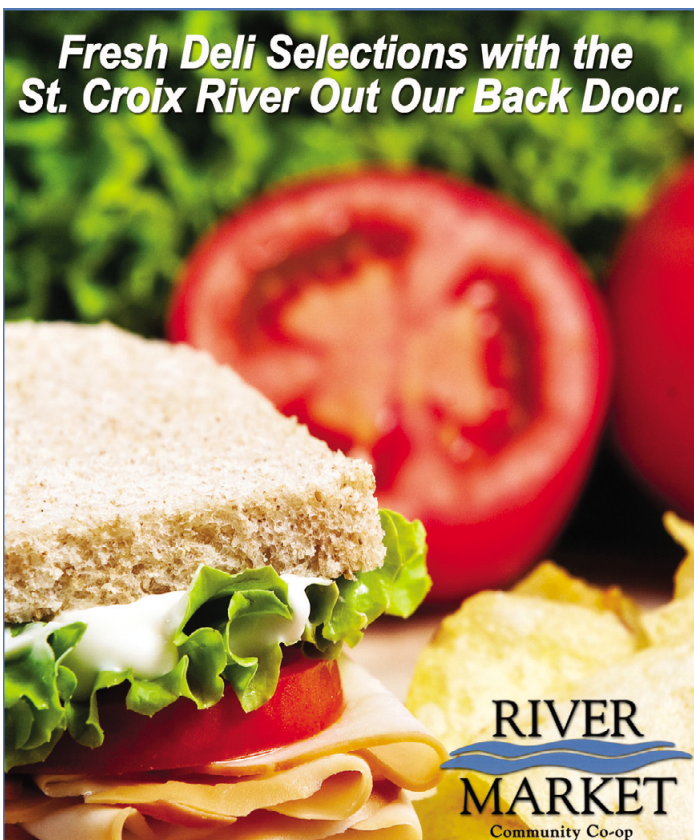
SUNDAY MORNING SCONES

2 C flour (half whole wheat)
 3 Tbs sugar
 1 tsp cinnamon
 1 tsp each salt & baking soda
 2 tsp cream of tartar
 3 Tbs butter, cut into above
 1 egg, slightly beaten
 1/2 C buttermilk, or milk with 1 Tbs vinegar added
 or try yogurt instead
 1 C blueberries, fresh or frozen, or raspberries
 or currants

Mix dry with wet, a few strokes, add a few drops of milk to moisten all flour. Fold in blueberries. Drop by spoonfuls onto greased cookie sheet. Sprinkle tops with cinnamon & sugar if desired. Bake at 400 F about 25 min.

Source: Rush River Produce

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