

Tony Hooks & Carol (Orange) Schroeder

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[00:00:00] Thank you for having me. Thank you. Tony Hook, as Jim said, um, as I'm speaking, if you have any questions along the way, please just speak up on, you know, ask me then so we don't pass over as late. Um, I started making cheese when I graduated from school in barn barn cheese company. Started working there during the summer and you working there while I went to college.

[00:00:34] When, when you become a cheesemaker, you have to apprentice for, uh, at least a year and a half. I apprentice Thunder, bill Minot for a year and a half, two years, and took my cheesemaker's license in, uh, 1972. So been making cheese. Um, so I worked for Bill, uh, when I [00:01:00] started we had all can milk. I don't know if anybody here has worked on a farm, but you know, everybody milk, put milk in 10 gallon cans at that time.

[00:01:11] Of course, previous to that they had started using bulk tanks and by the time I was done working for Bill, we had a few farmers that had bulk and planning on retiring. So, you know, they just kept doing it as cans. Um, from 1970 to 1976, I worked for Bill and then we moved to General Point and took over a small cooperative cheese factory called Buck Grove.

[00:01:43] Uh, all those farms were vault when we got there. So little less hard on the back, you know, when you're younger. Doesn't seem, I don't think I'd wanna lift all those cans. These won't let me mute it. Um, so the [00:02:00] farms we had at Buck Grove, um, we actually still get milk from the same farms that we were getting them, but many of them have retired.

[00:02:10] So we're down to a few farms. But, uh, very small farms. About 45 cows are, is the biggest that we have. Mm-Hmm. Uh, so we don't deal with any of the big companies that have big farms, that have 35 or 4,000 cows. We try to stick with small family farms and keep them in business. Mm-Hmm. Um, started at Buck Grove.

[00:02:37] We were making mainly 64 pound blocks of cheddar cheese. When I worked at Bill's, we had made Cheddar some Monterey Jack and some, when Bill started making, he had made the big 200 pound wheels of, and when I started there, he had switched to bats [00:03:00] from the kettles, but we still would make one wheel of Swiss about every two or three months.

[00:03:05] 'cause we were right on the road in Marville, so tourists coming through, plus all the town folk, you know, were used to getting Swiss cheese from it. So I learned to make Swiss Colby, Monterey Jack Cheddar, and we moved to Buck Grove. We were mainly making cheddar from Borden's for the first several years.

[00:03:25] And, um, then Borden's decided they were going to pull out of Southwest Wisconsin and we started making more, uh, Kolby Monterey Pepper Jack, baby Swiss, Swiss,

um, in. 1982, we entered a va one block of Colby from one VAT in the World Championship and, uh, in my name and one block from my wife, Julie's, uh, [00:04:00] from one vat and Julie's won first place in the class.

[00:04:05] They judge every class against each other for the top prize. Mm-Hmm. And hers won the overall world championship. Oh, wow. So Julie's the only woman to have ever won that up. Uh, they're up to now, but one aside from that is that, um, nowadays most places, just like we do, we enter everything as team hook. Most places enter under the team that's made the bat and the last one that in the US that's won it.

[00:04:40] Was 2016 Roth in Monroe. And I imagine there's some women on the team down there. I don't know, but I would imagine so. But she's the only individual woman who I've ever, ever wanted. So, you know, even more, [00:05:00] we lost. So from there we kind of grew our Hopi business and by 1987 we had kind of grown Buck Grove cooperative.

[00:05:12] It was pretty small, the factor was small and the pasteurizer regulations were being upgraded at the time. Uh, the PMO for the whole nation. They wanted milk that was pasteurized to be pasteurized with. Uh.

[00:05:31] Valves and pasteurizer chart, you know, so everything was recorded and we didn't have that out of Buck Grove. The farmers didn't really wanna spend the money to put that in. And the facility in Mineral Point was available for sale at that time. It was sitting ILE for a couple of months and continue on just Seminole Highway.

[00:05:56] So we bought the facility in town, [00:06:00] the farmers all came in there with us and closed the co-op down. Mm-Hmm. Um, and like I said earlier, we still got milk from the same folks that we lived at. Um, when we bought that facility, we, the cold storage was a lot larger than what we were using at the time. So we decided we'd get into more aged cheddar.

[00:06:25] For Gordons, when we were first at Dark Grove, we were making cheddar for aging for about a year for them. So we decided we'd get into aging cheddar for at least three or four years. Nobody else was really going beyond two. Yes. Do you age it in the cold storage or? We do age it, but most of the cheddar, we age it at about 38 degrees as opposed to the caves at 55.

[00:06:51] We do sell some cave aged cheddar that we age in one of our four caves. Uh, it cures faster at 55, but you don't wanna age it for [00:07:00] 20 years because some of the bitterness and stuff would come out too fast when they cure it that fast. So a slow cure is the name of the game. What's that? So, but if you have it in the colder, colder temperature takes a little longer to get there.

[00:07:15] Yes, correct. Yep. You slow down the process a little bit. Yep. So. We started doing more age Cheddars and uh, we still were making mostly, let's say commodity cheese. So Monterey jack, kolby, cheddar for big distributors. Most of it was going out on pallets and

being cut up and processed under others labels, you know, so it might be a store brand or that distributor's brand or whoever they sold to.

[00:07:55] Very seldom that it was under our own name. You know, we would cut up some stuff at [00:08:00] the factory and sell our own, but most of it, 99% or more was going under other labels. Hmm. So then we started doing the Dane County Farmer's Market in 1994. Uh, full-time. We had been invited before that, we had gone a couple times in 91, 92, but we started doing the Dane County Farmer's Market full-time in 94.

[00:08:23] And started getting our name out there a little more to individuals and chefs and specialty scores. Um, chefs seemed to have word of mouth with a lot of other chefs in the country, so we would start shipping cheese to other states. You know UPS Under your label? Yeah, under our label. And so we kind of grew our label a little bit from there.

[00:08:55] One of the niches we had when we started at the market was some age cheddar and also [00:09:00] our world champion Colby. But by 1997, we decided we wanted to have another one. We started making blue cheese, so we started making our original blue, the Danish style blue in 97. In 2001, we added Gorgen Zola on a Italian style blue.

[00:09:19] In 2004, we added Blue Paradise, a Double Cream Blue. Uh, we also started making Tilstone Point a Wash Shrine Blue. I don't know if any of you have had that, but that one was very time consuming debate. So we had a kind of put that by the wayside the last couple years. Um, if we were to continue making that one, we'd have to probably double triple the price just because it's so time consuming.

[00:09:49] But we did add three more blues. Uh, 2009 we added, uh, sheet belt Blue Little Boy Blue. That one won first at [00:10:00] the World Championship this year. Um, 2011 we had a, uh, goat milk blue. Um, we called that one Barbell Blue because that's where I started making cheese on the first. That of the goat milk we got was from a farmer by barbell.

[00:10:15] Actually taught music in barn high school goats on the side. So then 2013 we added a mixed milk glue called you Cap to Be kidding. So,

[00:10:35] um, we started playing with more, uh, goat milk, the sheet pump, the mixed milk cheeses, um, triple play. We added triple play extra innings. I believe we had some, we have some out there. Yeah. Um, so we started making some of those too. The triple play, very first batch of triple play was [00:11:00] February, 2014. And Brian, my nephew that's planning on eventually buying us out, actually kept some pieces.

[00:11:09] We actually opened one of those last Friday and it's like. It's almost sweet. It's 10 years old and it's like the very first batch. You know, some of the things we've kind of tested along the way that we try to make or wanna make, of course, the first few batches, it's like, well this isn't quite perfect, we need tweaked something here to tweak something there.

[00:11:29] But that one looks very left. So that one was a good one to begin with. Yes. Um, I haven't thought about this before, but what makes blue cheese blue? How is it different? Sure. So when you make most cheeses, you add starter culture to the milk and you know, we'll pasteurize start running milk in the vat.

[00:11:51] We'll add starter culture. Uh, like with cheddar, we use a mesophilic starter culture, Kolby Monterey Jack, even the blue, we use [00:12:00] 'em meso file. But with the blues we also add some adjunct so that when you make the cheese, it kind of makes some openings in it so that when you pierce it. The blue can start growing.

