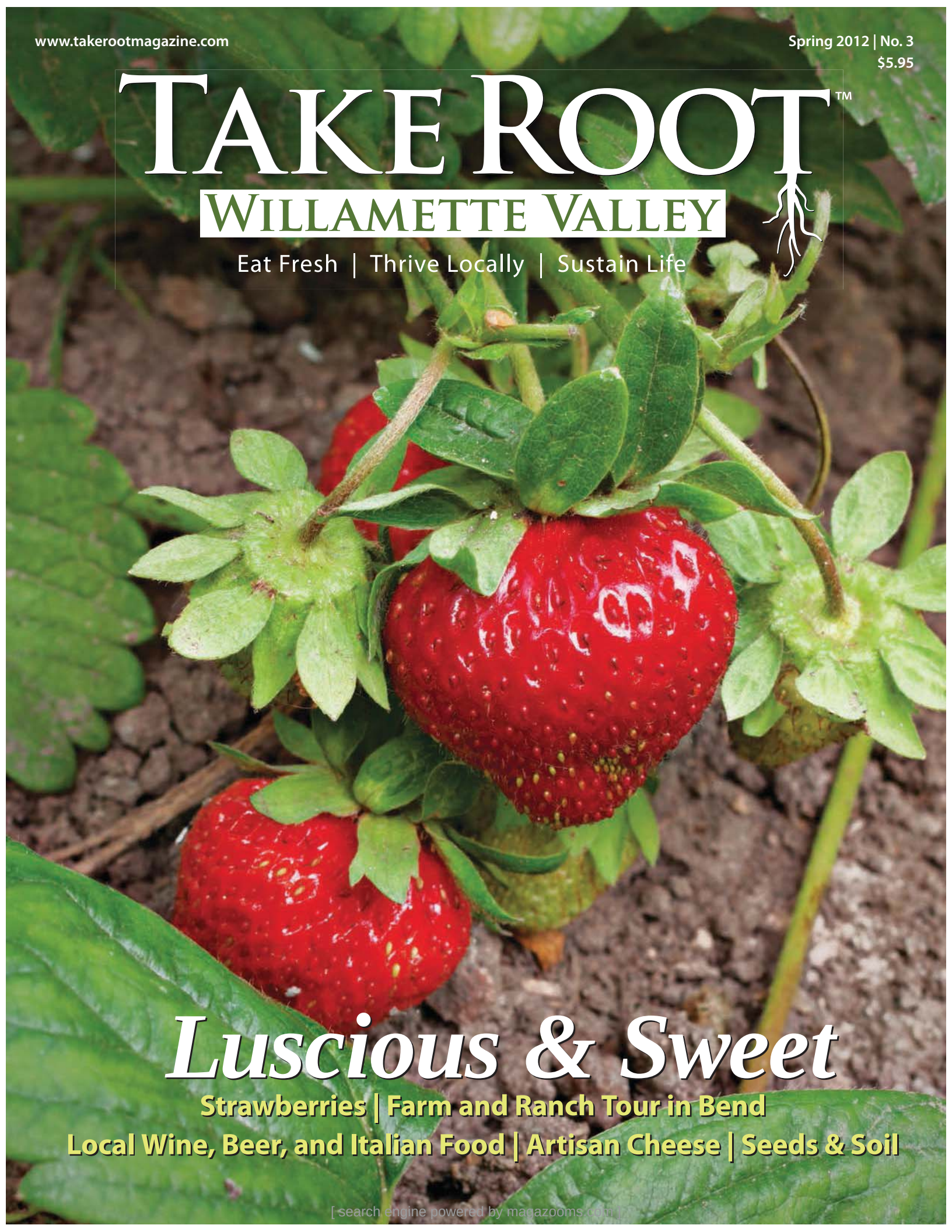
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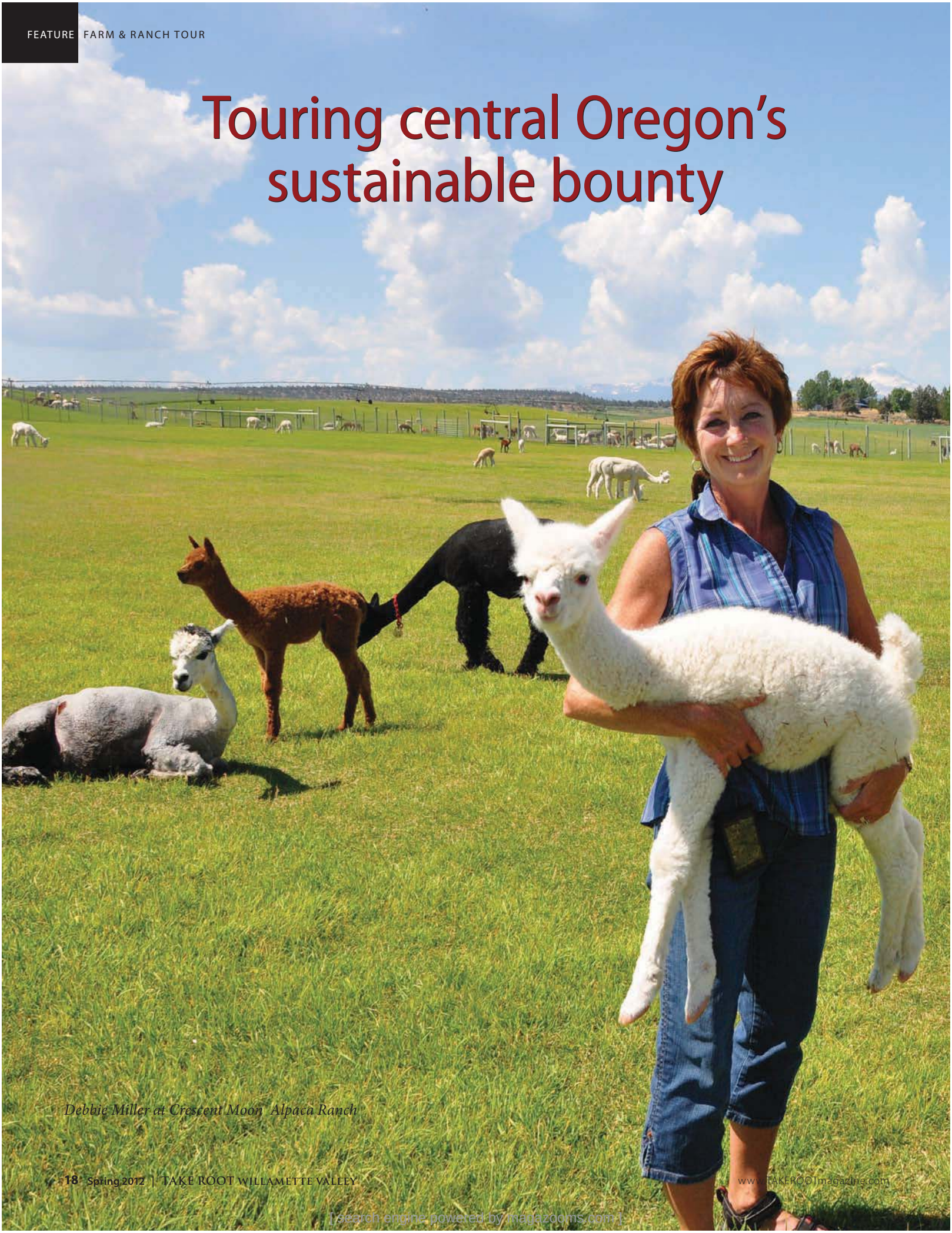
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Touring central Oregon's sustainable bounty

