

# 2014 National OYF Finalists

## ARKANSAS • John and Angie Halverson

*Potatoes, peanuts, corn, soybeans, sweet potatoes*



If you enjoy snacking on potato chips, you have probably consumed a product grown on Black Gold Farms, the largest supplier of chip potatoes in the United States. John Halverson serves as vice president of the family operation that encompasses 25,000 acres across 11 states. In addition to producing 500 billion pounds of potatoes each year, the farm also raises corn, wheat, soybeans, sweet potatoes, milo, and peanuts. After graduating from North Dakota State University with a degree in Ag Economics, John relocated to the delta region of Missouri to begin a potato farm in cotton country. Fourteen years later, the Missouri farm has expanded to 5,000 acres, and John's role in Black Gold Farms has grown substantially.

A primary focus of the company is stewardship, and their efforts in water management and precision fertilizer application earned them the National Potato Council's environmental stewardship award in 2008. A three-time recipient of the Clem Kuehler Innovation Award from Frito Lay, Black Gold Farms is a leader in the use of electrical optisorting technology and cutting edge research for the industry. The farm measures

growth in dollars, not acres, and prioritizes the recruitment and training of its 175 employees. John is also working toward the goal of making each of the company's farms "tour ready" 365 days a year, creating an appealing environment for its employees, customers, and communities.

Managing a company the size of Black Gold Farms requires time and travel, and John's wife, Angie, has been supportive of his career in agriculture. Angie works as a nurse in their hometown of Paragould, Arkansas, and volunteers in the community and school while caring for their three daughters, Hannah, 11, Ava, 8, and Lilly, 2. John is involved in the United States Potato Board and the National Potato Council in addition to school and church organizations. The family is also engaged in a company-wide initiative to help over 30 organizations with volunteer work as well as the donation of thousands of pounds of potatoes as a social sustainability project.

## CONNECTICUT • Jamie and Christiana Jones

*Fruits, vegetables, Christmas trees, vineyard, winery*

Jamie Jones dug up his mother's flower bed and planted tree seedlings at the age of four, and that's all it took for the sixth-generation Connecticut farmer to be hooked on agriculture. By the time he was in high school, he was growing vegetables to be sold along with the family's berry harvests, and he enrolled at Cornell University to study plant science following high school. His time in New York exposed him to the vineyard and winery industry, and he returned to the family farm to plant vineyards and begin a wine production facility. The business venture has grown into a ten-acre vineyard producing 4,000 cases of wine in the 15 years since Jamie's return to the farm. Along with his parents and his wife, Christiana, Jamie also raises strawberries, blueberries, vegetables, hay, and Christmas trees, most of which are sold to the 100,000 visitors to the farm each year.

Established by Jamie's great-great-great-grandfather, the farm's philosophy of "Be good to the land and the land will be good to you" is still followed today. Cover crops are utilized as well as woodchip composting to amend the soils. Pumpkins are grown on rolled-rye mulch, conserving soil moisture and suppressing weed growth while improving the soil structure. Micro-irrigation and water conservation projects such as drainage swales have made more efficient use of the farm's water resources. With a population of 7.5 million people within a 50-mile radius of his farm, Jamie is conscious of his responsibility to show the public the face of American agriculture and how farmers care for the land.

Jamie has spoken about the farm's innovative growing practices at growers' conferences, and he is also active in the Farm Bureau, the Connecticut Farm Wine Development Council, and the Governor's Council for Agricultural Development. He is president of the Connecticut Vineyard and Winery Association and is active in his church. Christiana helps manage the farm's retail operations, develops staff training programs, oversees social marketing, and organizes school tours to the farm while raising the farm's seventh generation: nine-year-old Jackson, six-year-old Sam, and three-year-old Juliet.



# 2014 National OYF Finalists

## IOWA • Ben and Janelle Johnson

*Wean to finish hog operation, corn, soybeans*



Ireton, Iowa, farmer Ben Johnson thought that engineering sounded like a great career until he realized how much he missed farming. With a degree in Ag Business from South Dakota State University, Ben returned to the farm that was homesteaded by his great-great grandfather in 1885. Undaunted by the size limitations of the farm, Ben and his parents invested in state-of-the-art hog barns, and the operation now grows 630 acres of soybeans and corn while finishing 4,800 head of hogs per year. Ben plans to expand the livestock component of the operation by constructing more hog finishing facilities since skyrocketing land prices have made farm expansion nearly impossible.

