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GOATS AT MILNER VALLEY CHEESE (ABOVE), APPLE CIDER DOUGHNUTS AT E.Z. ORCHARDS (BELOW), FARM STAND PEARS (BOTTOM) AND APPLE TREES AT KIYOKAWA FAMILY ORCHARDS NORTHEAST OF MOUNT HOOD (LEFT)



BUMPER CROPS

Fall harvest drives offer delightful surprises

BY LESLIE FORSBERG

► Fall is time to slow down, look around and enjoy. Once kids return to school, roads become meditative ribbons of beauty as you take in changing colors and embark on mini-adventures. Crisp mornings and the hazy autumn sun add to the joys of discovering farm-fresh apples, pears, pumpkins, pies — even pizzas — at roadside stands and country markets. Taste your way through the day and load the car with ripe fruit to bring home, or bring the kids on a weekend trip that promises bushels of fun.

The Northwest yields a bounty of sights and flavors. Green Bluff Growers near Spokane offers three dozen family farms to visit. The Hood River Fruit Loop features farm stands backed by majestic Mount Hood. The Circle Farm Tour in British Columbia's Fraser Valley yields fresh-made cheese and other surprises among its harvest offerings. And the Marion Farm Loop near Salem, Oregon, boasts wineries as well as winsome produce stands.

Add in a bumper crop of harvest festivals and standout destination farms, and it's clear that fall in the Northwest is for foodies and families who love road trips. →

Where Apples are King

► In the foothills of Mount Spokane, Green Bluff's Apple Festival in September and October is a community-wide affair with live music, kids' activities, craft booths, crop mazes and more beyond each farm gate.

Walters' Fruit Ranch is among Green Bluff's best-loved farms, in part for its adorable, miniature Icelandic sheep.

"My wife picked up a few sheep at the fair, and now we have 20," Jason Morrell says as he swings down from the tractor while tending his spread, which he calls the home of the bend-over peach. "When you take a bite you have to bend over, because it's so juicy."

U-pick peaches are still available through mid-September, with apples — Honeycrisp, McIntosh, Empire and others — following close behind. Walters' housemade take-and-bake pies (peach-huckleberry, apricot and caramel-apple, to name a few) are a great way to extend the experience.

Siemers Farm, which makes tangy-sweet apple cider and offers local honey and jams in addition to farm-grown produce, ups the ante on festival weekends with inflatable playhouses, arts and craft vendors and live music.

Fuel your Apple Festival fun at the Green Bluff Grange all-you-can-eat Sunday pancake breakfasts (8-11 a.m. September 29 and October 6, 13 and 20) and top it all off with apple dumplings at the Green Bluff United Methodist Church.

APPLE PICKING AT GREEN BLUFF'S HIDDEN ACRES



5 Fall Farm Festivities

Fall is harvest festival time throughout the Northwest. Here are our top picks for the whole family:

1 North of Victoria, British Columbia, the Salt Spring Island Apple Festival celebrates its 20th anniversary on September 29. The island is famous for its apple orchards, with more than 450 varieties.

2 South of Portland, Oregon, Bauman's Harvest Festival at Bauman's Farm & Garden features farm animals to pet, apple slingshots, an apple cannon, mazes, obstacle courses and rides September 28 through October 31.

3 On Hood Canal, Hunter Farms' PumpkinFest and Catapult Competition on October 26 features pumpkin-launching catapults and trebuchets handcrafted by local high school students.

4 North of Spokane, the Harvest Festival at Beck's Harvest House (weekends, September 21 through October) offers a 5-acre corn maze, fresh-picked pumpkins, pumpkin doughnuts and live music.

5 Between Lynden and Bellingham, Bellewood Farms has 62 acres of apple and pear orchards, and a farm store, bakery, café and distillery. Their Harvest Festival (weekends, September 7 through October), features apple bin train tours, a corn maze and apple-cider doughnuts.

farm's annual harvest festival runs from the last weekend of September through October 31, celebrating the season with a corn maze, pumpkin patch and petting zoo, with live music, hayrides and horse rides on weekends.

Mother Nature operates on her own timetable, so when planning your farm-country drive, call ahead to make sure the fruits and veggies you're looking forward to will be available.

But no matter where you choose to aim your car, a fall road trip is a spectacular — and delicious — journey of the senses. **1**

LESLIE FORSBERG grew up on a heritage farm on the Olympic Peninsula and learned to bake pies and process fruit and jams at an early age. She has traveled hundreds of miles in search of the best fresh peaches, apples and other farm fare across the Northwest.



MILNER VALLEY CHEESE

Circles of Deliciousness

► British Columbia's Circle Farm Tour is actually five self-guided loops in the Fraser Valley (about 30 miles north of Bellingham), with each loop encompassing 10 to 20 agriculture-related venues, from farms to open-air markets to country eateries.

This verdant farmland that grows crops for the Vancouver area makes for a beautiful — and delicious — country drive with everything you might need for a picnic during a day of exploration. While you might not want the hassle of going through U.S. Customs with a box of fruit upon your return, fruits and vegetables are permissible to bring back into the U.S. if they are clean and labeled as products of Canada, so ask for receipts but be prepared to forfeit fruit that fails inspection.

You'll meet playful kids and their moms at Milner Valley Cheese, a boutique farm with about 80 dairy goats that produce the milk for styles such as Flavored Jack, which blends cumin, jalapeno and stinging nettles to give the cheese a bite. From May through October, Milner Valley Cheese's goat-milk gelato is a top draw on weekends, available in flavors such as salted caramel, vanilla, chocolate, hazelnut and lemon.

"We're a step back in time," says co-owner Marianne Smith. ... "It takes time to age cheese, so we don't always have the hard cheeses. Every week I make fresh chevre, and curds — or squeaky cheese — are popular."

At the Local Harvest Market, you'll find organically grown fruits and veggies, and also breads, pastries and crackly-topped, wood-fired pizzas. For the full experience, book a tour of the gardens and visit the market's alpacas and pigs.

Fall is big at Krause Berry Farm, which hosts an annual pumpkin weigh-in with an astonishing display of slumpy squashes, some as big as recliners. Pumpkins are also celebrated in a wide array of indulgent delights, including ice cream, pie, waffles, milkshakes and fudge.



MT. VIEW ORCHARDS' DAHLIAS (TOP) AND PACKER ORCHARDS' FRUIT PIE

Taste Sensations

► Deeper into Oregon, the Marion Farm Loop offers a scenic drive through pastoral farmland in the Salem area, with 23 gardens, farm markets, wineries and farms. This 120-mile loop from St. Paul to Jefferson offers exceptional views of lush farmland embraced by the Coast Range to the west and the Cascade Range to the east.

Minto Island Growers' organic vegetable farm is one of the only farms in the nation growing tea plants. Co-owners Chris Jenkins and Elizabeth Miller sell green, black and oolong tea near a small demonstration garden with sturdy, glossy-leaved tea plants. Their food cart (open through September) utilizes farm-fresh produce in milkshakes, wood-fired pizzas, salads and sandwiches.

Yet more flavors are in store at E.Z. Orchards Farm Market, a family-owned farm that grows pears, apples, hazelnuts and peaches used for their highly sought-after peach shortcake (available from mid-July to mid-September), apple-cider doughnuts and hard apple cider. The fourth-generation



CHRIS JENKINS AND ELIZABETH MILLER TEND TO THEIR TEA PLANTS

LEFT: KATHY PLODKA / THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW; TOP: COURTESY OF MILNER VALLEY CHEESE

TOP: ISTOCKPHOTO AND PACKER ORCHARDS; RIGHT: SHAWN LINEMAN