

# Just Peachy

Bill Bader Farms makes Campbell the Peach Capital of Missouri.

PHOTOS AND STORY BY CAROLYN TOMLIN

**M**ISSOURIANS TAKE PRIDE in many things. There are the beautiful Ozark hills that gradually fade into the distance; clean, sparkling rivers that weave through the countryside like a ribbon fluttering in the wind; and rustic old mills that tell of a lifestyle generations ago. And then there are Bader peaches.

Growing up in the northwest edge of the Bootheel, Bill Bader started working in the peach orchards as a high school student in 1970 to earn money to buy his school clothes. This part-time job changed his life.

“When a boy works on a peach farm each summer, picking, grading, packing, whatever is needed,” Bill says, “that peach fuzz gets under your skin.”

Finding his niche early, Bill bought his first 250-acre farm in 1987, and he was soon in the peach business.

As many real estate agents will tell you, location is everything. The same rule applies to producing quality peaches. Good soil and a mild climate go hand in hand. With these ingredients, Bill realized that the small town of Campbell in Dunklin County, on the southwest tip of the Bootheel, was perfect for growing this golden fruit. Thirty years later, Bader Farms is a family-owned business known throughout the United States for its delicious peaches.

Gradually adding more acreage, Bader Farms has expanded from the original 250-acre tract to nearly 6,000 acres today. About one-sixth of the farm’s acreage is devoted to peaches, where about 110,000 peach trees thrive. Bill’s farm sits on Crowley’s Ridge, a geological formation that extends from southeastern Missouri to the Mississippi River near Helena, Arkansas. According to Bill, it’s the best place in the state to grow peaches.

“The soil is better, and there is better protection from frost,” he says.

Hard work and good soil have paid off for this successful venture. Today, Campbell is nicknamed the Peach Capital of Missouri.

## **A Family and Employee Business**

More than peaches, family is important to Bill. He and his wife, Denise, depend on their sons Levi and Cody to operate the farm throughout the year. Bill’s brothers, Tom and Steve Bader, and several other relatives lend a hand at harvest time. The Bader family has extended outside of blood relations, too. With Campbell’s population at about 2,500, many local teenagers and high school students show up for summer work. Most come back for multiple summers and pass the tradition on to their family members.

Cody, the sales manager, started working at the farm when he was just six years old.

“I worked loading boxes in the loft,” Cody says. “Later, I worked in the shoots for the graders and then worked as a grader.”

Now thirty-three years old, he knows the peach business from the ground up—or rather from the tree up.

“Working with family has its rewards,” Cody says. “On occasion, you may bump heads, but by the end of the day, all is well. You trust your family. That’s important in a business.”

Caring for the peach orchard is a twelve-month-a-year, and often a seven-day-a-week, job—especially during the harvest season. After all, peaches don’t stop growing just because it’s the weekend. During the summer, the farm provides seasonal employment for approximately 110 people, most of whom are migrant workers who return for seasonal work each year. The farm provides housing for these workers in the peach industry. Between June and September, work begins as early as 6 AM and usually doesn’t end until dark. Pruning and thinning trees is part of the off-season or winter work.

Due to the stress on trees, the number of peaches must be reduced during the early spring. Otherwise, the trees could not withstand the weight of the peaches on each plant.

## **From the Tree to the Grocer’s Shelf**

The Bader family takes pride in the fact that their peaches can go from the tree to the grocery store shelf within twenty-four hours. Picked by size and color, the pickers look for yellow with a red blush on each piece of fruit. Workers remove each mature peach individually and load them into a picking bucket, which deposits the fruit in a tractor-drawn trailer. From there, the peaches move on to the farm’s shed,



Bill Bader holds in his hand one of the peaches for which his farm in Campbell is known. A peach is picked by size and color. Workers look for a yellow and red blush.



where they are run through the hydro-cooler wash, which reduces the internal heat and slows the ripening process. Next, the fruit is graded by size and various other factors. Finally, the freshly picked peaches are packed and loaded onto trucks, ready to be shipped to grocery stores across the region.



As each packing bucket is filled, workers gently deposit the peaches into cardboard boxes that are loaded onto a tractor-drawn trailer, which will take them from the fields.

“Numerous factors determine the peach crop,” says Cody. “Some years are good; some not so good. Last year, we sold approximately 30 percent of our usual crop. An April hail storm took its toll. A chemical drift from a nearby farm hit us hard. Instead of the 100,000 bushels usually sold, we processed between 45,000 and 50,000.”

