Smooth Sailing for 'Oil-Free' Food

Contributed by Diane Urbani de la Paz
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SEQUIM, Wash. - Let us follow a strawberry, flush from the field as it travels on wind and water - but without petroleum - from Sequim to the big, hungry city.

People in Seattle want these oil-free Sequim berries with the Nash's Organic name on them, according to David Reid, owner and operator of Seattle's Sail Transport Co.

He's the bringer of our berry - plus hundreds of pounds of other produce - across the Strait of Juan de Fuca, into Puget Sound and to the city dock in Seattle, all without a motor.

This strawberry, ripened in Sequim solar energy, travels aboard the Whisper, Reid's 27-foot, engineless sailboat.

Upon arrival, the fruit is carried on a cargo bicycle or tricycle to the table of someone who discovered Dungeness Valley flavor at a Seattle farmers market.

Nash's Organic Produce, grown on some 400 acres north of Sequim, has a reputation in the Puget Sound metropolitan area, Reid said.

People lust after the berries and leafy greens that peak this time of year, and he's more than happy to satisfy their desires - without bothering with those gas-guzzling trucks and ferries.

Reid is growing a CSA, as in community-supported agriculture, club of about 25 produce subscribers in Seattle. They've signed up for regular deliveries of freshly picked produce - and not just as a summer fling.

"Nash's has a long growing season," Reid said, so when winter douses the city in rain and chill, he'll be able to deliver comfort food: squashes, potatoes, sweet carrots for roasting.

His mode of transport is not only oil free; it's done with very little sound.

At 7:30 a.m. last Friday, he and Nash's staffer Sid Maroney were nearly wordless as they loaded box after box of Nash's produce picked that morning, from fluffy lettuces and herbs to fava beans, spring baby garlic, French breakfast and Easter-egg radishes, to wheat berries and strawberries - and four dozen eggs.

"These are actually for me and a few friends," Reid admitted as he placed the cartons in a safe spot on the packed boat.

Reid and his crewman, fellow Seattleite Alec Billroth, will need the protein.

Like gondoliers, they used an oar to push the Whisper out into Sequim Bay, which was flat as a mirror.

The men barely spoke, as if reluctant to disturb the tranquil scene. Once away from the marina, the crew raised the sails, and a light breeze sent the Whisper gliding into the pale blue horizon.

With Sail Transport, Reid is embarking on a kind of second voyage.

The product of a small organic farm in Aberdeenshire, Scotland, he grew up to be a project engineer for Philips Healthcare.

After traveling the globe, he decided to explore new territory - proving what's possible when it comes to delivering food.

It's high time, he believes, to move away from fossil-fueled modes of shipping.

With the waterways between Sequim's farms and the Puget Sound's population, he considers Sail Transport Co. a viable venture.

"This is a demo year," he said, in which he's slowly, steadily adding produce subscribers in Seattle - and sailing toward a livelihood unaffected by fuel prices.

Reid is not only frugal and determined; he's patient.

The voyage from John Wayne Marina to the Seattle dock can take anywhere from 11 hours to more than 24, he said.

But he doesn't mind depending on wind and muscle instead of gas and speed.

The price on his type of energy isn't going to fluctuate much, after all.

The Whisper "is the equivalent of a three-quarter-ton pickup," Reid added, "except the fuel cost is zero."

Reid plans on being back at John Wayne Marina in a few weeks for another load of summer produce. And as more subscribers come on board, he'll further streamline the sailboat by stripping out almost everything but shelves for crates.

Friday's pickup was only about 400 pounds of food, but "when this scales up, I could do up to 1,800 pounds," Reid said.

There was one glitch, though, in our strawberry's trip from field to Whisper: The truck Maroney drove from Nash's packing shed to the marina is a petroleum-slurping Bronco.

That's the bad news, Maroney acknowledged, but the good news is that he owns an electric truck.

A staunch proponent of alternative fuels, Maroney has been driving his plug-in truck around eastern Clallam County for many months.

It's now in need of a minor repair, and he hopes to have it back on the road shortly.

Reid, for his part, indicated that he'll feel even better about sailing to Sequim when that electric truck is up and around again.

"Let me know," he told Maroney before hopping onto the Whisper's deck.

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