
SNAPSHOT SERIES: TRANSITIONING TO VALUE ADDED ENTERPRISES

TAIT FARM FOODS – CENTRE HALL, PA

Organic Fruits and Vegetables, and Specialty Food Products

 WALLACE CENTER
WINROCK INTERNATIONAL

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The Wallace Center supports entrepreneurs and communities as they build a new, 21st century food system that is healthier for people, the environment, and the economy. The Center builds and strengthens links in the emerging chain of businesses and civic efforts focused on making good food – healthy, green, fair, affordable food – an everyday reality in every community. Winrock International is a nonprofit organization that works with people in the United States and around the world to increase economic opportunity, sustain natural resources, and protect the environment, implementing projects in more than 65 countries across the globe.


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The Snapshot Series examines how traditionally direct marketing farmers are using value added enterprises to supplement and expand their agri-businesses, reaching new markets and consumers through the development of new products. This effort was funded in partnership with the Risk Management Agency as part of a multi-year initiative to develop and distribute risk mitigation resources for the direct marketing community.

More information on the series can be found online at www.wallacecenter.org.

AT A GLANCE: TAIT FARM FOODS

After a bumper crop of raspberries in 1986, owner and manager Kim Tait and her late husband David Tait experimented with a little known beverage to salvage their crop: shrub. A colonial-era favorite, customers quickly warmed to the product, and its popularity led to a variety of new products using shrub concentrate, including sauces and dressings. From this early innovation, Tait Farm Foods now produces about 50 value added products, including jams, chutneys, vinaigrettes, fruit chocolate sauces, savory sauces, scone and pancake mixes and flavored oils, in addition to growing 90 varieties of organic fruits and vegetables on 10 acres.

BACKGROUND

Tait Farm is located in Centre Hall, Pennsylvania, a rural area 170 miles northeast of Philadelphia, and home to Pennsylvania State University (Penn State). Beef and dairy farms dot this fast growing area, with several Amish farms located east of Tait Farm. Although many grow sweet corn and other produce, owner and manager of Tait Farm Foods, Kim Tait says, “There are not many farms in the area doing what we’re doing.” Tait Farm Foods considers itself a diversified agricultural business. They grow 10 acres of organic vegetables and fruits mainly for a 175 member CSA, manufacture and sell specialty food products (both wholesale and retail) and operate a year-round retail store and a seasonal greenhouse business.

Originally from Southern California, Kim grew up with an interest in food. Although she didn’t have farming experience prior to coming to Tait Farm, she grew up influenced by parents who ate organically and had a large family garden in the backyard. While Kim was a college student in the ‘70s, author Frances Moore Lappé published her seminal book *Diet for a Small Planet*. During this early period of the organic movement, Kim began to recognize the importance of food and farming. She started out as a nutrition major as an undergraduate in California and later finished her degree in education, specializing in garden-based science. In 1988, Kim moved to Pennsylvania and began to farm with her husband David Tait in 1990. David’s parents, Marian and Elton Tait, originally purchased the farm in 1950. In 1997, Kim took over business and operations and management of Tait Farm Foods when her husband David passed away. She’s now more involved with the management and administration side of Tait Farm Foods than with farming, but she still enjoys working in the fields whenever she can.

The farm began taking its current shape in the late 1970s, when David and his brother John returned to their family farm to make their living off the land. Previously, their parents Marian and Elton had raised sheep, chickens, hogs, horses, Basset Hounds and Christmas trees. With David and John tending to the farm, perennial plantings of apples, raspberries, asparagus and more Christmas trees soon developed. By the mid-1980’s the farm was fast becoming the local spot to pick-your-own fruits, vegetables and Christmas trees.

Today, the farm grows over 90 different varieties of vegetables and fruits on 10 acres, and employs eight full-time and eight part-time staff, two of which are farmers and live on the premises. On an additional 120 acres, John Tait raises Christmas trees and Basset Hounds, with the rest of the land being wooded. The farm has always used sustainable or organic farming methods and four years ago became certified organic.

