



Editor's note: "Wandering Around Washington" is a regular, exclusive column from Joe Tennis highlighting the untold stories in the county, direct from the people who live and work here. Watch for him to wander into shops, restaurants and parks to bring you the gab and gossip — only in the Washington County News.

Puerto Nuevo restaurant docking in former Harbor

ABINGDON, Va. — Like you, I'm waiting.

That is, we all sadly said bye-bye last year when the Harbor House sailed out of sight along U.S. Highway 11 in Abingdon, Virginia.

And now? Well, current plans call for opening a new location of Puerto Nuevo at what was once the mighty Harbor House, less than a mile from I-81's Exit 19 in Abingdon.

But wait! There ain't nothing opening right now with Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam's latest order, telling us all to stay home due to concerns over the coronavirus.

To let you know: Puerto Nuevo is a restaurant hybrid, serving seafood on half the menu and Mexican dishes on the other. It's also part of a chain of restaurants with the same name — with locations in Toccoa, Georgia; Wytheville, Virginia; and Boone, North Carolina.

Just outside of Washington County, you'll find another location of Puerto Nuevo on Linden Drive at Exit 7 in Bristol, Virginia.

As for the upcoming location, well, I noticed several workers there when I pulled into the parking lot on Saturday afternoon.

But its opening is "on hold," said co-owner Felipe Reyes, who lives in Abingdon and tends to a garden to grow peppers and tomatoes to use at the Bristol restaurant.

Like the old Harbor House, Reyes plans to serve seafood whenever the Abingdon location opens.

Whenever. "Most of our customers come from Abingdon," Reyes said at the Bristol location. "And Abingdon does not have any full set-up restaurant with a nice bar. So we think that will be a good place to be."

The Abingdon location is slated to offer as many seats as the Bristol site: 175, according to Reyes.

"It's bigger," Reyes said, referencing the Harbor House.

"But we're going to save one of those rooms only for special occasions, by reservation."



Joe Tennis



JOE TENNIS/WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

Puerto Nuevo is slated to open a new location the former Harbor House Restaurant in Abingdon, a seafood restaurant that closed last October (below).



Down the drain

Dairy farmers hurting with loss of school sales

BY CAROLYN R. WILSON

FOR THE WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

GLADE SPRING, Va. — Rena Johnson said she and other local dairy farmers were looking forward to getting on better footing in 2020, especially after the dairy industry had suffered less than favorable prices the past four years.

But the onset of COVID-19 is changing all of that.

The novel virus has sickened just about every part of the country's economy, and the dairy industry is no exception.

Milk may have been flying off the grocery store shelves in the last few weeks, but it's still not enough to offset the reduction of milk not being sold to schools and restaurants, many of which have closed throughout the country, according to Johnson, who operates the family-owned Highland Dairy in Glade Spring.

"Right now, there's a big demand for fluid milk in the United States. People are stocking up, and the supply chain cannot keep up.

"I read today that sales are up 33%, and that's unheard of. But it's still not enough to offset our losses," said the young dairy farmer, who took the reins of the farm in 2006 after graduating from Virginia Tech.

"Our last check was down \$1.30 per 100 pounds of milk. Who knows about this coming check?" said Johnson, with hesitation in her voice. "No one knows how low it will go. I guess it just depends on how long the ill effects of the virus last.

"We rely on milk sales to schools a lot," she said, "and now people are not eating out at restaurants unless it's takeout."

Exports of milk are down because of unsettling economy abroad.

"This is a good example of our new global economy," said Andy Overbay, a Smyth County Extension agent.

"An issue, even an isolated one, can upset the markets and affect prices negatively.

"Even though the Southeast is a milk-deficit area — more demand than supply — and our milk goes mostly to fluid use, which garners the highest prices, milk is still priced based on the prices of cheese and butter.

"Cheese and butter prices are down due to lower demand and market uncertainty," said the Extension agent.

Most of the milk produced in the United States stays in this country, with about 15% exported to other countries, such as China and Mexico.

"When those imports of milk slow down," said Johnson, "there goes our prices down even farther."

