

## Featured Guest Interviews

Bill Brinkerhoff (@argusfarmstop, argusfarmstop.com)

---

**Bill Brinkerhoff:** [00:00:21] Hi, my name is Bill Brinkerhoff and I'm one of the founders of Argus Farm Stop, which is located in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

We are just coming up on our seventh anniversary and we started Argus Farm Stop to make purchasing local food easier mission-based entity that is looking to stimulate our local food system and increase local food sales

**Diego Footer:** [00:00:45] know starting that seven years ago. What was the cause? The why?

**Bill Brinkerhoff:** [00:00:49] We were at a point in our I started with my wife and then a third partner, and we were at a point where we were have a career juncture.

And we were looking at how we could actually transition our career, suspend our focus on efforts that were more local in nature. And we started to investigate like the local food system a little bit in more detail. Like one of the unmet needs or the real challenges is that it was a little bit difficult to buy local food.

There was there was a lot of demand in farmers and they're willing to produce amazing local food. And there are a lot of customers that really wanted that local produce as well. But the connection between the two had been limited to, to farmer's markets and the SAS like farm share. And farm stands and those are all great things.

That's where you can meet the farmer and you can experience local food, but it's not really the way that people shop. It's not the way people buy most of their food. We actually happened to be down dropping our middle son off in college at in Wooster, Ohio and came across a store called local roots.

And it was at this point where we were trying to explore where we could apply ourselves. And we thought a model. That they openly shared with us, and then we took it and modified it. And then that'd be became the basis for artists farm staff. Yeah. I've seen local

**Diego Footer:** [00:02:05] stores, like what you do as I've traveled around the U S but not a lot.

And there's, I don't know if there's any near me. Why is that? Why don't we see more models like that?

**Bill Brinkerhoff:** [00:02:19] I think the Erica that the food system has gradually moved to more and more industrial nature, where you're purchasing things from farmers that are a far away from where the far from where the distance between the farmer and the customer is significant.

And it has put downward pressure on prices. It's made it harder to be a small farmer. And one statistic that we see is that on average, across the nation out of every dollar of sales, like a

produce at a grocery store, Only 15 cents goes to that farmer. And the 85 cents of the dollar goes to the middle people, the distributors and the retailers.

And it's not that any of those other intermediaries are bad. It's just our food system is set up that food travels on average 1500 miles from farm to table. And that takes a lot of effort and costs. And it just pushes backwards. And so the folks that grow our nation's food are generally price takers.

They're not price setters, and it makes it quite difficult for this, the small local farmer to compete against this kind of industrialized system. And so that's one of the challenges is just the economics of growing produce compared to the industrial system is challenging.

**Diego Footer:** [00:03:33] It's the new model.

Like you run. Comparing it against the traditional model where 15% makes it to the farmer, how much makes it to the farmer and your model?

**Bill Brinkerhoff:** [00:03:43] So in our model currently we're paying 75 cents. So we're paying five times higher to the local farms and the 25 cents that we keep as enough for us to run.

A high-quality store that's open every day and has staff that can help represent those farms and tell that farmer's story to people that are shopping every day of the week and all year long.

**Diego Footer:** [00:04:06] Yeah. It's really cool that

**Bill Brinkerhoff:** [00:04:08] just

**Diego Footer:** [00:04:10] some local initiative and the right model can put that much more money back in the pocket of a farmer because they're not.

They're not wholesaling it as much. There's not as many entities between customer and farmer. Now. Now it's just, you buy from farmer customer buys from you, and you're trying to cut a fair deal with the farmer.

**Bill Brinkerhoff:** [00:04:34] Yeah, it really, I think the biggest difference is we're a distribution Fremont. And that's super important because we started with 30 to 40 or 40 farms back in the beginning.

And that was enough to fill a complete store across produce and dairy and meats and grocery items. So we're exclusively staff are stocked with local, locally produced food of all kinds. And so as a customer coming in, you don't have to read labels and figure out what's local and what's not. If you're a shopper who is intentional in your shopping, and you want to prioritize supporting the local food system at your first goal and shopping, you could come into a farm stop like Argus.

You can be sure that all of the food is local and make sure that the farms are getting as much money as they can. We're organized as a kind of a mission-based entity. We're going to cover all of our costs and have a high-quality store, but we're not looking to take profit out of the system. And so we really think that this reflects a true economic advantage for farmers and like the cost of buying local food.

**Diego Footer:** [00:05:43] And for somebody here in this who like loves the concept behind it, and they're not a farmer, but they say, I want to participate. I want to help stimulate local food and bring this to my community. When they hear things like, okay, you're paying out 75 cents to the national average of 15 and in your mission-based, can you make money doing this?

