

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:00:03](#)):

Bob Lesnikoski, owner, with my wife, Elizabeth of Vermont Cranberry Company in Fletcher, Vermont. We've been growing cranberries for the Vermont market since 1995.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:00:29](#)):

I'm your host, Andy Chamberlain, and I take you behind the scenes to learn how farmers are building their business in sustainable agriculture. These farmer to farmer interviews cover a wide range of topics from cropping systems, marketing channels, lifestyle decisions, and lessons learned along the way. This podcast is supported by the University of Vermont Extension, and the Vermont Vegetable and Berry Growers Association. It has funding from the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food, and Markets as part of a specialty crop block grant.

([00:00:57](#)):

Unfortunately, the end of that grant funding is coming to a close soon, so if you enjoy the show and would like to help keep more episodes coming, please consider making a donation. Any amount is greatly appreciated, and can be made on our website, thefarmersshare.com/support. Thank you. Today's episode comes to you from Fletcher, Vermont, where we visit with Bob Lesnikoski of Vermont Cranberry Company.

([00:01:21](#)):

He is the one and only commercial cranberry grower in the state of Vermont. We start off the episode with a tour of his packing barn where they sort and box up fresh cranberries, press juice, and bottle seltzer. We then pull up a stool in the commercial kitchen and learn more about the cranberry market in the northeast. I do want to mention my mic cut out for the second half of the conversation, but Bob does most of the talking anyways, so that's why my questions may sound a little bit faint since the only audio is coming from his mic later on in the show. And with that, I hope you enjoy this episode learning about Vermont Cranberries. I'm just looking forward to learning more about your operation, why, and how you do what you do.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:02:02](#)):

Yeah, so I'll show you around.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:02:03](#)):

That'd be great.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:02:04](#)):

Yeah, the thing is I hurt myself the day before I had everything picked up for the winter. There's still-

Andy Chamberlain ([00:02:11](#)):

Well, winter came quick this fall. Made cleanup for a lot of people challenging, at least for me.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:02:20](#)):

Yeah.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:02:22](#)):

Well, this is cool.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:02:24](#)):

Yeah. Well, this is ... We built the main barn ... Well, till 11 years ago, we really had no production space, barn space. Did it, fixed everything outside. We had a small processing room attached to the house that we built like 15 years ago. And we built this 11 years ago. And you'll see when we go downstairs, this level's bumped up 32 inches, mainly because that's our sorter, and it's a comfortable height to ... We pick everything in the black knockdown crates. Yeah, we have pickers here.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:03:20](#)):

Only?

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:03:21](#)):

We're a dry pick operation. Most people see wet harvesting, but a wet harvest operation you can't use for fresh fruit. At least cranberries are grown in New England, they won't keep. Wisconsin actually can wet harvest fresh fruit because they're so much drier. These are state of the art 1960 cranberry pickers. And it's just like a walk behind combine. It combs the berries off the vine, and then they go into the black crates. They're in chaff because it's also a pruner.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:04:10](#)):

Does it get a cutter bar or just a rake?

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:04:12](#)):

Yeah, there's actually a cutter bar right here.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:04:14](#)):

Oh, I see it. Yeah.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:04:15](#)):

And it's on this cam.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:04:17](#)):

Yeah.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:04:18](#)):

And it worked great as long as you keep those sharp. Actually, yeah, there's cutter bars down there. They go into bins. We harvest in October, and then they're dumped in here. And this is basically ... First stage is a fanning mill.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:04:45](#)):

Oh, okay.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:04:45](#)):

And then, it has ... There's five chances for the cranberry to bounce over a barricade, a wooden barricade, which is adjustable, because the sound cranberry will bounce. A rotten one, a field damage one won't, and then, the plywood's covering up. Then there's two conveyors, which we visually sort for color, and stuff that gets missed by the mechanical sorter. And usually, it's three people sorting. There's two people there, and then the last person is really just doing cleanup, getting the last of the berries, and then-

Andy Chamberlain ([00:05:42](#)):

Just hand-picking?

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:05:44](#)):

Yep.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:05:45](#)):

Throwing off the bad ones.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:05:46](#)):

And then it goes to this elevating conveyor. And then it goes to a transfer conveyor, and this bin just has a gate valve.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:06:06](#)):

Oh, yeah.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:06:06](#)):

This is just an old flower bin that we modified. And that's where we fill 15 pound bulk boxes, which typically go ... Some co-ops like to do bulk products, restaurants use bulk products, but this is just a filler for our cranberry boxes, which you may have seen the cardboard boxes.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:06:37](#)):

Yeah.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:06:38](#)):

And it's just operated with a foot pedal. It's not plugged in, but-

Andy Chamberlain ([00:06:42](#)):

Ten you put the box on a scale and just-

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:06:45](#)):

This is volumetric.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:06:48](#)):

Oh, okay.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:06:48](#)):

We check weigh, and it stays within half an ounce usually. We do have to adjust it between ... We run two varieties now, but yeah, it works pretty good. And then, they're just hand glued and then put in our master boxes. And then, we used to sell to over 100 accounts when we got going, the heyday of local food around 2015, 2017. But, gradually, we've shifted more to pretty much 90% distributor sales, because we really sell everything in three and a half weeks, and there just physically isn't time to deliver everywhere. And the distributors take a cut, but they're also doing the marketing and sales.

([00:07:49](#)):

In my opinion, at least for us, it's well worth that. We distribute through Black River, Albert's Organics, Pumpkin Village Foods out of Fairfield, Myers Produce out of Craftsbury. And then, we sell ... Actually, we sold actually 6,000 pounds to Food Connects for the Vermont Food Bank. They contract directly with the food bank, so it's nice to get it to that market. It's really busy here, like four weeks. We pretty much keep it at this temperature, just so the berries don't sweat in the boxes.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:08:39](#)):

Oh, okay, yeah.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:08:41](#)):

October, November is a hard time here. Those temperature swings and cranberries keep very, very long time when they're dry, but not so long if they're moist.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:08:55](#)):

Do you have heat in here?

