

## Featured Guest Interviews

Jesse Way & Meghan Brandenburg (@milkywayfarm.ca, milkywayfarm.ca)

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**Jesse Way:** [00:00:14] So we're a small scale, a one and a half acres of vegetables on a four and a half acre farm in Southwestern Ontario. We, I guess, focus and specialize on over like winter production and just like, full year production and lots of product variability, a lot of availability throughout the whole year. So we have an overwintered one heated greenhouse. And, so we do overwintering greens and a hoop house to do a lot of season extension. And so that's our niche, I guess, in our area is trying to provide for our customers year round.

**Diego Footer:** [00:00:57] And how important is overwintering where you're at in Ontario? Is that a big advantage? Is it something to do? Does it make a good, significant difference in the farm?

**Meghan Brandenburg:** [00:01:08] I think so. Definitely. Most people are used to having farm products available kind of half of the year. So like June to November or that kind of range. And then the rest of the year, they're buying from the grocery store. There's a few local products available, but not very much not enough to meet the need for sure. So we find that, yeah, we can maintain our customers year round. So people buy from us in the summer. They continue buying from us through the winter, and we don't have to find them again in the summer the next year. And so it's also, yeah, just that's half of the year that most farms aren't actually making any sales.

**Jesse Way:** [00:01:49] Yeah, in Ontario, like the demand for local food and just the awareness of local food is very high. So we do have a lot of local producers throughout the summer. And you can get local produce at farm stands, like lots of different markets and the grocery store carries a lot of local stuff, but come wintertime, that really dries up, especially for the like fresh lettuces and fresh greens and things.

So that's been our, I'd say niche that has really helped grow the business year over year since we started and that every winter, the demand for local doesn't go away, but the supply definitely decreases. And so lots of customers find out about us throughout the winter, who may be part of other CSA's or market shoppers or even just had typically been shopping at the grocery store, but want local food year round. So then, that's helped us grow our business since we have started.

**Diego Footer:** [00:02:41] Which is more important, what Meghan talked about, not having to go find a customer because you're selling to them throughout the winter and kind of staying in their ear and in their mouth all year round, or that additional boost of revenue that you get from winter sales that if normally, if you take it off, you're not taking in revenue? So you think about it one hand, you get additional revenue, other hand, you just keep in a customer. What are your thoughts there?

**Meghan Brandenburg:** [00:03:09] I think they kind of both go hand in hand. Like it kind of builds off of itself. We are in our third season here working together here on the farm. So we're pretty fresh, still, in our production as Milky Way Farm. And having that reliable income through the winter is another part of the factor that like enables us to keep moving ahead and progressing and not having to spend that extra time then in the spring in marketing because the customers haven't forgotten about us. They're still buying every week. So when we start building up our offerings again, our varieties in the spring and early summer, it just builds naturally. And we don't have to put that extra effort and time into marketing and trying to push that to sales.

**Diego Footer:** [00:04:02] And how would you describe that market? There's a lot of different locations people farm in from really rural to just outside cities or in cities. Where does your market fit within all of that?

**Jesse Way:** [00:04:14] We're very close to a large city for Southwestern Ontario. We sell into the Kitchener-Waterloo market, which is one of the largest urban centers outside of the greater Toronto area in Ontario. So we're very close to a—it's probably over a quarter million people combined between those two cities.

So that's our main sales outlet is that city, although we are closer to a smaller city called Woodstock, which is about 30,000 people. And so our sales are split between people who pick up here at the farm, which we consider our local customers, and then I'm driving, it's about a 40-minute drive into the city, where the majority of our sales are into Kitchener-Waterloo. And so we're very, yeah, we're close to—I mean, we live in a rural setting, but where we live in Southwestern Ontario, we are quite close to a major urban centers.

**Diego Footer:** [00:05:08] Given that urban center, it's 40 miles away or 40 minutes away, drive into there. What was your initial plan on, alright, we're living in this rural location. We like where we're at. There's a big populous over there. It's relatively close. It's not like a three-hour drive. How were you initially planning on selling into that market? Was it farmer's markets? Was it trying to direct market right into that market?

**Jesse Way:** [00:05:34] We originally went to the downtown farmer's market in the city of Kitchener. So that was our, when we started the farm, that was our primary sales outlet, was the downtown Kitchener farmer's market. And so that is—how we designed our business was largely based on a combination of farmer's market and our CSA.

So the CSA in our first year, before we went all online was a smaller proportion of our sales and revenue, and the market was our primary sales outlet. And we had decided when building our farm, like, Meghan and I had both previously farmed for several years before we created a Milky Way Farm together. And the farm that Meghan had managed before was a similar like market plus CSA. And that was the kind of what we were planning on doing.

And the closer town of Woodstock has a farmer's market as well, which I had attended when I was farming on a smaller scale on my own beforehand. And we knew that when we were combining into building our own business, that we wanted to look for a larger market outlet, and so we decided to go to the bigger city of Kitchener.

And we did have a friend that farms who was at that market and kind of—so that it was underserved, I guess, as far as like small-scale, local, organic farm, like actual farmers at the market, it was a lot of resellers. And so, we had a friend at that market who had suggested it

and who didn't farm year-round. She does just seasonally, that she thought that there would be room at that market for another small-scale grower. And it worked out that first year we were there. It was a good market for us before COVID a hit, and the market ended, or the market temporarily closed.

**Meghan Brandenburg:** [00:07:19] Yeah. It was quite a large market. Well-established and they touted, I think, 10,000 people go through on a typical summer Saturday. So it was quite—

**Jesse Way:** It was a busy market.

**Meghan Brandenburg:** —well attended. And we visited in the wintertime and noticed that there just wasn't anyone selling local salad greens. So, there was an opening there for us that we thought really, we could slip into easily and start building customers from there.

**Diego Footer:** [00:07:43] Yeah, great place to do research and sales.

**Jesse Way & Meghan Brandenburg:** Yeah.

**Diego Footer:** Starting out as newer farmers—new farmers with your own farm. What were your thoughts on farmer's market sales versus CSA sales? Did one seem more advantageous to the other? Did one seem more challenging? You were skewed more farmer's markets than CSA in the beginning. Was there a reason for that?