Johnson said the futures market began to drop in January when the virus hit China, more than a month before the virus even showed up in the United States.

Most of the prices are driven by financial speculators, people who analyze and forecast futures price movement, and trading contracts, she said.

"Now that the virus is here in the United States, things are all out of whack."

The young dairy farmer said the last good year for dairy farms was in 2014 when milk prices were at record highs because of an unprecedented milk demand in countries like China and Russia.

"We were getting \$28 per 100 pounds of milk. We had never had prices like that before."

When the demand fell off, it left the dairy industry with farmers producing more milk than could be exported.

"Our prices were terrible for the following four years," Johnson said. "Our prices dropped down to between \$16 and \$18. Most dairy producers need \$20 per 100 pounds to just break even.

"As a result, we lost hundreds of dairy farms throughout the country that were forced out of business. It's been heartbreaking to see families lose their generations-old farms."

Johnson said, before the coronavirus, everything pointed to a better



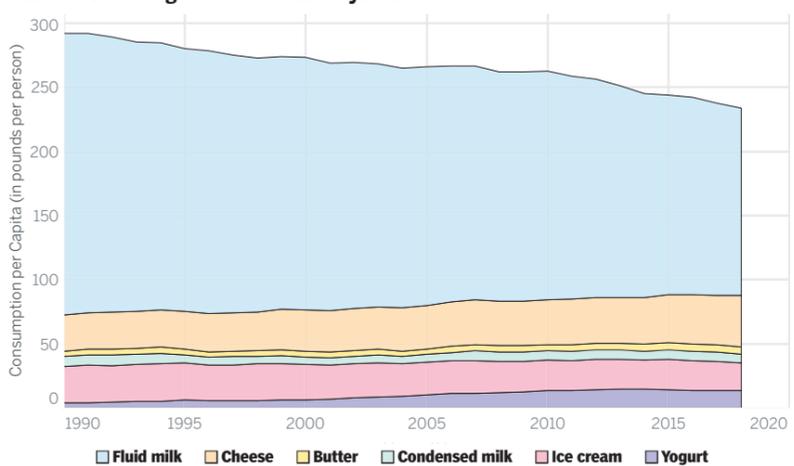
CAROLYN R. WILSON/FOR THE WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS/FILE

A refrigerator in a barn at Highland Dairy in Glade Spring holds an in-line sampler that takes a representative sample of the milk to check it for milk quality and bacteria, fat and protein content.



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Many dairy farms have had to cut back production or go out of business altogether due to a shrinking demand in recent years.



SOURCES: USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service, USDA Farm Service Agency, USDA Foreign Agricultural Service, USDA Agricultural Marketing Service, U.S. Department of Commerce Bureau of the Census, California Department of Food and Agriculture, USDA Economic Research Service calculations

GRAPHIC BY CHELSEA GILLENWATER/WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

Dairy farmers were hoping for a better year in 2020, after about four years of price drops, but the coronavirus has driven down restaurant and school sales, which the dairy industry counts on to stay in business. Consumption of fluid milk has gone down steadily for decades.

year of prices in 2020.

Fewer dairy farms are not oversaturating the market, she said.

"Before the virus hit us, we were exporting more milk, and our country was getting trade deals in place with other countries. Everything was looking up. The futures market was rising with indications we would have \$20 to \$21 prices of milk.

"The last couple of months of 2019, we had better prices. We got a little more money in the bank, but that's not going to be there much longer because the first feed bill we get this month will take pretty much all of that," she said with a laugh.

Prices are not the only concern at the local dairy farm.

The farm is being especially careful to clean surfaces that each of their nine employees touch during milking operations.

"Fortunately, this is not a virus that cows contract. Cows get their own form of coronavirus that we vaccinate for.

"But pasteurization of milk kills any virus anyway," said Johnson.

The rise of input costs is also taking a toll on local farms.

"The stuff we have to pay for to keep the farm going must be considered, too. We have to keep the cows fed and pay for hauling costs. It's time to plant corn on the farm," she said. "There are corn seed costs, fertilizer and chemicals to buy.

