

Pickle Creek Herbs started by selling garlic-infused olive oil and has expanded to sell in over 100 retail stores.



Infusions Add Value To Market Garden

Infusing oils and vinegars added value to the herbs, vegetables, berries and fruit Jocelyn McCracken Engman and her husband Tim grew on their 100-acre Iowa farm. It also turned a seasonal CSA and market gardening operation into a year-round business. Freezing and drying what they couldn't sell let them put it to use in the off-season.

"When you have tomatoes, everyone has tomatoes," says McCracken Engman. "You can't sell them all, and you end up composting them."

A second problem the young couple faced when they started farming in 2004

was location. The nearest big town had 10,000 people, and being in a largely rural area limited their potential sales. At the time, gas was \$4 per gal., and driving to distant markets didn't make business sense.

A third problem was the commodity nature of produce. The difference between the cost of inputs and established prices leaves very little profit margin.

McCracken Engman and her husband had an ace up their sleeve, having spent 15 years as chemists in the Chicago area. They began working on ways to add value to what they grew.

"Our first product was a Greek basil and

garlic infused olive oil," recalls McCracken Engman. "We took it to the local farmers market, but we were scared to ask people to try it, fearing they wouldn't like it."

They quickly sold eight bottles, expanded production, developed new recipes, and morphed into Pickle Creek Herbs within 5 years. Today, they sell a wide array of oils, vinegars, soaps, salves, deodorants and lip balms. They make everything themselves from their own original recipes.

McCracken Engman emphasizes that while the business grew quickly, it wasn't an overnight transformation.

"As chemists, it didn't bother us to mess up as we developed a recipe," says McCracken Engman. "We love flavors and love to play around. We grew organically as we added products."

Adding products even after a recipe had been developed was a challenge. "Before we could offer a new flavor, we had to take a couple of years to grow enough of the herb or vegetable to what we needed on hand," says McCracken Engman. "It all required learning new things."

Another big challenge was finding help in the field and off. "The business requires enormous physical labor," says McCracken Engman. "Anything we could invent, we did."

As sales of the original basil/garlic oil grew and new garlic products were added, production also had to grow. McCracken Engman's husband and her father designed a garlic lifter and had a local metal worker fabricate it.

"This summer, we lifted 16,000 garlic heads in 4 days," says McCracken Engman. We used a greens cutter to harvest the basil, and Tim created a water bath infuser. We've done a lot of small things that make a difference. You look around at what you have and make it work."

"We kept adding farmers markets and started wholesaling to stores along the way," recalls McCracken Engman. "We started adding shows and events, like the Midwest Old Threshers Reunion, until we had multiple events every weekend of the year. We give out coupons at shows for online orders."

Today, Pickle Creek products are in over 100 retail stores and sold directly to customers from the company tasting room. Online marketing continues to build sales and reach.

McCracken Engman advises others thinking of adding value to create a brand and a marketing plan and stay flexible. She adds that keeping it simple at the beginning is also a good idea.

"We directed our growth a bit, but we kept adapting, changing and growing as we went," says McCracken Engman. "We like the Greek basil and garlic we started with, but they were also the easiest to grow and harvest."

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"The most unique decals are for early industrial models. I can do equipment motors, plows, whatever original equipment John Deere had," Peterman says.



Deere Decal Company Has New Owner

After restoring John Deere tractors for 38 years, Dan Peterman has plenty of experience applying decals. That, and his long-time friendship and business relationship with Travis Jorde, made it natural for Peterman to purchase and take ownership of Jorde Decals in February 2024. Jorde started the business in 1976 and retired at 86.

As a restorer and owner of the business, Peterman appreciates Jorde's extensive research to match the correct decals for each John Deere model and year through 1975. Most customers, whether in business as restorers or hobbyists, need complete sets. The older tractors typically have five or six decals, while newer models may have eight to 10 decals.

"I have diagrams for placing them, if people ask, for many models," Peterman says. As a restorer, he's well-qualified to answer customers' questions. Sets range from \$50 to \$275. He also takes orders for individual decals.

"Many years ago, they were mylar, but now they're vinyl decals which look more authentic and high quality," Peterman says. He has them printed at a couple of

businesses and keeps plenty of inventory on hand.

After securing licensing from the company, he only sells John Deere decals. He says there's always a demand for style A and B tractors and 4020 series models.

"The most unique decals are for early industrial models. I can do equipment motors, plows, whatever original equipment John Deere had," Peterman says, adding he's not licensed for garden tractors, pedal tractors or models.

"In the next few years, I'm hoping to branch into new models (beyond 1975)," he says. Customers find him in magazine ads, at some farm equipment shows and on social media.

He greatly respects Jorde and the business he started and feels the responsibility of filling "pretty big shoes."

It's a family business, and Peterman gets help from his wife and mother-in-law with billing, packaging and shipping.

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Dry Mixes Take The Work Out Of Home Cooked Meals

Billie Erdman is a stay-at-home mom who makes saving other moms time and effort her business. She mixes dehydrated and freeze-dried ingredients and seasonings and markets them locally under her Billie's Kitchen brand. It all started in early 2021 when she suggested a friend, who sold farm-raised meat, offer customers "dry meals in a bag stuff" and be a one-stop shop.

"Yeah, you should do that," said Erdman's friend. "Then she told me she was going to a show 3 weeks later, and I should have some to display at her booth."

Erdman moved into high gear and began developing recipes and locating ingredient suppliers.

"It was difficult looking for larger quantities," she recalls.

She found a reliable distributor of the bulk dehydrated ingredients she needed. She also used two dehydrators in her kitchen to process mushrooms, spinach and tomatoes. For beans, she soaked them overnight, cooked them and then dehydrated them.

Through it all, she relied on her family to taste-test her products. By the day of the show, she had a variety of products ready to go. The show was a success, and Billie's Kitchen was up and running.

Today, Erdman has 10 soup mixes, half a dozen skillet recipes, and several cookie mixes. Erdman's \$8 and \$10 soup and skillet mixes are a quick fix for busy families. Add water, cover, and cook while preparing the meat of choice; the food will be ready to serve in no time.

One thing that helped was Erdman's already having a Minnesota cottage food license. For many years, she made and sold the Norwegian potato-based specialty lefse. "I put a post on Facebook that I have it for sale, and it's gone," she says. "Last year, I



Erdman uses dehydrated and freeze-dried ingredients in mixes she sells at markets.

used 220 lbs. of potatoes for lefse between Thanksgiving and Christmas."

While the cottage food license helped, it's also a limiting factor. All sales must be direct between her and her customer; no shipping or remote sales are allowed. Erdman takes her mixes to local farmers markets and makers markets when she can.

Their store is self-serve and operates on the honor system. In addition to her mixes, Erdman carries products from other local businesses. She admits she does have security cameras in place but reports no problems with visitors.

"There are so many talented people locally," she says. "It's really awesome to see the support people give small businesses like ours."

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