**Meghan Brandenburg:** [00:08:10] I think, for me, when I started out, I just did a CSA, and it's risky to jump in that way because you're committing to people who you are obligated to provide vegetables for an entire season. It worked out for me, but I think the market and the CSA combination went really well together because the CSA, you're looking to provide your 10 or 12 items per week of a certain variety you want to mix and match for your customers, but you often have surplus of certain items that you don't want to just push onto your CSA members. They might not need, 11 zucchini that week or something, so you don't want to overdo it.

And the market allows you a spot for that excess product. Like you might have a bumper crop of lettuce heads that week. The market provides an outlet for those. But on the other hand, if you're only selling at market, you might bring \$2,000 worth of product one week, and it's a slow week, and you come back with more than half of that back again, so that's the downside of the market.

And the CSA is a guaranteed sale each week. So, I think they do work really well together if you can do them both, and they can balance each other out in that way. And that's kind of what we were thinking when we started as well, to just have that guaranteed sales of the CSA as we weren't sure what the market would provide for us, but then a place to bring excess product when we have it and potentially make more sales if the market turns out to be very busy.

**Jesse Way:** [00:09:52] Yeah. Going into our first season, Meghan had 10 years of experience farming already, and I had a handful of years as well. So we were pretty confident in our ability to grow and produce food, but we were quite uncertain about this new market and what it would be able to provide. So the CSA was definitely a nice guarantee from, you know, X number of customers, like Meghan mentioned.

But I think our first year when we started the farm, like the marketing side was our biggest uncertainty because Meghan had a lot of experience growing. So we were fairly confident in our ability to grow a wide variety of things, but how much we could sell, we weren't sure. But we did luck out and that the Kitchener market worked out well for us before it closed. And we went online. Temporarily closed.

**Diego Footer:** [00:10:39] What was the catalyst to going online? Was it purely COVID necessity? Hey, this is closed. We got to do something?

**Meghan Brandenburg:** [00:10:45] It was kind of like, yeah, they let us know a few days ahead. And it was like, we set up the store overnight, our first attempt at an online store 'cause we knew that it was going to be a pretty big deal and we had all, everything already producing and growing, and we had to act really fast to not be able to lose the crops we were growing, but also, yeah, just...

**Jesse Way:** [00:11:13] Yeah, I guess at that point in March, we had already planted our like greenhouse tomatoes and peppers and everything. And we did have a week notice when the Ontario government announced all the lockdowns, the market was still open the very next day, but it was well understood that it would probably be close to the following week. And then it was like, I think, on Tuesday they officially told us that it would be closed.

And by Wednesday, Meghan had an online store up and running. So we kind of did an overnight shift, and that first week was definitely, well, the first while, it was definitely a learning curve, but the first week we hosted an online store just through Square. And it was after a week that we switched to Local Line. But it was definitely COVID that kind of boosted it into...

**Diego Footer:** [00:12:00] That pushed you that way?

**Jesse Way & Meghan Brandenburg:** Yeah. Yeah.

**Diego Footer:** So it's March, you see everything starting to unfold, not just even in the farm space, but just, around you. Like, everything suddenly starting to change with the pandemic. You get that notice that the market's closed. What's your initial thought? Is it like, holy shit, like what are we going to do? Was there a panic? Was it okay, this happened, we know we're going to do this. What was your mindset at the time when that bomb got dropped?

**Meghan Brandenburg:** [00:12:34] It was a bit of panic and anxiety. And we had already invested so much time and effort and money into the growing season. And also that we relied on the farm income as our sole income for our whole family, so we knew we had to make it work as best we could and adapt.

**Jesse Way:** [00:12:56] And we knew that we had a strong customer base built up that was going to still be seeking out our produce, especially with when the pandemic hits and like the grocery stores, there's all the concern about food shortages or people stocking up on items.

And so the week, that one Saturday where like people were realizing that something big was about to happen, everybody was very interested in like, how can we continue to buy your produce? And so we just like that—the last Saturday that the market was open, I was kinda like, just follow our website, we'll make postings and let you know.

So we did know that there was a lot of people who still were going to be wanting and needing vegetables. And we were in a, I would say, in a good position there that we knew we would still have a customer base. It was just a matter of what is the best way of getting and connecting with those customers without our primary means of the market?

And that's what the online—I mean, local line had approached us a year earlier, like during our first year, and they had gone over their product and Meghan, the farm Meghan previously managed had started using the Harvie system. And so there was like, we were familiar with other outlets of selling stuff, so we knew some of the benefits or values of what these programs may be able to offer. So we were able to, I think, quickly reposition ourselves to utilize them, knowing that we now had to.

**Diego Footer:** [00:14:26] Yeah. And once you guys had store up and running and started selling, what were your thoughts compared to going to market? Was it like, whoa, this is great, like same sales. We don't have to leave home. Was it something different? So online stores, running markets close, how does life feel?

**Meghan Brandenburg:** [00:14:46] Yeah, it was a pretty big difference initially. In terms of the actual market day, Jesse would have had to wake up at 3:30 in the morning and have a 14-hour exhausting day to do the market compared to leaving home around 8:30 and having a much shorter day and guaranteeing that the product was already sold. So that stress that you go with. Okay, we're bringing a lot, I'm not sure hope it's not wasted. All of that was removed.

There were a few additional things we had to do: take an inventory of our crops days ahead and try and guess how many peas were in that pea bed, and there are certain things that are add a little extra complication or a learning curve for sure. But that took a little while to figure out. And after that point, I'd seen an improvement overall, for sure, on our...

**Jesse Way:** [00:15:48] We also kind of lucked out with our, we have a very good pick-up location partner in the city. And so, one of our market customers owns a cafe in the city, and it has a large like outdoor or large parking space beside it. And so when the market closed, he had reached out to us and offered that location as a pickup location because partly that he wanted to continue getting vegetables, but he knew a lot of, we had shared customers, but also he just knew that many of us vendors from the market would still be looking for an alternative place to still bring produce to the city, and so he offered up this cafe that he had and the parking space for us to have an outdoor pickup location, so we started we still are doing the same thing. I just go with a pop-up tent and set up and the customers just meet us there instead of the market.