[00:12:13] So we actually add the mold, the liquid mold. Mm-Hmm mm-Hmm. To the vat the same time as the starter culture. So on a vat of 10,000 pounds, we add about 10 ounces. It's about 300,000 spores. Mm-Hmm. Um, we'll make the cheese, like, let's say this week. We'll make a gozo on Wednesday, next Monday. We'll pierce that.

[00:12:35] So usually when you buy a wedge of blue, you'll kind kind of see some holes in the top. A lot of even chefs think that that's the blue being injected. It isn't. It's just a, that area so that the blue can start breathing. Mm-Hmm. Once it gets oxygen, it can start growing. Huh? Give it the right conditions.

[00:12:54] You know, our caves gave three and four are high humidity, about 98%, [00:13:00] 55 degrees. Hmm. So it only takes about three weeks to get as blue as you want 'em to be blue. But of course you still want to cure them longer. To get a nice flavor. So most of our blues, we age about a year. Uh, the Blue Paradise, the double cream breaks down a little faster.

[00:13:18] So we only age that one about six months. But the rest of them, we typically try to age a year. I don't think there's any other blue cheese make out there that do that. You know, they wanna, in the us even if you've made it from pasteurized milk, now the regulations say raw milk cheeses have to age at least 60 days before you sell them.

[00:13:40] There are still some other cheeses out there that they won't let you sell before they're 60 days old, even if they're made from pasteurized down. And blue cheese is one of them. So you have to age it at least 60 days. But many of the big makers. Sho it out the door at 60 days so I can get my money back.

[00:13:57] You know, they don't care about how [00:14:00] good it is. When you talk about a cave, you're not meaning a literal cave, are you? Uh, sort of, but if you've ever been by our factory, we're built into a big hill. So cave number one, when you walk up to you actually walking uphill to get to it, you're, it's still about 16 foot underground, but it is part of the building.

[00:14:21] So in the wintertime, that cave doesn't really need any, uh, air, you know, um, cold, um, to, to keep a cold, a compressor, to keep it cold or anything running. 'cause it, it's

back in the hill basically. So it does that itself. Naturally, the two, three and four are closer to the make room. So you still have to have a compressor to keep those.

[00:14:49] Chill down a little bit. Mm-Hmm. But yes, they are, I mean, we're mimicking caves. Uh, the problem with, if you actually use a lit [00:15:00] cave, most of them are big enough that you're gonna have some food safety issues that you can't keep it clean, you know? Oh, so that cheese that way? That's right. I'm not sure we wanna try that one.

[00:15:14] Interesting. But, uh, yeah. Who survives, right? Right. Kinda like the mushroom hunter. Yeah.

[00:15:23] Yes. So you may be getting onto this same way, but how many employees do you have and how have you grown just in terms of personnel? Sure, sure. So it was just my wife and I, and in the nineties we had one employee for a while, and then it was us again. Then in. I haven't gotten really into this, but in 2001 we switched, um, from the big distributors.

[00:15:55] We just said, you know, we're, we're done selling [00:16:00] commodity cheeses. We're gonna go a little haul, artisan specialty cheese and sell at the Dane County Farmer's Market. Chefs, uh, restaurants. We had picked up specialty stores and with the health of the Wisconsin Milk Marketing Board, dairy Farmers of Wisconsin and the Wisconsin, uh, innovation Board through the Department of Ag, we've gotten cheese out to other places.

[00:16:29] It keeps growing. So they, they really promote specialty cheese. They really wanna push show that Wisconsin has some of the best, if not the best in the US and the world. So they keep pushing our, our cheese and a lot of other small cheese makers. And so what that what'll, what they'll do is they'll bring, um, heads of stores in, or [00:17:00] chefs in to Wisconsin, they'll tour around to different factories.

[00:17:04] So it gets our name out to a lot of these places. So it keeps growing, you know, and we keep getting Mm-Hmm. More contacts to deal with. So from us two, we're up to seven. Full-time. Yeah. One part-time. So roundabout way of answering your question. Oh, thank you. But, but yes. Um, when we were making commodity cheeses, we were making about a million and a half pounds of cheese a year.

[00:17:32] And that's pretty tiny this day and age with a lot of the big guys that will make a. 11 or 12 million pounds a day. Oh yeah, I know. That means they're running Mm. Millions and millions of pounds of milk. 'cause it takes one pound of, uh, get, you get one pound of cheese for one up to 10 pounds of milk. So, Mm-Hmm.

[00:17:55] You know, that the big places are getting [00:18:00] so much milk in and they've gotta run it through. They have no time to wait. Mm-Hmm. Where if we have a slow, bad, or a fast that we know how to work with it, you know, where they have, they've got a time constraint. Just push that stuff through. It's gotta go out the door, you know, whether it's good or it's bad, you know, get it outta here.

[00:18:18] We got more milk coming in Uhhuh. So, um, so yeah, since 2001 we cut back we're, we built our way up from about 150,000 pounds a year production to about 500,000 pounds a year production. We're now. You know, dollar wise we're about four times because we charge a decent price. Mm-Hmm. I mean, hopefully we're not ripping people off, but when we were in the commodity business, you, you're basing everything on what is now called, um, yeah.

[00:18:55] The Chicago Merck Price, cheese, price, you know? Mm-Hmm mm-Hmm. And that's gone up just in the [00:19:00] last few weeks, about 20 cents. So it's like two 20. Well, you know, try and get that and pay our farmer a decent price and make a living is very hard to do. So, you know, when we were making for 30 years commodity, we were working 89, 90 hours a week ourselves just to pay everything off.

[00:19:21] Mm-Hmm. Nowadays, uh, you know, I supposedly semi-retired in 2001, but I'm still back to, uh, 70 or 80 hours, just, but it's more fun doing things you really like to do as opposed to just working hard and. Hoping you're making something, but now we get to kind of play with recipes, try new things, kind of add things on.

[00:19:43] Actually once in a while, like the tilston points, you have to put things aside and say, you know, it's not cost effective, but yes. Yeah. Um, so two questions. Do you have your Master's Master Chiefs certificate? I don't know what the Yes. Exact name. [00:20:00] So master's chiefs degree. So in, in, in Wisconsin, they started the master's program in 1995.

[00:20:10] Um, so Wisconsin and Switzerland are the only two places in the world that you can actually get a master's degree in. Cheese, bacon. Mm-Hmm. So yes, I do have mine in blue cheeses and in cheddar. So, but yeah. Um, the only two places you can get a master's degree and, and part of that is. Wisconsin's the only place in the nation that it requires a cheesemaker's license.

[00:20:38] Every VAT has to be presided over by a licensed cheesemaker. You have to have your license for at least 10 years, be making that type of cheese for 10 years, and, um, apply to get into the program. They come and interview you. Once you get into the [00:21:00] program. You have to take several courses through uw, the Center for Dairy Research, uw, um, and they test the type of cheese you're going in at least twice a year, at least out of four different vats.

[00:21:19] Make sure they meet the grades that they should. Mm-Hmm. And then after those three years. You get a take home exam and it's like 80 pages long, so you have to cite, you know, where you got all of these answers and it takes about 40 hours to take the exam. Wow. You, they send it to you in the middle of October, you have to have it back sometime before Thanksgiving.

[00:21:52] So yes, thank you for that. And passing that. Yes. When did you decide that you were gonna do these? [00:22:00] Ultra Age? Jesus. When I wanna take a very special gift to somebody, I get them a 15-year-old books Cheddar. Yes, yes. Sometimes a 20. So trend.

[00:22:14] So, you know, like I said, when we first bought the facility in Mineral Point, it was bigger than we would use for commodity cheeses. Roommate, when we started aging cheddar. At that time we thought we'd go to five years, seven years. Nobody else was doing it. But you know, as we kept aging it and when we do make cheddar for aging, so any of the cheddars, I'll have a sample block.

[00:22:40] We always have a sample block of every vat that we send in for testing. Hmm. I'll pull a plug, we'll taste it. So when it's like six months, then about a year or so, a couple times a year, I'll test every vat. So the sample block, and we thought we'd go to five or seven and of course [00:23:00] some of these were really getting, getting even better as they aged.

[00:23:04] So we decided we'd go to 10. The first 10 year we released was in 1999. The next uh, you know, we released a batch of first batch of 15 in 2009. And we only had that available for sale 'cause we'd only have a smaller batch. Usually around October, November, December. It's only the last couple years we've had enough that we can sell that all year long.

