

# A fresh approach to marketing local farm products

## Couple starts online grocery store, delivery service

By Jeff Fetzer

AFTER nearly three decades in the financial services business, Tri-County member David Nowacoski traded in his suit and tie and frequent flier miles for farm attire and the weekly chore of butchering fryers.

Seated in the kitchen of his home on Hoblet Road in Columbia Cross Roads, Nowacoski recalls the moment he hatched his plan for a life-altering career change. The employee benefits and wealth management firm in Binghamton, N.Y., where he had worked as chief operations officer for nine years had been sold, and a no-compete agreement essentially forced him to look for another line of work.

“April 2013, my wife and I were sitting on the deck drinking a cup of coffee,” he says. “It was the first day I didn’t have to go to work. I said, ‘Sweetheart, what are we going to do now?’” She said, ‘We gotta eat.’ I said, ‘Yeah!’ And that was the genesis of WindStone Landing Farms.”

Now Nowacoski admits that his wife, Marla, may have simply been implying that her husband would need to work *somewhere* to put food on the table. Aware of Marla’s passion for gardening and making and preserving her own



**GROWTH ZONE:** Tri-County members David and Marla Nowacoski stand in the greenhouse at their WindStone Landing Farm in East Smithfield Township. They grow about 500 tomato plants and a variety of fruits and vegetables on their 88-acre farm and do not use any chemical fertilizers, herbicides, or pesticides.

food, David decided to make good on Marla’s comment. And, he thought, the family had raised laying chickens for many years, so why not sell eggs and raise meat chickens, too?

“Staying home and making food sounded really appealing,” says David, a 1987 Penn State graduate with a degree in computer science whose previous career involved frequent travel around the country as a financial consultant and software developer. “I knew had I to start something niche-oriented because nobody starts a big farm.”

He explains that he wasn’t going into the food and ag business blindly. His father, a chef from Brooklyn, N.Y., who moved to Bradford County when David was a boy in the 1970s, operated a successful veal farm for many years.

The growing popularity of the chemical-free, organic food movement, coupled with the national Buy Fresh Buy Local program aimed at encouraging consumers to purchase products from local farm sources, further fueled David’s notion that the time was ripe for launching a niche food business.

“She was going to do the vegetable garden and canning, and I was going to do the chickens for eggs and meat,” he says. “I thought, ‘Here is something that doesn’t require a tremendous entry point.’ We had no idea what we were getting into.”

With his operations background and an entrepreneurial spirit, David sprang into action planning for the new business. He built a commercial kitchen, butcher shop and food warehouse on the couple’s 88-acre property, acquired the necessary approvals and underwent the required inspections for the operation. Within a year, WindStone Landing Farm was up and running.



**LOCAL GOODS:** A sampling of WindStone Landing Farm’s canned goods that Marla Nowacoski produces in her commercial kitchen. She expects to can about 400 cases of jellies, jams, apple-based products and pie fillings this year. The fruits are either grown on the farm or sourced locally from chemical-free farms and orchards.

The Nowacoskis found some success that first year marketing their pasture-raised, all-natural chickens and Marla's canned salsa and applesauce to local stores and restaurants.

"That first year, my wife did six cases of salsa and applesauce, and I did 200 meat chickens," David says.

In year two, one of the restaurants that purchased chickens from WindStone, asked if they could supply pork. So David raised half a dozen hogs, in addition to doubling the number of fryers he butchered to 400.

"We could not keep up with demand," says David. "We had to build more hutches for the chickens and needed more equipment to keep up with more animals. We were constantly chasing."

That continues to be the case even today, David says, noting he expects to sell about 4,600 chickens and 400 turkeys this year, and Marla has expanded her offerings to 42 products, including a variety of locally sourced jams and jellies, apple butter, apple pie filling, dilly beans and, her most popular product, salsas.

By the end of 2016, David says he decided to explore other avenues for sales in addition to restaurants and local stores.

"We realized that we were very heavy on wholesale and light on retail," he says. "We weren't balanced. So I started exploring ways to include retail."

So in 2017, Marla began peddling



**FRESH DELIVERY:** Marla Nowacoski displays a typical grocery order for a Delivered Fresh customer in the commercial kitchen at WindStone Landing Farms. Marla and husband David started the Delivered Fresh business earlier this year to deliver fresh produce and meats from local chemical-free farms to customers in Bradford and Tioga counties.

WindStone Landing Farm produce, meats and canned goods at farmers markets in Wellsboro and Sayre. When would-be customers would ask about products that she did not carry, she would make arrangements with other farmers, pick up their products and deliver them to the customers at the farmers market the following week.