So we have lucked out with having a—and I think that's like part of the key to our success has been that our customers really like this pickup location, and the cafe switched to just like a window walk up counter, and it's right next to a very busy walking trail. And so there's a lot of foot traffic through the area of people walking and cycling and walking their dogs, so we're constantly getting new people learning about it.

And for our previous customers, many of them like it better cause the parking is actually better than what the downtown market parking situation was. And with the early days of COVID especially where no one really knew what was happening, people like really liked just contactless pickup with lots of outdoor space. And so that worked out well.

And so yeah, the switch from like the market to the online sales and the pickup with how we manage our pickup was pretty smooth, and I'd say, yeah, an improvement both based on what Meghan mentioned in that our pickup window is only three hours long instead of an eight hour market day and the setup and take down is much quicker due to the location.

**Diego Footer:** [00:17:44] And it's already sold, right?

**Jesse Way:** [00:17:46] Yeah, I think that's one of the best. Yeah, that's by far, it's hard to explain that to people of just how great that is because at the end of the day on a Saturday, now I come home, and I literally have zero extra produce in the truck. So you don't have to worry about putting it away, what you're going to do with it. Are you going to try to find another sales outlet? Is the quality good enough to hold over? Or what's going on?

It's just, we have our list on harvest day. We harvest what we need, plus a few extras to donate and then for ourselves and our employees and we just harvest exactly what we need and yeah, a hundred percent of it's already sold. So that is like—it's just a huge time-saver not only in the amount of you don't have as much wasted produce, but you're also just not spending that time setting it up at market, taking it down at market, dealing with it afterwards, let alone all the time you put into growing it and harvesting it. So, yeah, it's definitely a much more efficient system.

**Meghan Brandenburg:** [00:18:40] And we have found our average sale at market to a market customer, we don't have exact numbers, but do you have an approximate, maybe \$15?

**Jesse Way:** [00:18:53] Yeah. Like our average sale per customer has also increased. So, I like, market where you'd have customers shopping around more from many different vendors. Now it seems that many of the customers that have come and stayed with us from market are now just primarily shopping from us. And so, we're selling more items, whereas—

**Meghan Brandenburg:** Per person.

**Jesse Way:** Per person, whereas we may have sold like just salad mix or some fresh greens to somebody and they'd buy their root crops elsewhere. Now they're just, it seems like they're buying it all from us or because the average sale per transaction per customer is higher, which is nice because then you need fewer customers to support the revenue that you need to take in.

**Meghan Brandenburg:** [00:19:33] And a lot of them too, they have mentioned that they would go to market and something would be sold out or they weren't sure if they could get what they need from us. So they might not come and just go to the grocery store. But when they can shop ahead and guarantee they're going to get the carrots and the beets and lettuce and the broccoli, everything they need that week from us ahead of time, then it just makes it easier for them to have everything they need.

**Jesse Way:** [00:19:59] And plan ahead for the week 'cause they already purchased it, and they know that it's going to be there when they pick it up on Saturday.

**Diego Footer:** [00:20:08] I know COVID's made things tough to measure, but if you looked at pre-COVID, we had this many customers per market, and now we have this many customers online each week. Where do you think those levels are at? Are they close? Is one way ahead of the other? Where have things settled out?

**Jesse Way:** [00:20:28] I think total customer numbers isn't that much higher. I think a lot of our—we have increased sales, but it's largely due to that higher sales per customer. 'Cause right now, we're at like 120, 130 customers a week. So it's not like a huge number, but the average sale is like almost \$40 versus that market, you might get like a handful of \$40 customers whereas most of them were spending like \$15, \$20.

So the number of customers hasn't changed by that much, but definitely the sales to each customer is better. So it's like now that we have like a loyal customer base, it seems, I don't know, we don't have to put a whole lot of time into trying to find new customers. It just seems they now find us, and we are at a pretty steady number of decreases in the winter when our availability decreases when we have less variety. But it stays consistent throughout the summer months. And yeah, I don't know the total number of customers, I don't think is that much different. It more falls back to their spending. They're buying more of their produce from us.

**Diego Footer:** [00:21:34] When you first went online, again, like we got to ignore the COVID side, were there any worries around just selling online, that part of it? Now, regardless of platform, like, we were used to selling physically in person. Now we're selling online, sure, that came with some challenges, just different things to wrap your head around.

**Meghan Brandenburg:** [00:21:58] Definitely. Yeah. More to learn, just about the platforms and how exactly that works and what's expected of us. But that first week we just jumped in and learned it as best we could. Chose one way to go, and we've tried to keep it simple, so if people are purchasing through our online store, through the retail side of the store, it's all through credit card, paid as they check out. So we just keep it really simple that way.

We don't do any cash at pickup or e-transfers, which can get messy and complicated and lost. And it involves a lot more work in administration. And through our CSA, we use the Local Line customer credits feature, which allows us to put their full CSA payment onto their Local Line accounts at the beginning of the season, and then they can just use that to check out on their own as they wish. so that really simplifies payment for the CSA for us as well. We weren't really nervous about—we've been online shopping, we're younger folks, so we're kind of used to that idea.

**Jesse Way:** [00:23:08] Yeah, and we also actually subscribe to a food delivery service for like local dairy products before COVID hit and before we started our online store. So we have an account with a different farm that does local dairy products, so we had been familiar almost with the online system. They use a different platform, but with the whole shopping for food online beforehand, and that, I dunno, I feel like maybe that kind of helped ease our stresses about the transition 'cause we knew it was working for them, and that was an example locally that we had, that we were involved in as a customer that this can work and it can be quite nice. And so that I think helped with just giving us a little more familiarity going into moving online.

