

Puget Sound Food Network launched

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Frank Varga

Alan Merritt, co-owner of the Merritt Apple Farm and Rosabella's Garden Bakery near Bow, introduces "Skagit Fresh," a natural sparkling juice beverage, during the launch of the Puget Sound Food Network at Rosabella's Wednesday.

BOW — It took Laura Joseph eight years to get Trilby's BBQ Sauce into 50 shops. Since she started working with the Northwest Agriculture Business Center in December, she has added 100 more outlets, and — with the reach of the center's new Web-based system — she hopes to connect with even more customers.

"It will help me go to the next step," she said, standing behind bottles of her marionberry flavored sauce. "I can start bringing on employees."

Joseph, who is currently a one-woman operation in Ferndale, was joined Wednesday by dozens of farmers, politicians and others in welcoming the launch of the Puget Sound Food Network at Rosabella's Garden Bakery in Bow.

Once developed, the Food Network will connect producers, processors, manufacturers, retailers and consumers through one Web site, said Gary Merritt, director of marketing for the Northwest Agriculture Business Center. The Web site still has to be created, but he said the project is fully funded thanks to a \$400,000 U.S. Department of Commerce grant.

The Web project will feature value-added products from an area that includes Skagit, Island, San Juan, Snohomish, Whatcom and other counties, said Merritt.

Those goods could be special cuts of meat, produce marked as Skagit Valley-grown or jam. One product sure to be featured is the soon-to-be released Skagit Fresh Natural Sparkling Juice Beverage. The juices are a joint effort of the Northwest Agriculture Business Center and three local farms: Sakuma Brothers Farms, Perkins Variety Apples and Merritt Apple Farm.

"One of the problems that local apple growers have had are foreign apples, especially in juice," said Gary Merritt.

The competition has been so tough, he said, that farmers are uprooting their orchards and giving up on apples. "It just breaks your heart to see some of these apple trees pulled out

of the ground," Merritt said.

Alan Merritt, who owns the Merritt Apple Farm and Rosabella's Garden Bakery with his wife, Rosabella Merritt, said the new juices are made with local apple juices and berry concentrate and have no added sugar. A banner and samples displayed at the event featured four flavors: Ramblin' Raspberry, Sassy Strawberry, Big Bad Blackberry and Bodacious Blueberry.

They should be available in a four-pack of 12-ounce bottles in Haggen grocery stores this September.

Joseph said her barbecue sauce is available at Haggen too, and she has already sold more this year than she did in all of 2007. But she said the eight years she spent developing her customer base shows how hard it is to get local goods into chain stores.

"Especially here in the Northwest, our farmers are not able to compete in the larger commodity market," said Tim Van Hofwegen, relationship manager for Northwest Farm Credit Services, which sponsored the event. "... The best way to preserve farmers and farming is to let them make a little bit of money."

David Bauermeister, executive director of the Northwest Agriculture Business Center, seconded that statement and said that by increasing the profitability of small farms the Food Network will help preserve farmland.

Bauermeister said the current system is too tough for small farms to get into because goods travel so far before reaching consumers and so much of the purchase price is devoted to transportation costs.

"Our food system is dangerously dependent on expensive fossil fuels," he said. "... Only about 8 cents on the consumer's dollar goes to farmers."

U.S. Rep. Rick Larsen, D-Wash., who helped secure the \$400,000 grant for the Food Network, spoke too. "It is especially important these days ... to cut down the time and cut down the travel," he said.

"Food travels quite a long way to get to our tables but it does not need to be that way here in the Northwest, because we have plenty of great farmers," he said.

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