"I'm afraid this is going to be another bad year for farmers. I'd say we'll see more dairy farms go out because they cannot sustain another year of these prices.

"Thankfully, our farm is holding its own. We're operating on the short term and hoping this setback doesn't last long," said Johnson.

"I hope people keep buying milk. And, don't worry, it's going to get to the stores," she said with a laugh.

"We're still here milking cows."

Carolyn R. Wilson is a freelance writer in Glade Spring, Virginia. Contact her at news@washconews.com.



WANDERING AROUND WASHINGTON

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Baby alpacas are arriving at Dreamland

MEADOWVIEW, Va. — It's springtime on the farm called Dreamland Alpacas.

And in the midst of a worldwide health crisis, Debbie McLeish stands with a smile as she announces the birth of another baby.

This alpaca was born on a recent Friday at noon to a mother named Heather.

And McLeish, 59, watched the miracle — just a few days before Easter.

"I saw the feet first," McLeish said. "That's how they usually arrive. The feet and nose usually come first, within seconds of each other."

McLeish watched the miracle of birth with awe.

"This is my favorite part of raising alpacas," she said.

And yet, even after 13 years on the farm and with more than 30 other alpacas in the field, McLeish has not lost count: This baby was No. 115 to be born here at Meadowview.

"It is one at a time," McLeish said. "It is possible to have twins, but it is extremely rare. People have twins more often than alpacas have them."

Still awaiting a name, this baby alpaca weighed 18 pounds.

He's also sticking around on the farm at Meadowview in Washington County.

"This one will not be sold," McLeish promised. "We had purchased his mother pregnant because we wanted to tie into that bloodline. We were hoping that we were going to get a boy, which we did, so we can use a lot of his gene pool."

This is the first alpaca born on the farm this year.

An alpaca stays pregnant for 11 1/2 months.

But there is more good news: Five more alpacas are pregnant at Dreamland Alpacas, and four more babies are expected to arrive around Memorial Day.

"I love the whole birth process," McLeish said. "Truly, this really is the best day on my farm."

The baby alpacas are simply a delight to see, she added.

"They prong around," McLeish said. "They jump with all four feet off the ground at the same time. They just kind of float off the ground."



CONTRIBUTED PHOTOS

A baby male alpaca weighing 18 pounds was born at Dreamland Alpacas farm in Meadowview this week. Debbie McLeish, one of the owners, said they will keep the alpaca and eventually use him for breeding.



BLUE DOOR GARDEN

Picking (up) flowers

Florist makes arrangements available for pickup, delivery

BY CAROLYN R. WILSON

FOR THE WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

ABINGDON, Va. — When fears about COVID-19 take an emotional toll, Deni Peterson has some sweet advice. She retreats to her flower gardens for solace.

"Flowers can help make your day brighter — the colors, textures and the fragrances," said Deni, who, along with her husband, Tom Peterson, lives in Abingdon and operates Blue Door Garden, an organic florist.

"I love to play with flowers, arrange them and take them apart and arrange them again. It's an art form. And caring for flowers can distract the busiest mind," she said.

An environmentalist and farmer for most of her life, Deni uses nature's inventory of flowers and grasses to make and sell spring bouquets.

The Abingdon Farmers Market vendor is relying on creative ways to sell her wares during the pandemic this spring.

Deni ordinarily would be set up at the Abingdon market on Saturday mornings, but during the coronavirus outbreak, she's making arrangements to meet customers at her home or deliver the flowers to customers.

The flower farmer has one of the few gardens in the area to produce flowers this early in the season.

Most of her flower seeds are started in greenhouses, planted in fields or transferred into three-hoop houses — unheated greenhouses that help extend the season — allowing her to raise a variety of flowers from spring to fall. In winter, row covers protect the young plants.

In addition, the flowers are grown organically.

"Most people don't eat the flowers they purchase for their tables, but growing flowers organically provides the same benefits to the soil and environment as growing organic food," she said. "People like to smell flowers. Flowers that are grown organically do not 'off-gas' toxic chemicals."