In 2000, Tait Farm started Community Harvest, a community supported agriculture (CSA) program serving local Pennsylvania residents. The CSA now has 175 members, including two restaurants. Additionally, the farm conducts tours and hosts college students for internships and research projects.

VALUE-ADDING

The value-added food business began after a bumper crop of raspberries in 1986, when hundreds of pounds of fruit sat on the canes in the pouring rain with no one coming out to pick. After unsuccessful attempts to sell the harvested crop as frozen raspberries, David Tait turned to an old recipe for raspberry shrub, a colonial-era concoction he’d tried once. Shrubs are sweetened fruit vinegars, made by preserving fresh fruit in vinegar and adding sugar; the final product is essentially a concentrate. In the colonial period, shrub was enjoyed in the fields during summer and enjoyed in the off-season mixed with water. To suit contemporary tastes, Tait Farm Foods experimented with and updated the original Colonial-era shrub recipes.

The first bottles of shrub were sold at the farm beginning in 1987. By 1989 a new label had been developed and David went on the road selling shrub in Pennsylvania. For the first few years, raspberry vinegar and raspberry shrub were the only value-added products Tait Farm Foods made. According to Kim, customers would often ask her to bottle what she would regularly make as samples using raspberry shrub – things like raspberry vinaigrette and raspberry teriyaki sauce. Customer demand coupled with “a real push in the marketplace to make something new,” soon resulted in a line of sauces and dressings. She explains that, “Once you have the knowledge and technology to make one product, it’s easy to make other ones.” Tait Farm now produces its own line of jams, chutneys, vinaigrettes, fruit chocolate sauces, savory sauces, scone and pancake mixes and flavored oils, in addition to their shrubs.

THE FIRST YEAR

Initially, shrub was produced in the Tait’s home kitchen on the farm. The original bottles had handwritten labels and the product was sampled to customers who had come out to pick raspberries. Then the Tait’s took raspberry shrub to the local farmers market in State College. People were intrigued with the drink and its popularity slowly grew. In 1990, they got the idea to market shrub to historical sites and soon had customers such as Colonial Williamsburg and Sturbridge Village. The original investment was very minimal, but over time they borrowed money to expand the business. The biggest challenge initially was that no one knew what shrub was. People weren’t used to making drinks using concentrates or drinking vinegar, so it took quite a bit of education and marketing to engage customers. Tait Farm Foods did some work with university extension programs in the beginning and later went to SCORE (Service Core of Retired Executives, run by the Small Business Administration), the Small Business Development Center, Ben Franklin Transformation Group and Penn Tap for help.

“If you listen carefully to your customers, they’ll guide you.” — Kim Tait

In 1989, Tait Farm converted part of a barn into a manufacturing facility, following the specifications and food manufacturing licensing requirements of the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture (PDOA). Except for its dry mixes, Tait Farm Foods makes all of its products on-site at the farm. Because they don’t have the equipment to make their dry mixes, Tait Farm Foods hires a local bakery to make them. All the products they make are considered high acid and are annually inspected by the PDOA.

MARKETING AND CUSTOMERS

Kim says that she learned about business and marketing on the job because “most people in agriculture don’t have the luxury” to pursue outside study and take courses in business. She’s found that, particularly in agriculture, one ends up being a jack-of-all-trades because the funds to hire staff are often not available.

Tait Farm Foods uses local artwork and historical prints for most of its labels. Kim points out that labels give a company “a visual identity” and that “how a product is packaged does matter, because we’re a visual culture.” For its signature products like fruit shrubs, Tait Farm Foods uses black and white labels based on 19th century wood engravings of people and pastoral scenes from that era. They decided to use old-fashioned images that take people back to a time when “life was simpler and folks did real, honest to goodness work in the fields (and got really thirsty).” They worked with a local graphic artist and selected pictures from the print archives at Penn State. Kim says that this same local artist taught them about choosing a graphic concept that “conveyed an emotional response, as opposed to a literal one.” For other products, such as their jams and chutneys, Tait Farm Foods uses a label drawn by a local artist depicting fruits and vegetables.

