

# Vermont Folklife Center Audio Log

**Project:** Archie Green Project  
**Interviewer:** Kolovos, Andy  
**Interviewee:** Buley, Joe  
**Interviewee Contact:**  
**Location:** Screamin' Ridge Farm, East Montpelier, VT  
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**Indexer:** Shannon Esrich

| Time              | Content   | Keyword 1   |
|-------------------|---|---|
| START-00:00:24    | Introductions.  | Introduction.   |
| 00:00:24-00:08:00 | <p>Family goes back 7 generations in VT, all farmers. Grandfather on mother's side ran dairy farm and butcher shop in East Randolph, VT. Parents graduated from college, moved away, no work in VT. As a kid, started cooking, went to France for 3 years training. Came back to US, worked in restaurants and hotel food service for 25-30 years. 16-17 years ago began burning out, took job teaching at culinary school in VT for 9-10 years. Didn't want to retire from cooking. Didn't want to move because of kids, so started vegetable farm, has been going for 14-15 years now. Original business plan was to use culinary background to do catering with own produce, started making soup for farmers markets with farm vegetables. Red Hen Bakery asked Joe to make soup for them, got first wholesale account. Cooked out of kitchens, church kitchens, bootstrapping it. Mad River Food Hub helped get USDA inspection, scale up. Been making soup seriously for 5 years, pretty big part of farm business. Shifted farm from local farmers markets and CSA and wholesale to 2-3 wholesale produce accounts, and everything else goes into</p> | <p>Family, generational farming, butcher, chef, culinary school, institution, Red Hen Bakery, Mad River Food Hub, retail outlets, wholesale, United States Department of Agriculture, CSA, expanding business</p> |

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|                   | <p>the soup business. No farmers markets or CSA. CSAs are flooding the market, no barrier to entry, new young farmers, all competing for same number of accounts. Started buying others' products to go into soup, keeping farm small while growing soup business and creating new market for growers in the state. Vegetables, beer, proteins, cheese, etc. Own 7.25 acres, 3.5 in production. Of the 3.5, 3 30x100ft greenhouses. Grow year round in those with passive solar heating. Fall is busy to start growing greens in greenhouse, will regenerate in winter every 4-6 weeks. This past winter, everything stopped. Harvest spinach in winter. April/May, take spinach out, move into traditional summer crops. Process them when they come in, roasting, dicing, and freezing. Soup season in September/October takes product out of freezer, make soup and sell in winter months. Co-ops serve soup every day. Initially soup was seasonal to keep farm moving in winter, now expanded into enchilada sauce, gazpacho, selling to NYC, Boston, buying constantly year-round. Very consistent, gaining new accounts. Farming still happening, but soup business taking over.</p> |   |
| 00:08:00-00:10:45 | <p>Didn't know about farming when starting. Very stubborn and persistent, did much internet research, many were skeptical about size of operation. Growing spinach in winter was questioned, now a little more popular. First 5-6 years difficult, more error than success. Now, 4-5 former employees running their own farms with similar greenhouses. Built first greenhouse in February, have added more since then. Farm is stable, runs itself, just needs some labor in summer during busy months. Give lost of seminars, asks questions, lots of research. "I think part of why it's worked for me is that I didn't know what I was doing." Open to experimentation and innovation. Some more traditional older farmers think Joe is insane for his practices and timing of plantings.</p>   | Lack of knowledge, challenges, stability, experimentation, innovation |
| 00:10:45-00:14:20 | <p>One bad failure with one greenhouse where plants didn't even grow, just died. UVM Extension couldn't figure out why plants weren't growing. Turns</p>  | Trial and error, failure, institution, UVM Extension,                 |

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|                          | <p>out, was a small insect with no known way to control it. Was told to abandon the soil and move. Happened 1.5 years ago, so 30% of production deemed useless. Insect came in on compost, likes organic matter. Spent last 2 years trying to make up that lost production, so goes back into catering, teaching. Farm was self-sustaining. Soup business means that even if greenhouse can't pay for itself immediately, business is stable enough that there is till room to grow.</p>   | <p>stability</p>   |
| <p>00:14:20-00:19:20</p> | <p>Late Blight disease migrates south to north on storm fronts. Affects nightshade family. Nursery plants bought by home growers in VT were contaminated, showed up in June before harvest. Lost 600-700 plants before ripening. Decided to move canning tomatoes to greenhouse, harvesting 6 weeks earlier than normal, yields 30% higher with fewer plants and less labor. By the time Late Blight arrives, plants are pulled out and does not affect harvest. Figured it out by observation. Tomatoes in greenhouse not affected by the disease even if plants in fields killed by it. Late Blight permanently in Vermont. Breeding plants to be resistant, and resistant fungicides.</p>   | <p>Success, Late Blight, problem solving</p>   |
| <p>00:19:20-00:26:23</p> | <p>Not certified organic, but follow more than organic practice. Some things in organic certification allowed, but he will never use. Example: copper, it's highly toxic. Organic is not supposed to cause harm. Certification also allows black plastic "mulch", but it's petroleum-based and goes into landfills and gets stuck in soil. Organic does not do DNA testing to certify non-GMO contamination. Follow bio-rational approach. If chickens are sick will treat them accordingly and not use their eggs, will return chicken to flock once healthy. Don't use black plastic, use other Biotello, non-GMO corn, certified for organic use in EU and Canada, which have stricter organic standards than US. Degrades, is photosensitive, tilled into the land. Issue with gaps in organic values. Don't spray. New field in organic pesticides for biological controls, moving away from natural chemicals that were allowed.</p> | <p>Organic, certification, GMO, Monsanto, producer, Integrated Pest Management (IPM), values</p> |

