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**FOR ALL
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JUST PEACHY!

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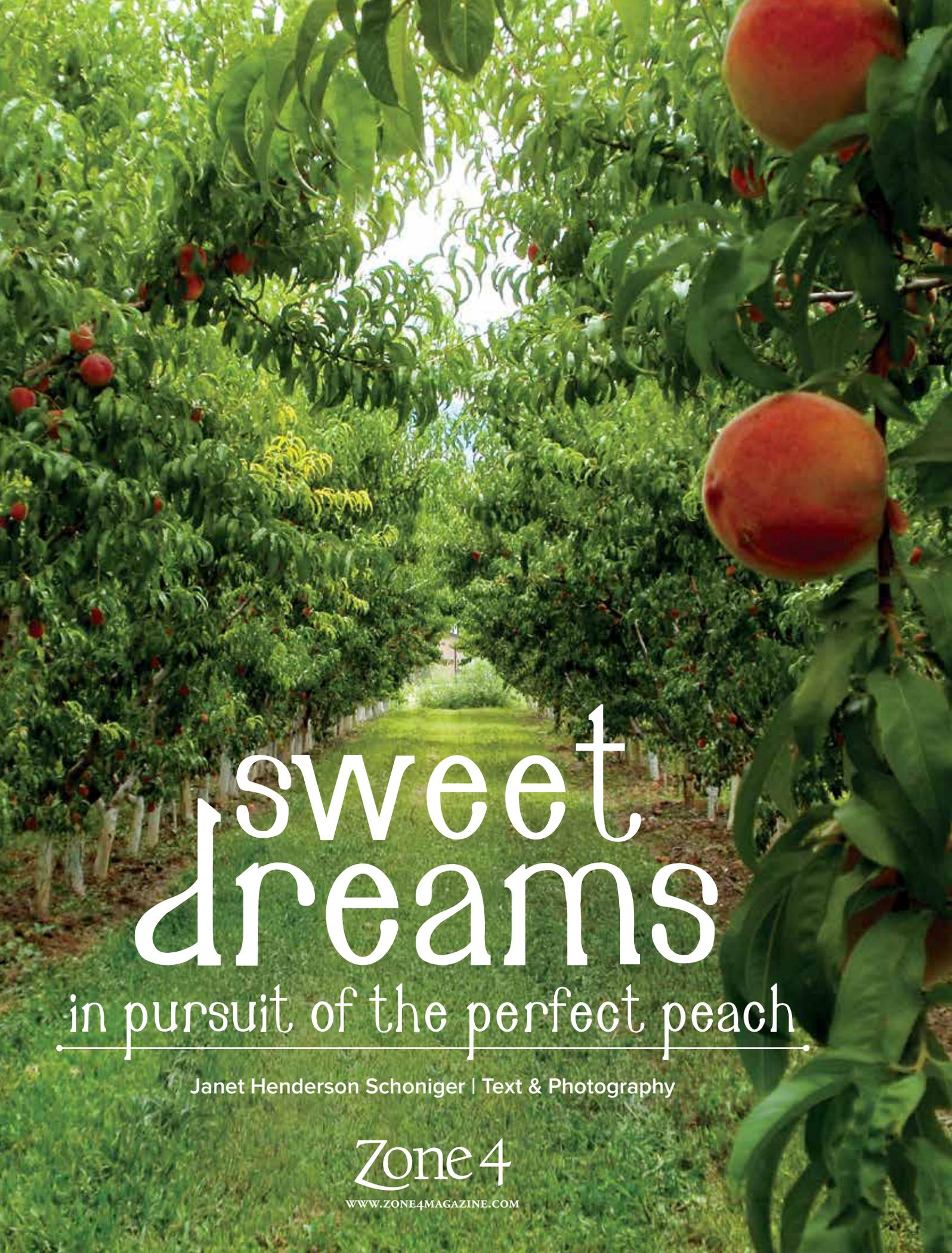
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sweet dreams

in pursuit of the perfect peach

Janet Henderson Schoniger | Text & Photography

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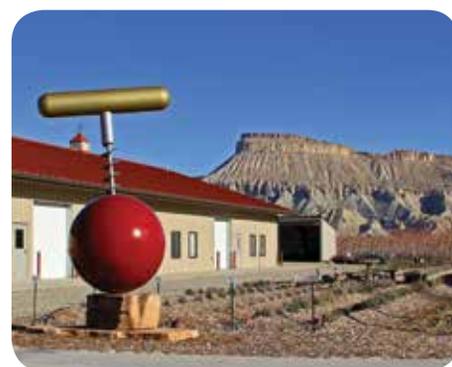
Theresa High knows one thing for sure. The peaches harvested from her Palisade, Colorado orchards are the sweetest in the valley. And that's not by chance. But how she got started growing peaches, well that's another story.

"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 22 million pounds of peaches annually, with about 90% grown 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 the 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 things they do to maximize the growing



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.



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 their peak; the time was right to replant the

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

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. In fact, 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.

Always with an eye to the future,



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.

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 Colterris 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." ✓