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:08:57](#)):

Just construction heaters.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:08:59](#)):

Oh, okay. Yep.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:09:00](#)):

That's how I heat the whole building. I have four of those. Like I said, we built this ... And then, we built this addition eight years ago under the guys that my daughter got married here, and it was cheaper to ... But no.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:09:21](#)):

Yeah. Let's build a barn instead of renting one.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:09:24](#)):

It actually worked out.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:09:25](#)):

Yeah. Fair enough.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:09:28](#)):

We've cut all the wood from our property. All the wood is milled right across the road at LSF Forest Products. I don't know if you've ever done business with them-

Andy Chamberlain ([00:09:39](#)):

Yeah, I have.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:09:40](#)):

... but they're awesome.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:09:42](#)):

Yeah, I built a garage with their wood.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:09:44](#)):

Yeah. And he's just gone through a huge expansion and traded excavating for that timber frame.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:09:55](#)):

Nice.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:09:57](#)):

That's the fresh fruit side of things. Now we'll get to the value subtracted side of things.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:10:03](#)):

Value subtracted?

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:10:08](#)):

I'm a big advocate that we make ... Our most profitable fruit is a cranberry in a bulk box going to someone else. This is where we produce juice. This is a somewhat copy of a Goodnature Press. It's just horizontal racking cloth. Where's the press pan? Oh, the press pan's there. The process for the cranberry juice is the second cranberries get frozen. There's a drive-in freezer over here, and then they're split. The splitter is out there. The fruit's thawed here, then split, pressed, goes back in here, pasteurized, and then filled. And then just this summer, we started producing a maple sap seltzer. And we have like 1,500 maple taps that we actually sell to ... We sell a sap to LSF Forest Products.

([00:11:31](#)):

That's just cranberry juice and maple seltzer. And so, this is a labeler. Yeah, so the bins, the bins come out of the freezer. They go to this pallet lift, which basically this is a homeowner's right on lawnmower lift meant for people with one car garages so they can store their ... They're right on lawn tractor for their quarter acre above their car, but it works well. This way we can get-

Andy Chamberlain ([00:12:08](#)):

Just working with the natural grade, which is why you've got lanes.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:12:12](#)):

Yeah, yeah.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:12:13](#)):

Yeah.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:12:13](#)):

And that's freezer. Pretty empty cooler.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:12:21](#)):

Wow.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:12:23](#)):

We're just storing ... Mostly just store sap in here or syrup in here now.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:12:29](#)):

You said you tap?

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:12:30](#)):

Yeah.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:12:31](#)):

And then bring it over to LSF, and they boil it?

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:12:36](#)):

Actually, they do all the woods work and truck it. It works out really well for us. And this is our small canning line, manual in, manual out. My experience with canning and bottling lines, high capacity ones, which I have a fair amount of experience in that, because I was winemaker at Boyden's for 14 years.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:13:01](#)):

Oh, okay.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:13:03](#)):

And it's the infeed, outfeeds, and conveyors that cause you the most trouble. This is just manual and then it's a single can labeler, but for the volume of production we're looking to do, it actually works really well.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:13:20](#)):

Yeah. That's really neat. How expensive is a single can filler?

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:13:27](#)):

It's 22,000.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:13:28](#)):

Okay, so-

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:13:30](#)):

The next step-up, this will do six to 10 cans a minute, and we hit that pretty regularly. The next one up, we'll do 10 to 15, fill in, but it also has an accumulating table, so there's efficiencies there, but it's 45.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:13:49](#)):

How has your new products of canned seltzer compared to the other products? Are you moving the amount of volumes you hope to there?

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:13:58](#)):

Yeah. The beverage business is wicked competitive. In my opinion, throwing a lot of money at marketing in that business, doesn't have a lot of margin. You really need to sell three times as much product as what you spent in the marketing, just to stay even with where you're at. We have really good customers that we've had for decades, and a lot of them are picking that up as a sideline. And seltzers really don't sell.

They sell well in January, dry January, and also mixers for the holidays, but some are ... They sell pretty well. Like I said, this is our first-

Andy Chamberlain ([00:14:47](#)):

Right, right.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:14:48](#)):

We just started selling in July, and we have a spot at the Burlington Farmers market, and that's one of the reasons why I was thinking of doing a seltzer was ... The bylaws of the Burlington farmer's market is you need to do at least half the markets to have a permanent spot. No one buys cranberries in July. It really is a seasonal product, but that product will sell through the summer.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:15:19](#)):

Mm-hmm, right, yeah.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:15:21](#)):

Because we have it cold there, and a lot of the customers that come to the farmers market aren't shopping for weekly groceries. They're just walking through-

Andy Chamberlain ([00:15:36](#)):

Your season is very quick. If you're harvesting in October, you're really selling the majority of your product immediately, November, December.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:15:44](#)):

When we have large crops and we carry berries over past Thanksgiving, the first two and a half weeks of December, no sales. Then you have a big blip for Christmas, but you've been holding those berries another month-

Andy Chamberlain ([00:16:05](#)):

Right.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:16:05](#)):

... and the sorting just gets slower and slower and slower. We're better off freezing them, and using them for other products, after November, I think. But, this year, we sold out the Friday before Thanksgiving.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:16:23](#)):

That sounds perfect then.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:16:24](#)):

Yeah, it was. And this is the other reason for that bump up upstairs.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:16:31](#)):

Uh-huh.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:16:32](#)):

Because I wanted a shop with 14 foot ceilings-

Andy Chamberlain ([00:16:35](#)):

Nice.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:16:36](#)):

... and a 12-foot six door, so I wasn't tempted to buy a log truck because it wouldn't fit in here. That was my original career is I was a pretty high capacity logger.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:16:47](#)):

Oh, okay.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:16:48](#)):

Yeah. And did that until '95, and then economy was poor. I got hurt, and we decided to do something a little closer to home.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:17:02](#)):

Yep, yep. What is that contraption?

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:17:07](#)):

That's a distraction. Once again, getting back to the seasonality of cranberries, once they're established, cranberries, it's tending other than irrigating, which you have to do when you need to. It's just tending, and it's pretty flexible on a lot of your schedules. We run a food truck, and pretty much, we just have ... I used to do a lot of events before COVID, six or seven events a week, and then, COVID, we just shut down, and then afterwards, we just started doing week stints at Hill Farmstead, and that works pretty well. Yeah, that was all fabricated here.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:18:04](#)):

What do you sell at those food trucks?

