

MEET YOUR FELLOW TILTH PRODUCER

Tilth Producers speaks with member Chris Petry, farmer/owner of Oh Yeah! Farms in Leavenworth, WA. Following him from field to bakery to farmers market, this young farmer shared his passion from soil through sales. Somewhere between morning harvest and milling flour, Chris made time to converse about his farm operations, aspirations for becoming a master baker, and love of all things Tilth Producers.

Education Coordinator Angela Anegon catches up with Tilth Producer member Chris Petry of Oh Yeah! Farms in Chelan County.

TILTH PRODUCERS (Q): When and how did you start farming?

CHRIS PETRY: My first real farm job was working on my family friend's Christmas tree farm years ago in upstate New York. It was my first experience where I thought that maybe I could be a farmer. I came west and worked as a mountain guide in the Cascades, up until about 2008, when the market crashed. So I called up a friend of mine who I knew had been working on farms and thought I'd give it a shot. I worked at Nature's Last Stand for about two and a half years doing CSA deliveries, working farmer's markets, and managing the nine acres of vegetable production when [the owner] was away from the farm. I began to think I could give farming a shot on my own.

I was trying to figure out how to move to Leavenworth because I knew I wanted to be in the mountains to be able to continue mountain biking, climbing, and skiing. I was interested in interning and living on a farm so I went over to Gibbs Farm and basically worked out a deal where I lived in one of his cabins on a nearby logging property. I did that for about three years and learned so many new skills. Working for Grant was when I really started to fall in love with growing grain. I definitely wouldn't be a grain farmer if it wasn't for him and probably wouldn't be where I'm at as a vegetable farmer either.



Photo credit: Alasdair Turner Photography

Chris Petry holds eggplants harvested from his farm near Leavenworth, WA. INSET: The Oh Yeah! Farms sign welcomes visitors to his plot.

Q: What appealed to you about farming when you started?

CHRIS: I fell in love with the physical aspect of it—I like to work hard and be outside. Farming is a super stimulating thing for me—I have a thousand things to think about and try to keep in line in a given day. Another thing I love about farming is the community and the camaraderie. I enjoy seeing the joy that I put into farming reciprocated—when people compliment my work or tell me that they're proud of what I'm doing. Then when people enjoy the bread that I've made from wheat that I planted, harvested, milled and then baked—that's the greatest accomplishment of my life.

Q: Who have been your inspirations?

CHRIS: My family is a huge inspiration. Grant Gibbs is up there and probably has been the most educational—I look up to him in so many ways and he's the ultimate wizard when it comes to mechanics. He's a great wealth of knowledge for my questions, which is the key to young farming—asking the old timers questions.

Q: Farming can be a challenging profession. What has motivated you to continue farming?

CHRIS: The community support. When people say something that hits home and gives me that fuzzy feeling, I hold on to that. So for those 14 to 16 hour days. I hold on to those positive things and think of the people that rely on me for their food. And I think of the people that come to the market with their kids to have them meet the farmer and understand where their food comes from. It's a really beautiful thing.

Q: What have been your greatest challenges? How did you approach them?

CHRIS: Employment has been hard and I don't think that it will ever be easy. Right now I have great employees, but they're expensive. Then there is the challenge of what to grow and what to sell, and how to grow and how to sell—these things that you basically have to make mistakes to learn and feel a tenth closer to knowing what works. Another challenge was I not having my own tractor, up until this year. Now that I have one that works, I can work my land more efficiently. And that's the name of the game—improving efficiencies.



Photo credit: Alasdair Turner Photography

Chris Petry with onions from Oh Yeah! Farms near Leavenworth, WA.

Q: Where/who/what is your best source of information when you're in a pickle?

CHRIS: Grant Gibbs, the farmers at the Seattle farmer's markets, or any farmer that I know is the best resource! When I go to a farmer with a problem, either they've experienced it before or made that mistake before. If I can't find an answer from a farmer then I'll turn to books. I'll go to my mother and father, too, because it's not always farming advice that I need.

Q: What have been your greatest successes?

CHRIS: Being interviewed by Tilth is definitely up there. For sure the greatest accomplishment would be planting, harvesting, cleaning in a seed cleaner, and then fresh milling wheat to bake it into 100% whole grain sourdough bread. I'm not a baker but it is definitely a new passion.

Q: Do you have any nagging pest pressures on your farm? How do you manage them?

CHRIS: I don't have a lot of pest problems. And you read about how pest problems are often worse where there is unhealthy soil. Rotating fallow is a huge organic tool. If you're not fallowing, and growing vegetables in every space, every year, you're going to have problems. If I have a pest problem, I'll till the crop under and then fallow.

EXTENDED VERSION & VIDEO

For the full interview and to view a video of Farmer Chris in action, please visit tilthproducers.org/about-us/member-of-the-month

Q: How do you approach marketing? What has served you well in this realm?

CHRIS: Smile and a positive attitude. I love talking to people and sharing my excitement for food. I do a lot of education at my stand about grains and growing grain. I also keep a really clean market booth with my veggies in nice wooden boxes. I've had more than one customer come up to me and say that I have "museum quality produce." I want to put that on a banner. I also think that my farm name is welcoming, and I get compliments on it. People will walk by and scream "Oh yeah!"—so it's fun. I feel strongly that farming is a celebration, like "Where does food come from? Oh yeah! A farm!"

Q: Tell me three things on your "bucket list" (farming related or otherwise).

CHRIS: Building a commercial kitchen with a wood fired oven to be able to bake year-round. And this is not a joke, but a goal of mine is to speak at a Tilth conference. My first year working for Grant, he paid my way to the [2010] Tilth conference and it was the most inspirational thing—and I've gone every year since. A third thing would be to manufacture a small-scale combine.

Q: What is your favorite crop to grow? To eat?

CHRIS: Growing wheat is really fun. I enjoy eating the bread that I bake. I also really love growing eggplant. Fresh eggplant is so beautiful and I love eating it. The alliums really fascinate me—garlic and onions—because everyone eats them but not everyone grows them. Basically crops that grow and sell well, I like growing those.

Q: What are three pieces of advice you would give to a beginning farmer?

CHRIS: Read your books. Intern with an old guy or gal who's been doing it for a long time, who's diverse—has animals, grain, orchards, vegetables—so you don't have to intern five times to get all the information. Seek the right person out, and as simple as it sounds, ask questions all the time. Go to Tilth conferences, which was huge for me. I tell all of my employees to go.

Q: Why are you a member of Tilth Producers?

CHRIS: After my first conference I was hooked. I believe in the organization and that there is no better advocacy group for agriculture in Washington. So I'm going to support them. I see the old-timers who have been a part of the organization for so long—these farmers are so devoted and care about it so much that you can't help but feel it and want to be a part of that community.

Q: What role do you see Tilth having in promoting the next generation of sustainable and organic farmers?

CHRIS: The next level could be more farm videos. Showcasing skills that are surely on YouTube, but having it directly from a credible source would be a great outlet for information. Organizing a young farmer's Tilth would be cool—maybe something with the Washington Young Farmers Coalition—but setting it up so young farmers are speaking to and connecting with other young farmers.

Q: Last year, Tilth celebrated its 40th year as an organization. What is your vision for agriculture 40 years from now?

CHRIS: Small-scale. What you see now is subsidized, large-scale, genetically modified commercial ag. All that needs to turn around and go back to where it came from. Sure we need to feed the world, but I think we should focus on feeding our neighbors and our communities.

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