If somebody did want to run a store, like this is a livelihood, is this model can do to doing something like that.

**Bill Brinkerhoff:** [00:06:14] I'd say. Definitely. And I think, when we were having initial discussions in the beginning we met with business people who had been in retail, Ben heard about this model and that was their advice was make sure the economics can support people to bring them in here because you don't want to be so mission oriented that no one else can copy it.

Like it's. So it's not a, really a mission of philanthropy, but I would say a mission-based business that runs like a business. And so we pay our staff. Higher than competitive wages. And now between both stores, you have a staff of 60 people across full-time and part-time, so it's it's a big group.

I think if we would've known that right at the beginning, we might've been a little terrified at how big this could get, and we weren't really worthy, but we started with, 12, 12 staff and 35. And it's just been growing each year as more customers want to support these farms and they just find that they're too busy, to, to they're out of town or something happened and they missed their normal local food outlet.

There was no plan B. And we've become that predominant kind of plan B. When you can't buy local food and other methods, where

**Diego Footer:** [00:07:26] do you think most of your customers come from? So they could come from IC several buckets, one, they could be CSA customers or farmer's market customers that just would rather shop in a store.

Do they could be somebody who's just gone from a call it a larger scale, traditional brick and mortar. And they've shifted over. Where do you think you're really drawing people?

**Bill Brinkerhoff:** [00:07:51] Yeah, it's interesting. I think this is one of our biggest miscalculations in the beginning was how many people are interested in buying local food if only it were easier.

And I think it may be similar across different communities, but maybe for every person who does make it to the farmer's market on Saturday. We think there's 20 or 30 or 40 others in town put up intentionally, they would have, it's just, they couldn't for whatever reason. And sometimes it's just weather, like rainstorm, we had a big rainstorm last Saturday makes it real difficult to go out and shop.

And in the past, those farms would have to pack back up all that produce that didn't sell and bring it back to the farm. And it was a kind of a loss situation. With artists now, most of the farms sell at the farmer's market and drop it, artists, anything that didn't sell at the market.

And so it gives them that second outlet. So I think that the biggest segment for us in terms of customers are people who are intentionally interested in supporting local farms, but just couldn't because it was not easy enough for them to do it. And they had busy lives. I, to the second big segment and one that we're excited about is converting.

People to be more locally oriented in their eating call it a locavore. And so we may have a customer who comes in doesn't know really what we're about other than we're interesting store with some nice displays, but maybe they're looking for they're looking for artichokes, for example, for a dinner that they're making.

And we actually have some farms in Michigan that grow artichokes locally. Not to say that they're not available, but if it's the wrong month, probably not because we are in season and local with the food that we're selling and we'll start a dialogue with that customer and just ask them what they're looking to make.

And we may propose a parsnip translation or a turnip translation in for the recipe that they're going to. And they'll normally go away try that, give us a shot. I'll come back and say, oh, that person that we roasted for that dish was like, amazing. Like no one had it at the dinner table.

What else do you have? And so we start to see a transition for people coming into the store originally, with the recipe list and looking to buy what they had pre-thought about for dinner. Or we have some, and we don't have, all of the things always. To stopping at us first and seeing what's in season, what just came in.

It's a very dynamic market and what is coming in every week changes every week of the year and are interesting and amazing and vibrant things that come in, but it's a little bit of a different way of copying that requires some education and some learning. And so we really also appreciate customers who hadn't been aware of local foods.

That we get to take along the journey. And sometimes, six months later, they're stopping at our store first buying what they have, and then they go to the big store to finish off and get their citrus food and their aluminum foil or whatever else that we don't have. So we, I think those are the two main segments.

**Diego Footer:** [00:10:43] And how much of do you think your success has built upon creating that experience? And I'm a big believer in this. Like you don't leave home. Unless you have to. And a lot of times, if you can replicate something at home, like at the store, like I could go to big box brick and mortar and buy it, or I can order it online.

Like I might as well order it online because there's no enhanced experience for me for walking around that big box to get it. But if I go to a winery or a brewery or someplace that makes bread bowl, I can go in and I can browse, and I have questions on what is this? And they can tell me how they made it.

Somebody comes into your store. I'm imagining that person is not just, for the most part they're browsers looking to also buy. It's not just, I got my list. I get to speed in and out. Obviously, maybe there's some people that fall into that category, but there are the artichoke to parsonage people.

What do you got? I didn't even know this grew here. What is this? I've never seen this before and you guys are helping curate that locavore journey for them.

**Bill Brinkerhoff:** [00:11:48] Yeah. So it's, I'd say it's quite interesting. The experience in the store is one community that the farms that sell through our store.