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|                   | <p>Monsanto's Bt-resistant corn so prevalent, becoming ineffective. Need to constantly do research to keep up with changes and inventions. Use IPM, beneficial insects, nematodes, bacteria, etc. Usually only spray once, trying to minimize that. Some growers are no-spray, greenhouses have screens, plants are covered. Possible to grow successfully without spray. Integrity about farming food without harmful substances. His kids eat it, he eats it. "I farm on a small scale for a reason. It's manageable, the variety's there, I make a viable living off of it. I've been offered more land - I just don't need it." Friends with larger farms hire other employees and use machinery, but still use hand labor too. "I want to know what I'm eating, and I want to eat healthy food."</p>  |   |
| 00:26:23-00:29:49 | <p>Business plan for farm ~10 years ago, now 51 years old, getting old, can't pull weeds. Need employees, can't do hard physical labor, have culinary background. Living in France also big driver, saw what high quality small-scale agriculture was capable of. Very prevalent there. Farming part time and teaching part time, went with farming full time. Asked CSA customer if interest in tomato sauce, responded positively. Started with value added products for CSA to add more value than a box of vegetables. More young members (under age 50) were busy and wanted to eat well, could do some cooking, but wasted food because didn't have time to cook it. More value added products added. Bakery owner made offer, was going to start doing soup for CSAs anyway, found niche market and expanded from there. "I'm a very rare farmer in that I know how to cook...I know the marketing end of things very well because I ran restaurants for 25 years. I'm the oddball farmer because I probably know the least about farming but I know how to manage and run a business. I came at it backwards...I came to it knowing how to run a business; I had to figure out how to farm."</p> | <p>Business plan, employees, value added, marketing, CSA, retail outlet</p> |
| 00:29:49-00:36:10 | <p>Regulations for making soup very complex. Food Safety Modernization Act will simplify it some, but home catering exemption will go away. Small food</p>   | <p>Regulations, Food Safety Modernization Act, institution,</p>             |

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|                   | <p>businesses will never be able to get started because will need to have licensed facility built specifically for food production. In part why Mad River Food Hub or Food Venture Center in Hardwick came into being, need driven by regulation. At the time of start up, because soup was going only to direct CSA members, considered a retail exemption as long as under \$10,000 in sales per year. Outgrew that, food hub in Barre called Lace, got in to make vegetable-based soups, no meat. Once wholesaling, have to have USDA or state inspection because selling over the state line. Food Hub became defunct, asked to rent church kitchens, had health inspection for catering. Sold soup at farmers markets, bakery, then Mad River Food Hub. Slow progression and new challenges to scale up, find a facility, deal with regulations. Mad River Food Hub 4 years ago started, got state and USDA inspections. Got funding, grant money, about to sign lease and move into own facility. All within course of 5 or 6 years. Will sublease factory to other food processors who are starting out because won't need full capacity. Returning favor of help in the past. New facility in Montpelier. Currently driving 3-4 days a week 40 minutes each way to get from farm to cooking facility. Huge inefficiency, office for business at home, facility has storage and kitchen but no office, paperwork, labels. Too disjointed. Very challenging to run between the two. Having new facility within 10 minute drive in Montpelier very appealing and helpful. Almost over the last hurdle. Very hectic schedule currently with two distant locations.</p> | <p>Mad River Food Hub, Lace Food Hub, retail outlets, farmers market, Food Venture Center, new facility</p> |
| 00:36:10-00:41:38 | <p>Produce at farmers market expected to be cosmetically perfect, but not possible with all yields. Value added products a way to not throw things away, increase yield per acre and be more efficient in growing. People want value added products. Don't grow labor-intensive crops, so contract with larger growers to get those ingredients. Eliminates storage loss for others farmers. Soups are 50-90% local ingredients depending on type and season. Currently, buying in organic tomato product because running out of own</p>   | <p>Consumer, value added, sourcing ingredients, expanding business</p>                                      |