Advertising is an important part of their work, but not “super sophisticated.” For their wholesale customers, advertising new products consists of sending a flyer out twice a year. Kim has also discovered that events such as National Association for the Specialty Food Trade (NASFT) fancy food shows have been a good way for Tait Farm Foods products to be introduced to wholesale customers. For its retail customers, Tait Farm uses a small catalog, seasonal flyers, public radio, local newspapers, and magazine ads, depending on the season. Tait Farm also has twice yearly seasonal sales (July and January) and holds an open house two times a year (May and November). Kim says that everyone wants to know what’s new (hence the open houses) and that everyone loves a bargain (seasonal sales). Tait Farm Foods also hosts local events that support and showcase local artists, such as the Farmland Preservation Artists.

Originally selling at farmers markets and on-farm through its seasonal store, Tait Farm Food products are now carried at about 200 diverse outlets, including other farm markets, specialty stores, restaurants, museum shops, its own year-round retail store, an online store and at three or four festivals or events each year, such as the Philadelphia Flower Show. According to Kim, the best place to sell is through the on-farm retail store, because they receive retail prices without having to worry about transport costs. And with CSA members picking up their share each week from the farm, coupled with the farm’s convenient location on a main road, “a lot of traffic comes through the shop.” Tait Farm Foods is very much a regional company that emphasizes quality and specialization. She doesn’t intend to take Tait Farm Foods products to big grocery store chains since the big chains “tend to emphasize volume and low price,” a sharp contrast to the philosophy of Tait Farm Foods. Kim also notes that it’s easiest to market “to the people who come to know you and trust you and value you,” and that they’ve been fortunate to have a loyal local customer base.

Tait Farm Foods has not only developed a devoted customer base through direct marketing at farmers market and public events, but has also built a loyal group of niche customers among cultural and educational institutions. Raspberry shrub, Tait Farm Foods’ most popular product, is sold at Colonial Williamsburg, Plymouth Plantation and at other historical sites. The farm’s largest food service account is with Penn State, which buys such value-added products as jams and chutneys for use in their dining facilities and for catering.

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GROWTH AND RECOGNITION

Over the years, the number of products Tait Farm Foods manufactures has grown from 2 to over 50. This includes products that are outside its traditional line of fruit-based offerings. Among its non-fruit based products are dry mixes, such as those for pancakes, rice, polenta, and scones. Kim says that Tait Farm Foods’ product line has probably doubled over the last five to eight years. Although most taste testing of products happens within the company, Tait Farm Foods pays close attention to customer requests and feedback in developing their product line. Kim says that good ideas for products often come from customers and that “if you listen, they will guide you to what’s next.” Farmers markets were cited as especially helpful venues for gleaning customer feedback. Because of this, they’ve developed a trust with their regular customers, who have now come to expect quality products from Tait Farm Foods.

Kim attributes major increases in the growth of the food business to Tait Farm Foods’ participation in the NASFT Fancy Foods Show during the 1990s and the opening of the year-round retail store on the farm in 1997. Prior to the opening of its year-round retail store in 1997, Tait Farm operated a seasonal retail store, which also carried a few items from other producers such as honey and maple syrup. Now, in addition to its own products, Tait Farm continues to sell other local value-added products, and its retail shop consigns the work of more than 50 local artisans. Kim estimates that about 10 percent of the products advertised and sold through its website are non-Tait Farm Foods products. Over the last 10 years, Tait Farm Foods’ commitment to supporting local producers and artists has grown and they believe in supporting local whenever possible. “Once we had our new shop, providing a market for other producers and artisans was just the right thing to do – everyone wins.” This commitment has also given Tait Farm Foods a niche in their community.