Her homegrown bouquets are arranged with joy-filled flowers such as ranunculus (buttercups or spear-worts), anemone, snapdragons and campanula (bellflowers).

Flower availabilities change weekly, she said, and "peonies and sunflowers will arrive soon."

She mixes all fresh-cut flowers with greens from her property — lilac, ivy and autumn olive, for example.

"The lion's share of our business is in fresh-cut flowers and arrangements from April through early November. We offer fresh flowers for weddings and special events," said Tom.

The husband-and-wife team is participating in community-supported agriculture (CSA), a program that's sprouting at farms throughout the country.

The program allows customers to purchase bundles of flowers directly from the Petersons. The farmers sell shares of their harvest to the public and commit to growing the flowers for the participating members.

The system is beneficial for the customers as well as the growers.

Customers are ensured a certain amount of fresh flowers, when needed, and it's a good way to get to know your local farmers and learn about their growing practices.

For \$100, customers can receive four bundles of spring flowers anytime between now and June. Upon payment, customers choose the dates and pickup locations available.

"You can order them all at once or receive them every other week. It's your choice," Deni said.

Delivery is an option for an additional fee of 75 cents per mile.

For those who do not participate in the CSA program, individual flower bouquets can cost as little as \$6 and contain two tulips, stems of ranunculus and anemone and sprigs of greenery. Larger arrange-



PHOTOS BY CAROLYN R. WILSON/ FOR THE WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

Deni Peterson, operator of organic florist Blue Door Garden, is inventing some creative ways to share her craft through flower delivery and package services.

ments are also available and priced according to customer needs.

"All arrangements are held together by rubber bands and wrapped in wax paper. I handle the flowers with masks and gloves for everyone's protection during this time of great uncertainty," she said.

They also make dried floral arrangements for a variety of celebrations, including weddings, private parties, baby showers and corporate dinners.

For more information on ordering flowers, send an email to blue-door444@gmail.com.

How to Extend the Life of Cut Flowers

- » Clean flower vase with warm, soapy water and rinse well.
- » Ideally, clean vase and change flower water every day, cutting ends of stems 1/4 of an inch to reduce bacteria and enable better water intake.

Check out their website at www.bluedoorgarden.net.

Carolyn R. Wilson is a freelance writer in Glade Spring, Virginia. Contact her at news@washconews.com.

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BY CAROLYN R. WILSON
FOR THE WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

Business is booming for local beef farmers, processors despite supply chain woes

DAMASCUS, Va. — A recent trip to the grocery store may leave you asking, “Where’s the beef?” Once again, the effects of the coronavirus pandemic are managing to change the way we live, especially when it comes to what we put on the dinner plate tonight. Beef cattle farmer Adam Wilson in Damascus explained sparse cuts of beef on the grocery store shelves are more than likely caused by a disruption of the supply chain — not a lack of beef.

Many large meat processing plants through-

out the country recently were forced to close or slow down when the coronavirus infected their workers, causing a massive bottleneck in the meat and livestock supply chain. “These closings are really presenting challenges to the beef supply chain,” he said. Closed meat plants mean less meat on the grocery shelves, he said. “But there is no widespread shortage of beef in the United States. I believe these are temporary conditions that are causing the limitations. It’s not the producer’s fault that the meat

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METROCREATIVE



CAROLYN R. WILSON/FOR THE WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

Beef cattle farmer Adam Wilson in Damascus explained sparse cuts of beef on the grocery store shelves are more than likely caused by a disruption of the supply chain — not a lack of beef.



MARK GORMUS/RICHMOND TIMES-DISPATCH

Gov. Ralph Northam speaks during a news conference on the coronavirus Friday at the Patrick Henry Building in Richmond.

Governor details reopening plans in Virginia

BY ROBERT SORRELL
BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

If current COVID-19 trends continue, Virginia will begin to open in stages at the end of this week, Gov. Ralph Northam said Friday.

Numbers in the state have improved, Northam said, and phase one could begin on May 15 — two months after the governor issued orders that resulted in a number of business closings.

