

# DIVERSIFY TO SURVIVE: TWO FARMERS, TWO BACKGROUNDS, ONE GOAL

“Farming is a business.” *Mark Sacco, Wm. H. Buckley Farm*

Mark Sacco, owner of the Wm. H. Buckley Farm looked out over fields that were thickets of weeds and brambles twenty-nine months ago. He is telling the story of his farm to a group of visitors, making the first stop of the Cornell Cooperative Extension Capital District Ag Educators’ summer tour.

“My wife tells me I’m not normal every day,” he says, his serious face lighting with a grin. “I like trying to achieve things.”

And achieve he does. He has owned the 300 acre Wm. H. Buckley Farm for only three years, purchasing it as an abandoned property. During that time, he has transformed the neglected farm.

The Buckley Farm was built in 1861 as a traditional diversified and self-sustaining farm, complete with gristmill. Later it became a specialized dairy farm, supplying Capiello Dairies before a gradual decline led to it being abandoned. The Buckley Farm has seen many changes over the years – as has its owner.



Sacco grew up on a 500 acre farm owned by his grandfather, but did not have much hands-on experience or plan on a farming career. He attended law school, became a trial lawyer and served seven years in the Marines. He describes living in suburbia, looking out his window at the window of the house next door, and how that sparked his desire to return to a farm.

Sacco’s first farm in Schaghticoke helped him realize that diversification is essential for modern farmers. He expanded his beef operation to include pork, egg and chicken production. Frustrated with the available wholesale channels for selling his products, he offered local merchants a win-win situation – he supplied his own freezers to grocers, co-ops and health food stores, stocking them with his products. What they didn’t sell, they didn’t pay him for.



It worked. Sacco found a demand for pasture raised meat, chicken and eggs existed due to growing consumer concern about food quality. He also saw that diversity, not concentration on a single product, is the salvation of the modern family farmer.

“I’m forty-four,” Sacco told his audience. “The average age of a farmer today is fifty-seven. There is a serious gap here. Ten years from now, when your average farmer is ready to retire, who is going to take over?” His concern for the fate of family farming is obvious and he emphasizes that farming must be treated as a business, a profession.

“Farming doesn’t have to be a disaster,” Sacco says emphatically, pointing out that farming as a disaster has become a common perception due to the “all the eggs in one basket” situation of many modern farms. Specialization has defined modern farming - so when a disaster, like avian flu, comes along, the farmer loses everything.

Wanting to avoid just such situations, Sacco has made the Buckley Farm a model of diversification. There are six distinct businesses on the 300 acre property – all productive parts of the whole. Two farmhouses have been renovated and are rented out for farm stay vacations, conferences and other events. A barn has become a popular venue for weddings. Another one-time vacant building is a combination store, café and custom butcher shop. Beef cattle, pigs, free range eggs, pastured meat chickens and turkeys make up a diversified product line.

Sacco described the process of making the farm self-sustaining, returning to methods farmers had used for centuries before the twentieth century brought farm specialization in the name of efficiency. Nothing at the Buckley Farm is wasted, be it an elderly trailer purchased cheaply as shelter for turkeys or lumber former owners left piled in the outbuildings. Sacco showed the Cornell group a cooler he purchased for \$1200 and repaired for a few hundred dollars. If he had purchased it new, it would have cost \$12,000. Thrift is part of his plan to make his farm prosper, and re-using is part of thrift.

Retail is part of Sacco’s plan as well. “Wholesale is terrible, you make nothing. Direct retail is the name of the game,” he says, indicating the store and café that draw many visitors to the Buckley Farm. He has made a commitment to non-GMO feeds and pasturing for his livestock, knowing that both these issues have become important to many consumers. The farm store is stocked with meats butchered and smoked on the farm, pastured chicken, free range eggs, dairy products, maple syrup and baked goods. The café provides a fresh menu of breakfasts and lunches.

Community involvement is Sacco’s goal, and so far, it is working well. Farm stays, a retail outlet for fresh farm goods, the always lucrative wedding industry – he has tapped into all of these with great success. “There is an old stereotype of the farmer greeting strangers with a shotgun, telling you to get off his land,” he says. “You can’t do that these days. People are welcome to come here, to learn about what we do, to possibly become interested in farming. It’s our connection to the community that makes us successful.”

To learn more about the Wm. H. Buckley Farm, visit their website at <http://www.buckleyfarm.com>.