[00:23:32] The 20 year, the first batch we released was in 2015 mm-Hmm. And we released one in 2021 last year in May, and we'll have another batch next year in April. Last year's was white. The first two were yellow. Last year's was white next, uh, April and yellow again. But yeah, as they kept aging, we decided they were, seemed to be getting better as long as [00:24:00] we tested them along the way.

[00:24:02] Naturally, out of all the cheeses, you know, about 70% could easily be aged that long. Naturally it sells before that typically, but we're always looking for any hint of any off flavors along the way. Anytime there's anything that shows up. We need to sell that batch, you know, within the next several months because it typically won't get better after something, a little bit of bitterness or whatever will show up.

[00:24:30] So you wanna move us? The rest of them could age longer. Main sales are between three year and five year. So about 70% of the cheeses are typically sold by the time they're five years old. But many of them would be able to age longer. Have you aged any beyond 20 years? Only in my daughter's refrigerator.

[00:24:53] We got some 48.

[00:24:58] So what is a bat? [00:25:00] What's that? You, you, you're using the term bat and I think of a, you know, a a, a big kettle. Yes. Uh, that, yes. So a kettle, like they used to make Swiss cheese in, and I'm sure you've probably seen pictures of a copper kettle, right? Like you're talking right. So typically these days, the VAs, the small people now, 'cause the big people just use a big tank that's round and you would never see the milk.

[00:25:26] And they never see the milk. Everything's computerized and one in, they never see it. Robots are stacking cheese on the pallets. If they drive the forklift to the old storage, maybe, but they never see the cheese. Mm-Hmm. But yes, ours are open bats. So they're the

smaller vat. The 10,000 pound is, um, about 20 foot long and six foot wide and about five foot deep.

[00:25:55] Wow. The bigger vat is, uh, about 30 [00:26:00] foot long. And the, and the cheese has aged in that? No, no, no, no. What happened? It's just being made in that. Oh, okay. So, we'll, when we make the cheese, we start it, running it through the pasteurizer. We'll pump it from one of the holding tanks. So my milk caller, I used to haul the milk, put my milk caller, now hauls it in the afternoon before, puts it in the holding tank, pumps it in the holding tank, and we pump it up through the pasteurizer and then into the vat.

[00:26:27] So as we start adding it to the vat, we'll add starter cultures. 'cause we wanna ripen in about 50 minutes before we set it. Um, so like with cheddar, we'll add the starter culture. It takes about a half hour to pasteurize the smaller va, about 45 minutes to pasteurize the bigger rat but ripen. So that means to let the bacteria grow, to keep doubling about every 15 minutes.

[00:26:56] Then we'll set it with Reed. So [00:27:00] we wanted it to be at about 88 degrees Fahrenheit. That's optimum temperature at 86 to 88 is optimum for bacterial growth. And we'll put in. All mammals have ret in their stomach. Coagulate mother's milk, years ago, they used to use calf in it. Um, butcher the calves, soak the stomachs, get the ret.

[00:27:22] mm-Hmm. And that was, that was the Cadillac of Rens. Nowadays they actually, um, grow it on a fungus in a lab. Hmm. And the chromosome is even a higher chromosome content than Catherine. And that's the type of ret we use is the chromosome growing on a fungus? But we'll add the ret, stir it for a couple minutes, and then just pull the paddles and let it sit for about 25 minutes on cow milk, uh, gets about as thick as like Greek yogurt, and then we cut it with wire [00:28:00] knives.

[00:28:00] So the wire knives. So there's a framework. But there's wires running down and then horizontal on the other one, and we'll cross cut with a vertical. Then we'll run up one side and down the other vertical, horizontal. And what you end up with is little tiny cottage cheese size cubes because of, like I say, out of 10 pounds of milk, they get one pound of cheese, nine pounds of liquid.

[00:28:26] So there's gotta be a lot of liquid kicking outta that. Mm-Hmm. Cut it in those tiny cubes and the liquid will start coming out right away. And then put the paddles back in and start stirring and cooking. Cook it up to about a hundred for cheddar. So the stirring and the heating keep kicking more moisture out.

[00:28:47] And then with cheddar, we'll let the curd settle the bottom, drain the way out, and start cutting that curd at. At about a hundred has started kind of knitting back together again. We'll cut those [00:29:00] into slabs that are about so wide, about this long. Turn them over every 15 minutes, we'll come back. We'll cut the first one in half.

[00:29:07] We'll double it up. 15 minutes later, we'll come back. We'll pile those three high. 15, 20 minutes later, we'll pile 'em four high. So what happens is once you've cut 'em in half, they're about this long. By the time you get to four high, they've stretched out about this long, but they've gone from this thick to about this thick.

[00:29:26] The texture changes the bacteria start, keep growing in there and then we'll test the pH or the acidity of the way, make sure the starter culture is still working like we want, and then we'll run 'em through the cheddar mill and make a large curd. So cheddar is typically the only cheese you would make curd twice.

[00:29:49] Um, it changes the texture and the flavor of the cheese. So then once you mill it, well ditch it, but a little more way out. There isn't a whole [00:30:00] lot coming out at that time. And then we'll assault it. The salt. Salt, just like heating to about a hundred slows the bacterial growth down so it doesn't get real acidic.

[00:30:11] And, uh, acts as a preservative and of course adds flavor. It's very bland without the salt. You know, they keep telling us they wanna regulate salt because sodium intake for everybody, but we're making cheese. It's something, you know, we don't want to cut way back on it because you're gonna really affect the cheese.

[00:30:32] So we try to keep the finished product at about 1.75% sodium. Um, but somewhere between one and a half to two is often 1.75. Um, if you get out of those bounds, you know, you're not gonna affect it a whole lot if you're not too far out, but you wanna keep control, um, so that you don't affect flavor the cheese too much.[00:31:00]

[00:31:00] Fascinating. Oh, is that fascinating? Yeah. Well thank you. Thank you. Yeah. One more question then we'll switch over to Carol. Yes. Yes. Do you do tours? Are there, so we have a viewing window. So you come in and actually watch us making cheese. 'cause the vats are rec record right there. Could one, we're all working down there and if I have time I can come up.

[00:31:20] We've got kind of a picture book. I can go through that. But you know, so with six other employees, I, most of the time I had help. I had time to do that. But like on Fridays, I. Really slow. So sometimes I don't. One last question. So give us the range of curds at the farmer's market. You talked about this before, but so what's, what's the high mark and the low market?

[00:31:48] Is it football season or what, what you, you know, it's the opposite of what you'd think really. Football season, it actually starts going down. You'd think that would be the peak, wouldn't you? Yes, yes. Uh, the peak is [00:32:00] really around Memorial Day is the, probably the biggest sales of, of curd and the young cheese.

[00:32:06] But the first opening day of the outdoor market, um, if it's a nice, beautiful day, I mean, people come out of woodwork, yeah. Could almost sell rocks, sell rocks. But that day

and memorial day are, are typically the best. Um. And it's really weird. You'd think football season people would want that. Right? Right.

[00:32:32] But it seems to start going downhill on curd sales this time of the year. Interesting. Interesting. Well, with that we'll switch over to orange. Thank you Kelly. More question, please. And uh, and the art of, uh, art of retailing. Yes. Orange Schroeder. Uh, thanks so much. Well, thanks. Floor is yours. Yeah. Um, I'm, I'm delighted to be here.

[00:32:56] The last time I addressed this society, I was talking about Danish food. [00:33:00] So we're not gonna talk about Danish food. Don't know. Cheese and blue cheese. I mean, I kept thinking of all these cheese things to say, but I'm not supposed to talk about cheese right now. Um, of course, Denmark is a very big cheese making country.

[00:33:11] Very important, right to the Danes and blue cheese especially. Um, so. One of the questions I wanted to start by talking about is how I became a retailer. My, uh, we just got back Wednesday from Boston, which was the, uh, first day of school for our 6-year-old granddaughter. And I had sent them, sent her a sign that you fill in each year.

[00:33:30] You know what grade I remember my favorite color is, and I sort of planted this in her head, but where it says what I wanna be when my, what I wanna do when I grow up, she wrote, I wanna work at Orange Tree Boards. Um, that's not what I wanted to do when I was six years old. When I was six years old, I wanted to be a writer, and I was very set in that right from the beginning.

