



SMALL FAMILY BUSINESS WINNER: **Fruithill, Inc.**

(From left) Lee Schrepel, Brandon Cable and Mark Schrepel look over wine grapes at the Fruithill, Inc., farm in Yamhill.

Preparing for the Excellence in Family Business Awards application process, Becky Gagnier compared her family's Fruithill, Inc., with other organizations who had participated in the past.

"We're just an ordinary family with a beat up office," Gagnier said. "Why would we get an award over somebody else?"

The answer was something the family already knew, even before receiving word they would be winners themselves.

"It's not just what there is on the outside that people see, it's how deep the roots grow," Gagnier said.

The family's roots, both literally and figuratively, are strong.

Fruithill began in 1919 with the purchase of a small family farm by the grandparents of Lee and Mark Schrepel, third-generation brothers who currently manage the company (Becky is Lee's daughter).

The business passed to Lee and Mark's parents Keith and Kathryn Schrepel in the 1940s, before the brothers took over in the 1970s.

"Mark and I became involved as soon as we were able to walk and talk and start doing errands and chores," Lee said. "I feel like we were groomed to do what we do. By the time we were teenagers we were taking friends to work and supervising those friends."

Fruithill now grows sweet and tart cherries, plums, hazelnuts and wine grapes, with a number being processed on site.

"It helped that Mark and I came into a family business and grew up in a family business that was diversified horizontally," Lee said. "We had several things we were producing as a farm, so though you might have a crop failure of plums, tart cherries and sweet cherries all in one year, you probably weren't going to lose your hazelnuts that year."

AT A GLANCE

Name of company: **Fruithill, Inc.**

Year started: **The farm in 1919; Fruithill, Inc. in 1968**

Number of Generations in the business: **3**

Number of family members in the business: **10**

Age of youngest family member in the business: **7**

Age of oldest family member in the business: **62**

Last family vacation destination: **Holden Village Church Camp, Costa Rica, Kauai, Malaysia, Thailand, Cambodia**

Favorite restaurant for family dinner: **Chart House, Harborside, Outback, Gustav's Pub, McCormick's, Thai Country, Kame**

Name and firm of most helpful family business professional: **Mark Wickman of Corrigan Wickman Associates, McMinnville**

Best business decisions: **Mechanical harvesting, developing fruit processing and freezing facilities, developing vineyards**

The fifth-generation of the family is now starting to enter the business, with Becky's three daughters—Matia, 12, Hope, 10, and Kya, 7—starting to run the same chores and errands their parents and grandparents did.

"I had my first forklift driving lesson a few weeks ago," Matia said. "It was hard but it was fun. It was frustrating because I couldn't get the bins all lined up."

Forklift driving is a special rite of passage for Fruithill family members.

"[Lee] and I or Mark, we make such a good team, it's always fun to see everybody buzzing



Hope Ellis offers frozen Fruithill cherries and plums after inspecting them in the lab.

around on the forklift because it's like a finely tuned musical orchestration," Becky said. "You know when somebody's going to go the high road or somebody is going to go the low road."

Over the past few years the business has undergone major expansion to its processing capacity, a decision that was difficult for the third-generation owners.

Lee and Mark said they've had to rethink their role as that of stewards of the business, protecting what they inherited from their parents, to building up Fruithill to support the next generation.

"Risk taking has not come easily for Mark and for me," Lee said. "We observed generation one starting something, then generation two took the ball and really ran with it. Our dad was an early adopter, he was truly an entrepreneur."

The business got a push six years ago when Brandon Cable, who married Mark's daughter Elizabeth, joined the business. Eventually Brandon started speaking to Lee and Mark about a possible expansion.

"I urged that we did take a risk so the next generation that comes after me has a chance to continue to grow," Brandon said. "I think the way the business is growing now, the multiple grandchildren will have a way to all come into the business and continue to grow."

While the future is always uncertain, it feels now that spots will exist for Matia, Hope and Kya should they choose to lead the next generation of Fruithill.

"I think Keith would be very, very proud of what our sons have done, and that's including their families," said Kathryn. "The only question now is what's next, and I know that worries them, too. But I know we'll make it."



(Back row from left) Brandon Cable, Lee Schrepel, Becky Gagnier; (middle from left) Linda Schrepel, Kathryn Schrepel, Debbie Schrepel, Mark Schrepel; (bottom from left) Kya Ellis, Matia Ellis, Hope Ellis