One of the main differences definitely is like customer interaction, where it used to be at market, if customers had questions or at our CSA pickup like CSA members, whether they're mostly picking up at the farm, and the market customers, they would just ask us questions directly, and you would just have verbal conversations. Whereas now, there's a lot more email correspondence and just like the communication aspect of communicating with customers has changed. So that was one big difference just in the amount of time was now being spent

at the back end, like at home when you're trying to be on the farm, you're also doing customer interaction. Whereas it used to be just primarily at the marketplace, like on the Saturday market.

So that was one of the challenges of just like how to balance. 'Cause you want to be very, I don't know, I guess, you want to respond to customers right away, but sometimes like you need to be planting and harvesting and be actually working on the farm. And yet you have customers asking questions about the online store or having problems with the online store, which is, as you are at home—so it's nice that you can just deal with it from home, but it adds a kind of another dynamic that we didn't have before the online store.

**Meghan Brandenburg:** [00:25:06] And it's mostly smoothed itself out. In the beginning, it was a lot of time, until the customers became comfortable and familiar with purchasing online because a lot of them hadn't ever done that before. So that was a learning curve for everyone. So it did take quite a while to smooth out all the wrinkles there and make sure everyone was comfortable and knew exactly what to do, but now it's quite a bit less time and yeah, it's pretty straightforward.

**Diego Footer:** [00:25:37] So let's say I'm a veggie farmer and I want to start selling online. What advice would you have for me, for customer interaction and simplifying communication? Like from your experience, you've seen customers probably get confused over things, asked questions, there's probably a lot of commonality amongst those questions.

When it comes to setting up your online store on Local Line, what are things you think need to be laid out really clear or just work in terms of here's what we have, here's what you can get, so that customer understanding of your store is as simple as possible?

**Meghan Brandenburg:** [00:26:22] That is a good question. We tried to keep it as simple as possible with as few choices as we could. So last season, we had two different pickup days, Tuesdays for the local people who were picking up from our farm or the local area, and then Saturdays in the Kitchener-Waterloo area. This year added extra complication and time and confusion when people would choose the wrong location and think it was a different day.

So this year, we just have the one pickup day it's all on Saturday. I think trying to keep it to as few options as possible keeps it simpler.

**Jesse Way:** More streamlined.

**Meghan Brandenburg:** And easier to explain to people. On the other hand, it's not as convenient for people. So if you're trying to gain new customers, that can limit the options there. But we try to keep—I know a lot of other larger farms have pickups four to five, four days of the week in different cities and different towns, and that model works for them. But if you're just starting out, I think just try to keep it as simple as possible so your customers know your store opens on Wednesdays for purchasing, and you pick up on Saturdays. And just that's an easier way for them to remember instead of having the store open for a longer period of time.

**Diego Footer:** [00:28:00] What about in terms of just like product choices? Have you found anything around, let's say carrots, you can get a half kilo bag, a kilo bag, a five kilo bag. Have you found a sweet spot of okay, here's the choices or there's people who do bundled pricing. It's one at this. It's two for this. For you, when it comes to, okay, we're growing this crop.

What's your thought process behind, this is how that's going to go on the site as an item for sale?

**Meghan Brandenburg:** [00:28:29] Yeah. Also to simplify, to keep the units very basic and straightforward, we don't do by the pound because in the picking and packing end of that, that gets very complicated. And also just for how customers understand what they're ordering, we do bunch sizes, so one bunch of carrots. And in the winter, it's a large bag or a small bag, and we list what that weight is, but...

**Jesse Way:** [00:28:56] Yeah, it's all standardized units on our part in that it's bunches or set weight. So we'll do like salad mixes. We just do two sizes. We do a large size and an extra-large size, and each one has a guaranteed minimum weight. And this offers us flexibility in that we usually have a guaranteed minimum weight, not like a set weight week to week.

So we'll have lettuce mix, for example, as either 165 grams or for a large bag or one pound for an extra-large bag. But in the summertime, when we have an abundance of lettuce mix, often the bags are larger than that, and they'd get better value in that. They're getting more of that product when it's coming from outside, and we have an abundance of lettuce to put in there versus in the winter when it's coming from the greenhouse, then we're more like strict to sticking to that minimum weight just 'cause we don't have as much available.

So that gives us the flexibility of, oh, we have a lot of lettuce. Let's give them more lettuce, but they don't have to make a decision of, like, which size do I buy? They're still just buying a standard size, they're just having to get more when it's abundant. And then from like bunches, it's the same. Like, our bunch sizes may vary from early spring to the mid-summer. Like a kale bunch will get bigger, but it's still listed as a bunch.

And that keeps it simpler for us to harvest and to pack. And from the customer standpoint, it's just, there's a kale bunch or there's a different option. Like, there's not multiple sizes. And we don't do two for something. It's not like one price at this item, and then two becomes a new price. If we have an abundance of something, through the online store, you can just put it on sale, and you can have it like one week something's on sale by X percentage. And then the next week you can just set it back to a standard price if your abundance changes again. So yeah, I guess the main theme there is just simplified, again, like simplified options.

**Diego Footer:** [00:30:49] How important do you think it is for describing a product when you go to list it on there? So you have carrots. And I want to buy this microphone. I'm going to want to read about the specs because microphone A versus microphone B could be very different, and I don't want to offend the carrot aficionados out there, but for the most part, a carrot is a carrot. How deep do you need to go into describing? And is there—do people overthink that? Can you just say carrots one bunch, this is about how big it is.

**Meghan Brandenburg:** [00:31:26] I think we're towards that, the latter part of what you said there. We don't spend a lot of time describing in flourishing language our carrots. Usually, it's a bunch of orange carrots, type. And if it's from storage, we try to say from storage, from the cooler, versus if it's coming in fresh from the field, basically.

**Jesse Way:** [00:31:49] Yeah. We try to keep it pretty much like a one liner, just like a very short, simple description. Mostly just like to distinguish between orange carrots versus rainbow carrots or one type of kale versus another type of kale. So like a short descriptor to let you know that they are different, but not a large amount of information about each thing.

**Meghan Brandenburg:** [00:32:12] If it's an unusual item, I might just describe tastes like this or can be used like this, just a very basic.

