



The *New* American Farmer

Skip and Liz Paul, Wishing Stone Farm

Little Compton, Rhode Island

Summary of Operation

- *Herbs, vegetables and fruit sold through a community-supported agriculture operation, farmers markets and restaurants*
- *Eggs from range-fed chickens*
- *Value-added products*

Problem Addressed

Switching to a farming career. Skip Paul considers himself a more adept marketer than farmer, but wasn't satisfied just hawking organic and other healthful foods. He wanted to get his hands in the dirt.

He started small, and through experimentation, observation and critical input from his wife's tree-growing family, he has over the past 23 years placed more and more acres under cultivation. Today, they work 35 acres, on which they grow a range of herbs, vegetables and fruit. He's converted most from conventional practices to organic, taking the time and necessary steps to gain state certification.

Background

In the 1970s, Paul lived in Colorado, where he helped establish several natural food cooperative grocery stores. Paul's interest in organic farming spurred him to delve into growing and selling his own organic food. It may not have appeared an obvious career move, since he had no farming experience, had grown up in suburban Washington, D.C., and held a university degree in classical guitar.

Yet, on a visit to his native Rhode Island, he met the woman who would become his wife, and together they discovered a small farm for sale. At the least, they thought, it would make a good investment.

For a time they lived on the property and allowed a neighbor to farm it, but Paul grew increasingly frustrated with the neighbor's heavy dependence on chemical pesticides, herbicides and fertilizers. His, wife, Liz, was familiar with planting and cultivation from her family's nursery. Her experience, and Paul's 10 years of involvement in the organic and sustainable foods community, convinced them to try to do better. Another factor helped make the plunge easier — their initial endeavor was less than an acre.

That changed quickly though, as Paul's comfort with farming grew, and as he began realizing that his marketing experience could contribute to his family's success.

Focal Point of Operation: Diversified marketing

Their first step was a roadside stand to sell the produce they grew in their garden-sized plot. Paul said that simply by listening to his customers, who asked for bread, pies and recipes, he got inspired to add value to what he was selling. "I realized that if they were coming all the way out to the end of the little peninsula where we lived (near Sakonnet Bay, just north of Rhode Island Sound) to buy produce, they

were likely to spend more on almost anything we offered, as long as it was made from quality ingredients and done right there.”

Skip and Liz invested in a commercial, state-inspected kitchen. They marketed their value-added products, such as salsa and dips, under a “Babette’s Feast” label. They also began leasing land and buying small plots when they became available — “stringing together a farm,” Paul said.

Just as they experimented with what types of produce to grow and how to grow it, the Pauls also experimented with and adjusted their marketing. By the early 1990s, their rising yields were overwhelming the on-site farm stand, where sales were limited by their remote location. He opened a few other farm stands with other farmers, but experienced management and staffing problems that soured him on that approach.

By the late 1990s, the Pauls’ marketing strategies had evolved to include limited sales and Babette’s Feast products at their farm, establishment of their own community supported agriculture (CSA) project, an increasing presence at a popular, bustling farmers market in downtown Providence and increasingly frequent direct sales to area restaurants.

Paul recognizes what works and what doesn’t. For him and his family, sales at the Providence Farmers Market are key, and he concentrates his energy on strategies to increase the volume and diversity of what they produce for sale there. In fact, even though the CSA project brings in needed income, he hopes to expand his presence at the market in Providence and others he has helped establish.

“There’s just a kind of energy at the market



Kerry Culmore

Skip Paul has been a driving force behind thriving farmers markets in the Providence area.

that I don’t find anywhere else,” he says. “People appreciate what we offer, they line up at our three cashier booths before we even get our displays set up every Saturday morning, and they come back week after week.

“It’s incredible. They inspire me to keep thinking about new products we can offer, how we can provide more of the produce they like, and how we can get it to them earlier and deeper into the season than the competition.”

To extend the season, he invested in greenhouses that allow him to be among the first at the market to offer tomatoes. Providing vine-ripened heirloom tomatoes for sale in June in Rhode Island is quite a coup, and

they can sell them through October, while others’ seasons run from mid-July to September.

He also depends on temporary, easily constructed shelters — high tunnels — made from heavy-gauge plastic stretched along ribs of one-inch PVC pipe. Inside the 10-by-40-foot long structures he grows herbs, lettuce and greens earlier and later than the traditional growing season.

With direct marketing, Paul says he’s limited only by his imagination and energy. “The constant exposure to my customers helps me understand what they want, what new things they’re willing to try,” he says.