Always get free coffees. And we have a full cafe, which I'd say also economically underwrites, how we can pay out so much to the farms is the cafe component which we originally did for make, to make the finances work so we could pay the pharmacist more. But we found that the true, real benefit of the cafe portion is it creates a sense of community.

Where that farmer, when they're making a delivery can linger they can get a cup of coffee and they can spend 15 minutes and talk to customers, but they don't have to invest their entire day in the store. They can then, have those conversations as a customer. What it means is if you're in the store for a half an hour you're going to see a farmer making a delivery of something and have a chance to talk to that farmer.

And that's just an experience you don't have at the big box store. The farms are not allowed to come in and, help, talk to the staff about how to sell their products. You have to deliver to a loading dock at a certain time at our store. It's organized around the farmer to make life easier for the farmer.

They can deliver any time of the day, any day of the week, whenever it's convenient for them. And when they come in, they're a little bit like a rockstar, it's a celebrity situation. John how're NOI is here in the house, th our staff is also very enthusiastic and attuned to this local food connection.

And so you feel that energy. I'm always amazed at no matter what kind of day you're having to go in and feel the appreciation from the farms that they have, this outlet that is such an economic boost for them, and then feel the appreciation from customers. And we've had some that literally break into tears and they see this much local food on display.

Like one of those beautiful produce taxi. You only see in the big grocery store. And there's not a, it's entirely filled with local items. It's showcasing and displaying and automatically missing, the produce from 20 local farms that is all displayed in a beautiful way. So I think this experience of the farms and the display and the the passion to help grow this local food system is something that customers really feel.

**Diego Footer:** [00:14:09] Yeah, I love the way you describe it online too. It's it's a full farmer's market in a store. That's open seven days a week.

**Bill Brinkerhoff:** [00:14:17] Yeah. And I take another, just a feature of it is it's not like a boutique tapping experience. You can definitely, go and see what's happening, but it is set up so that you can you can go if you've got 15 minutes and you want to get your shopping done.

Cause it's a busy. You can make your loop around the store and you can get your produce, your garlic potatoes. You can get, milk from two different creameries, and pick up some meat and be at the checkout counter in a few minutes and then pay once with a credit card and have a easy transaction and you're out the door and it also allows us to accept EBT and double up food bucks for low income customers.

I'd say no matter who you are, that in-store experience was set up to be, to mimic how people shop, like to create that. Like we wanna have one stop shopping. So I want to be able to make

dinner. I want to, from everything I need for the dinner in one stop, I'll be able to pay for it quickly.

If you can hear it, there's a little, I have a. An email system that I need to get rid of because it's making noise across the bank. You can, you

**Diego Footer:** [00:15:19] can take a second to fix that. I'm not hearing it.

**Bill Brinkerhoff:** [00:15:21] Okay. All right. If you're not hearing it, then I'm fine. I want, let me just I'm still, I'm getting this computer back up to speed after a few hiccups.

And so that's it didn't have my stuff located on it. No,

**Diego Footer:** [00:15:37] No, no problem.

**Bill Brinkerhoff:** [00:15:39] So I'll just do this.

Yes. All right. We're back. Okay.

**Diego Footer:** [00:15:56] When it comes time to filling the shelves, what are the mandates that you've put out there? Because it could. It can be very easy to start ever expanding the net. Oh, this is what local means. 30 miles. Ah, it's a hundred. No, it's 500. What if you set out if it comes into the store, then it must

**Bill Brinkerhoff:** [00:16:19] E X.

So we so our approach to local food is is aimed at the customer experience that customers want a choice. So it needs to be local, but they don't just want things from one farm. Normally they would like maybe two or three choices. So whether it's carrots or pork chops that there's two or three farms, there's two or three, they normally have slightly different methods of production or growing practices.

So that variety is important. When we started with the 30 to 40 farms, it was pretty much one of each thing. And then we've grown last year, had around 200 farms selling through the store at any across the year and probably a hundred at any one time. And the intent of that is to have the full shopping experience all local with some choices.

At the same time customers, when you start to have six or seven choices, it's, it makes it harder for customers to shop not easier. It's exhausting. When you have two choices and it also dilutes the economics too, to the farms and we've targeted to have, 2, 3, 4, producers of any one item.

And it all needs to be local where those farms are participating in the store. The fact that for produce that they need to really deliver to the store for fresh produce. We need to deliver to the store probably twice a week. So they would come on Saturdays with the farmer's market normally, and then they probably would need to be back on Wednesday.

And that requirement that they're in the store and they're delivering twice. Tends to limit that the radius. So we don't have a mile radius that we define local. We define local as able to participate in our community. And I'd say with that being said, we have, like, all of our producers are from Michigan, except for, I think we have one kombucha producer from Toledo, Ohio.