The Johnson farm is truly a family operation. Last fall Ben tested a combine and grain cart communication technology that allowed his 93-year-old grandfather to continue to operate the combine. Ben's grandfather began a legacy of conservation when he studied land and water preservation techniques in high school and college, and the Johnsons now implement contour farming, terraces, waterways, riparian strips, and minimum and no-till farming. Concrete pits in the hog facility along with windbreaks and filter strips assist with water quality, odor control, and an aesthetic view while providing wildlife habitat. Manure management is carefully monitored based on the nutrient content in the soils.

Along with conservation, Ben prioritizes consumer education through his positions on the county Pork Producer Board, Farm Bureau, County Fair Board, Northwest Iowa Farm Business Association Board, and the Beginning and Young Farmer Committee. Together with his wife, Janelle, he plans educational sessions and tours of livestock and farming facilities. Ben and Janelle received the Master Pork Producer Award for their dedication to the industry in 2011. Janelle holds a degree in horticulture and plans to grow perennials and annuals to sell locally. She works at the county extension office and handles the farm office work.

## LOUISIANA • Christian and Julie Richard

*Rice, soybeans, crawfish*

Christian Richard of Kaplan, Louisiana, may be the only farmer that will admit that record low commodity prices can be a good thing. When he graduated from the University of Louisiana with a degree in Agribusiness 13 years ago, Christian found that low prices had resulted in farmers retiring or finding jobs off the farm, leaving him the opportunity to rent and purchase land and equipment. Since then, he has grown the operation to 4,000 acres on which he raises rice, soybeans, and crawfish.

His grandfather passed down the philosophy that conservation and farming go hand in hand, a piece of advice that Christian has implemented on his land. Growing soybeans has allowed Christian to break some week cycles and replenish soil fertility. No-till planting and laser leveling are two additional farming practices that have yielded positive results in the operation. In 2008, Christian became president of the local soil and water conservation district, a position which allows him to promote and participate in current conservation programs.

The use of technology complements Christian's conservation program. Grid sampling, variable rate fertilizer, and yield mapping have decreased input costs and increased yields. The addition of an automated drying system to two grain bins has reduced drying costs by 25 percent while preserving the quality of the crops in storage. The farm is also a test site for John Deere product engineering.

Christian's progressive practices and devotion to the future of agriculture are evident in his involvement in local and state organizations. He is the past president of the Louisiana Rice Growers, president of the Vermilion Parish Rice Growers, vice president of the state Rice Promotion Board, and a member of the parish Rice Advisory Committee. He is an ag leadership class graduate as well as a Louisiana Master Farmer graduate and is active in the volunteer fire department, Farm Bureau, and the local co-op board. Christian's wife, Julie, is a former assistant director of field services for Farm Bureau. She is now employed full time on the farm where she assists with office duties and cares for the couple's children, three-year-old Katherine and one-year-old Saul.



# 2014 National OYF Finalists

## MICHIGAN • Scott and Ali Ferry

*Dairy, corn, soybeans, alfalfa*



Telling the story of agriculture has become a passion for Scott and Ali Ferry of Litchfield, Michigan. Named dairy spokespeople for the state by the United Dairy Industry, Scott and Ali regularly reach out to consumers and youth as speakers, farm tour hosts, and career day presenters. Their dedication to promoting agriculture is a reflection of their devotion to the success of the Ferry Farm.

Following the unexpected death of his father, Scott returned to the family dairy farm five years ago, leaving his career as a mortgage banker to become a fourth generation farm owner, managing employees, finances, crops and cows. After learning the basics necessary to keep the operation functioning, Scott and Ali set goals for improving cow comfort and lowering somatic cell counts while improving milk production and conception rates. All of their goals were met despite the financial downturn in the dairy industry followed by a massive fire that consumed their machine shop, a barn, two machine sheds, and multiple pieces of equipment. In the process of recovering from their losses, Scott and Ali improved the efficiency of the operation and

have grown their acreage, their herd size, and their family as they raise two-year-old Amelia on the farm.

No-till soil conservation practices, crop rotation, buffer strips, and soil and manure testing prior to field spreading have all helped conserve water and nutrients on the farm. The plate-cooler water used to chill the milk is recycled for the milking cows to drink, reducing farm water use by 8,000 gallons per day. Participation in many conservation programs and an energy audit ensure the farm is practicing good stewardship, and they have been verified in the state's Agriculture Environmental Assurance Program in all three categories of cropping, livestock, and total farmstead.

Scott and Ali consider community involvement an essential component of their outreach efforts. Scott is president of the local milk producers' association, president of the MSU Extension and AgBio Research State Council, and president of the Rotary Club. Ali is a member of the county ag council and a volleyball coach, and she documents the farm's activities on a popular Facebook page.