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:18:06](#)):

Mostly seafood.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:18:07](#)):

Oh, okay.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:18:08](#)):

Lobster rolls, calamari, scallops, because I do a little bit of commercial fishing out of Rye with a friend of mine, so it's all seafood-oriented. Not all seafood, because if you're the only vendor, you need to branch out.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:18:25](#)):

Yep, yep.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:18:26](#)):

But, yeah. Still unknown how much we're going to do this summer.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:18:33](#)):

Yeah, you're into the fabrication, huh?

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:18:35](#)):

Yeah. That's a factory original tasty freeze grill truck and creamy machine.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:18:42](#)):

All in the same thing?

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:18:46](#)):

Actually, that was in here. Do you know Diane Abrazini and Colin?

Andy Chamberlain ([00:18:52](#)):

Yes.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:18:53](#)):

Yeah. Well, when they wanted to get the rigorous started, they couldn't find anywhere to rent, and they needed a place for proof of concept to get its original programs, and they rented my shop, and this got moved out then, and just has not gone back. Because they were here about six or seven months, but it's cool how to see how well they're doing.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:19:22](#)):

Yeah, they seem to be getting some tractions.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:19:24](#)):

Yeah.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:19:24](#)):

Do you do events here?

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:19:30](#)):

No. We're thinking we might do some popups once a month just to justify the space.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:19:39](#)):

Right. That's a nice spot there with the glass windows and everything.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:19:42](#)):

Yeah. We wouldn't be renting event space out. I don't want to be in that business.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:19:48](#)):

Yeah.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:19:49](#)):

But, yeah, doing once a month lobster bake or something like that. Not a lot of food options around here.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:19:58](#)):

Nope.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:19:59](#)):

Yeah, so this is ... Initially, this was our first packing house for cranberries. The sorter was here, and we just outgrew it, and now it's just commercial kitchen.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:20:13](#)):

Nice.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:20:16](#)):

We have this seasonal migration of the sap tank. The sap tank goes in here, because our pipelines come down into here.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:20:25](#)):

Oh, okay. And truly integrated into business here with commercial kitchen, maple stuff all attached to your house.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:20:36](#)):

Yeah. When I make the joke about value subtracted, we have six Department of Health permits. They're not that expensive individually, but it adds up over time.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:20:51](#)):

Yeah. Yeah. It's that much more to figure out.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:20:54](#)):

And raw materials have really cut into the cost of goods sold. Periodically with our juice, we can't get glassware for months on end, and it's very expensive glassware, and we really don't have the resources to buy a 40-foot shipping container or glass.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:21:19](#)):

Why is that a challenge? I would think the glass bottles is a pretty standard item.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:21:24](#)):

Well, very little glass is produced in the states anymore. The glass we use is, there's only one manufacturer of it, and it's Indian glass. And a lot of it is just uncertainty. The companies ... The glass distributors only have so much warehouse space and what do they carry, specialty glass that really doesn't have a lot of velocity or beer bottles.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:21:57](#)):

Yeah.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:22:01](#)):

Yeah, and it's like cans. The supply of cans, it was COVID, post-COVID, craft beer, boom. At one point you had to order 20 pallets. That was their minimum order. I was getting cans through a friend of mine who has a big cidery in Maine, and that's all settled out. Now you can buy individual pallets, but yeah.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:22:35](#)):

You have to buy half a truckload. What?

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:22:38](#)):

Yeah.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:22:39](#)):

Convenient for small business.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:22:40](#)):

Yeah.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:22:42](#)):

You got into cranberries in '95. What made you choose to get into cranberries?

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:22:50](#)):

I'm asked that question every week, and I haven't even figured out a good lie. As I was telling you, we were initially ... I was a logging contractor, and we specialized in first thinnings in forest plantations, Red Pine, Norris, Bruce, White Pine. And when you specialize that closely, you end up ... Your sphere of work gets bigger, longer. You're suddenly ... I was commuting two hours a day for jobs, and we did okay with forest products for a while. I'm a trained forester from UVM. My wife just retired from the chief forester position at McNeil Station, Burlington Electric. And I loved working in the woods, but it just ... The commuting and just the cyclical nature ... A lot of economists talk about depreciation, equipment depreciation. Forest products equipment is true depreciation. You buy something brand new, you take care of it, you run it, so it's a profitable machine, in five years, it's worn out.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:24:21](#)):

You've used it.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:24:23](#)):

And you can keep it running if you have mechanical abilities, and resources, but then, it's a trade-off of productive time versus saving money. Reducing expenses is nice, because it's pre-tax profit, but it's just the balancing act. And the equipment I was using was prototype. I'm a sucker for prototypes. And so, it required a lot of maintenance, and I also got hurt, and we decided to stop, and I wanted to do something closer to home that had ... I'm not sure I like the word, legacy value. And at that time, the cranberries were very profitable. In 1990, they said that cranberry production wouldn't beat demand for 15 years. And cranberry growers in Massachusetts were looking at Maine, and the maritime provinces to expand, and they were. And it seemed like an okay fit, so we decided to jump in and grow cranberries. And then by 1994, supply exceeded demand.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:25:55](#)):

Just you're getting started.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:25:56](#)):

And prices crashed. We initially were going to be a wholesale grower, just-

Andy Chamberlain ([00:26:02](#)):

Ship and commodity.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:26:04](#)):

Maybe have five acres, ship it, be done, and then there was no market.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:26:09](#)):

Of course.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:26:11](#)):

We said, "Well, I guess, we're selling cranberries." And I'm trying to figure out how the system worked. I bought Cranberry Vine, I bought an excavator. We built ... Our biggest bog is, it's up to almost two acres up on top of the hill. And then we have two small ones here, and I had a little bit of money from selling the logging equipment, and I used it to build the cranberries. And then, we're five years out from cash flow, so I guess I need a job. I took a job butchering fish at night for the net result, which was on Dorset Street at the time. I cut fish at night, and delivered the next morning. And I did deliveries all over the northern half of the state, all the co-ops, the general stores, and I met the buyers there. And then, so when it was time to sell cranberries, I had the confidence to go talk to the buyers. I'm introverted, but ... That was where our first-

Andy Chamberlain ([00:27:34](#)):

You didn't know that job that you needed would be a-

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:27:36](#)):