In a recent year, the farm packed about five hundred bushels an hour. On an average day during the summer harvest, workers often pack 4,000 boxes, which is equivalent to 400,000 peaches. However, on a very good day, the farm might pack 6,000 boxes with about 600,000 peaches. Peaches are picked, sent to a grocery store or roadside stand, and can be turned into a delicious cobbler or crumble in a matter of hours.

“We supply local grocery stores and roadside stands across southeast Missouri,” Bill says. “Large chains, including Dierbergs in St.

Louis, Henhouse in Kansas City, Fairway in Iowa, and others in Springfield also sell peaches from our groves.”

In fact, produce buyers from miles around depend on Bader Farms to supply their fruit and vegetables.

“I’ve been buying peaches from Bill Bader for years,” says Bill Ray, who delivers Bader Farms fruit to several locations. “He and his wife, Denise, are good people. I can depend on his produce being consistently top quality. When he didn’t have what I needed, there have been times he has told me to go to the orchard and pick. Bader is the type of person you want to do business with.”

Ray says that working with the Bader family makes his job as a fruit and vegetable buyer much easier.

### **More Than Just Peaches**

Signs advertise Campbell peaches for miles around. Roadside stands serve travelers and locals alike. But in addition to peaches, Bader Farms grows and sells nectarines, cantaloupe, watermelons, blackberries, strawberries, apples, tomatoes, pecans, corn, and alfalfa hay. Seasonal produce—from May strawberries to fall apples and early winter pecans—offer homegrown products during most of the year. If you miss the peach season, you have other produce to tempt your appetite. However, the peach trees make up a majority of their business, and not all of it is directly related to the fruit.

With 110,000 peach trees, the farm prunes the limbs and cuts down scores of trees each year, and they don’t go to waste. Peach wood adds a wonderful flavor to barbecue, so in addition to the peaches, bags of the wood, made for smoking meat, are available at Bader Farms.

### **A Summer Ritual**

Between late June and early September, Bader Farms markets fifty-four varieties of peaches. Each variety ripens at a different time, and people stop by the shed to purchase a specific type.

“They drive in from miles around, load up their truck or car, and buy peaches,” Bill says. “We sell them by the bushel or truckload. For some, it’s a rite of summer to find locally grown produce that is picked fresh and ripens on the trees. Our peaches look like a peach, smell like a peach, and taste like a peach.”

Sharing stories of buying Bader peaches, customers reminisce about parents or grandparents who made the summer pilgrimage.

Dick Wakefield makes this annual summer trip from Hartville, nearly two hundred miles a way.

“My wife was from Tennessee, and I’m a Missouri Ozarks guy,” Dick says. “For many years, we made the trip to Tennessee by way of Highway 53 through Dunklin County to Campbell, then turning on Highway WW. Years ago, Bader allowed my four kids to pick up the falls and box them up. These are the ones that have fallen on the ground and aren’t first grade. My children ate fresh peaches in the orchard, and the juice ran down their arms. There’s no comparison to eating tree-ripened fruit as opposed to those



When cut, the flesh on a freestone peach almost pulls away from the pit. Bill Bader cuts into one of his farm’s peaches with his well-worn personal pocket knife.

that have been picked green and transported hundreds of miles across the country by truck.”

While times have changed and the peach farm doesn’t let kids eat fruit off the ground anymore, the summer trip to Bader Farms is still a tradition for many families, especially in southeastern Missouri.

### **To Cling or Not to Cling**

Families and produce-buyers purchase different types of peaches for different uses. Some varieties are better for preserving and canning; others are best tasting when eaten fresh. Of the fifty-four varieties grown at Bader Farms, they can all be divided into two categories.

One of the early summer categories is the clingstone peach. As the name implies, the flesh clings to the pit, also known as the stone. Sweeter and juicier, clingstones are used for canning and preserving. Commercially canned peaches are typically clingstone—peaches that do not pull away from the pit when cut open.

Those that do not cling to the pit are known as freestone. This delicious variety is best eaten out of hand. Usually larger and less juicy, the freestone peaches are also favorites for baking and preserving. If customers purchase peaches in a



grocery store, they are usually freestone. Consumers will recognize this variety by names such as the Spring Prince and Ruby Prince.