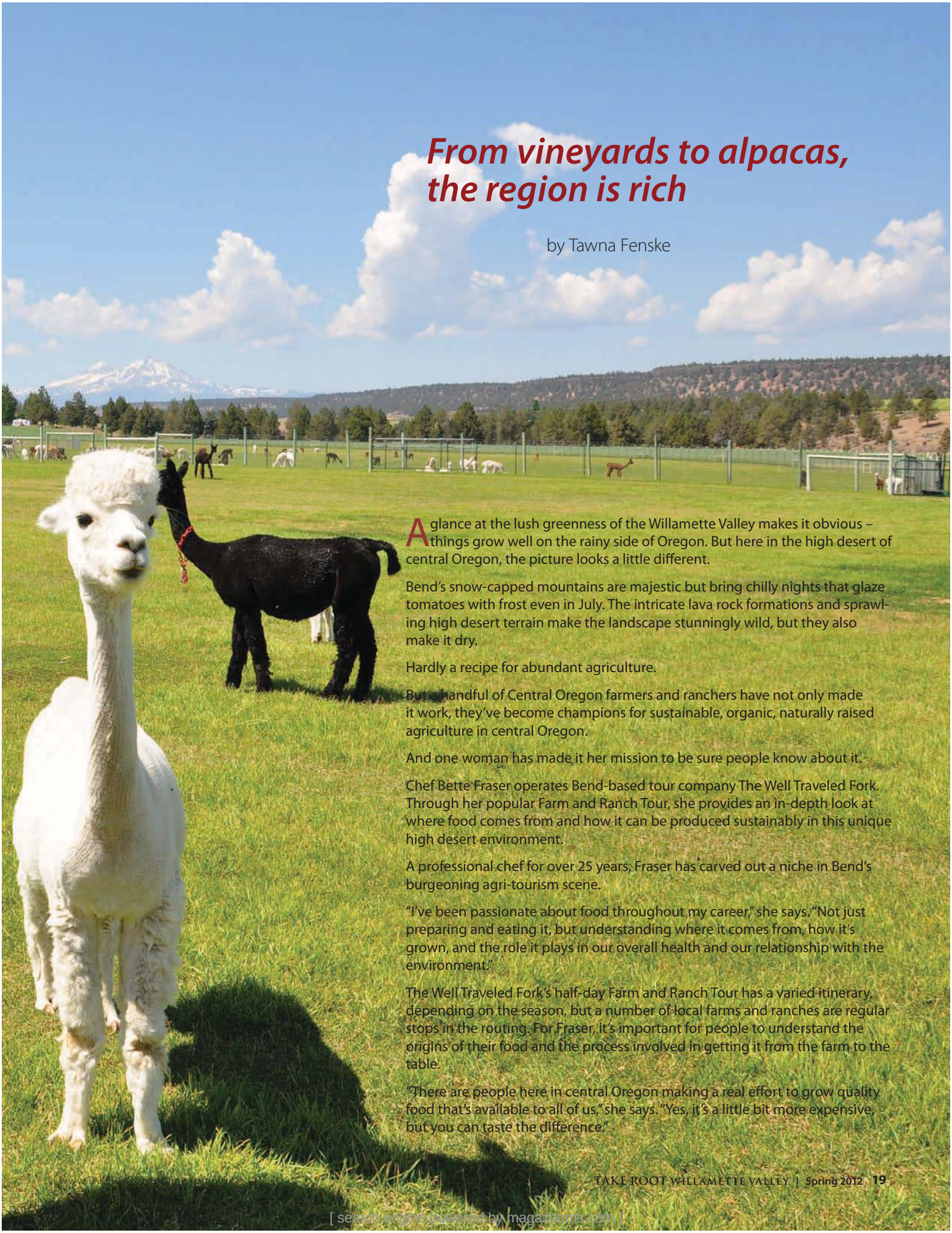


Debbie Miller at Crescent Moon Alpaca Ranch

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From vineyards to alpacas, the region is rich

by Tawna Fenske



A glance at the lush greenness of the Willamette Valley makes it obvious – things grow well on the rainy side of Oregon. But here in the high desert of central Oregon, the picture looks a little different.

Bend's snow-capped mountains are majestic but bring chilly nights that glaze tomatoes with frost even in July. The intricate lava rock formations and sprawling high desert terrain make the landscape stunningly wild, but they also make it dry.

Hardly a recipe for abundant agriculture.

But a handful of Central Oregon farmers and ranchers have not only made it work, they've become champions for sustainable, organic, naturally raised agriculture in central Oregon.

And one woman has made it her mission to be sure people know about it.

Chef Bette Fraser operates Bend-based tour company The Well Traveled Fork. Through her popular Farm and Ranch Tour, she provides an in-depth look at where food comes from and how it can be produced sustainably in this unique high desert environment.

A professional chef for over 25 years, Fraser has carved out a niche in Bend's burgeoning agri-tourism scene.

"I've been passionate about food throughout my career," she says. "Not just preparing and eating it, but understanding where it comes from, how it's grown, and the role it plays in our overall health and our relationship with the environment."

