

Cherry and walnut farmer Jon Brandstad moonlights as a competitive Formula Ford race car driver, after taking up the sport at the age of 57. He's since graced the winner's podium at least 40 times.



Racing offers thrills; farming provides satisfaction

Jon Brandstad likes running laps around the competition.

The fourth-generation farmer grows cherries and walnuts for a global marketplace and is also an accomplished race car driver who pushes his Formula Ford car to speeds up to 135 mph at raceways across the state. His times often place him in the top three finishers in the highly competitive Formula Ford circuit, and last year he finished among the top 10 in the sport's national championships.

Brandstad first exchanged the slow and steady pace of a tractor for a single-seat, open-wheel Formula Ford race car in 2004 when his wife, Christine, bought him a three-day driving class on the track of Laguna Seca. By the next year, Brandstad was seriously into racing.

"I was 57 years old," he said. "People told me that I was getting into racing way too late. But I started out wanting to win. And eventually I beat every one of the guys who used to lap me in a race."

By 2006, Brandstad made it to the winner's podium for the first time, finishing third in a come-from-behind race where he'd been in the running for fifth place. With 14 seasons under his belt, he's racked up at least 40 podium finishes in about 160 races, including two regional championships.

Last year, Brandstad set his sights on qualifying for the Sports Car Club of America National Championship Runoffs, held at Sonoma Raceway. He qualified for the championships based on his race times during the season.

"I competed a lot in 2018 to stay in racing shape," Brandstad said. His goal: to place among the event's top 10 competitors.

His efforts paid off. Racing his orange and silver 1991 Swift DB-6 (named Bruce in honor of the dog that used to accompany him to the races), the 71-year-old farmer placed seventh out of a field of 28 racers—including the 24-year-old winner. It was a tough, 40-minute competition.

"That's the longest race I've ever done," he said. "But toward the end of it, I was gaining on the guy in front of me and I wished for a few more laps."

Brandstad shares credit for his racing success with his wife, not only because she got him into the sport, but also because she serves as his spotter on the course.

"She's on the radio with me, warning me of what's going on in front of my car at some of the most dangerous spots on the track. She's saved me from crashing," he said. "It's pretty awesome having her there with me."

RISKS & REWARDS

Story by Jolaine Collins
Photos by Bryan Patrick



The family of farmers, from left, Jeff Brandstad, David Barney, Christine Brandstad and Jon Brandstad, enjoy cherry pie. Jon Brandstad inspects the cherry crop, above and right.



Farmland Forever



As new development across California places increasing pressure on the land that produces our food, the California Farmland Trust works to ensure thousands of acres of farmland retain their agricultural heritage.

Since 2004, the California Farmland Trust has seen to it that agricultural properties such as Brandstad Farms will remain farmland for generations to come. Jon Brandstad and his family worked with the trust to protect nearly 350 acres of their Central Valley land, which has been producing cherries and walnuts for three generations.

To date, 16,500 acres—representing more than 65 family-owned farms—have been permanently protected by landowners working with the trust. Though the land cannot be developed and must always be used for agriculture, the landowners retain ownership and use of their property.

“Our mission is to help farmers protect the best farmland in the world,” Executive Director Charlotte Mitchell said. “California farms produce food, fiber and foliage for the global market, with several crops grown nearly exclusively in California. Our unique conditions enable farmers to grow more than 400 commodities, but farmland is disappearing at an alarming rate.”

California loses an average of 50,000 acres of farmland every year—totaling more than 1 million acres since 1990, according to Mitchell.

In another effort to strengthen California’s agricultural future, the California Farmland Trust also brings schoolchildren to farms, allowing them to experience firsthand how food grows.

Growing from small beginnings

It was Brandstad’s father who encouraged his interest in the checkered flags at an early age.

“As a youngster, I’d go with my dad to the races at the Stockton airport, which was turned into a road course for events,” he said.

His father also shaped Brandstad’s farming career by planting one cherry orchard for the young man in 1962. That orchard remains among the approximately 100 acres of Bing and Skeena cherries that grow on the family’s farm in Linden.

San Joaquin County is California’s largest producer of cherries. The valley’s colder winter temperatures, along with its warm spring and summer weather, offer an ideal climate for the traditional Bing variety. Varieties such as Skeena, which are harvested after Bings, are hardy choices for retail sales.

Brandstad’s orchards are typically harvested from mid-May to mid-June.

“When the cherries are ready to harvest, there’s a very narrow window to pick, and we move fast. We might have 100 to 150 men picking cherries from the first light of day,” Brandstad said.

Much of the family is involved in the operation—as it has been for 150 years. Jon and his brother, Richard, are fourth-generation farmers, and the fifth and six generations have also come on board, including

Brandstad’s son, David Barney, and his brother’s son, Jeff. Christine helps haul bins of cherries to their packing destination in Lodi.

Brandstad also grows walnuts. First planted in 1987, the family’s walnut trees—primarily Chandlers—cover 180 acres, including 60 that are farmed organically. Though much of his crop is sold domestically, Brandstad said other destinations include China, Japan, Taiwan, Germany and Canada.

As with racing, one never knows how a crop will turn out, despite the best efforts. That’s one reason Brandstad grows two crops.

“While walnuts have to be babied nearly until October, they are highly mechanized and provide a more steady income than cherries,” Brandstad noted. “Cherries need to be hand-harvested and are more of a gambler’s crop. You can have several good years of cherries, and then there may be a bad one. It’s better to not put all of your eggs in one basket.”

Preserving the farm

While Brandstad is in the process of turning more of the farming operation over to his son and brother’s family this year, he and Christine will remain involved in harvest operations.

“This year, I plan to farm less and travel more,” he said.

Before hanging up his work boots, though, Brandstad took an important step to preserving his family’s 150-year-

old farming legacy. He and his brother, along with their families, chose to protect their 350 acres of farmland through a perpetual partnership with the California Farmland Trust. They will continue to maintain their ownership and the rights that come with owning the land, but it cannot be divided or converted from agriculture.

“We’re happy we did it,” Brandstad said. “The land has been in our family for years, and now we don’t have to worry that it could be turned into a housing development someday.”

The property includes the farmhouse built at the turn of the 20th century by Brandstad’s great-grandfather. During the Depression, his grandfather assumed ownership of the original property for \$15 an acre. In 1948, Brandstad’s parents built a house next door where they could raise their family, and now Brandstad’s nephew lives in that house. Jon and Christine Brandstad and their son also have homes on the ranch.

“One of us is always home to keep an eye on things,” Brandstad said. “We work together.”

When asked to compare farming and racing, he paused and said, “They both require you to be a risk-taker. While racing is more exciting, there’s nothing more satisfying than growing a really great crop.”

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