Crossed between a clingstone and freestone is a semi-freestone peach that is a hybrid. Researchers have attempted to combine the best of both peaches into one—a peach with the qualities of the clingstone’s juicy sweet taste and

Bader Peaches are recognized as a top producer of Missouri peaches. It’s not unusual for two or three generations of people to swap stories of visiting the peach farm.





The Bader Farm depends on migrant workers and local high school students to harvest the summer peaches and get them to market. When the trailer is filled, the fruit goes back to the warehouse for transporting to the market.

the ease of eating and using the pitted freestone variety.

The different type of peaches matter to Bill because his Missouri customers have come to expect a long season of summer fruit. In order to supply customers, both individuals and grocery stores, with an extended season, Bill offers a wide variety that is harvested throughout the summer growing season.

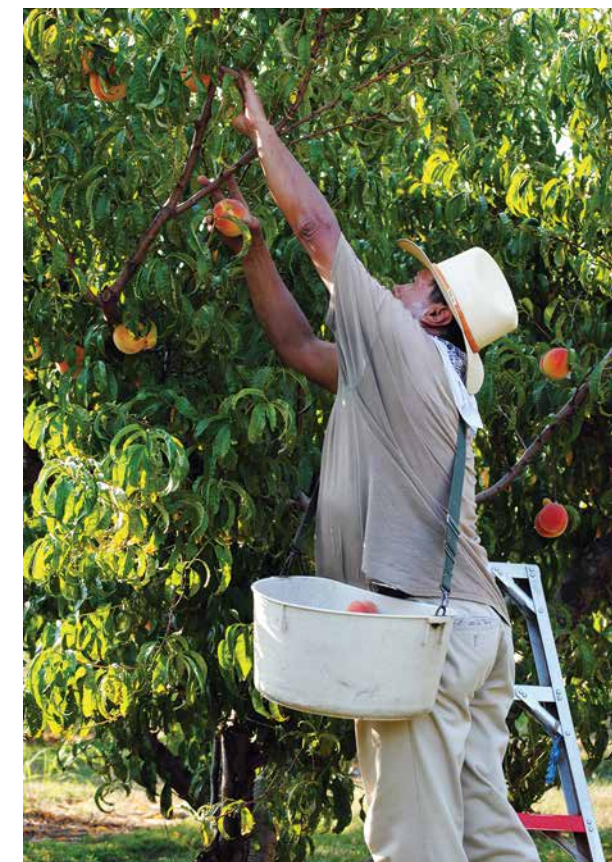
### ***A Peach of a Deal***

Packed with natural sweetness, the fruit is simply delicious. However, Bill likes to remind people that peaches are also healthy. Not only rich in fiber, good for blood sugar, and helpful in reducing cholesterol, the peach contains several major nutrients, including vitamin A, vitamin C, and potassium.

As for calorie-counters, a medium-size peach contains only thirty-eight calories—below the amount for apples and pears of similar size. The simple peach makes a perfect snack for children or adults as they're 87 percent water.

Customers who follow Route WW out of Campbell marvel at the Bader peach orchards on both sides of the country road. Once there, expect a friendly staff that is knowledgeable about peaches and who can answer any related questions. Also, check out the company's framed newspaper articles that line the walls. It's not surprising that Bader peaches help make Campbell the Peach Capital of the Show-Me State.

To meet market demands, migrant workers return each summer to harvest the peaches. Standing on a ladder, each employee uses a harness that supports a bucket that allows them to pick with both hands.



### ***Schedule for Bader Peaches***

Bader Farms is located at 38601 Route WW in Campbell. Call 573-246-2528 or 573-217-8008 and email [info@baderpeaches.com](mailto:info@baderpeaches.com) for more information. The end of the summer is a fruitful time for peaches. To find out about more varieties that are picked earlier in the season, check out the farm's growing schedule at [BaderPeaches.com](http://BaderPeaches.com).

- August 1 – Rusten Red
- August 8 – Cresthaven, PF 27 A
- August 12 – Jersey Queen, Sun Prince
- August 15 – Monroe, Summer Lady, Carolina Gold
- August 18 – Sweet Sue
- August 20 – O'Henry
- August 22 – Flame Prince
- September 1 – Fair Time
- September 5 – Big Red
- September 10 – Marston
- September 20 – Last Chance, Autumn Prince