[00:33:50] When I was nine years old, I somehow started reading Dickens. I can't quite imagine that now, but I guess I did. I became a very big Dickens fan. And, [00:34:00] um, when I was 12 years old, um, I asked my mother when I could go to England, because I really wanted to go to England because I was such a big Dickens fan.

[00:34:08] She said, well, when you're 16, of course I'm writing this down. Like, okay, 16, start saving my money. So two years later. In my small town in New Jersey, um, I met a, a fellow 14-year-old who was on a private exchange program in Denmark. Her parents had thought that it was a really good idea to send their 14-year-old daughter to America because they knew somebody in England who was coming to America.

[00:34:35] The father was from, uh, England, and the mother was from India, I believe, and they had a 3-year-old, I'm not sure they'd ever met a 14-year-old. Um, and Annette was a very independently minded 14-year-old, but she was 14. And if you had a 14-year-old, you know that you don't send 'em off in the world by themselves probably.

[00:34:53] But she arrived in our high school in New Jersey, and, um, I still have the note that I passed to her saying, [00:35:00] hi, my name's Carol. You're an Ned, aren't you? And, uh, she was just visiting a few months ago. We're still best friends. Um, she's, well, we're both

not 14 anymore. She's a retired doctor. And, um, there was a Danish magazine a few years ago that I came across a, an.

[00:35:16] A column called My Dearest Possession. And I wrote a story about how this note that I passed to Annette was one of my favorite possessions and that it meant so much to me. And they ran a picture story. I don't know if she was embarrassed or pleased, but so Annette was, um, a girl scout and I was a very active girl scout.

[00:35:31] My mom was a girl scout. My dad was an Eagle scout. Um, and so Annette joined our Girl Scout troop and I was very impressed by the fact that in her luggage when she arrived in America, she had her scout uniform. Well, that would've been enough in itself, except that the scout uniform included a smokey, the bear hat.

[00:35:50] There must have been terrible attack and a belt, the buckle of which was a beer bottle opener, and it had a knife. I mean, this was [00:36:00] pre nine 11, obviously, but, so she came equipped and we became good friends, um, throughout the year of Girl Scouts our freshman year in high school. But it was not going well with her host family.

[00:36:09] And they decided to send her home. So her mother came to get her and they said, oh, you must come visit us. And I said, good, I'm 14. I'll be 16 seven. But um, yeah, I'll keep it in mind. So a year passed or so, and Annette wrote and said, so are you gonna come, um, come visit? And I said, well, yes, but I really wanna go to England.

[00:36:30] And so she found a bus tour of England, Scotland, Wales, that would take two unaccompanied 16 year olds. What problem was, it was conducted entirely in Danish, of which I, I knew nothing. Um, but when I got back to, um, Pennington, New Jersey where I grew up, we had an exchange student from Norway. And, um, so I started learning a little Norwegian.

[00:36:56] To college in Boston at Tufts University. And [00:37:00] of course they didn't have Scandinavian studies, but this was during the hippie Vietnam War era and they had something called Make your own major through the experimental college. And I said, well, I'd like to make my own major in Scandinavian studies. And for some reason that included a lot of biking stuff, but I don't know why we were studying the Vikings.

[00:37:19] And they found a tutor who taught German at In Harvard, at Harvard, which is nearby to come and tutor me in Norwegian. The problem was that everything he told me, he translated to German first and then it was Norwegian, but it wasn't going very well. But we found that there was a young Danish woman in the area, and there were a couple of us that once learned Danish for some, for unknown reason.

[00:37:40] So we staged a sit in. Again, this is early seven, so we sit the German department because she said that she would teach US Danish in exchange for a sewing machine. It was a very short-lived, sit-in because we were successful. So f um, I started taking Danish, um,

second year of college. Met my husband Dean who had just, well it [00:38:00] wasn't my husband dean at the time, of course he had just returned from a year in Germany.

[00:38:03] And so, um, I said, well, it's great, you know, we're having a good time together, but I'm gonna to Denmark. And so he graduated, came back to Wisconsin where he was from. I went to Denmark for my junior year. I skipped a year. So I graduated, lived with an net, went to the University of Copenhagen, and um, then I had to decide what to do.

[00:38:24] Well, you were talking about this being the only one of two places in the world that you could get a degree in cheese making. This is one of five places in America where you can get a degree in Scandinavian studies. And Dean was from Wisconsin. He was working for his dad selling packaging machinery. So it was decided that I would apply to the Scandinavian studies department in Madison.

[00:38:43] I was very excited because as you heard, I was doing an independent study at Tufts. I was the only one studying Scandinavian studies and English. They forgot to give me my English degree, but I did get one. I think anybody cares. So, um, it was arranged that, that we would move to Madison. I came back from [00:39:00] Denmark.

[00:39:00] We lived for the summer in Milwaukee, where I got mugged. It was kinda a long story, but then we moved to Madison and um, I came up to the 13th floor of Van Heis Hall to the Scandinavian studies department and the secretary said, professor Nielsen, she's here. The new graduate student. I was the only new graduate student.

[00:39:18] It was a very small class. There was one young woman my age who was continuing, she'd been an undergrad in Danish and she was continuing, so at least there were two of us. But in April of, of our first year of graduate school, um, they mentioned to her that she needed a second. I. Language. And she said, yes, Latin.

[00:39:38] And they said, no, no, a second, second modern language. And she said, I'm outta here. So, um, I, I continue to got my degree in Danish. The reason I'm mentioning all this is what do you do with a graduate degree in Danish? Not much. You know, it's, uh, it's a bit of a limited field. Um, my, my dear friend and major professor Neil Engerson had the only job that I really would've [00:40:00] wanted, and I figured if he was assassinated, I would've been the prime suspect.

[00:40:03] So I was looking around for something to do, and my only work experience had been, my dad was a, was a dentist, so I'd been a, like the world's worst dental assistant. I knew I was not gonna go into dental assisting, but when I was at the University of Copenhagen, I had spent a lot of time wandering around going into a lot of retail stores, because at the time there wasn't a campus of the University of Copenhagen and I was living 45 minutes outside the city.

[00:40:27] So I had a lot of time between classes. They, they sort of improved things since then, but this was a long time ago. So I thought, well, I should learn how to work in a, in a retail store. And I don't know if any of you remember Bored and Stole, that was a, a Scandinavian furniture store here in the seventies and into the eighties.

[00:40:42] And, um, so I asked if they needed a retail employee, and Janice Hopman said, no, but I, but I'd like to learn Danish. I said, ha. So we, we made it through a few Danish lessons and she said, you know, I, I just rented a new location for my campus branch on [00:41:00] Monroe Street. Uh, would you like to be the manager? So it was a wonderful opportunity.

[00:41:05] Um, unfortunately I had never worked at a store at that point. Um, and we opened it on October 3rd, 1974 and had a fantastic first day. And then the second day, the person who bought the chair the first day returned it. So we had like a negative sales and it was a little up and down. But, um, one of the things that has in general been true in retail is you have 30 days to pay for merchandise.

[00:41:29] So net 30. So during the fall, you know, we had a Christmas season and we were perking along pretty well. And then January 1st Janice said, well, I've decided that the branch is gonna pay its own bills. And we had a bunch of bills that were due because of net 30 from stuff that had come in during December, but she didn't put any of the Christmas money into the account for the branch.

[00:41:48] So then I got to learn about what it's like to be running a store when you don't have enough money to pay your bills. That was also a good lesson, I think. Yes. So, and the spring went on, Dean and I decided that we would buy the branch [00:42:00] and Dean was still working for his dad selling packaging machinery.

[00:42:03] We coincidentally had bought a house about two blocks from the store, and every day at lunch he would walk over with a tray with, with two bowls of soup on it, and we would have lunch in the store and then he would be very reluctant to go back to selling packaging machinery. He really was not enjoying his job so much at that time.

[00:42:21] So we thought about, well, if we buy the store, maybe eventually you could come into business with me. We bought the store on, uh, and changed it Orange Tree boards on May 1st, 1975 with the idea that Dean would branch off and have his own store within a year or so. That never happened. So, um, next May 1st will be the store's 50th anniversary, and we're still in business together.

[00:42:43] I

[00:42:47] you've been in your business longer than I have. It's rare that I meet somebody that has that distinction. I, I didn't mention that during my brief stint at Tufts, my freshman roommate had nicknamed me Orange and, um, the, [00:43:00] the name came from my hair, which I'm afraid I sometimes have to explain now. People said, oh, did it used to be red?