**Diego Footer:** Add some context?

**Meghan Brandenburg:** A little bit, but I know, the way when I'm shopping, I don't want to scroll through a whole page of a description of a bunch of carrots. I just want to see carrots, and then the next item and keep moving. Yeah, so.

**Diego Footer:** [00:32:36] Do you think that's because of where an online store for a farm falls in terms of, say like the customer funnel, think of it like this: if somebody comes to the Milky Way Farm online store, they've already decided, Hey, we're going to buy from Milky Way Farm. We didn't just stumble upon this, and maybe we'll get it. So once we're there, you don't need to convince me to buy carrots and whatever. I'm just going to buy what I like or what I need, where if you go to an online retailer, and I am looking for a microphone, it's like all these companies selling microphones are competing now for views because I didn't go there to buy that specific microphone. I just went to the house, and now I'm trying to pick between all different companies trying to sell them where they've already decided they want to support you. They want to buy for you. You don't have to convince them, just put it out there.

**Meghan Brandenburg:** [00:33:26] Right, I think, and then you would read the reviews of all the microphones, but our reviews are you buy the carrot, you eat the carrot and then you say, oh, that was delicious. I'm going to go and get those again.

I think the tasting is the real, the convincing part for us. Most of our customers are repeat customers and I think—we don't put a lot of time into our product pictures and descriptions. We kind of just, the new thing comes on. Oh, we got to get it on the store, take a quick photo and make sure it's there so they can order it. And then once they taste it, they buy it again the next week. And it's pretty simple after that.

**Jesse Way:** [00:34:04] Yeah. And I think, we try to strive like at all times of the year to have as much variety as possible. And I think what you were mentioning, like once they get to the online store, like that's the biggest hurdle. And once somebody gets onto the online store, that's as much, I think, that's what you need.

And then what we can do to try to really make the sale is have as many different vegetables available at any time of the year, and that's what's going to draw in more different people because some people are looking maybe for one item or like a few different items, and then we have many more, so that increases what they buy from us, or they go to the online store and we if we don't have what they're looking for, then they say, ah, I can get that somewhere else, and I'll get everything else at that other place, too. So I think for us, it's once they get to the store, our job is to try to have as many different items available to them as possible. And that's when we'll try to convince them to make the purchase.

And then as Meghan said, then they try it. If they like it, then they come back, and we're quite fortunate that yeah, most of our sales are just repeat customers who have been supporting us since either before COVID before we went online or found us when we created the online store and now have keep coming back.

**Meghan Brandenburg:** [00:35:18] Yeah, that's true about the variety. I think if people... If you're a new grower and you're trying to sell online, move to online sales, if you only have two

things available, it's going to be a hard sell because that person has to drive all the way to your pickup spot to pick up one bag of lettuce and a bunch of beets or something. If you can have as many options available as possible, they're more likely to actually make that purchase and come back and look the next week.

**Jesse Way:** [00:35:47] Yeah. Because they might want your salad mix, but they then need to buy everything somewhere else. And that adds a layer of inconvenience. I think that maybe is a hurdle versus if you can have a one-stop shop then that increases the likelihood that they are going to make the purchase of the item that they really want.

**Diego Footer:** [00:36:07] That makes a lot of sense. You just think of anybody. I'm a parent, you guys are parents. You're going to go drive somewhere. You don't want to make multiple stops if you don't have to. If you can get as much as you can from one place, and it tastes great, the experience is great, then that's what you're going to do.

**Jesse Way:** Yeah.

**Diego Footer:** How much of a challenge has selling online been when it comes to, I'll say, field management in terms of inventory? Meghan, you mentioned that earlier, having to do that, is it a lot different than running a farmer's market booth where you pick what you pick, you have some idea of what's in the field? But when you're selling online, you need to know if you have 50 bunches of this or a hundred bunches of this because it's a big difference. If you listed at a hundred, you only have 50, you're in trouble. So from the technical farm management side, how different has it been managing inventory?

**Meghan Brandenburg:** [00:37:03] It is quite different. And I think it does take a few years of experience just observing the growth in the field at different times of the year as well because the rate of growth changes so drastically in the summer to the fall and spring. And you might get a hailstorm, you predicted you'll have 100 bags of spinach, but you get a hailstorm in between the time when you counted that and when you need to harvest, and that crop might not be salvageable. So there are definitely considerations there.

We've been pretty, pretty lucky. We try to be a little conservative with our guesses, and then if we do have extra, we can donate to the food bank or just like Jesse said, fill the bags a bit fuller, give them a little more abundance if we had more than we expected. But it does take, it is a steep learning curve. And it does take a lot of, I would say years of observation in the field to know. And also pests can come in or they're just lurking under the soil, so you think you have 50 bunches of radishes, but when you pull them up, they're not quite what you expected. Yeah, so that is something to consider for sure.

**Jesse Way:** [00:38:19] It is a whole new task that you didn't have to do. 'Cause now, Meghan on Monday afternoon is like doing a whole farm walk inventory, whereas beforehand, it was just like closer to market or harvest day. You just, how many are ready? Harvest what's ready kind of thing.

And yeah, I would say, the experience, I think, comes big 'cause Meghan has more experience than I do, and so she is better at knowing, as you mentioned. Like Monday to Friday, we make our inventory on Monday harvest on Friday. In April, you make a guess. It's very different than right now in mid-June. And it definitely takes some time to be able to figure that out. And, it's yeah. I don't know. It's a learning curve. That's why she does more so than I do.

**Meghan Brandenburg:** [00:39:04] We have occasionally had to refund people, we didn't have the zucchini count that we expected because we had some cool nights and they didn't size up like we thought. But usually, people are pretty forgiving of that kind of thing. It's just one item out of there that 14 they put in their basket, and they're pretty forgiving.

**Jesse Way:** [00:39:25] Yeah. And like the mech where you can refund them or you would just tell them next week, we can give you that item, and you can work it out. And when you do make those mistakes, it like pushes you to be better at predicting, so it doesn't happen again. So it doesn't happen that frequently.