In addition to the retail shop that was built in 1997, there are now four greenhouses on the farm. The first one was put up in 2002 to serve as a retail selling space for a growing retail plant business. In 2003, Tait Farm put up a high tunnel, to enable them to grow hardy greens for the winter CSA. In 2004, they put up a smaller high tunnel, allowing them to hold extra greenhouse inventory. In early 2008, Tait Farm added a production greenhouse so that they could grow their own seedlings for the farming operation, as well as grow vegetable plants for the retail greenhouse business.

Kim believes that any time you build something new, you have the opportunity to take your business to the next level:

“The retail store allowed us to become a year-round retailer of items for the kitchen, home and garden. The new greenhouse allows us to expand our retail plant offerings. The composting project (*described below*) will allow us to make great compost that will increase our soil fertility and hopefully can be sold at the store someday.”

ADVICE

“Networking,” says Kim, “has been very important—as is asking for help.” Tait Farm Foods has benefited from community input and information-sharing on everything from packaging to labeling to pricing:

“Farmers are independent and have to wear a lot of hats. If you want to be serious—you need to make sure you know what you’re doing—it’s good to get some advice. Most people in this business pay it forward and are happy to give their opinion or advice.”

Another word of advice from Kim: it’s very important to have a strong local customer base. “If everything falls apart, at least you have your local community.” She also reiterates that she’s a big proponent of listening to your customers: “If you listen carefully to your customers, they’ll guide you.” Finally, Kim notes that it’s important to have a “love for what you’re doing, because you’re going to have to work awfully hard at it.”

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE AND MEASURING SUCCESS

Kim says that Tait Farm Foods doesn't plan to grow big and fast; their goal is to take what they do and do it better.

Tait Farm has plans to carry out a large community composting project funded by a grant from Pennsylvania's Department of Environmental Protection (DEP). Although the farm has composted leaves from Harris, the local township, for about 20 years, it has never had the machinery to actively manage the large piles. With the grant from DEP, Tait Farm will be able to purchase the proper equipment to do so. Their plan is to partner with the Harris Township, local restaurants, a local dairy farm and CSA customers to create a pilot on-farm composting program that will compost leaves, kitchen scraps and local manure. They'll receive in-kind contributions (labor and materials) from Harris Township to develop the site, as well as composting buckets and large totes from Centre County Solid Waste Authority, and technical assistance from Penn State's Cooperative Extension program. The plan is to have the pilot program serve as a model to be replicated throughout the state of Pennsylvania.

Reflecting on whether or not Tait Farm Foods is successful, Kim focuses on the farm's relationship with the community:

“We get to do a lot of really great things and serve our community. We were never in this for the money, but rather, because we loved and believed in the work.”

For Kim, growing the business has been like the movie *Field of Dreams*. They have continued to build it and the people have continued to come. “It is an amazing experience and very rewarding.”

LESSONS LEARNED

- Build relationships with customers — especially with those in your local region.
- Listen to your customers — consider customers' tastes and suggestions for guidance on where and how to expand.
- Don't hesitate to seek help — continuously work with, network with, and reach out to other organizations and people to learn about how to start and improve your business.
- Always seek inspiration — customers expect you to continue to come up with new products and ideas.
- The rules of business do apply — making money is essential if you want to stay in business and gives you freedom to do the work you want to do.

RESOURCES

Service Corps of Retired Executives (SCORE):
score.org

Pennsylvania Small Business Development Center:
pasbdc.org

Ben Franklin Technology Partners:
benfranklin.org

Penn State Cooperative Extension:
<http://cas.psu.edu/docs/COEXT>

Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture (PASA):
pasafarming.org

Rodale Institute:
rodaleinstitute.org

Penn State Department of Horticulture:
<http://horticulture.psu.edu>

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