... right, professional development opportunity. I love cutting fish. Yeah, so our first customers were like Mehuran's in Waitsfield, and the Middlebury Co-op, when they were in a building as big as this room. They were tiny then, and City Market had just ... Yeah, they had just moved. Can't remember if I delivered on Archibald Street, but ... Then it gradually built up, and then, that first year we were ready to sell ... Boyden Valley Winery just got started, and actually, I met him on the chairlift, and he decided to buy some cranberries. And for a while, they were our largest customer, and then, they peered down, and sell them the cranberries, and I ended up working there also. Then I got done with the night job, and just did that. And then, we used to sell a ton to Champlain Orchards, and Citizen Cider, but all the bulk sales have pretty much tailed off. I think people are ... That business is ... People are watching their money. Our berries are expensive compared to commodity berries.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:29:18](#)):

Right. Your advantage is the small local brand you've built.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:29:24](#)):

Right.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:29:24](#)):

Right. How's your quality compared ... I don't know compared to commodity berries.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:29:32](#)):

It's changed a little bit over the time we've been doing it. When we first started, the fresh holiday market cranberry was two varieties, small varieties, early black and house, which were the traditional cranberry varieties. And then, there was larger fruited varieties like Stevens and Pilgrim, which we grow, that really didn't hold up well to high speed packing lines, the skin's a little softer. Our style of packing, we can get a better berry in the package as opposed to something that's going through an optical sorter or something like that. Except I did hear about an optical sorter that a bean grower in the Northeast Kingdom has. Small bean grower, but it's like, mmm. Yeah, yeah, that was working lands grant-

Andy Chamberlain ([00:30:37](#)):

Yep, yep.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:30:38](#)):

... which I just got done three terms on the working lands board. I was the value added rep.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:30:47](#)):

Oh, okay.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:30:47](#)):

But, I think it's just we're not producing a lot of berries, so we do try to do a higher quality berry. There's a lot of good quality berries on the market now, particularly coming out of Quebec. But, I think, being dependent on the Thanksgiving meal is interesting. And it seems like in times of distress, like during COVID, and all that, our sales went up, because people concentrate on the holiday meal. And the difference between our cranberry, and an Ocean Spray cranberry is a couple bucks. That's really decimal dust for the Thanksgiving meal.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:31:39](#)):

Yeah.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:31:41](#)):

And we've been selling them long enough. We have premium packaging, and we've been selling it long enough that now, the kids of our original customers are buying our cranberries nostalgically. At least that's my opinion, one opinion.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:32:04](#)):

Yeah, right. Your name's been out there for a while now.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:32:08](#)):

Right. Yeah, it's been good to us.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:32:12](#)):

Are there other small scale cranberry growers in the northeast like you, or is it pretty much the only big farms?

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:32:21](#)):

There used to be a small grower in Lunenburg. He sold basically the Littleton co-op, but I think he's done ... Maine at one time had 40 growers, and now they're down to two. And one of them sells direct, has his own brand. And he's pretty much like Hannaford's supplier. There's some growers in New York, but they're wet harvest people. And they sell to a company in Quebec, Fruit d'Or, which actually just bought one of the big independent distributors or processes in Massachusetts. But, they had extreme difficulty this year. I have a friend, he has, I think it's 50 acres of cranberries outside of Malone, like pretty much right next to the casino. And he didn't harvest a single cranberry because he didn't have any water to harvest.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:33:33](#)):

Oh, wow.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:33:35](#)):

He had a good crop, but he had no water. And by the time he had water, the crop froze.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:33:42](#)):

Now it's juice in the field.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:33:45](#)):

He's going to have to harvest in the spring to get the crop off.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:33:49](#)):

You can still get something from it?

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:33:52](#)):

No, he's going to dump it.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:33:53](#)):

You just got to clean up the plants?

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:33:55](#)):

Yeah.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:33:55](#)):

Okay.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:33:56](#)):

Or his fruit route will be-

Andy Chamberlain ([00:33:58](#)):

I see.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:33:59](#)):

... crazy. It probably still will be high.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:34:02](#)):

I really know nothing about it. Can you explain the process of growing cranberries?

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:34:06](#)):

Okay. Now, it's a perennial plant. It's the sister of the wild blueberry. It's a low trailing vine. To prepare a bed, you excavate to water holding material, mostly hard pan, plus or minus an inch to the acre. Needs to be really level. Then you import six inches of sand, six to eight inches of sand, and has to be mountain quality sand. Real expensive now. And then, there's two ways to plant. It used to be you always use prunings, like you saw that little Honda tractor down there. That's our pruning tractor.

([00:34:57](#)):

Basically, in the spring, you go through and you cut the long runners off to concentrate the growth to the crown, kind of like pruning strawberries. And then, you disc those vines in, and they root. Three to five years later, you have a crop. Recently, Rutgers contract ... Rutgers has some royalties varieties that are really very, very productive, and you can buy rooted cuttings for that. And that's what our ... We planted our biggest bog. I wish we could go up there and see it. But, with those, rooted cutting every six by nine inches, that was a long summer. I really underestimated.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:35:53](#)):

Just hand planting all of that?

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:35:54](#)):

Yeah. Then, for us, for the growing year, right now they're under ice. We flood a little bit after Thanksgiving, and once we get six or eight inches of ice, then we pull the water out from underneath the ice because if you leave the water on with heavy snow cover, your water gets oxygen deficient, and the plants get very stressed. And they'll be under ice until May. Then, May, they'll start growing, and everything has solid set sprinkler heads. They'll bloom starting first week of June, and then you're on frost watch for the flowers, which basically ... I don't know if you sell us at irrigate anything for frost.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:36:59](#)):

Yeah. Not right now, but we did for strawberries, yeah.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:37:01](#)):

Yeah, yeah, you're up all night.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:37:02](#)):

Yeah.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:37:05](#)):

And the plants are ready to harvest in October. We dry harvest, but for wet harvest, you flood the bed, and then you go in with a water reel, which knocks the berries off the vine. They pop to the surface, you corral them to the side, and pump them into the truck, really efficient.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:37:27](#)):

You chose a dry harvest so it would take longer to be-

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:37:32](#)):

No. We started wet harvesting when we really weren't doing fresh fruit, when we were just selling to the larger Vermont beverage manufacturers. Problem with the water harvest is it takes like five people to do it. And once you start, you have to finish within a day or two. And at that time, we didn't have storage. Went to the dry harvest when we started doing fresh fruit, and then, what we'd do is we'd harvest until this little walk-in was full, and then sell that, and then pick some more, and then pick some more. Now, we have the storage where we can pick everything at once.