But Toledo, Ohio is 50 miles away and it's closer than Trevor city. And we do have a Turkey producer up in man Salona that really has Turkey and that's what they do. And and I think we will reach, farm. And within, within, within our state or within our confines to give the customers a very impressive and full experience.

We stay as local as possible is a role. And that the end result is still, everything is most. Everything is in the state. We also in general, want to pay these farms as much as possible so that this consignment method of payouts, where we pay 75% of their actual sales. What's unique about Argus is the farmers own their goods and they set the prices.

And and that model is really meant to break the paradigm of traditional grocery stores, where in a traditional grocery store, you pay the producer as little as possible, and you sell it as much as the customer will bear. And we did not want to go down that pathway in our store, if something costs \$4.

And the math is on the wall, \$3 is going directly to that farm. And so it really also lets people shop without thinking more about that mission in mind, they know the math, they know what's a transparent financials. And and I'd say we. I'd say the vast majority of farms are producing in participating in that they're local and that they're selling in this way that they take 75% of sales.

There are a few producers, like our big bakery and our big Creamery that have to do wholesale. They just can't handle the accounting of a consignment basis for a big, crazy business. Like they have. Yeah. So we buy wholesale, a handful of things. That's the best alternatives. But,

**Diego Footer:** [00:19:49] okay. So for consignment model, just to make sure I'm on the same page, I'm a farmer.

Let's say I sell carrots. I bring carrots into the store. I price them. I create the pack size that I want. You put them on the shelf. When they sell 75% comes back to me, whatever doesn't sell. I take it.

**Bill Brinkerhoff:** [00:20:08] That, so that's the model. And I have to say in the beginning, there was some skepticism because under consignment models, the farmers normally got the short end of the stick because they were liable for that for the shrinkage and the waste.

I will say at artists' almost no waste. We have one residential compost container that we use. And it's mainly full of coffee grounds. There is completely unlike the industrial system where lettuce, which lasts about 14 days from when it's picked, until it really starts to rock, spends a portion of that getting the 1500 miles from farm to table.

By the time you see it in a local grocery store, it normally has three or four days left. So if you don't need it and you go away for the weekend, it's going to be not in great shape. If you contrast that. Locally sourced food that was picked within a day or two. It just, it, the entire store sells out for us every three days.

There is not things that, that linger for the most part. And we had a university of Michigan crew come try to study our food. And they came in with scales and, did a measurement system. And there was just, there was not food waste, little protein and printing of yellow leaves here and there, but in general so I'd say the food waste is another benefit.

We don't talk about it a lot, but there's a huge improvement in food waste compared to the traditional system, by having proper refrigeration misting and, we carefully. Create the storage conditions for each item, whether it's apples, potatoes, or lettuce so that they are in great shape for customers to buy.

So set the food waste aside because it turns out it was a skepticism in the beginning and it hasn't turned out to be the case. We do have some farms that deliver more than we then we, they, we both know would normally say. And we have a local organization that provides food fresh produce for food banks.

And so a number of farmers will have a standing orders. Hey, sell as much as you can. When I come back on Wednesday, we'll food, gather the rest and to gather being a verb for food gatherers, which is our Anarbor food bank. And so we've become a little bit of a hub for farms when they really have an over abundance of things to give us a little bit more than anyone thinks would sell.

And there is. I would not say food waste, but an intentional diverting of unsold produce to the to the food bank. And other than that we do accumulate sales and we pay out twice a month. And so from the first to the 15th, we run sales and then we close on the 15th. We crank up the computers on the 16th and calculate all of the payout reports and files, and normally have all the farms paid within a few business days at the end of each half month period.

When you started this,

**Diego Footer:** [00:22:59] what were some of your reservations as the store owner of selling consignment versus wholesale?

**Bill Brinkerhoff:** [00:23:06] So the biggest reservation work is, were farms. Like under this model. So we had a lot of, in our mind there were, we got to get a bunch of failure scenarios. Like it's pretty good if you're starting a business, like just before you get too far down the path, do your own risk assessment and think about how this thing is going to fail and be aware of those and brainstorm how it might go off the tracks.

And I'd say one of the areas we thought it might go off the tracks as if the farms look at this. Trust us with their produce because it is like literally we're taking their baby. And if we're not, if we're not selling it or we're mistreating it and they're not happy, then it's over before it began. I think with the relationship to the consignment model is just specifically, could we convince enough farms that this might be.

And we started with really the most influential farms in our area and spent time with them and explaining how this might work. And it took months to get them on board with this new concept. But by the time we opened and by the time really the second payout game first or second payout, they could not believe the size of the checks that were coming their way.