## OHIO • Brian and Jennifer Harbage

*Corn, soybeans, wheat, straw, hay, dairy cows, beef cattle*

The farming career of Brian Harbage began as an FFA project when he was 16. He rented 40 acres on a crop share with his father's neighbors near South Charleston, Ohio, using money earned from 4-H and FFA livestock projects to pay input costs and machinery rent. Today, his farm encompasses more than 3,000 acres, including the original 40 acres of ground he first rented 24 years ago.

In addition to raising corn, soybeans, wheat, hay, and beef cattle, Brian has opened a "cow spa" to house dry cows for two local dairies. The barns used in this venture are registered with the state historical society, but they have been modernized for energy efficiency with the addition of solar panels. Brian has always considered himself an early adapter of new technologies, and he utilizes tissue sampling and satellite imagery to target the needs of his crops. Yield and soil mapping have allowed Brian to build prescription rates and increase yields. He is also experimenting with intercropping soybeans into wheat in the spring as well as implementing cover crops into growing production crops. Some of Brian's ideas are so new that the equipment hasn't been built for them yet, so he builds his own or modifies current equipment to make it work.

Brian continues to look toward the future of the operation, setting goals to increase acreage and cattle numbers. The farm has been preserved in the Ohio Ag Easement Purchase Program, protecting the land and benefiting future generations. Brian and his wife, Jennifer, have two sons, Lane, 11, and Aidan, 9, who are active in the farm operations, including selling eggs from Jennifer's growing poultry flock. Jennifer is also responsible for the farm office tasks.

Brian is active on the county fair board, serves as president of the township, and is a past board member of the Ohio Corn Marketing Program. He has been a spokesperson for the Ohio Corn Growers, traveling the world to advocate for U.S. corn. He has also been active in the Ohio Soybean Association, Farm Bureau, Ohio Cattleman's Association, Farm Credit Services advisory board, and various other school and community organizations.



# 2014 National OYF Finalists

## TEXAS • Eric and Christy Seidenberger

*Cotton, wheat, cattle*



When 1,000 acres of land near his home in Garden City, Texas, became available to rent, Eric Seidenberger did not let the opportunity pass him by. Although he had entered college with the intention of playing football, a broken leg had sidelined that dream, and he knew he wasn't cut for an office job. He secured a loan to purchase a 1979 John Deere 4640, a 1977 Ford pickup, and a few four row implements, breaking the rented land and growing cotton. He has been an independent farmer since the age of 19, and he hasn't regretted that choice for a single moment. He now raises cotton, wheat, and cattle on 6,750 acres.

Eric has had many challenges in his 19 years of farming. Cotton pests, chemical resistant weeds, and fluctuation of commodity prices have provided obstacles throughout his career, but his two major issues are labor shortages and the depletion of the water table. Eric meets his challenges proactively, and he installed a subsurface drip irrigation system, maximizing the use of his water resources. Technology such as variable rate application with fertilizer, insecticide, and defoliant helps make the farm

more productive. Eric built waterways and terraces to minimize soil erosion on his farm.

Eric and his wife, Christy, were high school sweethearts with a common goal of being good stewards of the land for their children's future. Christy handles the office work and keeps up with the activities of their three children, Reed, 11, Owen, 9, and Lacy, 6. She works as a school nurse, is a volunteer EMT, teaches church school, and takes an active role in the farming and cattle operations. The children are active participants on the farm, raising 4-H livestock and providing manual labor by chopping weeds in areas that can't be sprayed.

Eric is also active in the community, serving as a board member for Cotton Incorporated, the county co-op, Texas Pest Management, and the Cotton Growers Association. He is active in the Lion's Club, the volunteer fire department, the county livestock association, 4-H, youth football, and his church.

## VIRGINIA • Phillip and Michelle Hickman

*Potatoes, corn, soybeans, stringbeans*

The roots of Dublin Farms near Horntown, Virginia, date back to 1872. Phillip Hickman, the farm manager, is a fifth generation farmer, tending 4,500 acres and specializing in potatoes. Phillip's involvement on the farm began when he was eight years old and was employed to ride the potato harvester, picking dirt and grass off the conveyor as his father loaded trucks in the field. The farm now uses computerized machines to harvest, wash and package the product which is marketed on a website. While the farming techniques have changed, Phillip's devotion to the farm has remained consistent in the 12 years since he returned to the farm with a degree in Agriculture and Applied Economics from Virginia Tech.

In addition to potatoes, the farm also grows corn, soybeans, and stringbeans, and Phillip markets corn and soybean seed for Monsanto. The farm has been quick to adopt new technology, maximizing yields and minimizing inputs. The farm size has doubled in the past 10 years, and GPS technology is used in every aspect of the operation from tillage to harvest. The grain operation has been no-till for 20 years, and cover crops prevent soil erosion and aids in water retention. Grass buffer strips and waterways catch any leaching nutrients and soils from the tilled potato and snap bean fields. Rain nozzles on the irrigation systems provide even coverage while using less water. Phillip's goal is to be a good farmer so his children will have the same opportunity he has had.

