

A tale of the

persimmon farmers

who struck

water

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Duane Smith was seeing things again. Where others, including his wife Leslie, saw scrubby trees, sticker bushes and a dilapidated, run-down dairy operation, Duane saw rolling hills, a lovely home, and the fields of persimmon trees that he and Leslie were hankering to grow. Leslie knew better than to challenge her husband's instinct on this ("Always trust the man," she laughs), and in 1997 the couple bought the first 40 acres of what would become their spectacularly beautiful 188-acre, 4,000-tree Persimmon Valley Farm in Greene County.



Ripe persimmons bursting with juicy pulp. Some of the 4,000 persimmon saplings the Smiths planted themselves.

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That knack, or vision, or whatever it is, was at work again nearly two years later when Duane was setting posts for a pole barn and needed some water to mix the cement. Recalling that he'd seen water in a ditch nearby, he went to fetch some and found it icy and clear, flowing

across a sandy bottom. Where some of us might have just seen a cold drink on a hot day, Duane saw something else. Today

Kroger supermarkets buy 12,000 to 18,000 gallons of the pure spring water daily, filling shiny 6,000 gallon tankers that belong to the Smiths. At the same time, boutique bottles, processed in the couple's brand new plant under the spring's name, Walnut Grove, are on their way to fine restaurants across the country.

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"I don't know," he says when asked, sounding mystified. "I'm certainly not a genius or a master of anything. It's just that I can see things

sometimes. I have this visual that's like... that can happen. We can do this. There'll be some work, but we can make this beautiful."

Some work, indeed.

The Smiths grew all 4,000 persimmon trees themselves—scrubbing the seeds, potting them in Styrofoam cups, starting the tiny plants in the greenhouse, and transplanting them to fields they had cleared. They built most of the buildings on the property, too, and oversaw the details of the water testing, drilling, and pumping. They have had to become experts, not only on taming the wild persimmon, but on "total dissolved solids" in spring water, on filtration systems, and on the many arcane regulations they must abide by to satisfy the Department of Homeland Security that they are protecting consumers against bioterrorism.

It was largely uncharted territory. Leslie says they continually ran up against the fact that "there was no manual"—no *Persimmon Growing for Dummies*, no *Idiot's Guide to Drilling for Water*—so they had to invent their own. While Duane doesn't say it in so many words, it was in part the fact that not only had they never done these things before, but hardly anyone else had done them either, that captured his imagination. It was the sheer delight of



Duane, Leslie, and Moby in the Gator utility vehicle they use to move around the property.

the challenge, tracking down the information nobody seemed to have, puzzling the pieces together, selling others on his conviction that “we can do this.”

Believing in the “next big fruit”

The Smiths’ story has the well-oiled wheels of a favorite tale, often told. Duane carries the main thread of the narrative; Leslie speaks in parentheses, interjecting, clarifying, laughing with the fun of it all. The energy of this partnership is palpable. Duane holds your eyes as he talks, willing you to feel their excitement, their fascination with the projects, one mobile eyebrow like a moving punctuation mark, questioning, exclaiming, urging you to share their enjoyment. There is no doubt that the Smiths are having a ball.

And it all started with persimmons.

Duane’s grandmother had a persimmon tree in her yard when he was growing up, and she made a wicked persimmon pudding using a recipe handed down from her mother. It’s a taste Duane never stopped craving. So, why not grow a persimmon orchard and share that taste with the world? The only hitch is that, while persimmons grow wild in the American

south, and thrive especially in Indiana, they don’t take kindly to domestication. The plants don’t transplant well because of their long taproots, and the soft, glowing orange fruit are puckery tart until they are fully ripe, when they either need to be eaten right away or pulped and frozen. All in all, not an easy commercial proposition.

That didn’t stop the Smiths, who are convinced that the persimmon is the kiwi of tomorrow, “the next big fruit,” in Leslie’s words.

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The entrance to Persimmon Valley Farms.

In theory, it should work. It takes a tree six years to bear fruit, but once established, persimmon trees are remarkably maintenance free. They don’t need to be pruned or fertilized, and the fruit is so sweet that they kill any insect pest foolish enough to stop by for a snack. If you could just get around the propagation issue and figure out how to market the pulp, there’d be no stopping you.



An aerial view of the farmhouse, pond, and out buildings. (below) It will take six years for this sapling to bear fruit.

That's just the kind of challenge Duane, 54, and Leslie, 48, relish. Having analyzed the soil needs of persimmons (they like it sandy) and determined that Greene County had the right soil in abundance, they found their farm and got to work. The first step was to find an expert, a persimmon guru who could guide their steps. Calls to local nurseries yielded nothing. County Extension offices? Nothing. But one guy in Brown County sent them to a guy in Columbus who had a few trees and knew a guy in Illinois, the Johnny Appleseed of persimmons, who taught them how to propagate seeds. Four thousand trees later, the Smiths haven't looked back.