*This picturesque barn at the Wm. H. Buckley Farm has become a popular venue for weddings.*



*Mark Sacco shows his thrifted cooler to Cornell visitors.*

## "I'm the fifth generation on this farm."

*Chuck Curtiss, Willow Marsh Farm*



*Chuck Curtiss at the site of his future creamery*

When Chuck Curtiss took over the 134 acre land trust Willow Marsh Farm, devoted to dairy production for decades, he knew he had to downsize his dairy herd and diversify to move forward. Initially, he added a beef herd to the farm and then, due to a fluctuating milk market, began selling raw milk and other milk products directly to the public three years ago.

A store was initially opened as part of the farmhouse, where Willow Marsh raw milk, Greek yogurt and cheese is sold, as well as Angus beef, veal and pork grown and finished on the farm. Local free range eggs, naturally raised chicken, honey, soap and butter are sourced from other local farms. Excess compost from the dairy barn and firewood are also sold.

When the store opened, Curtiss thought it would be great if he could eventually sell fifty gallons of raw milk a week. Three years later, his raw milk sales average two hundred thirty gallons a week. "The store makes more money than the rest of the farm," he smiles.

Now the store is a separate building, adjacent to a soon-to-be creamery, where Curtiss will be producing fresh butter and other products. While he's speaking, several local customers pull up, make purchases and leave.

"We also sell wholesale to a number of stores and restaurants," Curtiss continues, waving as one customer backs out of the parking area. "At this point, I'm having problems making enough to meet the demand." In fact, demand has so outgrown Willow Marsh Farm's ability to meet it that Curtiss has turned to a fundraising website to raise funds to complete the creamery. When the creamery is up and running, Willow Marsh will be able to produce ice cream, chocolate milk, cream and butter. Considering the demand for their current product line, Curtiss expects no problems with moving additional products. "We have people who buy twelve or more gallons of milk at a time," he explained. "If the milk is so widely accepted, we'll have no problem moving other products."

Curtiss is used to explaining the production and marketing of raw milk to people more familiar with pasteurized products. "We pride ourselves on our cleanliness," he says, proudly displaying his holding tank and other equipment. "We love to take the filters out of our system after milking and see that there is nothing, no dirt, no pieces of hay anywhere. This indicates quality and we take that very seriously." He explains that for decades his farm has supplied the Stewart's chain of stores with milk, and that Stewart's holds their suppliers to a higher standard than most retailers. His personal standards for his raw milk are higher still.

The cows are milked twice daily. Before each milking, they are cleaned and their udders are checked. When selling raw milk, Chuck emphasizes that vigilance and monitoring are essential. The farm is tested twice a month, and consistently passes health inspections, but Chuck is not resting on those laurels. He continually seeks ways to improve the quality of his products through upgrading and creating a cleaner environment for his cows.

With the goal of reducing the somatic cell count in his raw milk, Curtiss instituted a system of using lime under his dairy cows' bedding. Somatic cells are white blood cells found in milk which indicate the presence of pathogenic



*Willow Marsh Farmhouse*

bacteria, inflammation or irritation affecting a cow's udder. This change in barn hygiene resulted in a significant reduction the somatic cell count of Willow Marsh Farm's raw milk.

Like Mark Sacco, Chuck Curtiss is seeking out ways for his farm to be made more self-sustaining. Greek yogurt and cheese leaves him with a byproduct – whey. Curtiss described his search for a use for whey and his final decision to purchase veal calves, which are fed the whey along with his pigs. "Whey makes for a higher quality of meat from these animals because it is high in protein," he explains.

He's also instituted a deep litter program for his animals' bedding, which results in a natural composting action right in the barn. "The litter can go directly on the fields and because it has composted right there in the barn, it is better for the crops and environment than raw manure from a pit," he explains. Using a deep litter system rather than the more traditional manure pit has an added plus for Willow Marsh Farm – in Curtiss' words, "it makes the farm more visitor friendly" because of the reduced odor that results, rather than the pungent "fresh country air" that accompanies a manure pit.

Part of diversification is making the farm more open to the public, and like Mark Sacco, Chuck Curtiss knows that working directly with the public is essential to the survival of family farms like his. Curtiss outlined plans to expand his parking area, and pointed out plots that will be landscaped. He hopes to host events in the near future and to have school groups tour.

"Lots of kids don't know how their food is produced," he says, looking out over an area that will be devoted to seating and decorative plantings, a place for visitors to relax. "It's important for people to get back in touch with just what a farm is about."

For more information on Willow Marsh Farm, see their website at <http://www.willowmarshfarm.com/home.html>.



*Chuck Curtiss tells Cornell Cooperative Extension visitors about his plans for Willow Marsh Farm.*