**Diego Footer:** [00:39:42] How does that inventory in the field tie into how you decided on when your store was open?

**Meghan Brandenburg:** [00:39:52] Well, for us this year, we, again, tried to simplify even further from last year. Last year, we had to do inventory twice a week. We had to open the store twice a week, and then harvest twice a week for our local versus the Kitchener-Waterloo residents. This year, we do the inventory one time, open the store for our CSA members on Tuesday, and our retail members on Wednesday. So the CSA members get first choice of all of our items that week.

And then whatever's remaining in the store, the retail members can access. And this, for us, that gives us Thursday and Friday to complete the harvest. So typically, we harvest everything on Friday and pack it all to bring to them on Saturdays, but if it's a really hot week, and Friday's going to be 33 degrees, we can do a little bit of pre-harvesting early Thursday morning, or split it up just to make sure that we have enough time to do what we need to do if it's a really big week. So we realized that we need to have kind of two-day harvest zone to make sure that we're able to do everything without overworking ourselves.

**Diego Footer:** [00:41:13] So, you guys inventory Monday, then you open the store for CSA Tuesday. They can buy Tuesday and Wednesday, it closes Wednesday at midnight. Retail customers have just Wednesday to buy, then it's closed. So now, you estimated what you thought you had. You have some sort of sales going against that hopefully lasts, then. Then you pack it all up and it's then ready for pickup or delivery. Do you think that in one day to retail sales some farms might be like, really? But I guess that's a farmer's market, right? Like farmer's markets are one day.

If you left it open, throwing this out, Thursday and Friday plus Wednesday. Do you think you'd see a big bump in sales or do you think you're just limiting it forces people to buy?

**Meghan Brandenburg:** [00:42:00] Yeah. Yeah. Last year we did have it open for retail sales two days, Wednesday and Thursday, and looking at our numbers, like, Local Line, we could look at the reports of the sales per day. It was, I would say 96% Wednesday between 9:00 AM when we opened the store and like 6:00 PM, and then Thursday, maybe three or four sales. It was really not much happening on Thursdays at all. So we realized like, people don't really need that second day. I know a lot of people have occasionally contacted us if they're doing shift work, and their shifts overlap with the time our store is open, and they just can't quite make it work.

So we've made occasional exceptions for them putting in like an order out of hours, past hours time for them if they need to. But just looking at those numbers, it really became apparent that we would send out the email Wednesday morning with the link to the store

that week. And yeah, like I said, almost a hundred percent of our orders would come in just on that first day.

**Diego Footer:** [00:43:09] Like, is part of that stock? Are you out-of-stocking on items? So people know now, Hey, there's scarcity here. So, I need to by Wednesday, but not just Wednesday, I need to by Wednesday early?

**Jesse Way:** [00:43:20] That is a hundred percent of the case, yeah. Like cherry tomatoes, peppers, like the items that we have in limited quantity but are like high-popularity items definitely sell out fast. And so people, yeah, they have changed their purchasing habits in order to try to get their orders in as quickly as possible in order to try to get the most variety possible because items do run out quickly.

And that is probably the biggest, like one of the biggest drawbacks of this system. And like the only real complaint we get from customers is that they'll come on a Saturday, and they'll say, oh, I had this week, for example, I had snap peas in my cart. And I thought I was getting peas, but by the time I checked out, they were gone because somebody else had placed their order before they had completed their order. And so, the inventory just gives it to whoever checks out first when there's a limited number of items.

And so that does happen, but that's why we have the two-day system and that our CSA customers get the priority day. And the idea is that we try to have enough abundance of everything that the CSA customers don't have to worry about getting their orders in immediately. And then there's just maybe a little bit of like cherry tomatoes. I think we'd have four cherry tomato pints leftover for retail, but everybody who was a CSA member did have access on the first day, whereas last year, all our cherry tomatoes were selling out even before all our CSA members had access to them.

So that is something we're still working on is like how to have the right balance of like abundance to CSA members who get priority access. 'Cause I do—we have CSA customers who are telling us, sorry, like they set alarms to make sure that they are ordering exactly at 9:00 AM so that they remember to make sure they're ordering right away.

**Diego Footer:** [00:45:16] I'm thinking of this as just as a retailer, myself. On one hand, you do want more sales, but on the other hand, selling out is a good thing, right? Like it shows that, Hey, this is popular, and you got to get here early next time. This is not 24/7 unlimited inventory. So get it while it's fresh. And if you can't—

**Jesse Way:** [00:45:37] And we do try to have a few items like salad mix, spinach, kale bunches, like we try to have a few items that we always will have more than what we can sell.

**Meghan Brandenburg:** [00:45:46] There's generally, but yeah, 25 items that we don't sell out of. So there's still—if you get there late, there's still quite a lot of variety to choose from.

**Jesse Way:** [00:45:55] And those are usually crops that you don't have to harvest and sell that week, like green onions and kale and spinach and salad mix that you could leave in a week and leave in the field. And you just don't harvest as much, but you could have harvested more if you had those sales or it just stays in the field and you harvest it next week.

So those items, we do plant things with the idea of having an abundance of certain items, whereas our high value crops like tomatoes and peppers and what not, we have limited space

in the greenhouse, so there's just as many as we're going to grow. And those items we know we're going to sell out every week, which is a good situation to be in. Yeah.

**Meghan Brandenburg:** [00:46:34] Especially when we are paying for the fuel in the spring, too, to heat the greenhouse, and we need to absolutely sell all of the tomatoes we produce in order to make it work.

**Diego Footer:** [00:46:46] How important has it been to make a good customer experience or a great customer experience. It's a given, okay, you got to have quality crops. Nobody's going to come back is the stuff just doesn't taste good, and they don't like it. So you've taken care of that part. The buying experience, you and Local Line, they try and make that as seamless as possible.

The third part of this is okay, the orders are in. It now has to go from you to the customer, and they have to have a good experience getting it, and then interacting with you potentially afterwards if there is a problem. What are some keys that you've really tried to focus on to enhance the customer experience? And maybe this is just based off some things, too, that you've noticed with the subscription box you have. Hey, they do this well, they don't do this well, here's what we're going to do. What are you trying to do to make sure that customers come back?