The governor said the reopening will be a “safer-at-home” order, rather than the current stay-at-home order. People will be allowed to leave their homes for more things, he explained.

Nonessential retail businesses may open May 15, but they must retain 50% capacity. Nonessential businesses have been closed since March 24 in Virginia.

Restaurants and beverage services, such as breweries, will remain open for takeout and delivery, leaving dine-in

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Health service vendor to establish regional center with Ballad, hire 500

BY DAVID MCGEE
WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

Ensemble Health Partners, a North Carolina-based medical billing management company, announced Thursday it plans to establish a new operations center in this region to employ 500 through a new partnership with Ballad Health.

In addition, Ensemble will immediately begin employing 1,100 current Ballad employees who work in patient registration, records, insurance and billing as

part of a strategic agreement. Officials of both companies announced the partnership during a video media briefing. Affected Ballad employees were notified last Wednesday.

Ballad is investing \$200 million to acquire Ensemble’s comprehensive revenue services technology to use throughout its network of regional hospitals and health care facilities. Ballad’s board of directors unanimously approved the partnership, which meets one of its goals to reinvent and mod-

ernize its revenue cycle functions and improve patient satisfaction.

Plans call for Ensemble hiring 500 employees to staff the new operations center and service hospital and health care clients from throughout the nation, company CEO and founder Judson Ivy said.

“When we think about why Ensemble was attracted to Ballad and the Appalachian Highlands, it’s really three reasons,” Ivy said. “There is a great amount of dedicated talent here. The culture

of this region has a terrific work ethic in addition to quality education. We’re very excited to locate a regional service center here and welcome the 1,100 Ballad team members to the Ensemble family.”

Based in Huntersville, North Carolina, Ensemble presently employs more than 5,000 serving hospitals and health care systems in 36 states and Europe. Earlier this year, the company opened a

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Ballad

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400,000-square-foot facility that will ultimately employ 2,500 near Cincinnati, Ohio.

"We've grown significantly over the past five years. As health care systems struggle with the [COVID-19] pandemic and running a health system, we're actually busier than ever because our clients and others are reaching out to us to help them with some

of the pressures of the pandemic," Ivy said.

Locally, Ensemble will consider either revising an existing building or constructing a new facility, Ivy said. Asked by a reporter, Ivy didn't reveal a specific timeline to identify a location, open the new facility or begin hiring. In the meantime, Ensemble will use Ballad's existing locations for revenue cycle functions for the transitioning workers.

Ensemble officials have already spoken with Ten-

nessee Gov. Bill Lee and Stephen Moret, president of the Virginia Economic Development Partnership.

"We built into our relationship with Ensemble incentives for them to reach that 500 mark no later than the end of the fifth year," Ballad CEO Alan Levine said. "We already have a ready-made workforce. As Ensemble grows, their growth is going to be here."

Ensemble began working with Ballad predecessor Wellmont Health System around 2015, but

Ivy said this arrangement would have been impossible with either of Ballad's legacy firms [Wellmont or Mountain States Health Alliance] individually because each lacked the scale for Ensemble to make that kind of commitment.

"As we developed our relationship with Ensemble over the last four-and-a-half or five years, they learned we have the people and the culture and the work ethic in the region," Levine said. "So why should we see our

jobs disappear and go somewhere else?"

Ballad is the region's largest employer with about 15,000 employees. In response to a question, Levine said that some of the Ballad employees furloughed last month have been called back as elective procedures are again

occurring.

"The region isn't going to be able to grow without Ballad, and Ballad is not going to be able to thrive without the region growing," Levine said.

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Beef

From Page A1

isn't in the stores. It's just that things are so much different than what there were."

According to the USDA, U.S. processing plants are operating between 50-75% of their normal capacity to allow for worker protections and distancing requirements that will help keep plant workers safe and on the job.

Markus Vaughn, manager of the Washington County Meat Packing in Bristol, Virginia, said business is booming for the local facility. More people are responding to the shortages in the stores by turning to local meat packers to process meat for their own use or to resell to customers.