(00:38:19):

But, that is the advantage of fresh fruit is you can do it a little at a time. And until this year, we only had one harvester. I bought another four this fall, so it was limited by how fast you could go. And for dry harvested fruit, the vines have to be absolutely dry. If you irrigated for frost, you're not picking for a couple of days. You have a heavy dew, you're not picking until 2:00 in the afternoon. Mid-October, you start at 2:00, the dew sets at 4:00, because if they're wet, they don't store. They sour.

Andy Chamberlain (00:39:02):

Right. You're really dependent on a short window of opportunity there late fall.

Bob Lesnakowski (00:39:06):

Yeah.

Andy Chamberlain (00:39:09):

Do you think ... How is the market now? Is it steady?

Bob Lesnakowski (00:39:16):

Yeah. Yeah. That's interesting. We sell through two large distributors, the two largest produce distributors in the United States, and we're just a tiny little farm, but we have a unique product. Our fruit goes out to the DC and Philadelphia metro area now.

Andy Chamberlain (00:39:43):

Wow.

Bob Lesnakowski (00:39:46):

A lot of it goes to New York City. A lot of it goes ridiculously to Boston. We have cranberry that grows right there. But, yeah, once again, it's our distributors, the small distributors we use are upscale distributors.

Andy Chamberlain (00:40:05):

Do they grow well here? Where's the majority of them growing in the States?

Bob Lesnakowski (00:40:10):

Wisconsin's the biggest grower. Quebec would be the world's largest grower in the future, and the potential in the maritime provinces is huge. It all depends on the world climate for cranberries. There was a fairly big market in Europe. There's actually growers in Europe, some very good growers in Latvia, and yeah.

Andy Chamberlain (00:40:51):

Why do you think there isn't other small cranberry growers like you?

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:41:02](#)):

Probably 10 to 15 years of unprofitability.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:41:09](#)):

Okay. Large startup costs-

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:41:12](#)):

There's a lot of startup costs.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:41:12](#)):

... and time before it starts working.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:41:16](#)):

Yeah, yeah. Yeah, we're lucky that we purchased this place in '84 and we purchased another 100 acres of mostly timberland over time. And it's not like I allocate land cost.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:41:39](#)):

Yeah, yeah.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:41:42](#)):

Yeah. It's really, it's just startup is tough. It's basically build an acre of cranberries is basically doing the site work for 10 very big homes.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:41:58](#)):

It's more complicated. Like you said, it has to be plus or minus an inch, so it's-

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:42:01](#)):

That's what you're shooting for.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:42:02](#)):

Yeah. It's more complicated than digging a pond.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:42:06](#)):

Right. And then, you need water resources.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:42:09](#)):

Yeah. Because you needed to drain for dry harvest, but you need to be next to something you can pump it in.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:42:15](#)):

Right, and you need the water for irrigation. You're 90 gallons a minute for irrigation per acre. Less than that, sorry, 45, because you have about 14 sprinkler heads per acre, and you're looking at three, three and a half gallons a minute.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:42:40](#)):

This last fall being really dry, was that a problem for you?

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:42:43](#)):

No, that was good, because we have pretty much unlimited water resources.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:42:49](#)):

Are you pulling out of a river, or a well?

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:42:53](#)):

Our two beds down here, we pull out of this marsh, and then, our upper one, there's a 10 acre beaver pond most times. It's decided to unemploy itself a couple of times, just washed out, destroyed our road-

Andy Chamberlain ([00:43:12](#)):

Oh, gee.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:43:14](#)):

... three times. But, even when the dam bursts, we still have enough water to irrigate up there if I'm careful. And small beds, any small agriculture gets inefficient.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:43:31](#)):

Yeah, right.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:43:31](#)):

It's like for a little less than two acres of cranberry bogs, I have three pumps. One pump could do all that if they were in one place.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:43:45](#)):

Right. But, you're working with everything else.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:43:47](#)):

Yeah. And the cranberries are flat, and we're not flat.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:43:53](#)):

Mm-hmm, yeah, right. You're on a hill.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:43:57](#)):

Right, but the thing is, that helps a lot of times, because of frost drainage.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:44:03](#)):

Uh-huh, yep, like an orchard.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:44:06](#)):

Yeah. Yeah.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:44:08](#)):

A lot of startup costs like an orchard.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:44:09](#)):

Initially we were going to build a bed across the way. It would have taken a wetlands permit, but it was flat over there. But, one spring, set up thermometers, and realized that it was 10 degrees colder on the flat than right here, and decided it was not viable.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:44:31](#)):

What are you excited about in your next year of farming life?

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:44:36](#)):

I don't know.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:44:37](#)):

Are you planning any changes in the near future?

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:44:42](#)):

No real plans. We'll be pretty much debt free shortly, not short, within a few years. We've had a pretty big capital campaign over the last 11 years as far as buildings. Probably, we're going to be renovating one of our original beds to new genetics. I'm pretty excited about the new genetics. They're almost twice as productive, and we're a little concerned. We have one variety that really no one was using for fresh fruit, and we were worried about its keeping quality, but it looks like it's going to keep pretty well.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:45:29](#)):

I take it you've had the same three beds for quite a while now. Did you have way more fruit than you had demand for, or has-

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:45:38](#)):

No, no. We're about even. Yeah. Particularly, our original genetics weren't that great possibly, or we're just not very good growers, because our yields really didn't hit like benchmarks of the cranberry business. Things are a little different. Our sand soils aren't really great for cranberries, because they're basic. Cranberries want very acidic soil. They'll grow in it, but they just don't compete well with the ... Your weed complex gets pretty onerous, particularly for us. Marestalk is the big problem. It's just a lot of hand weeding.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:46:37](#)):

That's your primary weed control, all hand stuff?

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:46:40](#)):

For the most part, we'll wipe. We're not organic growers. We're conventional growers. We try to use real light touch, but we do wipe contact herbicides for weeds, and we use conventional fertilizer.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:47:02](#)):

Yeah, so just a granular you spread in the spring?