[00:43:05] Yes, red. Um, but the, um, the nickname came to Wisconsin with me because of Dean. I think if I had. Stayed in New Jersey or, or Boston. I probably would've gone back to Carroll because it, it was not a childhood name. It had only happened, you know? And in Denmark, they, in, in Denmark, I'm called, called Ca Maximus TuiNa, which is Charlamagne the 27th.

[00:43:31] Um, so, so the name Orange came with me to Wisconsin. And so when in naming the store, we thought, well, what should we call the store? Borden stole is Danish for table and chairs. And we knew we didn't wanna have it in another language that nobody knew that's what it meant. And, you know, we, and so we decided to call it maybe Orange Imports, but we thought, well it needs a little something, some consonants.

[00:43:51] So that's how it became our, um, nonsensical in a way. So Dean continued selling packaging machinery the first year. [00:44:00] But his main interest he decided was either in selling cars, some sort of exotic car, I forget what it was, stereos or, or, um, kitchen cooking equipment. Mm-Hmm. And we decided to expand that part of the business and that became his, his part.

[00:44:15] So if you come into the office at Orange Tree Imports, one of the things that you'll see is all the files are his and hers. Dean has his vendors and his files for everything related to cooking and serving and food. And I have all the fun stuff. Mm-Hmm. So that's a bit of a, a difference in, in our working together.

[00:44:32] And when he came into business with me a year after I had been in business, it was a real challenge. I mean, you've worked with your wife for a long time, but there was a time when it was new to us and it was, it was difficult. I mean, I would second guess his decisions and, but we worked that out quite a while ago.

[00:44:48] Um Mm-Hmm. So Orange Tree Airports has a lot of departments, and I think that's been one of the secrets to success, that in addition to the kitchenware, we have toys, we have bath and body products, we have kitchenware or [00:45:00] Christmas and other holidays. We have a whole lot of different stuff. So we're like a mini department store rather than being focused just on, on cooking.

[00:45:09] And one of the things that, you know, Jim asked me earlier, what, what is your hot seller? But it really depends on, on what department it is. Um, I mean the, um, and, and over the years of course, I mean there was a time when souffle's were very big, but I bet none of you have made a souffle lately. But the advantage to having so many different types of merchandise is that we can, um, ride the tide of it, so to speak, that you know, when one thing is really big and then something else isn't.

[00:45:37] And one of the things that's really hot right now is aprons and kitchen towels. I mean, go figure 'em. Um, that was the third biggest apartment last year. Um. But one of the other things that is, that sets Orange Tree Imports apart is, um, sometime in the early eighties

we heard a UW extension professor speak at List Estrada, which was a feminist [00:46:00] coffee shop back in the, in the early eighties.

[00:46:03] And his name was Garth Stone, I believe. And he was talking about participative democracy, and I'd never heard of this. Um, it's, and most people still haven't heard about it. It's a way of running your business, not as a co-op because we are family owned, but with your employees having buy-in. So he also had another part, which we did not do, which he said, just ask your employees what they wanna be paid and that's what they should earn.

[00:46:33] Even back then, that that was not gonna work. One thing I don't like about retail is that the wages are low. I mean, there's no way we can compete with the University of Wisconsin or you know, in terms of benefits and wages and such. We're very fortunate that we have employees who have been with us. I think the longest term employee has been with us almost 40 years.

[00:46:52] Um, we have about staff of about 20, and quite a few of them have been with us a very long time. Unfortunately, that means they're getting [00:47:00] old like we are. But, um, we've been very fortunate to have staff that really feels that they're an important part of the business. And that's where the participant of democracy comes in.

[00:47:08] That they either almost everybody's in charge of a department, usually even even the bookkeeper. And they do the displays, they restock the department. They have some say in what is bought for the department. Mm-Hmm. And a number of our employees have grown into the point of doing buying. We also have a management team and, um, that helps us make all major decisions.

[00:47:29] And often there's a manager present when we're not present. So in the, um, about 1992 or 94, I thought, you know, with a degree in Scandinavian studies, I've really learned a lot from doing it. So I decided to write a book about retailing, and this is actually the, the fourth edition. This one. I'm embarrassed to say this, this book is a failure.

[00:47:54] I, I'm, oh, happy to own up to it. The first three editions were published by John Wi and Sons, [00:48:00] which is a major publisher. They sold 44,000 copies and were translated into Russian. John Wiley and Sons probably very wisely, decided that they didn't wanna continue publishing books about retail. And there are no other books about retail.

[00:48:13] I mean, mine is really like the last book about independent retailing, which puzzles me. So when they decided not to do it, I hired, I got an agent and the agent shopped it around. Nobody wanted to publish a book about retailing, which tells you something. Mm-Hmm. You asked about the challenges and Amazon had come on the scene by then and was really very difficult to be an independent retailer.

[00:48:33] Yeah, sure. So I went with a hybrid publisher in Milwaukee, um, in 2018. Publish this book, and there are no bookstores carrying this kind of book anymore. And I don't wanna

sell it on Amazon, particularly because I'm anti-Amazon. And so we have sold very few copies of this, but, and then people will say, well, does it cover the pandemic?

[00:48:52] I thought, no, I didn't have a crystal ball. But I'm very pleased that at least the first [00:49:00] 44,000 have helped a lot of people. And I even got letters from Russia from people saying that really made a difference in their lives. So that feels very good. And it talks a lot about participant of democracy and how getting people involved and making their jobs meaningful and also working around their other, the rest of their lives is important.

[00:49:17] Because a lot of retail businesses, especially the big stores, will let you know the week before your shift what, how many hours you'll be working and what days it'll be. So you can't have, you know, classes that you're taking or, or other meaningful things that you're doing. So we try and make, make a.

[00:49:32] Working at a retail store, meaningful and enjoyable. Um, and I still write a weekly blog for retailers, uh, and a column for a national magazine. So I do, I have become a writer. Oh, yeah. Um, I've translated some books from Danish to English and um, sort of a little known fact in my life is that, um, I've also, um, am one of the authors of a whole series of books on medical terminology.

[00:49:58] And that was not what [00:50:00] I had in mind when I was six and said I wanted to be a writer. But my mom started a book, a textbook in medical terminology, and my daughters, my daughter and niece and I have continued it. So, um, Orange G Imports is actually a corporate structure where we are in the business of retail gifts and medical terminology, textbooks unique in us.

[00:50:22] Um, one of the things that I love about being in retail is, is the people. And I don't get to see people as much anymore because so much of our work is done on the computer. And of course, during Covid, we, we had a very difficult time during Covid. We were closed longer than most stores. We were open to five customers at a time, longer than most stores, and then 10 customers at a time.

[00:50:41] Then we went back to five. Um. We developed curbside pickup. Fortunately for us on Rose Peak, we have an alley Mm-Hmm. So we were able to do curbside pickup, and I think that many of our customers bought things out of sympathy and, and wanting, wanting us to survive, which I will mention that Nutcracker, which is now called Fortune [00:51:00] Flavors, Spice Nuts, was our biggest curbside pickup.

[00:51:03] I don't, and, and one of the items that I feel kind of, um, proprietary about, because Eric Rupert used to be a cooking school instructor for us. And he came in and told me that he was in charge of all the food at Epic, but that he hated his job and he wanted to start this Spice Nut company. And he wanted to call it Nutcracker.

[00:51:20] And I said, oh, really? Um, but he recently went national and the, the national grocery stores had enough power that they said we're not carrying something with the word crack in it. So now it's, and papers. Um, but one of the things I enjoy is helping people develop products, working with local artists. Uh, we now carry a lot of Wisconsin themed gifts.

[00:51:41] Mm-Hmm. And, um. Local products when we can. We were talking before about how much of our products do come from China, and one of the challenges of that is that people don't wanna buy things from China necessarily, but there either are not any other options or the price is such a big [00:52:00] difference. So I'll, I'll give you an example.

[00:52:01] We used to carry two lines of cookware. One made in Wisconsin and one made in China. Same triply construction, which means it's aluminum on the inside or on the core, and then stainless on the inside and outside. And I would say, well, this one is X amount of money and it's made in China. This one is X amount of money, it's made in Wisconsin.