"Usually, we're booked up about two to three weeks this time of year because it's our slower time of the year. But instead, we are booked up for six months," said Vaughn.

Vaughn said all meat that will be sold to the public must be inspected. "We're doing more inspections for meat resale than we ever have."

The meat packing facility processes meat from lamb, goats and pigs, in addition to beef.

Most of the increase is being seen in beef, he said.

"I think more people are buying local meat to help support the farmers. And consumers also like to know where their meat comes from. Meat no longer carries labels that tell customers where it was processed."

Last December, Congress repealed the law that requires Country of Origin Labeling, which informs consumers of the origins of the animals and where it was slaughtered.

Panic-buying

Wilson believes panic-buying is also responsible for a lot of the meat shortages.

"As a consumer, when you go to the grocery store and you really want that pack of rib-eye steaks and it's not there, you may

panic and think they have run out," he said.

"But that's not the case. The cuts you are looking for may be there tomorrow. It's a temporary thing.

"When processing plants do not run at full capacity but the demands for beef stay the same, that causes the problems you are seeing. It makes it hard for every cut of beef to be there consistently.

"It's like the toilet paper deal," he said. "People buy five packs of toilet paper instead of their normal one. All [of] the sudden, grocery stores run out of toilet paper. It's the same way with beef.

"I know for a fact that you can't find a freezer anywhere — at all. It's because people are buying up a surplus of beef, pork and chicken and freezing it. People who normally buy four steaks are purchasing twice as many each week."

Crippled supply chain

The crippling effects of COVID-19 are testing the nerves of cattle producers.

Wilson, who sells an average of 20 processed beef to customers per year, is worried about how long it will take for the supply chain to recover.

"Cattle sold to feed lots out west to fatten up are not being moved to the next step at processing plants because of the closings of some plants. Some farmers may have to keep their animals longer before moving to the next supply chain.

"It's going to take a while for feed lots to move the cattle and restock their inventories."

Wilson is among several local farmers who sell their processed beef to area restaurants and individual customers. The farmer regrets not scheduling appointments with Washington County Meat Packers before the pandemic hit.

"Normally, it takes a month to get an appointment to take a cow to be processed. Last week, I called for an appointment and was told the earliest would be mid-September. Now, I'm out of the products because I can't get

them to the processors.

"Some people are good with waiting that long, and some are not."

The cattle farmer mostly sells his beef to 7 Trails Grill in Damascus, but since they have been closed, he has relied on selling to individual customers.

"I've had more calls in the last two months about beef than in the last two years. It's amazing how many calls I've been getting."

Even at selling ground beef for only \$4 per pound, Wilson said he gets more for selling the cuts of processed beef than he would from selling the cow at the market.

"You get more money for a processed beef, but it also has more in it." Wilson's cattle are grain-finished, adding an extra expense for the producer.

"You get more, but you have to spend more, too."

retail, which has been our goal all along.

"We raise all-natural, pasture-raised cattle that is grain finished. We don't use any added growth hormones, steroids or antibiotics," she said.

"We also raise our own pork, which is sold at our store on Main Street."

The business is a local incubator, carrying the products of several small businesses, including Southern Fork Farm, Duchess Dairy Products, Abingdon Olive Oil, Dark Hollow Micro Roasters, Gather Ye Honey, Vintage Kitchen Cast Iron and Collectibles and Dreamland Alpacas.

Carolyn R. Wilson is a freelance writer in Glade Spring, Virginia. Contact her at news@washconews.com.

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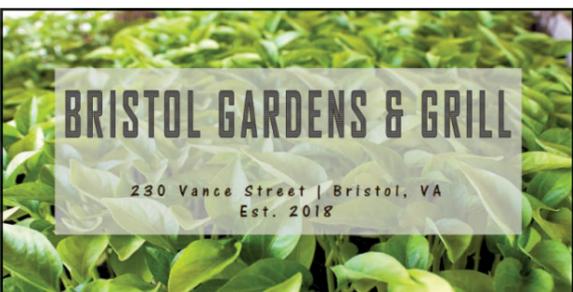
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