The farm today looks much like Duane imagined it in '97. He seems to like nothing better than taking a visitor on a tour, bounc-





An old windmill that the Smiths brought from Texas.

ing over the hills in a Gator utility vehicle, its distinctive green and yellow brightening a chilly fall day. One hand hangs on to the steering wheel while the other waves expansively at the tidy rows of sturdy young trees. There's the Reva field, named for his mother, and the Jesse field, named for his great grandmother. All the fields, in fact, are named for important women in Duane's life. Over there, behind their rustic home, with its wrap-around deck, stocked fishpond, and limestone countertops, is the barn whose construction helped found a spring water business. And here is an enormous structure—part garage, part workshop, part office building, part dining room for huge family reunions. Next door is a bar, and a game room, and the home of Duane's full-size replica of a 1935 Auburn Boattail Speedster. Several of the buildings have apartments for friends and family when they come out to the farm to spend a few relaxing days. All of the buildings were built, with some help, by the Smiths.

And then there's the water. Small, unprepossessing structures at the source of the stream house the machinery that pumps water at the rate of 100 gallons a minute up the hill and across the road to the newly built water

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(left) One of the six tankers owned by the Smiths that transports their Walnut Grove spring water to Kroger stores. (above) Duane's prized replica of a 1935 Auburn Boattail Speedster.



facility. The enterprise is thriving now, but while the Smiths threw themselves wholeheartedly into the persimmon-growing business, they approached the water project with more caution. “It's taken us years,” says Duane, “and we've taken our time, because we wanted to be sure that we weren't going to do something that would hurt the spring.”



The farmhouse and pond, which the Smiths built themselves. Photo by Christine Barbour

Saying “no” to big buyout offers

In fact, the spring on the Smiths’ property is one of the very few left in Indiana that hasn’t been rendered unfit for consumption by fertilizers, pesticides, and other chemical runoff. “If this crazy spring we have weren’t such a deep, long running source,” says Duane, “it’d probably be trashed by now, too.” So the Smiths have a rule at the farm: “Don’t pour it on the ground if you aren’t prepared to drink it,” and they make all business decisions with the welfare of their spring in mind. That means

refusing to over-pump a source that runs below ground at speeds faster than 1,000 gallons per minute, shutting the pump off at night, and turning down lucrative offers from companies like Nestlé that have wanted to buy them out.

“We knew that if we were to develop it, it would be done properly,” says Leslie. “We can help the community, we can help the state, we can create jobs.” This commitment to “giving back” (including a pledge to donate a generous percentage of their water profits to Farm Aid) is an important part of the Smiths’ business philosophy, which is that there are two kinds

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Duane, Leslie, and Moby with their 1948 Ford pickup. (above top) Duane's great grandmother's handwritten recipe for persimmon pudding.

of capitalism. "I don't like the way some big corporations do business," says Duane. "Don't like the way they do people." Instead, he says, they operate under "the friendly kind of capitalism, a kind of win/win."

It is perhaps their very successful lives in the world of less-friendly capitalism (where Duane is a vice president and underwriter for a title insurance company called Land America Financial Group and Leslie is an owner of LeChar, a California-based manufacturer of furniture for hotel chains) that have given the Smiths a taste for the country life, even if they can't quite manage to relax and do nothing while they are living there. Despite their high-powered day jobs and the constant travel

they keep an apartment in Bloomington, just because they love it.

The Smiths' current goal is to develop the boutique bottled water business, a business that will exist almost solely through e-commerce. They figure they can't compete with the Nestlé's and Cokes of the world, and they don't want to, so they are staying focused on what they can do well—serving white tablecloth restaurants and individuals who want to drink what Leslie calls "the best tasting water there is." They have a people-oriented production line and they'll be hiring developmentally handicapped workers to do some of the bottling tasks. "It's win/win capitalism," Duane repeats. "We help people out and they help us out." ✨

around the country, it is Bloomington that is home. Duane grew up in Fairmont, Indiana, went to school in Vincennes, and when given the choice by his company to base himself anywhere, he chose Bloomington. His three daughters from a previous marriage went to high school here and when he met Leslie, they bought a house in Hoosier Acres. Even now, with the farm in Greene County and a home in Newport Beach,



Duane Smith's Great-Grandmother Jesse's "Wild American Persimmon Pudding"

- 2 cups Wild American Persimmon pulp
- 2 cups white sugar
- 2 eggs beaten
- 1 3/4 cups flour
- 1 tsp. baking powder
- 1 tsp. baking soda
- 1 cup whole milk
- 1 cup buttermilk
- 1/4 cup melted butter

Combine the pulp along with all of the other wet ingredients into one bowl. Mix well.

Combine the flour, baking soda, and baking powder together into a separate bowl. Mix well. Now combine everything in one bowl. Pour into a 13 x 9 x 3 inch ungreased baking pan.

Bake in preheated 350 degree oven for one hour. Pull and let cool for approximately 10 mins. Serve in shallow bowls with milk or ice cream or whipping cream or all of the above.

Note: For an interesting twist to create what Duane's family calls "Sticky Corners" style, place ingredients in oven for 20 mins, pull and stir entire pan then put back into oven for 20 more mins, then stir again then back into oven for final 20 mins (total oven time is 60 mins). Let stand for about 15 mins. The pudding gets very sticky and chewy in the corners.

Also, if you are concerned about all of the sugar, substitute with Splenda. Enjoy!!