[00:52:19] And do you know which one they bought? Actually, I know neither because it embarrassed them. You know, they didn't want to have to say, oh good, I'll take the Chinese one. But they didn't wanna spend the money or spend the money under the Wisconsin one. Mm-Hmm. So that's, you know, those are some of the issues that we do deal with.

[00:52:35] Um, the biggest issue, you just carrying one of them now? You know, the Wisconsin one, I don't think is still made. Okay. Probably. Uh, but we did actually sell the, a lot of the Wisconsin one. I mean, people in Wisconsin do like Wisconsin made products and if they can afford it, they wanted the Mm-Hmm. The locally made product.

[00:52:51] But, um, probably the biggest problem we're facing right now is succession. You know, when, when Tony mentioned having his nephew in line to [00:53:00] take over, we don't have that arrangement unfortunately. And we're trying to figure out what, what the options are. Our son works in theater, which is what happens when we start taking him to a PT at a young age.

[00:53:12] And our daughter lives in Boston and, um, is a registered dietician, which is what happens when you suggest she gets some initials. Bill behind her name if she's gonna write medical terminology base. I do have ma behind my name on the midterm books and nobody knows it's from Scandinavian studies. Um, so what, you know, we're trying to face.

[00:53:33] Some of, some of those issues. My grandmother and my mother both worked until they're 80. I'm now 72 or 73, something like that. And so I hope I have some years left to keep Orange Street reports going. But, um, it means so much to us that we're having a source 50th anniversary next year and that we really feel well loved by the community and that, that makes me wanna go to work every day.

[00:53:57] So, Mm-Hmm. Thank you.[00:54:00]

[00:54:05] But actually say I don't go to work every day. Um, we're, we don't work as many hours as we did pre covid. So, uh, I, I believe I remembered Orange that you established your online business, um, your catalog business pretty early. Is that correct? Well, we, we did a catalog business as part of a group of.

[00:54:26] Gourmet cookware catalogs based outta California, where we each put our own cover on a catalog and mailed it out to our customers. But at that point it was to bring business into the store. We never wanted to do mail order where we had to package things up, in part because if you think about the range of things we sell, packaging is really difficult.

[00:54:45] Mm-Hmm. So, so when Covid hit, the only thing you could buy on our website was my book and gift cards. And so we scrambled, I mean, Dean and I spent hours in the office by ourselves, which was a good thing because of Covid, [00:55:00] adding things to the website and um, allowing people to then do curbside pickup. When Covid re relinquished its grips somewhat, and I say somewhat because I have had so many people out with Covid lately.

[00:55:12] Um, we went to Bobs as it's called, which is Biona pickup in store, and very few people take advantage of that. Got it. Thank you. Sorry, Nixon.

[00:55:27] But one of the things that we haven't done is kept, kept the website updated because that would be a, a 40 hour a week job in itself. And we don't wanna take the stuff off the website, so some of it we don't, you know, people do place an order, we often don't have it, or, or the prices has changed a little bit, but we still feel it serves the purpose of showing the range of what we carry.

[00:55:46] And if we ever have too much time on our hands, we can spend updates on the website. But yes, obviously, uh, uh, COVID played a big role along the way. Did, did Biden's, uh, assistance [00:56:00] to Oh yes. Many, many businesses, yes. All of, all of the, um, the PPP, all those grants made a huge difference. We were able to keep the staff on, we were able to pay their health insurance.

[00:56:11] So yes, that made a big difference. And we are now back to our pre covid levels. However, um. There's been some inflation. So, you know, that's not necessarily, we're selling quite as much. And also we're not open as much we're, we are suffering as all businesses in this area are of a lack of employees who can work all those extra hours.

[00:56:31] So we finally are back to being open seven days a week, but we are not open any evenings, which we never did that much business in the evening anyway. And frankly, we were open five nights a week in order to compete with Walmart because they were open so many hours. But then Amazon came along and they're open 24 7.

[00:56:49] So, um, yeah, it, it didn't seem that it was necessarily worth it, but we're hearing that nationally independent retailers are down five to 20% [00:57:00] this year. So it's, um,

election years are never great for business and we're not down, so I'm very grateful for that. But we do 40% of our business in November and December.

[00:57:09] Our banker once told us that we were more seasonal than farmers, and so that Christmas season and this year is a late Thanksgiving. But you know, that's one thing about being in business 50 years, you kind of think, well, right. What happens, happens. How bad was the, uh, book work that you had to do for those grants?

[00:57:28] Um, it, you know, we weren't very busy doing other stuff, but yeah, it was, it was a bit of a work and I, I signed up for some program through the state of Wisconsin that I found out afterwards I didn't need to have signed up for. So that was disappointing. But, you know, it was all new to everybody, so we didn't know it wasn't backbreaking, you know?

[00:57:46] Mm-Hmm. Um, it was worth it. Yeah. I was wondering how have, how have you survived, um, Amazon? I mean, what's the secret there? Because don't people come and look at the price and then just go home [00:58:00] and order, you know, we'll never get back to our 2015 level probably of sales. I think that was when, you know, things really started being impacted by Amazon, the showrooming, as it's called, where people come in and look at stuff.

[00:58:12] Right. It's not as much of an issue now as it, we were very much afraid of that at first. My feeling is that if somebody comes in the store, they're generally motivated to support local business, so they're probably gonna buy something. Mm-Hmm. So, but it happens. It happens. Um, and especially at first, that was a really big fear and, and people would be on their cell phones and we'd be really paranoid, take a picture or something.

[00:58:36] But now we know that people are on their cell phones all the time and they're sending a picture to their sister to say, do you want this? Mm-Hmm. So we, we, we don't get too freaked out about it. Mm-Hmm. Do you find that, do you have an experience advantage at this point? And, and I ask this because really what an experience advantage?

[00:58:53] Um, I ask this because, you know, we don't buy much from Amazon, but once in a while there's [00:59:00] something, and it's interesting over time how they have played games with their search response. I mean, it's fascinating you say, I, I want the specific thing right. You know, I dunno, toothbrush, you know, whatever it is.

[00:59:14] And you'll get back just this mess. And I, what, what strikes me about this, because it seems pretty consistent now, and it is because they're getting so much money for advertising. You know, they're, they're advertising businesses enormous. Yeah. So they're, they're essentially spamming the search response with all this stuff that people are paying to place.

[00:59:34] So I wonder if that plays well for you and, and independent businesses who have survived because you can actually walk in and get the straight story. Sure. It's, you know, as

opposed to this mess there is that you walk in and you can walk out with something. Yeah. And um, and what we love is you walk and walk out with something you didn't know you wanted.

[00:59:54] Right. We have to make it a pleasurable experience as much as we can for people to walk in and, and browse [01:00:00] around. Mm-Hmm. But there are some things you will not find in a locally owned store. I always use the example, this was Preco pre-Amazon when I used to talk about how to compete with Walmart, but plastic storage tubs, you're not gonna find a local specialty shop that carries plastic storage tubs.

[01:00:15] So I don't really care if you buy them from Amazon or except for the shipping. I mean, we try and be environmentally conscious and, and we know that shipping a plastic tub from somewhere else compared to go walking into Walmart even and buying it is not so good. Um, but yeah, the, the instant gratification is definitely a part of it.

[01:00:31] And, you know, walking out with something and you can see the quality of it and you, you know, had a chance to feel it, you touch it. Mm-Hmm. Um, so we, we try, we do our best and I hope that we'll keep going for some time and next year. We'll, I'm very excited about celebrating the 50th. Oh, that's so thrill.

[01:00:47] Speaking of writing in, in Denmark, you have other books? Oh, well, I, the, the book about Danish food, I forgot about that one. My daughter and I wrote, uh, eat Smart in Denmark, which is my last talk of literally Oh. About [01:01:00] that. How tough was the research? Yeah, that was really fun. So how about finding suppliers?

[01:01:10] What, how has that changed in the arc of 50 years dealing with, you know, buying and just all that, how that has changed a lot because our main source of merchandise used to be going to the Chicago Merchandise Mart and to the McCormick Place gift show in Chicago. And then there was a gift show in New York and LA and now there is no show at all in Chicago at all.

[01:01:31] And the Minneapolis Mart, which has always been a small mart, is in the process of sort of folding the big shows are in Las Vegas and Atlanta. Um, so Dean and I actually went to Las Vegas. It was only 105 when we went right. But there is a, a website called Fair, which has made a huge change. They launched almost at the same time as Covid.