**Jesse Way:** [00:47:43] Yeah, I think a lot of it comes down to just like the pickup location and the convenience of that, and the time window in that, like we mimic our pickup window as if it is a market in that it's Saturday morning is when we have the pickup window.

And yeah, I feel like a lot of our customer experience comes down to that location in that it's like a very central in the city of—Kitchener-Waterloo are two cities, but they're like sister cities that you can't tell the difference where one ends and one starts. So we're right at the border, basically, of those two cities. And so people from Kitchener or from Waterloo, whether whichever city they are, our pickup location is pretty much right in the middle of those two cities.

So people can fairly conveniently get to that spot no matter where they live, and then the fact that this pickup location, throughout COVID, when we've had all of these lockdowns, it has been a place where people who, the only thing they can do is go for a bike ride or walk their dog, or go for a walk with their family, and this happens to be on like one of the busiest walking trails in the city.

So we're like just adjacent to a very accessible location. And that, for most of our customers, has been one of the best customer experiences throughout the COVID experience because they shop online, they know what they're getting, they pick up, we have the box pre-packed. It's in this nice, very spacious, outdoor location, and then right next door is a café. If they want to get a coffee and a treat, they can also do that.

And it makes for a nice like destination kind of something they can do on the weekend where they otherwise have nothing else to do throughout the lockdown period. And I think that has been a big part of our customer experiences, is just like how convenient and how well that works out and when that day in that point where they actually have to go and pick up the vegetables.

And then we're also quite conveniently located, like our on-farm pickup, we're on a main highway. We're just minutes from town where we're on a like a paved road but just outside of the city. So we're not that far to get to for a lot of people. And that again, adds to the convenience level. And that they don't have to travel very far to get to us.

And then we offer delivery, too. So for those who can't pick up, we do delivery. And that gets those customers who our locations aren't convenient to them. And our deliveries are a small frag, like probably less than 10% of our sales per week are deliveries, which makes it convenient in that most sales are just through our two pickup locations.

**Diego Footer:** [00:50:15] That's interesting. It's like this idea of micro versus macro, right? Some people just focus on the box design and say, I have to have a great-looking box when it's really Hey, if I have to drive out of my way as a customer to pick up that pretty box, it's all a moot point, where it's really make it easy for the customers to get and pick up everything beyond that is going to accentuate the experience. But the hardest part for a customer is getting to that location, pick a good location. Got it.

**Jesse Way:** [00:50:43] And we just lucked out in that the cafe owner who offered up this location just happens to be at a great location. It's not a great location for his, it wasn't a great location for his main like café 'cause this was actually a secondary location that they use to bake for their main location. But through COVID, it's become a better location for them due to this pick up, due to this walking trail, and the fact that he's created this mini market.

We're not the only other, we're not the only farm at our location. Right now, there's three other farms that use this as a pickup location or like a pop-up market. So he's kind of created—like the cafe owner has kind of created, and this was his intention, of a little mini, like neighborhood mini-market.

**Diego Footer:** [00:51:27] And you're keeping customers happy. One thing I think a lot of people worry about or wonder about when going online is how do I get people to the store? A farmer's market is doing some marketing for you. Other vendors are doing some marketing for you because people are coming there to buy from them, and they see you. When you go online, it's you out there in the wilderness. What's your biggest source now of attracting new customers in?

**Jesse Way:** [00:51:55] Word of mouth. Combination of word of mouth of our pre-existing customers and people who are coming to that pickup location for other reasons, like usually they're going to the cafe. Or a lot of them are just like, they went for a walk or a bike on this trail, they saw this kind of like activity going on, so they stopped in to see what's going on, and then they just ask what we're selling and how to buy our product. And then either I give them a card or they take a picture of our sign with our details, and then some of them end up going to the website and deciding that they want to buy some stuff from us.

And others may just ask about it and take them a while before they actually make their first purchase. But at this point, when I ask new customers when I see them, it's either my friend or neighbor told me about it, or oh, I was here picking up coffee, and I saw you guys. So they just saw us at that location. And that's like convenient to them, whether they live in the neighborhood or they're going to go to the cafe anyways. So those two would be the primary new sales outlets.

**Meghan Brandenburg:** [00:52:57] Yeah. We haven't been doing any marketing, really.

**Jesse Way:** [00:53:01] We've been quite lucky, yeah.

**Meghan Brandenburg:** [00:53:03] Just busy farming. I haven't spent much time on social media doing that like we had been doing the last few months.

**Jesse Way:** [00:53:12] Previously. Yeah.

**Diego Footer:** [00:53:13] That's the best part for a lot of farmers, right? Is the farming part.

**Jesse Way:** [00:53:18] Yeah, that's what we enjoy the most, for sure. Like our social media account shows that when we make a post like once a month and we think, oh, we need to be more active. But I dunno, like we talk, I still talk to the majority of our customers. So they still get that farm—like they can talk to and ask questions directly to me of how things are going on the farm.

And we do get some feedback that it would be nice if we posted more so they could see more of what's going on. So that's more of our driver, but we're no longer using our social media accounts as like promotional tools, whereas we used to be trying to like post, this is what we have, come check us out at the market kind of thing, and trying to draw people in, whereas now it's more just updating existing customers of like, here's what's going on the farm because we know that they're interested in that, but yeah, most of the new customers are just word of mouth, and they see us at the pickup location.

**Meghan Brandenburg:** [00:54:09] And we kind of seem to be at capacity for orders for the week. Like we're happy with the number we're getting. And we do get, I would say, the average of two to three new people ordering every week, checking us out. But like we're happy with the number we have and yes, we're not trying to push that anymore.

**Diego Footer:** [00:54:34] Just to close this out. Can you describe what life is like now on Saturdays and weekends for you? You as a dad and 3:30am, I hear that. 14 hours a day, that's long. Now it's drastically different. Can you just talk about what that means for you? Not as a farm business, but just as an actual person, right? Like, businesses are run by people, but as a person, you have a partner, you have a family. What does that mean to you now to not have to get up that early and spend all that time away?

