

Wloka Fruit Farms a Creston Landmark

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From July through October, Wloka Farms fruit stand in Creston is a happening place. Up to 45 employees are on site at the peak of the season tending to beautiful produce and repeat customers from throughout the Kootenays and as far away as Alberta. The business' highly visible location on Highway 3, ample parking and large retail space make it a natural stopping place and hub of activity. So it's hard to believe it when Barb refers to this thriving business as her and Frank's retirement plan.



Barb Wloka with staff member Cindy Flamenco.

After Frank retired from Columbia Brewery in 2008, the couple realized they were passionate about the fruit stand they had previously operated for 16 years. They bought the current 9-acre property and farm 7 of acres. They built a large retail/storage/processing building and opened in 2013, and every year since has been more profitable than the one before.

The farm produces a mix of cherries, peaches, plums, apples, pears, apricots and raspberries, and a number of vegetables. "Frank loves the challenge of working with a diversity of crops, and I'm passionate about working with customers and staff," Barb says. "We have the best staff in the world. When you're supported by great people, you can't go wrong."

All new staff at Wloka Farms go through a rigorous interview process. Successful applicants must provide a formal resume, demonstrate their math skills and describe how they would handle various scenarios related to customer service. "Customer education is really important," Barb says. "People ask all sorts of questions about sprays, how to cook different produce, the best type of potato for a certain recipe. Our staff do more than just manage the till." Barb won't accept much credit for her own skills although she's clearly a manager extraordinaire and her enthusiastic presence contributes to the signature vibe.

In addition to customer service, Wloka produces outstanding products and without a loyal and supporting base of customers for these products, we wouldn't function," Frank adds.

The fruit stand has 4 separate cold storages of varying sizes that allow the farm to meet the complex storage requirements of a wide range of products. There's a cherry sorting line, an extensive root crop washing and sorting line and a drying room for potatoes. Products go from field to display stand in a very short time. In fact, 98% of what Wloka Farms sells it produces. "We joke that we do the 5 km diet," Barb says. "The 2% is purchased from other growers within that 5 km radius as much as possible."

Is there a second retirement on the horizon for the Wlokas? Barb and Frank have already starting looking at the succession planning process, including tapping into the resources of the Basin Business Advisors Agriculture Advisement program. “Although formal retirement could be several years down the road, we know these conversations need to start well in advance, Barb says.”



“We need more fruit stands in this area,” she adds. “People stop when they feel they have choices to shop and while they are in the community they spend money on other things such as meals and accommodation. That’s good for everyone and the economy overall.”