[01:01:55] And because people couldn't go to gift shows, it became a very big deal. A little bit [01:02:00] controversial, but they are a, a portal for vendors so they don't sell themselves. But, um, you know, you might find different vendors and you can order through Fair. They collect the money, but the, because the, the supplier ships the merchandise.

[01:02:14] And I, I, at the Las Vegas gift show, I found this Irish line of, so-called Inni. I think that's how they pronounce it. Does anybody know that kind? You're gonna Ireland off to look for it. Mm-hmm. And I got very excited about, but I've seen it before. But I thought,

yeah, I need a new line. This be great. And they just, uh, wrote back to me and said, we're not gonna sell to you.

[01:02:31] We are zip code protected and there's somebody else in your zip code who has it. And which is not true. It's actually the soap opera, which is, they're not in our zip code. But I thought with fair, there's no loyalty. Oh, anybody can order anything. And I thought this was so touching, so I said, okay, fine. But you know, for that kind of protection and, and sales reps who get commission and such.

[01:02:51] Fair is undercutting all that. So in a way, it's making a shift in the wholesale part of the business. Similar to Amazon. Yeah, exactly. So on the other hand, it's super easy and if I put in the [01:03:00] word Wisconsin, I can find small vendors. Like I ordered some candles from northern Wisconsin. They would never have been at the gift show.

[01:03:06] They would never have had a sales, but they would never have been able to go. So I'm finding companies that I wouldn't have found that way so that, that and up. So I can do it at home at night, on my iPad at bed supply chain. Yeah. Which is one reason people buy from Amazon because they can do it at bed at night.

[01:03:22] QC, their biggest time is like 3:00 AM I don't wanna run over my time, John. No, no. Any other questions for, go ahead for, I have one question actually, both you Carol and Tony, I feel like you're both so innately creative and that's something that you constantly have to feed, I imagine. So what are some of the things that are source of creativity with your crazy flavors and your beautiful windows and.

[01:03:48] Just sort of the novel approaches you have to the way the stores Well, I would say that it's the, it's the, um, uh, versus participant of democracy that I'm give credit for because it's actually my stock person who does [01:04:00] all our windows. And in any other job she used to work for, uh, p Pier one, I'm sure they didn't say, oh, and would you like to unpack things and do windows?

[01:04:08] So, you know, the fact that she can use that creative aspect of her outlet, but also I've been doing it long enough that I, I feel like I have some skills as a buyer and I love exercising those and finding new things, and I get excited about it. So, um, same thing, it's, it's kind of seeing thing all the way through your life, you know, you're testing different things and it's like, you know, I might be able to do that or come up with something that adds this to this and Mm-Hmm.

[01:04:39] So sometimes it doesn't always work out, but other times it's like, wow. This is great. Reminds me you ended your talk by saying that it was like selling rocks. I actually turned down the pet rock. I said this stupid idea, it's not gonna sell. Lose something. You're coming done. Great. [01:05:00] I could've done though.

[01:05:04] I have a question for Tony. You said that, um, what, when you got outta high school, you started working for the cheese. Yep. Had you wanted, did you ever see yourself at that point being a cheesemaker or not really? You started to really love it throughout life. Before that point, I would've never se even thought I was going to make cheats.

[01:05:26] I just started working at the local factory summer job. Mm-Hmm. While I went to college. And when I went to college, I actually got my business degree and minor in accounting. Well, at the time I was through college. That was the business I knew so. That's kinda what I stuck with. And you know, we, we were married young and had kids young and you better work raise family, right?

[01:05:52] Mm-Hmm. So that's kind of the job we stayed in. Mm-Hmm. You know, like I say, 30 years of making commodity cheese, it's like, [01:06:00] yeah. It's like farming. It's a very, very hard, so do you wanna continue doing that? But when we decided to cut back and just do our own brand, then it became fun. Mm-Hmm. You know, um, then you kind of have more control over it and you see your name out there and you know, at the farmer's market, it's great that you, we sample everything at the outdoor market.

[01:06:27] People come up and try it. They might not buy it the first couple times or whatever, but I. They get to try everything we have. Oh, I don't like this one or I do like this one. But you got feedback directly from the consumer. Mm-Hmm. You know? Mm-Hmm. So it's always fun to know people love your crop. Mm-Hmm.

[01:06:47] We do. Yeah. Yes. So what kind of a cheese market is like artisan cheese now? Like what if, if you look at the cheese universe, how much of shifted? So, so is it like growing? [01:07:00] Like do you have Yeah. Are shifting into being artisan cheesemakers? I mean a lot of small, really small ones you would consider artisan.

[01:07:10] Some of the bigger factories that do some specialty items, small, small people would consider that artisan. But they just call it specialty 'cause they're producing it on a larger scale. But Wisconsin has got about 40% of the factories that makes at least some. Type of specialty cheese artisan itself.

[01:07:35] You know, there's probably about 25 of us that are really small. There's 125 licensed cheese factors in the state right now. And in 1930 when we overtook New York as a dairy state, there were 3,200 cheeseburgers. So[01:08:00]

[01:08:00] it was the transportation. So every farm had a few cows milk, some cow had extra milk. They had to have a local factory to take that milk to because transportation was terrible. There was no trucking really to speak of cheese. Went to Chicago and Milwaukee by rail, not by truck, typically, things like that.

[01:08:22] Mm-Hmm. So, you know. They had to be able to take their milk to the factory and go back home and do all their chores and plant crops, et cetera, et cetera. So there was one

every two miles up and down every road in Wisconsin, you know? Mm-Hmm. And you could see a lot of those buildings now long and narrow and kind of built into a side of the hill.

[01:08:42] So the back end was kind of their cooler area because no refrigeration really to speak of Uhhuh. So, you know, as transportation got better, things started consolidating. Yeah. You know, so just like the Amble Barns of the [01:09:00] world, a lot of the places are bigger, but luckily there are some of those small artisan places still left.

[01:09:08] Jack has a question. I was just, uh, wondering. First of all, both of you are, have really interesting stories and you presented them very well. It's a lot of fun. Thank you. Um, with you, Tony, I was wondering, have you thought about, um, expanding. Into Europe, into other places, because it sounds like you're getting a good share of the market.

[01:09:28] We, we are in about 40 states, but I mean there's, there's still huge market potential here, um, in the us Yes, it would be a good spot. I think what scares me is the paperwork, you know, well, the follow up would be, um, what the local Yeah. You just imagine you're going over to France and trying to, and actually they're not gonna actually, but is probably better.

[01:09:57] I don't, um, yeah. The US [01:10:00] Department of Export, uh, council actually is getting, uh, about 50 pounds of our cheese to take to a thing for export for France right now. Uh, wow. They're getting it in the next couple weeks. Okay. I better check and see if we sent that today.

[01:10:18] But, um. I mean, it, it is something we have thought about. It's just what scares me. Like I say, I should hire somebody to kind of do more of the paperwork thing. You know, I'm not as computer illiterate as I should be, but that's not the part of the job you really like. No. Right. That's one of the jobs that I really don't share for.

[01:10:42] Yes. Tony, are you aging any Swiss cheese these days? Uh, the oldest we have available is five year. Yes, yes. We haven't really gone beyond that. I mean, we have aged some up to seven or eight, but we don't have very big quantities. So even [01:11:00] though, you know, it may say five on the label, it might be six or seven years.

[01:11:04] Okay. That's really interesting. Each Swiss is very good. Yeah. Yeah. Uh, the problem is, unlike the Cheddars, the Swiss isn't, you know, a hundred years ago, Swiss was one of the main things in the us but Cheddar nowadays. Actually the biggest production item is mozzarella or pizza. Yeah. Mozzarella surpassed cheddar, uh, for production quantity.

[01:11:28] And, uh, about five or six years ago. Hmm. Yes. Well, for both of you. Well, what is the greatest obstacle that you had confronted in the long arcs of your careers? I'm, I'm interested if it came early or, you know, um, in, in the middle with changing markets, or, I would definitely not say early because we didn't know.

[01:11:56] I mean, we went into business without knowing we weren't risking [01:12:00] anything. I mean, we, yes, we had bought a house, but we didn't have children for eight years after we started the business. And so if we had decided to stop after two or three years, it wouldn't have mattered very much today. I think there's a lot more on the line.