The feedback resulted, for one, in the family’s evolving investment in poultry product marketing. They raise 250 range-fed laying hens and have offered their organic eggs at premium prices for nearly a decade. Now, Paul is helping coordinate a joint venture with several other local farmers that will give him the opportunity to offer range-fed chicken, too.

With a state grant, they hope to build a mobile processor outfitted with all the evisceration and cleaning equipment for licensing. They’ll move it on a coordinated schedule from farm to farm, so all can process birds just before market. Once he’s offering fresh chicken, Paul predicts he’ll be asked by a customer to cook some; thus, prepared chicken may become another value-added item offered by Wishing Stone.

Economics and Profitability

The Pauls’ CSA operation makes up about 45 percent of the business, farmers market sales 30 percent, and Babette’s Feast 25 percent. Combined, the three pursuits grossed an average of \$250,000 annually in the past few years.

“That sounds good, and it is good, but there’s a lot of work involved in getting to that figure,” Paul says. With up to nine employees, “it takes a lot of money to make that much.” Still, Paul admits he and his family live comfortably and are at a point where they don’t feel the need to scrimp. He was able, for instance, to pay more than \$30,000 in cash for a new tractor.

Though the Babette’s Feast portion of their business is profitable, he and Liz have decided to sell it. “It’s incredible how much you can ask for dips and salsas that are pretty easy to prepare and don’t have a lot of ingredients,” he says. But, multiple pursuits are becoming more difficult to manage at a time in their lives when they are beginning to think about doing less.

Environmental Benefits

Paul reports the most noteworthy change his family’s efforts have made is in the quality and health of the soil. Using compost made of horse manure and bedding from nearby stables, plus fish waste from canning factories and fish processing houses, Paul can see an improvement.

“I can feel the difference in the soils of my fields when I walk them now,” he says. “They’re less hard-packed than they used to be, with a lot more organic matter.”

Paul follows a “three-years on, one-year off” rotation schedule in his produce fields. Typically, that means a root crop such as carrots in the first year to help loosen the soil and to bring minerals nearer the surface. In year two, he follows up with tomatoes and/or eggplant. That field in the third year will then host a cabbage crop. In the last year of the rotation, Paul takes the field out of commercial production and sows green manure crops such as oats or peas — or both — in the spring, and red clover in mid-summer. The green manure crops have

the added benefit of suppressing weeds.

Paul usually adds compost every fall, allowing it to break down during the winter in time for spring planting. Plants like garlic, lettuce, beets, carrots and small seed greens generally follow a compost application.

Community and Quality of Life Benefits

Along the way to becoming an experienced farmer and marketer, Paul became a recognized leader among organic growers in Rhode Island, as well those who market their goods directly to consumers, stores and restaurants. He’s served as vice president of the state chapter of the Northeast Organic Farmers Association, and has been a driving force behind the central farmers market in Providence as well as six other markets in the region.

Considering the lifestyle choices available in an increasingly complex, technology-oriented society, Paul says he’d choose farming all over again because “it puts you at the heart of some pretty basic and wonderful things.” He believes too many people have become removed from a basic awareness of how their food is produced and prepared, activities he sees as central to what life is all about.

At the farmers market, “I get to connect with people who live in urban areas and don’t get to see much open space, trees, vegetables or flowers on a daily basis,” Paul says. “They just light up when they see what we’ve got.”

Paul welcomes visits from those interested customers. “I can just see how much it means to them,” he says. “Farms can be a chance for people to have real experiences, be in a real place. I think farms can offer a different experience, and I’m glad to be part of it, especially when people come around and share it with us.”

Transition Advice

“Do everything you can to improve the condition of your soil, don’t let weeds get away from you because they can be very difficult to control when you’re using only mechanical or hand methods, and be wary of anyone who tells you it’s possible to make a living raising cut flowers.”

The Future

Skip and Liz have begun thinking about the kind of farming they can do well into old age. Even with the sale of Babette’s Feast under consideration, they say they’ll maintain the scale of their efforts for a few more years while son, Silas, finishes his education. If he chooses to join the family business full time, they say his services will be welcome. Should he choose another direction, they will likely phase out their participation in farmers markets in favor of a small CSA operation.

But that won’t be all. Paul says he’s increasingly interested in passing on what he’s learned about organic farming, ecology, and horticulture, and hopes to turn the farm into an education center.

■ David Mudd

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Editor’s note: New in 2005