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:47:06](#)):

Yes.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:47:07](#)):

Yep.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:47:08](#)):

Yeah. And I'm glad I'm not a corn grower. Fertilizer prices are-

Andy Chamberlain ([00:47:17](#)):

Benefit of being conventional at least might be cheaper fertilizer in that regard.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:47:23](#)):

Yeah, yeah, but-

Andy Chamberlain ([00:47:26](#)):

What did you envision your farm would look like when you got started?

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:47:30](#)):

I envisioned probably having five to eight acres or maybe 10. But, that's when our business idea, I won't call it a business plan, was to be wholesale growers. And yeah, we have about a third of an acre that's been roughed in, and we didn't plant it because it was one of the years the beaver dam blew out, and I didn't have water for that location. And I'd like to ... It's 10 foot tall alders now, but I'd like to get that into a productive bed. Yeah, and I didn't envision, didn't have any concept of being a value added producer. That just came about by, I guess, learning how to do it through working at the winery.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:48:30](#)):

How much of your business is value add versus fresh fruit or value minus?

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:48:33](#)):

Value subtractive.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:48:33](#)):

Yeah.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:48:37](#)):

It's about 50/50 right now.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:48:39](#)):

Okay.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:48:40](#)):

Well, probably 60/40 fruit to ... It's a little hard to tell, because we've had major gaps in glass supply for six months at a time. And like I said, we could have ameliorated that by just buying in bulk, but we just didn't have the capability.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:49:05](#)):

Did you just sit on it in bulk tanks, or-

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:49:08](#)):

No, it's just in frozen, frozen, yeah.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:49:10](#)):

Just waiting to be pressed.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:49:14](#)):

Yeah. And I've gotten really numb to the \$600 electric bill every month. It's just-

Andy Chamberlain ([00:49:25](#)):

La, la, la.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:49:25](#)):

It's just there. Just don't open the door up. And I used to store some product for people, and it's not my business model.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:49:42](#)):

But, you recently invested in canning stuff, so you're obviously planning that value added side of things.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:49:51](#)):

Yeah. Well, I invested in a canning line, well, one, the can for the winery, and to do our own stuff. Well, see, I have some ideas about doing some other canned products, but I'm not ... I don't have blinders on about really making a ton of money on it just because it's such a competitive marketplace. If you don't have product for one month, you lose your shelf space.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:50:25](#)):

I see, yeah.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:50:27](#)):

It's just, that's the way it is.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:50:29](#)):

It's really hard to stay consistent with a-

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:50:32](#)):

And it's pretty much just me.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:50:35](#)):

Yeah.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:50:35](#)):

And I try to ... You set your priorities, and then you put out fires, and when you put out fires, then the priorities switch.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:50:47](#)):

Right. You primarily run the business, and then, you have a handful of part-timers come in at harvest time?

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:50:53](#)):

Yeah.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:50:53](#)):

Yeah.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:50:54](#)):

Yep. Yeah, used to be just family, but my kids are grown, and doing their own thing elsewhere, and they're doing really well.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:51:06](#)):

Well, that's good. Did you have any inspirations, or mentors, or influences that really got you into this?

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:51:15](#)):

Well, my original inspiration was a friend of ours back when the Massachusetts growers were looking to go to Maine, or expanding to Maine. She was head of the Finance Authority of Maine, which is pretty much like our vita. It's identical to it, except they invested in farming, forestry, and fisheries, and they produced a feasibility study. And I went through that, and they said, "Yeah, this could work here." And then, at that time, I joined the Maine and Massachusetts Cranberry Growers Association, and I met some growers in Maine, and that's pretty much ... I'm friends with a couple growers in Maine, in Massachusetts, and New York. And I get advice from them quite a bit, because I make a joke that you don't know how to grow cranberries unless you're a third generation cranberry grower.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:52:28](#)):

Yeah. You're a first generation cranberry grower, yes?

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:52:33](#)):

Right, yeah.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:52:34](#)):

What's the 10-year outlook looking like for Vermont Cranberry?

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:52:39](#)):

That's a question that ... Yeah, it's interesting. We'll see. One of our sons is in Colorado, and he worked all through high school for ... Sam's his name. He worked for Dave Marshawn all through high school, and some in college. And he may come back to take over, help out. As far as ... I'm 64, I can grow cranberries for the next 10 years. I think I would reduce the scope to just doing fresh fruit. We like living here. That is the curse of building a business in a place you really like and want to live in. It's not like we want to move away and sell the place.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:53:38](#)):

Right, right. Fair enough. Is this business structured that if somebody was interested in growing cranberries, you could take on a mentor or-

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:53:50](#)):

Possibly, yeah. And with a little rebranding, our value added products could be sold as a brand.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:53:59](#)):

Mm-hmm, yeah.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:54:01](#)):

Yeah, we'll see.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:54:03](#)):

A lot can happen in just a few years. You just invested in a whole bunch of stuff that ... It takes a while to build the market, and try new products and things, so who knows what could grab or not.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:54:14](#)):

Right.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:54:16](#)):

The economy is yet. You can get cans, but not bottles, bottles not cans.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:54:22](#)):

Yeah, yeah.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:54:23](#)):

Another reason to have another product if you don't.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:54:25](#)):

Right.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:54:26](#)):

If you can't get glass, at least you can throw-

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:54:30](#)):

Yeah, yeah.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:54:30](#)):

... something in the seltzer. Is the annual yields fairly consistent?

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:54:36](#)):

Yeah. Like I was saying earlier, we'll use ... The old benchmark for cranberries was 100 pound barrels per acre was your crop goal. We exceed that most years. But, the new standards with new varieties, just pretty

much new varieties is 250, 100 pound barrels per acre. We haven't hit that. But, once again, I think ... And for a long time we were at a, not a difficult place, but okay, so we have our beds established. The genetics aren't that great possibly, but I was better off leaving those genetics in place, and producing-

Andy Chamberlain ([00:55:38](#)):

Right.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:55:39](#)):

... versus taking them out of production for five years.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:55:42](#)):

Yeah, better to get a little bit than-

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:55:44](#)):