And the the high percentage of produce that. No, that's sold at a great price in a way that gets them great economics. So really your job

**Diego Footer:** [00:24:24] is the store owner. If we take out of the cafe out of it is to cultivate a great customer experience. So customers come back and to market to new customers cause you can't set the price, farmer's doing that.



So your job is to get as many people coming through the door as you can, and to make sure that they come back time after time. And then if you do a good job at that, You're going to get paid as the store owner, the farmer is going to get paid and everybody wins.

**Bill Brinkerhoff:** [00:24:50] Exactly. Yep. I'll say, and I'll maybe I'll amplify on that a little bit.

The so the experience that customers have when they come into an RV farm stop is one where we. We have an organization in Ann Arbor called Zingerman's as a great delicatessen has a great road house, but also they've cultivated a culture that whenever you go into any of their institutions, you feel welcomed.

You feel recognized, not overly, it's a great experience. And so we engage them to help us train and develop course for our staff. Do a whole set of things for staff, like the creation of an environment where customers feel welcome and that staff feel enabled and powered to have lots of degrees of freedom to make sure that experience is a good one, has really been fundamental for customers and the customer experience.

And so I think cultivating that experience between staff and the training, because customer service is. It's natural for some people, but not for everybody. And there's procedures and approaches that Zingerman's taught us that are, that we've really used. And we feel that they're important.

I'd say the other part, that's quite different in your original question about why aren't these all over the country. So the logistics of running a farm stop are. Are daunting compared to a normal store. So in a normal, like a normal whole foods or a normal wishes, or Kroger's, you have a, quite a limited offering a produce, it might be, 30 items that are sold, and pretty much sold year round.

And it's the restocking and replenishment is a kind of a checklist and maybe once a day, or once every few days a truck comes in with all that stuff. And it's one delivery, normally a semi-truck and you load it in and pallets and it's one whole pathway. If you can replace that idea with a store like ours and I'd say each store, had pretty significant sales, on a yearly basis.

That's now supplied by. A hundred to 200 farmers they're showing up at all times of the day. There's not, there's never been a semi-truck, it's always been pickups and bands and whatever the farm has as to come into town. And how do you like coordinate so that you have the right products and not too much?

Not too little So I'd say that like the behind the scene logistics of matchmaking process and realizing that we have some farmers that only want to text, they really don't want to call and we've got other, we have Amish farmers that you get a phone call and they ask what they should bring in and you gotta be ready for that phone call.

Cause that's the only chance they're going to get before they show up. And so the communication and logistics are the other impacts. Of the artists to work on beyond the customer experience. When a customer does show up.

**Diego Footer:** [00:27:34] So you have store layout, you

**Bill Brinkerhoff:** [00:27:37] have

**Diego Footer:** [00:27:40] store display. How are the products displayed within the store?

And then beyond just the general store ambience itself. You have signage and then you have people. What goes into creating a good customer experience and why I'm asking this is there might be people who want to do this model. There might be people who have just a farm store on their own farm. And a lot of times I think that the strategy is probably not a strategy, but it's, we'll just put everything out.

Here's a price, go at it and we'll ring you up. What do you think it takes to really maximize a customer experience to get I say, a full value out of that customer. So they enjoy that. They come back and they get what they need and maybe some things that they hadn't considered coming in.

**Bill Brinkerhoff:** [00:28:31] Yeah. So that's a, an interesting topic. I'd say, we were certainly inspired by the farms at south and farmer's markets and how they display and make their produce look amazing and compelling. And to take as much of the aesthetics of those displays and to incorporate it into a store where we use the same principles, but we go beyond that.

So one of the principles is to, to stack it high and watch it fly. This is, abundant displays sell much better than spires displays. If we put out a dozen ears of corn and try to replenish as each customer takes them, no one's going to buy that corn. If we put out 150 ears of corn in a display, that looks interesting.

People that had no idea that they are going to buy corn are not going to leave that store without, half a dozen ears. For us, it's been a joy. I can say we started off with and I feel like it's the same. I think I would encourage people to jump in and have fun and have creativity with this.

They'll be open to ideas. We learned along the way, like in the beginning, we didn't have a misting system in our produce. And one of our farms son seed, farm farmer, and his kale didn't look so great. And we were trying to hand mist every, every 15, 20 minutes, like they did it, but he said, it's just not working.

He said, I put all that effort in and it's looking pretty sad. This was within our first week of opening. And so we put together a homegrown misting system using an aquarium based in the steam system. It didn't have to be a fancy grocery one. And it was transformative, the quality of the of the produce that needs to be ordered in a cool and moist environment.

So I think having a little bit of infrastructure is important, I will say. So we teach a course, like a three-day course, and it's been a zoom course during COVID and w our produce manager teaches a section on how to create compelling displays. And takes things to a level that is so far beyond where we started.