Phillip's wife, Michelle, has provided support to the farm both in her off-farm jobs through the years as well as providing support to Phillip and raising Logan, 7, and Elana, 4. They are active in school and community activities, and Phillip is involved in the Elks Club and the local chamber of commerce. He is active in Farm Bureau and has served on the Virginia Corn Board and the Virginia Grain Producers Association Board, becoming the board's youngest president at the age of 24. Through that organization, Phillip has met with the House and Senate ag committees and has lobbied against oppressive EPA regulations that threaten the future of agriculture in the area.



# 2014 National OYF Finalists

## WISCONSIN • Brian and Nicole Barlass

*Dairy, corn, hay, soybeans, wheat, sweet corn, peas*



Brian Barlass of Janesville, Wisconsin, has been a dairy farmer for as long as he can remember. As a child, he daydreamed about how he could improve milk production and incorporate technology to help the farm run more smoothly. His dreams became a reality when he returned home after earning a degree in Animal Science from Cornell University. The farm grew from 100 to 350 cows in the next three years, and the operation currently consists of 420 cows that Brian owns along with his parents.

A self-proclaimed number cruncher, Brian enjoys maximizing productivity on the farm. He describes himself as being cautiously on the cutting edge, implementing new technology while being frugal. A feed management program that links to the scale on the feed truck allows Brian to monitor the feeding and improves feed accuracy. A silage face shaver improved forage quality and consistency. Embryo transfer has helped improve the herd genetics, and a free choice milk program has paid off with a noticeable improvement in calf health.

Brian realizes that conservation is essential to the future of the farm, and he strip tills or no-tills 75 percent of his corn fields and 100 percent of the wheat and soybean fields. Injectors are used for most of the manure application, and cover crops have improved soil health and provided wildlife habitat. Water is conserved by recycling the plate cooler water for the water troughs and washdown hoses. Improving the farm and expanding production continue to drive Brian, especially as he watches his son, two-year-old Jack, grow up on the farm. His wife, Nicole, works off the farm with an organization that provides resources to school districts, and they are active in a variety of community and agricultural organizations. Brian is a member of the American Jersey Cattle Association and is vice president of the Wisconsin Jersey Breeders Association. He is active in his church, Farm Bureau, Professional Dairy Producers, Accelerated Genetics, Jerseyland Dairy Sires Co-op, Agriventure mentoring program, 4-H fair assistant superintendent, Jersey Youth Academy dean, and the school wrestling program. He also serves on Rep. Paul Ryan's agricultural advisory group.

## WYOMING • Patrick Zimmerer

*Cattle, corn, hay, vineyard, winery*

Huntley, Wyoming, is an improbable location to start a winery, but that didn't stop Patrick Zimmerer from planting a vineyard. The fourth generation farmer was determined to develop a business venture that would allow him to keep the family's farmland and heritage intact, and the diversification of the vineyard has allowed him that opportunity.

While Patrick maintained a small herd of cattle throughout college, he knew that it wouldn't sustain him if he chose to return to the farm. The Ag Economics and Ag Communication major was required to complete an agricultural thesis prior to graduation, and after attending a meeting about growing grapes in the Wyoming area, Patrick researched the idea for his paper. As graduation drew near, Patrick "borrowed" a half-acre weed patch to plant 300 vines. In the past 13 years, the weed patch has expanded to 10,000 vines on 10 acres, producing 15-20,000 bottles of wine each year. An event center with a tasting room helps market the product, and more than 60 stores throughout Wyoming carry the wine of Table Mountain Vineyards.

In addition to the challenges of learning a new crop and a new business, Patrick also faced obstacles with the farm's ownership, which was split between siblings with different objectives. Patrick pursued a legal degree in order to navigate the complexities of estate management. Ultimately, the law degree paid off when Patrick and his parents were able to purchase the farm, and serving legal clients provides him with an additional source of income.

New equipment and technology have been a necessary component of Patrick's operation, both in the raising of the crops and the marketing of the products. Conservation practices have included a tree line and windbreak to protect the vineyard and prevent erosion. Minimal-till crop production practices have preserved topsoil in drought years, and water is conserved with drip lines for efficient irrigation.

Patrick's unique experiences led him to establish the Wyoming Grape Growers Association. He serves as chairman of the Wyoming Board of Agriculture and sits on the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources Dean's Advisory Board, the Wyoming Ag in the Classroom Board, and the county lodging tax board.