And four years ago we replanted. We just said, "Yep, we're just going to take the hit." And so, really, this is the first year we started to get increase in production. Hopefully next year, hopefully next year it'll be good. In farming, there's all these little things. Like I was saying to you earlier, we had one cranberry picker, and it's one style of picking that you prune your bed in a certain direction, so it's easier to pick. I bought these new to me pickers, these 1960 new to me pickers. They require you to prune in the opposite direction. Picking this year was a fight, just the pickers were plugging up all the time, and you have to untangle them, and we ended up with a lot of brews fruit from that, that got sorted out, and a lot of drop fruit. It was a little hard to see really what our yields were, but, hopefully next year. I'm excited about one thing for this coming year is to have it pruned correctly for the new pickers.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:57:18](#)):

Do the plants peter out over time, or-

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:57:23](#)):

Yeah. They used to say no, and you can do ... Then the feeling was, because they'll grow forever. But, now they say 25 years, you're starting to get a little bit of ... Because the cranberries are a clone. You're planting vegetative cuttings, so your drop fruit, if it sprouts, isn't true to the clone, particularly if you have other varieties in the area. Your vines can get Mangrove over time from those berries that are sprouting. But, right now, the cranberry industry is surviving, because they're planting the new varieties, because the prices are less now. The commodity prices are less now than what they were in 1980.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:58:24](#)):

Got you.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:58:24](#)):

Yeah.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:58:30](#)):

The industry hasn't, hasn't changed since the-

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:58:34](#)):

It's dominated by one player. And it's an interesting economic model, Ocean Spray Cooperative, it's an agricultural cooperative, the growers are owners. It's publicly traded, has one board of directors. What's the fiduciary responsibility to have board of directors? The grower owners who are also stockholders, or return on stocks when your highest expense is the fruit, an interesting dynamic. When we first came to start selling cranberries on the open market, we decided to price it for a fair price for us, and the customer, and ignore what the commodity pricing was.

Andy Chamberlain ([00:59:32](#)):

Right.

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:59:33](#)):

Maybe it only works in Vermont. We have customers that really value the Vermont brand, so-

Andy Chamberlain ([00:59:43](#)):

Mm-hmm. If you could restart knowing what you know now, what would you do differently?

Bob Lesnakowski ([00:59:50](#)):

I'd like to say I wouldn't learn by doing. That was interesting at that time. It was just reading some textbooks, and talking to other growers, and I would have spent more time bothering other growers just to get the nuances, all the little nuances.

Andy Chamberlain ([01:00:16](#)):

From the growing, or the post harvest, or the marketing side of things?

Bob Lesnakowski ([01:00:20](#)):

I'd say the growing side of it because that is something that's completely lacking. Cranberry growers don't sell direct. Very few of them do. There's very few individual farm brands. It goes through processes.

Andy Chamberlain ([01:00:49](#)):

Is there a particular reason there isn't a direct to retail brew?

Bob Lesnakowski ([01:00:56](#)):

I'd have to say for a while the cranberries was pretty profitable for growers until ... Well, geez, that's 40 years ago. I think because there's very few farms that are a small enough size to do that. And it's a fairly mature market.

Andy Chamberlain ([01:01:25](#)):

And it's not something that the back yarders can easily do?

Bob Lesnakowski ([01:01:30](#)):

No, right.

Andy Chamberlain ([01:01:32](#)):

It takes a certain amount of scale, infrastructure, commitment.

Bob Lesnakowski ([01:01:37](#)):

And the beauty of our size scale is everything we're using is, unless we build it ourselves, are antiques. We're back to the scale of when the average cranberry farm was 10 acres versus now it's 100, just economies of scale. Yeah, I'll have to think about that.

Andy Chamberlain ([01:02:08](#)):

Yeah, no, that makes sense though. I think just as I'm thinking about it too, is you can't ... Somebody can have a garden, and have a surplus of vegetables, and then bring them to the farmer's market. That's pretty low barrier to entry.

Bob Lesnakowski ([01:02:23](#)):

Yes.

Andy Chamberlain ([01:02:24](#)):

You can't do that with a quarter acre of cranberries just to take to the local market. That's a big commitment.

Bob Lesnakowski ([01:02:32](#)):

Right.

Andy Chamberlain ([01:02:33](#)):

And then, by the time you're committed, like you said, the economies of scale, you're like, well, a 10 acre cranberry farm is going to have big equipment, and therefore, they have so much volume. They don't want to go to the local farmers market. They want to go sell it to the distributors. What does sustainable farming mean to you, and what are you doing to achieve it?

Bob Lesnakowski ([01:02:53](#)):

A farm's not sustainable unless it pays its bills, but it also needs to do that as stewards, stewards of the land. And stewardship, it can mean a lot of things for a lot of people, but we really are protective of our water resources. Like I said, we're a conventional grower. We do some sprays if they're needed. But, I feel like there's no outside impact on what we're ... Other than what we're trying to control. And you also need to support your community. And then, you have the ... You got to pay your help decent. And I mentioned the legacy before, and that's something that I think is important, but we haven't figured that one out.

Andy Chamberlain ([01:03:58](#)):

And what do you mean around that?

Bob Lesnakowski ([01:04:02](#)):

I guess, you can look at sustainability at the five-foot level, or the 10,000-foot level. At the 10,000-foot level, this farm stops when I stop as it stands now.

Andy Chamberlain ([01:04:21](#)):

They're, by definition, not sustainable in the fact that it won't keep going.

Bob Lesnakowski ([01:04:25](#)):

Yeah, and I've made peace with that. It's taken me a while. Yeah, and I guess, we're guilty of overbuilding for the neighborhood. For us to get our capital out, our investment out at full face value is excessive to someone else's ability to mortgage that debt, and still run a viable farm.

Andy Chamberlain ([01:05:08](#)):

Yeah, that's right.

Bob Lesnakowski ([01:05:12](#)):

Like a lot of farms, my wife just retired from 42 years at Burlington Electric. That's paid a lot of bills.

Andy Chamberlain ([01:05:24](#)):

Yeah, yeah, yep.

Bob Lesnakowski ([01:05:25](#)):

And unfortunately, it's a lot of ag. There's very little small scale ag that doesn't have another outside income.

Andy Chamberlain ([01:05:33](#)):

Oh, right, absolutely.

Bob Lesnakowski ([01:05:34](#)):

And I don't know why people are embarrassed about that, or afraid to admit it, or it's just that's the economics of it. And you can't change macroeconomics, macro/microeconomics in your orbit. You have to be resilient enough to figure out how to accomplish that. Maybe we could sell the retiring Massachusetts cranberry farmer that doesn't want 100 acres anymore. I don't know.