But the, and the produce displays are amazing, but, like to the it's, he's just sharing the insights of, should you display carrots on the, the yellow end or the green end? Should they, how should you display cucumbers? How should you group them together?

I would say, this is Alex Bessel. And he has really started to move and preferred to group things and how people shop. And so in our product stack and displays, don't put things together that are more salad. Cause if you're going to make a salad dishes and your

cucumbers and your lattice, like roughly together, Kind of a different mentality, if you're looking at like eggplant or things that you're gonna roast.

So there's a little bit of a I don't want to scare people away that you have to be at, some perfect level, but there's a whole gradient of expertise about around how to display and

**Diego Footer:** [00:31:17] Totally. You go into high-end retailer ever. And I mean that stuff's not just put out there on racks, like it's yes.

It's aggregated as outfits. With similar stuff. What about this? This comes up a lot. When people talk farmer's markets signage, so you could have here's your carrots. You can have price \$4 a bunch. Then you can have non taste carrots for dollars a bunch, and then you can have, nine days carrots, \$4, a bunch of great and soups for juice raw, and then you could have next to it.

Okay. Here's the grower that grows them. Where's the sweet spot. I, again, I know there's a deep science to this, but where's the sweet spot for signage, but that somewhere between okay. Not enough. And you're overloading somebody with information.

**Bill Brinkerhoff:** [00:32:03] Yeah. So it's a good question.

And we started off putting too much on there and we had really, essentially what were almost three by five cards in front of every single idea. And if you recall so we may have carrots from three different producers. And so for us, a key differentiator is that the name of that farmer who grew the food is going to be on that label on that signage.

So a Monroe farms, carrot is going to be distinct from entree farms, carrot. They might have different growing practices. They're going to look different. For us, it's the farm name for sure. Growing practice, for sure. Especially if it's certified organic and we have no grown produce in the store, but some are certified organic and others use organic inputs.

And then the price and what we do Don is shrink that from a three by five card to a narrow. A more concise label and we let the produce do the talking. And so the carrots you're going to see now three displayed side by side, they're going to be gorgeous, different choices, and you'll make your choice based on which carrots look the best and right below it, you'll see it and which practice.

And I think that mixture has turned out to be better than trying to overload the signs. Get we give most of the starring role to the produce itself with a definitive and in stem really constructed credits, to the farmer, the price and the growing price.

**Diego Footer:** [00:33:32] Yeah, mate. Thanks. A lot of sense. Okay. I like that. Yeah. So your store has been open seven years. It's seven days a week. Now people can go shop physically in person, which was great. As from Instacart through door dash, Amazon, everybody's now in with COVID has shifted to also wanting to buy stuff online.

What was the catalyst for you guys to also offer an online option?

**Bill Brinkerhoff:** [00:34:00] Sure. So the original catalyst for us to move online, we're a local chefs from restaurants. Would come in and realize that we're the place that all these farms

come to. And they would see something in our store like fairytale, like plant or whatever it was that week.

And they would say, whoa, that's amazing. And they would buy the entire like display which was great. Our mission is to stimulate the local food system. And if they wanted to buy all that was. But as that happened and a more and more regular basis, it was also shortchanging customers who came in and, bunch of, a bunch of produce just got taken up by a big buyer.

And so we wanted to have a more organized way to make our products available for farms or for, to see what was coming in from farms. So we did a search of online platforms and selected Local Line as a way to host this restaurant. And also we had a preschool in town that wanted to provide local produce bunches it for their school.

They had, I think, a multiple sites in town and they want as part of the food and part of the activity of their preschool to work with local food. And so they became a big buyer and they were another one that was, they would come in and really try to buy a lot of stuff all at once from the store. And so Local Line lettuce have an online presence for sure.

And preschool is literally like our bigger customers in the beginning. And that's all we had in March a year ago, right before COVID sat in, we had seven orders. And we thought it was great. It's, these were seven big orders, so we're not going to come and disrupt the store. The farms had a little bit more notice they could bring more in and it was organized.

And so we were happy with that. And with COVID. It was happening. We had customers that were like in the age demographic that they knew that this thing was targeted at them. There was no vaccine, they were going to ground and they asked us, is there any way you can just, make local food available for us?

Because I am my apartment, for the next two months, I'm hunkering down. And we said, of course we can bring whatever you want. We had no idea how we're gonna do. And then we began the process over the next two months to transform every single thing we sold to sell it online, as all of our customers, needed to buy food in a safer manner, in a more convenient manner and where we had seven orders that first week in March, we want to have 3000 orders online over April, may and June.

Crazy volume of people. We had to close, we have two locations, we had to close one of our stores and we put two full-time shifts of packing or nothing doing nothing, but order fulfillment, tracking all these orders for that a good duration of that kind of the peak of the pandemic. And so for us, the transition to online was originally to serve bigger customers.