"This became our business model," David says. "By the end of 2017, we had 30-plus families who were doing their weekly grocery shopping through my wife's cellphone, and she was driving all over the place to pick it up."

Marla, who has a degree in consumer affairs — "home economics," she explains — from Indiana University of Pennsylvania, notes she was not charging anything for the delivery service.

"It became a little overwhelming," she says.

In particular, Dave notes, it became difficult for Marla to keep up with all of the orders she was taking and delivering on a weekly basis.

So after Dave finished processing and shipping turkeys for the Thanksgiving holiday last year, he decided to create a website where people could order chemical-free meats and produce from local growers and farmers who wished to participate.

He called his online store Delivered Fresh, and the venture had a soft launch in February of this year.

"What we created was a way for multiple farms to sell products to the public online, and we would do the pickups and deliveries."

When Delivered Fresh debuted, there were six participating Bradford County farms offering produce, dairy products, beef and pork in addition to WindStone Landing's goods.

By the time Delivered Fresh had its official opening on March 5, the *New York Times* had caught wind of the Nowacoski's new business model and sent a food reporter and photographer to cover the occasion of the first official delivery day.

The *Times* reporter had multiple phone conversations with David before coming to Bradford County to report on Delivered Fresh. David said the reporter told him that he thought Nowacoski's concept was an "Amazon killer."

"We hadn't had our first order yet, and he's telling me that we are going to compete with Amazon?" David says with a laugh.

The *Times* article hit the press on April 11, and the Nowacoskis were inundated with phone calls and emails.

"My phone went nuts," he says. "That first day, I had 250 emails from people (continues on page 14d)"



**BRADFORD COUNTY FARM:** David Nowacoski tends to his flock of free-range chickens at WindStone Landing Farms. Nowacoski left a 30-year career in the financial services and software development industry in 2013 to be a chicken farmer. In addition to keeping 150 laying hens, he raises about 4,600 meat chickens.

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all over the world. Venture capitalists, electronic vehicle manufacturers, people who wanted to do this in other areas. We were just trying to figure out how to get products delivered to Sayre, and people wanted to know when we could get this to Philadelphia and New Jersey. It was awesome. We got a lot of credibility right out of the gate.”

By June, Delivered Fresh's online store was carrying over 100 products from 27 farms, primarily located in Bradford, Tioga and Potter counties. In addition to seasonal produce, meats, eggs and milk, product offerings include honey, cookies, rolls and breads, roasted coffees and tea blends, herbs and spices, cheeses and gourmet mushrooms. gluten-free waffle mix, pesto sauces and fresh-ground peanut butter.

“We have a pretty good selection,” he says. “There is not too much we don't offer, but we are still looking to find some producers to fill in the gaps. And this is all local. That is what is so cool.”

He said the concept has increased



sales for the local producers, including his own farm, noting sales of WindStone meats, produce and canned goods have nearly doubled since the online food hub began.

“Everybody wins,” he says. “The farmers gets their products out to the public. The consumer gets fresh, healthy local foods, and the community benefits too, because the dollars stay local.”

To get the products ordered online to customers, Marla and the Nowacoskis' son, Matthew, 17, travel about 300 miles each Wednesday to pick up products from the Delivered Fresh farm participants. The goods are packaged for each customer in coolers at the Nowacoskis' farm on Hoblet Road in East Smithfield Township. Customers can retrieve their groceries at any of six designated pick-up locations in Bradford and Tioga counties on Thursdays and Fridays. The delivery schedule can be found on the Delivered Fresh website: [deliveredfresh.localfoodmarketplace.com](http://deliveredfresh.localfoodmarketplace.com) and on the WindStone Landing Farms website, [wslfarms.com](http://wslfarms.com).

David says about 50 customers are do-

ing their grocery shopping through the site each week. And, according to Marla, the customer list grows each week.

The extra work that Delivered Fresh entails keeps the Nowacoskis on the go. David points out that in addition to building and updating the Delivered Fresh website, he's running a farm with 750 chickens and several hogs at any given time, and his wife is operating her commercial canning kitchen, producing about 400 cases of canned goods annually, and growing much of the produce used in her products on site.

“It's really hard to juggle all of this,” says David, noting the couple has taken just five days off — all for their daughter's wedding — since starting the WindStone Landing Farms business five years ago. “The only time we're not working is for about three hours after church on Sundays. We butcher every Monday morning, so on Sunday afternoons, I have to prep the shop.”

But the couple, childhood sweethearts who have been married for 30 years, appreciate the ability to make a living — and a difference — in their community.

“I'm hoping what we are doing might help preserve our small farms, our towns and our communities,” David says. ☀