The Well Traveled Fork's half-day Farm and Ranch Tour has a varied itinerary, depending on the season, but a number of local farms and ranches are regular stops in the routing. For Fraser, it's important for people to understand the origins of their food and the process involved in getting it from the farm to the table.

"There are people here in central Oregon making a real effort to grow quality food that's available to all of us," she says. "Yes, it's a little bit more expensive, but you can taste the difference."

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First stop, Red Tail Farm
This tranquil 10-acre parcel is located on the outskirts of Bend, and a light, juniper-tinged breeze drifts in from the Cascade Mountains most days. A relative newcomer to the farming community, owner Heidi Moir and her husband purchased the land two years ago as an abandoned property. Now, they're working to become Central Oregon's first fully sustainable farm.

"By rotating where our plants are planted and our animals graze, we help to decrease the environmental impact we have on the land and ensure the health of the whole system," says Heidi Moir.

Red Tail Farm takes great pains to avoid pesticides, herbicides, fungicides, hormones, anitibiotics, or inorganic chemicals. They raise only non-commercial, heritage breeds like Red Wattle pigs, a rare type of hog.

All the animals here are grass or pasture-fed, and most have names and recognizable personalities. The pigs come trotting happily to the fence when offered an apple.

"They have such a short life, we want to make sure they're spoiled rotten," Moir says. "All the animals here have a purpose, whether it's keeping noxious weeds at bay or providing compost."

RedTail Farm also produces crops like greens, celery, and peas.

"The weather is definitely a big deal here in Central Oregon," Moir says. "There aren't many growers that can do it year-round. You have to cover your crops and take extra precautions when it comes to watering and frost."

But for Red Tail Farm, the extra work – and expense – is worth it.

Feeling fuzzy at Crescent Moon Alpaca Ranch
They're cute. They're fluffy. They're so adorably sweet, you want to bury your fingers in their fleece and hug their long, graceful necks.

But what on earth do you do with an alpaca?

"The boutique answers that question better than we can," explains owner Debbie Miller.



Indeed, the on-site boutique at Crescent Moon Alpaca Ranch is open seven days a week offering socks, sweaters, hats, slippers, and more – all created with alpaca fiber.

"It's one of the rarest and most treasured animal fibers in the world," Miller says.

She and her family started Crescent Moon in 1996 on San Juan Island, but moved the business – and 180 alpacas – to Terrebone in 2003. Since then, they've grown to be one of the largest alpaca breeders in the nation.

The 137-acre property is situated in an ancient river valley with abundant irrigation, a rarity in the high desert. For the Millers and their alpacas, central Oregon's unique high desert climate is ideal.

Unlike their counterparts in rainier or more temperate regions, Crescent Moon has no problems with mites, sucking lice, or foot rot. Miller says the alpacas' legs are straighter because of the high desert sun, and the babies – or cria – are larger than those at alpaca ranches outside central Oregon.

"Nutritionally, the grass we have over here is better," she says. "We don't have any problems with lactating or with worms the way they do in other climates, particularly west of the mountains."

Vineyards in central Oregon? *Really?*
Named for the Three Sisters mountains spanning the horizon behind this new vineyard and event center, Faith, Hope and Charity sprung up out of this unlikely terrain in the last year. The facility was built on principles of energy efficiency and sustainability, and owners Cindy and Roger Grossman have grand plans for growing it into a world-class event center.

Tasting room manager Jojo Howard has worked at wineries throughout the Willamette Valley, and agrees central Oregon isn't what most people imagine when they picture Oregon wine country.

"In the valley, we fight rain," she says. "Here, we fight frost."

There are very few frost-free days, but central Oregon vineyards like this one use irrigation systems to their advantage. Water maintained at a precise 56-degrees is used to insulate the grapes when temperatures drop below the 36-degree "danger zone." An ice shell forms and encapsulates the grapes, protecting them from freezing.

It's a complex system owner Cindy Grossman says is necessary in the high desert climate. "Without it, you could lose everything," she says.

Wine varietals in central Oregon are different from those grown in the Willamette Valley. Though Oregon is generally known for its delicate pinot noirs, central Oregon's shortened growing season is better suited for northern European varietals and hybrids created specifically for colder, drier environments. Faith, Hope, and Charity has grown everything from St. Croix and La Crescent to Marechal Foch, Frontenac, and more.