**Jesse Way:** [00:55:12] Quality of life has improved. Definitely. Now I just wake up at a normal time. Usually, not always, but sometimes like our son, we have a two-and-a-half-year-old, so sometimes he's awake, and I actually see them before I go. Or I get back, and I'm not just absolutely exhausted, so we can actually like, hang out. And on Sundays, I'm not just wiped. Like when we were at market, like Sundays were basically like a write-off for me, because Saturday was so exhausting after Friday, which was already tiring as a harvest day.

And so, Sundays, I was just usually, it's almost just like recovery day. So yeah, now I have more energy, and it's nice 'cause you come home, and you can actually still hang out with your family and feel like you have energy to do so. And just like now, I wake up at a regular time, even on Saturdays versus used to be that I had this one day that I was waking up at 3:30 in the morning, and then yeah, it was just like exhausted for a couple of days afterwards.

So yeah, the pickup window and the fact that we set our own pickup window, we decided on the time for it to be, we've made it at a time that works for us. It is a much shorter day. It does just make Friday a longer day, but that's turned into like almost like a family day because two

of our employees are Meghan's sisters. And then my dad helps with the picking. Meghan's dad helps with the picking and order packing.

And then we usually, have a Friday dinner, and it's with our family 'cause we were all working all day. And so that's like a nice feature, too, instead of just being exhausted after a long harvest day. It does take more work on Fridays now for packing all the orders versus, Saturdays. But now that workload is spread over more people and more time, and that just makes the rest of the weekend just like more relaxed.

**Diego Footer:** [00:57:01] I'm sure it feels pretty good, too, packing, knowing that you're packing something that somebody has already bought versus packing into the unknown.

**Jesse Way:** [00:57:09] Yeah, absolutely. That's, yeah, just the sheer thing of it. And when you're harvesting, like you're harvesting something you know someone's already bought, not being like, oh, we're bringing more of this item. I hope it sells. It's just like, every step along the way is more guaranteed, which then lets you to focus less on like the worries of how much you're going to make each week and more on just like making sure you're providing a quality product each week.

**Diego Footer:** [00:57:33] Last question. What are your thoughts on if you were a new farm solely selling online?

**Jesse Way:** [00:57:49] I do think that it would be tough to be a new farm and just jump into solely farming online because such a large percentage of our customer base came from the market. And that the market was like very important, I think, to us in like gaining traction in the city that we were selling in. And then those customers with COVID shifted to just our pickup location instead of being at the market. And I think the market gives you that visibility.

And so, I think, though, if you have good pickup location partners, whether it be at the farm or elsewhere in the city, I think, I dunno. I think it's worth having it at least as an aspect of your business. Like for us, our only outlet is through online, but I think making an online storefront in combination with being at a market or something, if I were to do it over again, that's how I would do it and allow customers to pre-purchase and have some guaranteed sales and maybe have the market as your pickup place in that you would still be able to make additional sales, but you're trying to build that guaranteed sale outlet. I don't know. I find it, yeah. I think we lucked out in timing of being at market for a year before transitioning online. And I think just solely going online would make it tough to make aware of it.

**Meghan Brandenburg:** [00:59:08] The other side of that is now people are used to looking, shopping for food online because of this past year's experiences everyone's had. They're more likely to be comfortable trying it out, trying out a new farm. Yeah.

**Diego Footer:** [00:59:22] Well, it almost sounds like if you're going to do a market, you might as well do an online store too. There's no reason not to.

**Jesse Way:** [00:59:29] Yeah. I just think that's absolutely true. I don't see why you—I don't see any reason not to, for sure.

**Meghan Brandenburg:** [00:59:33] Even if the market is your pickup location primarily, and people order their food online ahead of time and just pick it up from you at the market,

you're there gaining the exposure from all the other foot traffic, and they might then see you and then pre-order from you the next week as a convenience. And I think it's a good combination to start out that way.

**Jesse Way:** [00:59:57] But it's also, yeah, having an online store with social media now, like you can reach a lot more people than—some people just are never going to be market customers. Like some people just are never going to be people who go to the market.

**Meghan Brandenburg:** [01:00:08] Or they're just always on their phone, so they're not going to cross you.

**Jesse Way:** [01:00:09] Yeah, a lot of people, most people do shop online. So I think the percentage of people who shop online is higher than the percentage of people who go to markets, and therefore you should. It's worth somehow getting into that online marketplace. 'Cause yeah, I don't know. It works. It's been working, so I think it... We are, yeah.

**Meghan Brandenburg:** [01:00:30] We haven't really tested out like social media promotions and to see what kind of traffic that brings into the online store 'cause we haven't needed to, but I think people are out there. They're already scrolling, looking around, and if they come across you that way, I think they're, especially at this time, they're more likely to check it out and not be afraid to try out the online shopping experience.

**Diego Footer:** [01:00:59] I'm with Meghan with it. It's working for you guys. And with all your experience working on farms over the years, did you ever envision a day where the whole farm sales model would be online?

**Jesse Way:** [01:01:09] No, we definitely envisioned this being a market farm, like being a farmer's market farm. And that was the primary vision. That's how we designed the farm. That's what we thought would be our sales outlet. That's kind of how we anticipated our lifestyle would be: Saturdays at the farmer's market. So yeah, it was—like a lot of things with COVID, that's really changed what your expectations are, what you can foresee for the future, but we wouldn't have, I wouldn't have guessed, no.

And the fact that it's actually improved, I would say, the business, was definitely not. You know, when it first hit and we had to go online, it didn't feel like, oh, this is going to be, this is guaranteed to be better, but now looking back, it's crazy how it has for us. We've been very fortunate in that we're some of the few that have—we've kind of benefited from how some of the shifts in things have gone in that, the rise—more people seem to be looking for local food and then they were forced to do it online. So we just happened to be at the right place at the right time.

**Diego Footer:** [01:02:10] Yeah. I'm glad to hear it's all working out so well, and thanks for taking the time to chat guys. Really appreciate it.

**Jesse Way:** [01:02:17] No problem. Thank you.