[01:12:13] It's very hard to borrow money to start a business. Um, so I, I think that. But the biggest challenge, I would say before Covid had to be, um, had to be Amazon because we haven't had local competitors that we really felt were going to make it impossible for us to continue. Mm-Hmm. You know, we've had well respected local competitors, but, uh, Amazon has really been a challenge.

[01:12:38] Been, uh, our biggest was probably early on, you know, when we went out on our own because we were making commodity cheeses. And so the price points were so close, you know, the margins were so slim that it was harder. Like I say, we had to work a lot of hours to [01:13:00] keep doing it ourselves. Mm-Hmm. Um, the, the only, besides Covid, the only thing now is, um, with the Food Safety Act, uh, about 12 years ago.

[01:13:16] Uh. There's so much more paperwork now. You know, everything you do, you better be writing it down. Mm-Hmm. The lawyers always say, you know, if you have a recall, if it wasn't written down, you didn't do it, you know, for cleaning, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. And testing. You don't want to be bo sent. What's that?

[01:13:34] You don't, don't want to be bo not you not, I'm not, who's not? I feel terrible about that. I don't know how big they are or if they're gonna be able to survive that, but you don't wanna be killing people either, so. Yeah. I mean, it's, it's very hard. So yeah. You, you really wanna be on your game and I understand that.

[01:13:56] Mm-Hmm. Um, uh, is it going [01:14:00] overboard? I don't know. But yes, you do need to still make sure that things are the way they need to be food safety wise. Mm-Hmm. The other thing, like she said with Covid, you know. We're in a food business, so we gotta keep running, you know, you had to close down. Um, but 60, 65% of our sales are to high end restaurants.

[01:14:25] Well, you know, what happened to restaurants that year? So we actually were very fortunate that, uh, the end of 2019, we actually picked up, uh, um, specialty chain, uh, BJ's on the East Coast, and they're in about 13 states. And they did a, a run on her blue cheese for about a year. So from December 19th to December 20, [01:15:00] they were getting quite a bit of blue cheese from us.

[01:15:03] And I mean, we were, we were down. I. That year, 2020, about 8% sales. And we typically are up about 10% year over year. And without them we'd have probably been out about 35%. Mm-Hmm. So, I mean, that, that we kind of lucked out on that one. Mm-Hmm. But yes, COVID I think affected everybody. Yeah. Of course. Stores, things like that.

[01:15:31] You know, they transferred to where you could actually pick up outside or they even delivery, you know, and that worked for them. Even restaurants kinda learned to do a lot of that. That's what lot of 'em had do to survive. But yeah, that was a learning experience. Um, you said the, the 30 day rule or whatever, I didn't quite follow that.

[01:15:55] Net 30. Um, traditionally an invoice for merchandise is due 30 [01:16:00] days after the merchandise has arrived. Oh. But now a big change in the business is that it's almost. Well, not almost all, but a large percentage is paid by credit card. So obviously you could play the float there, but Mm-Hmm. Um, that's one way that fair has taken in all of these smaller companies and some of the larger companies, because billing was such a hassle.

[01:16:21] You would bill a shop in Paducah net 30 and 60 days later, they wouldn't have paid debt and you'd have to be calling and saying, I haven't gotten, our payment fair is tied to one credit card and it's net 60 on the credit card, so they don't bill it right away. So I was very surprised when I flew, I don't know, about a year and a half ago I was flying somewhere and I had not flown because of Covid and they said, oh, you are Gold Elite.

[01:16:45] I said, what I, and then I realized that it was my Delta card. Right. So that's been a change in the business and some, some of our accounts. If we buy Christmas merchandise and get it shipped in June and July. 'cause most [01:17:00] of our Christmas merchandise is in already. We don't have to pay until Christmas. So that's one way that they get us to take it earlier.

[01:17:06] So there are different traditions of you. You raised an interesting question, Maureen. 'cause I remember talking with Dick Burke, who was owned Trek bikes and really grew it many years ago. And he was a, um, connoisseur of financial statements. He, he knew how to dis distribution company really was his thing.

[01:17:24] And he always marveled at Walmart because Walmart, they would get the product, they would turn it within a few days and then they'd have the cash and they would pay in 60 to 90 days typically. Mm-Hmm. And you know, you just think about a big entity or Amazon. Right. You know, any of these things that are fair even probably, you know, they're playing with the money.

[01:17:44] Exactly. And where the small retailer, you know, oh my God, we don't have that. Well, and if we took 60 days or 90 days to pay, we would be cut off. Right. Traditionally the department stores. Take a large deduction for broken merchandise. Right. Right. And they don't pay on time. Right. [01:18:00] But my understanding is that Amazon does not make its money from selling merchandise.

[01:18:05] It has all these Oh, absolutely. Yeah. Advertising is huge now. That's why you get subscribed, uh, credit services and some sort of fulfillment and clouds computing. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Any, any last question. Go ahead. Now that, uh, especially since Covid, people are paying more with credit cards, how much is that?

[01:18:31] Uh, I would say that now at least 80% of our credit, our sales with customers are credit card. Wow. 90% or more, you know, no bounce checks, but we never got that many bounce checks. Yeah. Counting the money at the end of the day doesn't take us long. Mm-Hmm. You know, we do pay 3% or three to 4% for credit card fees.

[01:18:49] Mm-Hmm. But it's a convenience for our customers. And, um, yeah, that's, that's another big change that's happened with, yeah, I was thinking about be, before that I usually would always probably pay with cash and [01:19:00] then, uh, it's like the, oh, well, credit card. So, and another challenge that we're facing is, um, the demographics of our customers.

[01:19:10] You know, looking around the room, we are all aging. Um, some more than others of course, but people don't need as much when they get to be older, you know, when they move into old whatever and their, their kids don't necessarily want so much stuff either. So, Christmas ornaments, um, this is a little aside, but there's a wonderful.

[01:19:30] Capital, um, Wisconsin State capital ornament every year. Mm-Hmm. And the woman who started this had had a passion for the preservation of our capital building. So we sell the ornament. I don't know if we actually lose money on each one, but we don't make more than 50 cents of 41. And so we do it to help her out.

[01:19:48] And she just brought this year's, which is the dome. It's gorgeous. But I said, you know, people my daughter's age don't buy Christmas ornaments. They, yes, they decorate a tree. They might put some homemade ornaments on it, but they're, I said, why don't you [01:20:00] do one next year that has a prism hanging from it so it can be a window hanging?

[01:20:03] Mm-Hmm. So we went through some discussion about whether that might be feasible because a Christmas ornament has, I mean, it's limited to people have a Christmas tree. Right. Which is not everybody. And we used to sell a lot of Christmas ornaments. Now we're selling. When I order ornaments, which is something I love to do, I always think of who is going to give this to somebody else as a gift.

[01:20:23] Whereas a lot of stores used to say, oh, I'm doing a peacock tree this year. These are all my peacock ornaments for the consumer who wants to have a peacock tree in Madison, Wisconsin. There was never a consumer. I never ordered the way they did anyway. But most people don't buy Orna for themselves. They, yeah, they give them, give it to somebody else.

[01:20:43] Hundreds. Anyways, so that's the kind of thing you we that I enjoy keeping tabs up. Totally. All right. Any other questions? Fascinating. Monroe. Monroe Street location to your success. What was that [01:21:00] Monroe Street being on Monroe Street? Well, when, when we opened on Monroe Street, it was still on the cusp of being a neighborhood street with a grocery store and a pharmacy every few blocks.

[01:21:10] You know, that's how it had grown up in the thirties and forties. So we were one of the first specialty shops. Also I, together with someone else. I founded the Monroe Street Merchants Association because we discovered that the businesses didn't know each other and didn't cooperate with each other. And I really felt that that would be an important part to our success.

[01:21:27] And it has been. So yeah. I love being on Monroe Street. Mm-Hmm. Monroe Street Festival. September 21st. The first year that I'm not in charge. Uh, 46 years. Congratulations. Wow. See lasts. Wow. The person in charge this year said she's not doing it next year

[01:21:47] may get a pack. Yeah. She also had to survive the street construction. The street construction, 2018. We have one year between the street construction and open, open themselves association. [01:22:00] So important. Yeah. Um, I mean the promotions that you did for, um, to keep the street going that year. Yeah. That was a challenge, but, um.

[01:22:11] It, it came out very well. It looks nice. Mm-Hmm. And, and aren't we all enjoying the Rapid Transit?

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