Despite the chilly conditions that make grape growing a challenge,

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there are advantages to operating a vineyard in central Oregon. The soil is sandy with virtually no clay, and mildew isn't an issue.

"All the things that destroy a vineyard in California or the valley, we don't have those here," Grossman says.

Rainshadow Organics – a family affair

Fifteen miles northeast of Sisters is a market garden known as Rainshadow Organics. It's located at Lawrence Farms, where the Lawrence family has farmed and gardened for over 25 years.

Daughter Sarahlee Lawrence earned a master's degree in environmental science before she set off to wander the globe as a river guide. When she returned home to the farm several years ago, she worked with her father to build herself a log cabin on the property.

Then she made it her mission to introduce organic principles to the farm.

Rainshadow Organics is now the only food farm in central Oregon to be certified organic. They specialize in heirloom vegetables and heritage breeds specifically adapted to the harsh desert climate. They have a passive four-season greenhouse for winter and early starts, and a 100-year-old root cellar.

Rainshadow Organics even grows wheat and mills its own flour for use in bakeries around the area.

"All the crops we grow are distributed within 50 miles through our CSA program, local restaurants, and farmers markets," Lawrence says. "We pride ourselves on looping our nutrients and resources into our community and back into our land."

The farm's commitment to the environment is evident in everything they do, including running their delivery truck on used cooking oil.

This past February, Rainshadow Organics partnered with the Cascade Culinary Institute and Central Oregon Locavore to host the first sold-out "Meet Your Farmer" dinner. The farm provided pork, collard greens, cabbages, lettuce mix, micro green, beets, and flour, along with an informational talk about the farm's mission.

"It was the best meal I've ever eaten in my life," says Lynnette Braillard, marketing director for the city's tourism bureau, Visit Bend. "Everything was fresh and flavorful and beautifully prepared."

DD Ranch Beef – it's what should be for dinner

Mike and Diann Duggan have been working this stunning ranch on the fringes of Smith Rock State Park since 1985.

Though it's best known by locals for its petting zoo, seasonal pumpkin patch, and lush fields of corn and potatoes, the DD Ranch specializes in beef, and not just any beef, but steroid-free, naturally grass-fed beef.

Some of the animals on the ranch are descendents of those the Duggans acquired more than 27 years ago.

"It's some of the best meat in the world," says Mike Duggan.



Chef Bette Fraser operates Bend-based tour company The Well Traveled Fork.

Caring for the animals in a humane manner is a big priority for the DD Ranch. Though the butcher prefers to have animals brought in the night before, Duggan steadfastly refuses.

"Stress is one of the biggest challenges for the animals," he says. "And stress produces tough meet."

The Duggans have 200 acres of their own and lease an additional 350. They generally keep around 200 head of cattle, though the tough economy has reduced the herd to around 150. Though they also produce pork and lamb, beef is their true bread and butter.

"There's a big taste difference between grass-fed beef versus grain-fed beef," Duggan says. "Our beef is less fatty. We use no antibiotics, no chemicals."

Challenging financial times in recent years have left the Duggans scrambling to save the ranch. Central Oregon's difficult climate hasn't always helped.

"I lost my sweet corn crop two years in a row to a frost in August," Duggan says.

Two years ago, things looked dicey for the ranch, and the Duggans weren't sure they could hang on. But thanks to some savvy marketing and strong word-of-mouth about the quality of their meat, the DD Ranch has managed to survive.

"The media has been doing a good job of exposing feed lots and meat packers for a lot of the bad stuff they've been doing," Duggan says. "The cost may be higher for the sort of chemical-free, humanely raised meats we have here, but it's worth it to a lot of folks."

And as more people reach that conclusion for themselves, Chef Bette Fraser hopes it will make a difference not only in central Oregon, but around the nation.

"You can vote with your dollar, and vote with your fork," she says. "It may cost more now to eat healthy, organic, locally-grown foods, but if we all do it, the price will come down."

Writer Tawna Fenske is the communications manager for Visit Bend. For information on planning your trip to Bend, check out www.visitbend.com

Photos courtesy of Chef Betty Fraser at The Well Traveled Fork

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