Andy Chamberlain ([01:06:16](#)):

What advice would you give to a beginning farmer, and it doesn't have to be somebody interested in cranberries. It could be anybody in the working landscape because you've had experience in that.

Bob Lesnakowski ([01:06:27](#)):

My opinions might be counter to a lot of people, but avoid diversification. Concentration I think is ... Particularly when you're beginning is you need to concentrate on one or two products. At least that's what worked for us. Except I do have two acres of grapes with no market.

Andy Chamberlain ([01:06:51](#)):

In this situation, are you thinking that it worked well to focus on cranberries as a whole and not maple, and forestry, and food truck?

Bob Lesnakowski ([01:07:04](#)):

Right, yeah.

Andy Chamberlain ([01:07:05](#)):

Obviously, you're doing all that now, but you're established and further down your career. But, when you're getting started, or do you think stay focused on fresh cranberries and not get distracted with the value adds?

Bob Lesnakowski ([01:07:19](#)):

Right.

Andy Chamberlain ([01:07:20](#)):

Yeah.

Bob Lesnakowski ([01:07:21](#)):

Yeah. I'm thinking more fruit, or veggie growers, or even livestock growers. That might not be sage advice, because you don't really know what's going to work. But, I think it gets a lot of noise out of ... It gets rid of a lot of noise. And then, don't be afraid to realize it doesn't work. I'm just thinking of some of the really great livestock growers we have, they all seem to be moving around. Like a lot of people got out of poultry completely. Moving away from cattle, seems to be a big upswing in sheep right now. And I think a lot of it's grain cost. Our land base probably grows sheep better than grass-fed beef just from our forage standpoint. I don't know. And I also think there's a real ... It's starting to get the infrastructure for the fiber end has really gotten into place over the last half dozen, five years. We have three spinneries now, whereas a decade ago, I don't think we had any. We had to go to Maine.

Andy Chamberlain ([01:09:10](#)):

Right, right. What's one of your best memories as a cranberry grower?

Bob Lesnakowski ([01:09:15](#)):

I guess, it's multiple memories. But, every holiday season, we get dozens of emails on people saying how important our cranberries were for their holiday celebration. And it's also, it's heartwarming to think that there's probably 6,000 families Thanksgiving, that are using our farm product.

Andy Chamberlain ([01:09:48](#)):

Yeah, that's a lot of touch points.

Bob Lesnakowski ([01:09:49](#)):

Yeah, no, it's-

Andy Chamberlain ([01:09:54](#)):

What's something you wish the general public knew about agriculture or the working landscape of Vermont?

Bob Lesnakowski ([01:10:02](#)):

How intertwined all the various segments of agriculture are and forestry. The working lands are important to me, and I don't know why this ... Well, I guess, it's a true thought. How important our fluid milk agriculture is for all the other segments of agriculture in the state, because without that driver, we wouldn't have tractor dealers. We wouldn't have mechanics. We wouldn't have refrigeration guys, because the rest of the agriculture is too small and too segmented.

Andy Chamberlain ([01:10:49](#)):

Right.

Bob Lesnakowski ([01:10:50](#)):

And also, just how important all the trades are. And that's one thing that I really respect a lot of the younger farmers. They don't have the I have to do everything mentality that myself and a lot of my generation have. They're not afraid to hire out to tradespeople. Maybe because they have a little better control on their books and realize where their time is best spent. I don't know.

Andy Chamberlain ([01:11:33](#)):

Hopefully.

Bob Lesnakowski ([01:11:34](#)):

Yeah, I know. Because that to yourself, everything mentality can be pretty fatiguing.

Andy Chamberlain ([01:11:40](#)):

Yeah. And that was the Farmer's Share. I hope you enjoyed this episode with Bob of Vermont Cranberry Company. The Farmers Share is supported by a grant offered by the USDA Specialty Crop Block Program from the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food, and Markets. This funding helps to cover some of my time and travel in order to produce this podcast until March of 2026. The USDA Agricultural Marketing Service supports projects that address the needs of US specialty crop growers, and strengthens local and regional food systems. I have no doubt that this podcast will meet those needs, and help educate growers to support the industry. If you enjoy the show and want to help support its programming, you can make a one-time, or reoccurring donation on our website by visiting thefarmersshare.com/support.

([01:12:43](#)):

We also receive funding from the Vermont Vegetable and Berry Growers Association. The VVBGA is a nonprofit organization funded in 1976 to promote the economic, environmental, and social sustainability of vegetable and berry farming in Vermont. Their membership includes over 400 farms across Vermont and beyond, as well as about 50 businesses and organizations that provide products and services of all types to their members. Benefits to members include access to the VVBGA Listserv to buy, sell plants and equipment, share farming information, and tap the vast experience of our growers. Access the community accreditation for produce safety, also known as CAPS. This program is designed for growers by growers to help you easily meet market and regulatory food safety expectations. You can access the VVBGA's soil health platform, where you can organize all the soil tests, and create and store your soil amendment plans and records, access to webinars for growers in the VVBGA annual meeting, an email subscription to the Vermont Vegetable and Berry newsletter, camaraderie, enhanced communication and fellowship among commercial growers.

([01:14:00](#)):

Memberships are on a per farm, per calendar year basis, and annual dues this year are \$80. These funds pay for the organization's operating costs, and support educational programs and research projects. These funds also support projects that address grower needs around ag engineering, high tunnel production, test management, pollinators, produce safety, and soil health. Become a member today to be a part of, and further support the veg and berry industry. You can visit thefarmersshare.com to listen to previous interviews or see photos, videos, or links discussed from the conversation. If you don't want to miss the next episode, enter your email address on our website and you'll get a note in your inbox when the next one comes out. The Farmers Share has a YouTube channel with videos from several of the farm visits. We're also on Instagram, and that's where you can be reminded about the latest episode, or see photos from the visit.

([01:14:59](#)):

Lastly, if you're enjoying the show, I'd love it if you could write a review. In Apple Podcasts, just click on the show, scroll down to the bottom, and there you can leave five stars and a comment to help encourage

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new listeners to tune in. I'd also encourage you to share this episode with other grower friends or crew who you think would be inspiring for them. Thanks for listening.