Then it was to serve COVID customers. And now what we've seen is that habits and the exposure where people may not have been comfortable buying online. It's something they learned how to do during COVID and many of them like that a lot. And they're continuing to use that system. And so it's grown to a substantial segment of customers that are not necessarily ones who've been in the store, shopped in the store in the past.

There are more people that prefer to shop online, accustomed to buying through Argus on Local Line from all of these different farms. So you've gained.

**Diego Footer:** [00:37:37] Probably not customers as a result of adding the online.

**Bill Brinkerhoff:** [00:37:41] Definitely. Yeah, definitely. Yeah. Yeah it for us last year, the online sales during COVID were over a million dollars.

It was a lot of food being sold that way. And it was a lifesaver for the farms because last year, the farmer's markets in our area were closed. There was no other way really to buy local food other than Argus and Local Line. We kept one of our stores opened with social distancing. But the majority of sales last year went through the online business and, there's customers that are for whatever reason, prefer to shop online.

It makes it super easy. And let's say, even for us, when we need to check on something quickly, we can call the store and see if they have something. But you can also just check online because it has an accurate inventory. And, what's available, especially with different meat cuts or whatever, it's all up there.

And so there's some appeal for us. It was the first time we actually had to start tracking inventory in our forest system. It's a different approach than a consignment sale. So

**Diego Footer:** [00:38:44] you bring in new customers, more sales, you had to do it as a result of COVID, but it sounds like you'll keep it going now as we've moved past COVID, but it's not a free lunch, like there's additional work required.

What do you have now? Probably what, like a full-time person just managing the staff and the inventory on the online side.

**Bill Brinkerhoff:** [00:39:05] Yes. His name is well Moyer godsend. Ha and really curate the online offerings. And also weekly produce boxes have come in as well as kind of part of the offerings.

And we, we set up, so we had closed our second store to only do online. And now that COVID in the vaccine rates are in healthier situations. Our customers in the neighborhood want their store. And and we want our cafe, which had been operating in that store and we have a Tavern license that hadn't been operating.

And so we just acquired a third space where the online business and the grocery are going to move together and leave us with a kind of a cafe Tavern operation in two, two storefronts that are probably 300 feet apart. And so it'll be. I think a great opportunity for the online business, the produce boxes and the in-store to have we've been busting at the scene.

So to give us some more space to work in. So

**Diego Footer:** [00:40:06] for the online model that you have, it's a hub model through Local Line. So you're responsible as the soar owner for listing everything and taking the payment, and then you pay it out to vendors after it's done.

**Bill Brinkerhoff:** [00:40:21] Yes, we it's the same rule as in the store.

So it is for the most part, it's all, it's mainly consignment items. And so the way we work with Local Line is as if we're one giant farm who happens to have 750. of items and the fact that those w it was 700 and, we're trying to figure out the reasonable mix.

It might be 300 or whatever, but to have a full offering on these different suppliers is something we curate the mix. And generally we added into inventory and Local Line when it

comes into our store. So we count it when it arrives. It goes up for sale and sell. And we do a fair amount of trading horses between the in-store and the online.

So if we have extra of something like meat is one area like how to sell meat online was a challenge because, we way I'm at the register. When you buy it in the store online customers, we really didn't want. Have a two-step process. We wanted to have fixed prices, for, like for a pork chop.

And so we had to do ranges of weights for each item and put a fixed price on it. But the one, the pork chops, it's like a bell curve, like almost most of the pork chops coming in are in this range. And we can sell them in three different weight ranges on Local Line, but the edges there's some big ones and some small ones, sometimes it come through cause local food is like but we can shuffle those over and sell them in the store so that we can really keep the online stock with a reliable supply, have a manageable set of shares of meats and weight items.

How are you in time? I am good. Is it how no,

**Diego Footer:** [00:41:58] we're good. Yeah, we're good. I just didn't know if you I'm probably have 10 minutes left or something like that, but I don't want to push it past if you gotta run.

**Bill Brinkerhoff:** [00:42:04] Let me just. Let me just do a text and and I'll get myself 10 minutes about that.

Sure.

Yeah. Now I can tell from your questions that you are you've seen a bunch of things.

**Diego Footer:** [00:42:30] Dumb. Yeah. And just it's a cool model. If I didn't already have a hundred things to do, it'd be one thing I'd like to do.

**Bill Brinkerhoff:** [00:42:36] Yeah. Okay. Hub model.

**Diego Footer:** [00:42:40] So list it when it comes in, whose responsibility is it for images and description of that product?

Do you leave that up to the customer or sorry, the farmer to provide that, or do you guys do that when you input it into the system?