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|                   | product, but don't like added ingredients in canned products. Process and freeze local products until needed. Surpassed tomato growing capacity, so contracts out and pays normal price but only if still a high quality ingredient. Sales increased 20-30% each year. Guess what is needed, increase amount of ingredients and products bought, but also expanding own production.  |  |
| 00:41:38-00:45:00 | Mostly work in kitchen, and works as production manager. Has 2-3 employees in kitchen cooking 3 days/week, scales back to 2 days/week in summer, other days work on farm 3-4 days/week. Alternate. September/October still full time but move back into kitchen all winter. First started hiring outside help for farm in 2006, hired part-time employee. Have had 2-3 employees every year, most want to stay on. Seasonal labor hit or miss, lost some soup employees to other part time work. Now, about to be able to hire 2-3 full time, year-round jobs instead of seasonal and part time. Gradually increased every year. Used to work winters alone, now even have help in winter for harvesting spinach. Plus new employees in winter could share labor to work for other processors in shared new facility to create a full time job. New and experimental, will see what works. | Employees, schedule  |
| 00:45:00-00:50:48 | Joe created the soup recipes. Has worked in restaurants and run kitchens for 25 years, keeps recipes in head. Writes down ingredients to get general amount, not detail oriented or scientific, tweak it, develop label. Did much marketing research, took new soups to farmers market to understand consumer demand. Put it in CSA boxes. Got really good feedback. Did about 8 soups to start, up to about 25 different soups, plus different broths, sauces, salsas, refried beans. Typically make product in minimum 35 gallons. Scaling is difficult, taste changes with amounts, so tweak recipes. Because dealing with inconsistent local product, taste every batch of soup before packaging to tweak again because products vary from batch to batch, farm to farm, year to year. Packaging is 24oz plastic container. Bigger   | Recipe, scale, consumer feedback, sourcing ingredients, retail outlets, CSA, co-op |

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|                   | institutions get .75-gallon cryovac boil-able bag, frozen. Enables bulk sales with 3 gallons to one case sold. Co-ops and small retail stores want to sell local products but don't have time, so by having premade soup have their own employees do things more beneficial to their own work and creates business for local producer.  |   |
| 00:50:48-00:52:48 | 3 wholesale produce buyers. University of Vermont Medical Center, CSA in Boston, Intervale Food Hub in Burlington, VT, American Flatbread during summer if excess of slicing tomatoes, 1 or 2 restaurants will buy cilantro or one or two other items. Too much headache. Miss direct retail somewhat, will go out and do demos/soup tastings. Fun to interact with customers, but doing farmers markets was becoming saturated, sales were decreasing, takes away all day Saturday, Friday getting ready. Good way to launch business, but after growth, don't need the farmers market, time to let someone else have your spot. | Wholesale, retail outlets, institution, University of Vermont Medical Center, CSA, Intervale Food Hub, American Flatbread, farmers market |
| 00:52:48-00:53:44 | Used to have 400 chickens. Sold eggs for CSA, farmers market, 60-70 dozen a week. Grain was very expensive, keeping them penned too much hassle. Would need more grain to expand chicken business, didn't want to do livestock.   | Livestock, chickens   |
| 00:53:44-00:54:36 | Joe was first one to live on street, was empty dead end. Last 6-7 years field was purchased, was bad farmland and turned into co-housing development. Went from 3 to 10 houses on the road. Great neighbors, support the farm, ideology aligns with farming.  | Neighbors   |
| 00:54:36-00:55:57 | Daughter does books, helps with marketing. Kids were never very interested in farming, helped work farmers markets and organize CSAs. Wife works off farm but also helps with marketing, website design. Help frees Joe to do sales. Family business on certain level. Oldest daughter graduated from college and had worked for him for a few years, now lives and works for Levi Strauss in San Francisco. Youngest leaves for college in coming summer, all will be out of house.  | Family, marketing, support, CSA, farmers market, retail outlet  |

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| 00:55:57-00:58:28 | UVM Medical Center connected through executive chef Richard, who loved the spinach and sanitation processes. At-risk patients can't be given contaminated food, asked to buy Joe's spinach because of high quality. Started selling chicken stock, doing some vegetable processing, exploring different connections. Best business in state for buying locally grown foods, lots of green washing in general outside of it.  | Institution, University of Vermont Medical Center, sanitation, quality, value added, processing  |
| 00:58:28-01:02:03 | Market's become too flooded for CSAs, went from 250 members to 65. People say they're growing their own food, going to farmers markets, neighbor with farm doing own CSA. Becoming saturated. Land is so expensive, more small farms under 10 acres looking at value added product to remain viable. That's why there is huge explosion in food businesses up here. With successful local sales, then expand regionally, and it works without actively pursuing those markets. In perfect world, would never have to sell outside of VT. More large co-ops, UVM Medical Center have more opportunities. Understands that buying local is tough with low margins, will take time to incorporate local food into large institutions. End consumer doesn't understand pricing, just looking for best deal, but local prices are still really close to cost of production. Not getting rich. | Retail outlet, CSA, farmers market, value added, production, regional market, co-ops, institution, University of Vermont Medical Center, consumer, low margins |
| 01:02:03-END.     | Black River Produce has Joe's products in their catalog. Joe gets accounts on his own, but they do pickup and distribution for him. Very helpful. "They're the ultimate food hub in the state, it's what they do." They stand by the vendors they buy from, they help Joe grow the business by allowing for distribution. Been doing business with them for 20 years, worked with them in culinary school for purchasing too. "I've got to admit, when I got into it, probably the best thing was that I was very naïve about what I was getting into, because if I had to start all over again, I probably wouldn't do it." Much more support for beginning producers and farmers now, a bit easier, but 10-12 years ago not that much support.   | Institution, Black River Produce, distribution, food hub, support  |