**Bill Brinkerhoff:** [00:42:54] So we do it when we input it into the system. And sometimes we have help from the farmer. If the farm has promotional like logo and things like that, we'll make sure for all of our farms that we have their logo and we can print that on to either, display signage, if it's in store if it's Local Line, we've found better for us to take pictures.

What exactly is being sold than to use stock photos. And so we have generally will have a system as part of our receiving process. That's, it's a little bit of a burden in the beginning when you're setting up all the new items. But once it's set up, it is it's great to have a picture. That's an accurate picture.

That's a nice one item you're selling. And so we do that. We do the input. And again, the farm dropping off our purpose in life is to make life easier for them. They'll drop. And they can go

and and we just take care of the rest and that's, the 25% that we take, we cover, we do the signage of it's in store.

We do the picture and the description of it's online.

**Diego Footer:** [00:43:57] One other thing I imagine maybe. Accurate, but I would think that by going online, you're now also able to offer that weekly produce box, which would have been logistically more challenging to manage without a software system. So that's something else you had where people can subscribe to that.

They get a set number of curated items each week, and it's just another way for people to plug in and get a taste of what's local and, move more product to pull more product through the local system.

**Bill Brinkerhoff:** [00:44:26] Yeah it's been really enjoyable to see how that comes along. Because we're really in a position with so many farms that are supplying the farm stop that we can.

So we can always, we can pick an a, like an amazing set of things for that week. That's hard for a single farm or two farms getting together to do. And so we can pull from all those farms and we can also get, the customers that are buying it are somewhat intentional. If we've got an overage of eggplants or cucumbers or strawberries, like recently been a fantastic strawberry season, we've been able to, load in strawberries into the weekly produce boxes and, and sell, 150 quarts with one decision, so it's a bigger, it's a complimentary way to sell. In addition to the normal online and normal in-store sales.

**Diego Footer:** [00:45:15] Just to close this out. How do you view what you're doing as part of I'll call it new community? When I think about the average store out there, a grocery store, regardless of grocery store or not, I think they're viewed as stores.

It's where I go to buy something where I hear what you're describing and I think that's not a transcend store. And it becomes a fixture in a community for, in a few ways like you, because you're getting community working there. You have community coming to, to purchase stuff. And people who live in that area are selling stuff that they grew there.

It's deeply rooted in many layers, and it's not just where I go to pick something up and grab something. It becomes a bit of a hub. How do you see what you're doing as building community?

**Bill Brinkerhoff:** [00:46:13] Yeah, I think the community that's being built around each farm stop is really pretty incredible and energetic.

In both of the locations where we built out stores, they were defunct and decrepit locations. One was a former service station that became a failed marijuana dispensary. It had the light, it was not a great place mattresses upside down, outside. And it's been transformed to a place where the community gathered.

It's not too far away from like an elementary school. There'll be kids that come down directly with permission to their parents and they'll get, a drink at the store. It's a place where by bringing together, I guess the, the staff, the farmers and these customers, there's a very strong energy and sense of community that's built around there.

Who's the person who's picked up on this a lot is a faculty at the university of Michigan named Peter Allen. And he's had students, he runs an intentional design and of course for development. And he's had students try to incorporate this farm stock concept as well way to build community and to put it and, define the places in a town where it can go.

What we see is when the farm stock came in it were actually listed by the realtors as a key advantage of moving into our neighborhood is you're near Argus farm stop. The we've had, developers like try to include these guys. They see the value of having some community centric place like a farm stop in amidst their development.

Yeah. So I feel like the community that's generated by local food with this kind of approach with farmers and customer systems. Super good. And we think it's an important part of what we do.

**Diego Footer:** [00:47:53] All right on. That's it? Not so much.

**Bill Brinkerhoff:** [00:47:56] Yeah, that was great. So let me know if you have, if there's follow-up questions or anything.

Okay.

**Diego Footer:** [00:48:00] Yeah no, that's really good. Maybe it's somebody even talking to that guy, Alex would be cool and just displaying stuff.

**Bill Brinkerhoff:** [00:48:07] Yeah, I'd love to make a connection. So if you feel like, yeah, you want any other parts of that? Cause I feel like for your audience, What he talks about is super valuable.

And he's created kind of a booklet around it. It's, it would be, something we'd be happy to where we openly share it. Happy to to oblige, if there's interest in any of the stuff that we might've learned along the way. All right,

**Diego Footer:** [00:48:27] right on. I appreciate it.

Good luck and keep up the good work, man.

**Bill Brinkerhoff:** [00:48:30] All right. Thanks. Thanks, bye.

---

[www.readyfarmerone.com](http://www.readyfarmerone.com)