



FARMER TO FARMER

podcast



EPISODE 137

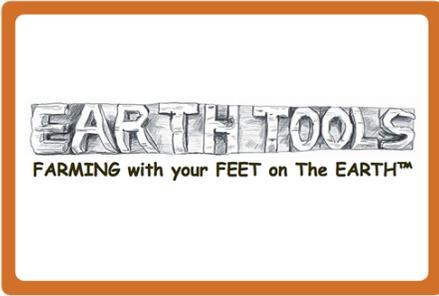
Shawn Kuhn of Vitruvian Farms on Growing Salad Greens, Selling to Restaurants, and Expanding into Retail Sales

September 21, 2017



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Chris Blanchard:

It's the Farmer to Farmer Podcast, Episode 137. This is your host, Chris Blanchard. Shawn Kuhn of Vitruvian Farms raises about five acres of vegetables with his business partner, Tommy Stauffer, in McFarland, Wisconsin, just outside of Madison. Vitruvian Farms raises a little bit of everything and a whole lot of salad greens, so we dig into the ins and the outs of producing 1,200 pounds of salad greens a week, from bed shaping and weed control, through harvest and delivery.

Shawn shares the way they have and have not mechanized their salad production and how they make this intensive level of production work on a small scale. We also look at the key success factors for their other main crops, oyster mushroom, tomatoes, and microgreens. Most of Vitruvian Farms produce is sold through 45 restaurants in Madison, and Shawn shares how they got started in that marketplace and how they maintained those relationships. We did into what quality really means when selling to restaurants, and how Vitruvian Farms gets top-notch produce to demanding chefs in a crowded marketplace.



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Shawn Kuhn, welcome to the Farmer to Farmer Podcast.

Shawn Kuhn: [00:02:00] Thanks for having me.

Chris Blanchard: So glad you could join us here today. It's kind of funny to be talking to you down in McFarland, Wisconsin. I've got you on Skype here doing the recording. You're only 15 minutes away from me, but the way I've got my technology set up, it's actually easier to do it over the internet.

Shawn Kuhn: For sure.

Chris Blanchard: I'd like to start off today by having you tell us about Vitruvian Farms. Where are you guys located and how much are you farming, and what are you growing, and how long you been doing it?

Shawn Kuhn: It's a farm that I and a couple friends started right out of college in 2011. We're located about seven miles south of Madison. We're a certified organic mixed vegetable operation with a couple hogs and laying hens and a couple of odds and ends stuff. We do a small CSA, one farmer's market, and the bulk of our business is we sell a lot wholesale salad greens to restaurants and a couple of groceries in downtown Madison and the surrounding area. I always tell people we grow a little bit of everything and a lot of salad greens.

Chris Blanchard: I like that. You guys got started in 2011, and there were actually three of you. You said when you graduated from college, that was here at the University of Wisconsin, right, in Madison?

Shawn Kuhn: That's right.

Chris Blanchard: Did you study horticulture or something related to this field or were you-

Shawn Kuhn: I was a philosophy and psychology major actually.

Chris Blanchard: There's a lot of organic vegetable farmers who were philosophy majors.

Shawn Kuhn: You just start thinking about things, at least for me, we wanted to do something that felt right and had some meaning behind it. I think you could argue organic farming can be that.



- Chris Blanchard: You said that you guys are selling to, I think, 45 restaurants and retail establishments in Madison. Madison's not a big city. Forty-five restaurants, that's a fair proportion of what's here.
- Shawn Kuhn: It's a lot. Madison definitely has a really advanced local food scene. I'm not exactly sure why it's developed that way, but we've sold a little bit in Chicago, and we're going to be looking to expand into Milwaukee, actually, this fall. When you start looking at other cities in the area, Madison just, even for its size, it blows the other cities out of the water in terms of how many chefs and restaurants are willing to pay more money for high quality, locally produced food.
- We didn't exactly know that right when we started the farm. We had an inkling of it, but we look at it as a very fortunate thing that we started the farm here because I think there's a lot of other areas around the country, and even in the state where it would have been a lot harder to find customers in the way that we did.
- Chris Blanchard: I know that Madison, for a long time, has often referred to itself as an island in a sea of reality.
- Shawn Kuhn: [00:05:00] I've definitely heard that.
- Chris Blanchard: We you started, did you intend to go after that restaurant and retail marketplace, or did you guys start off doing farmer's market and CSA like so many farmers do?
- Shawn Kuhn: We started, we didn't know this at the time, but we started on the opposite end of the spectrum where I think a lot of farms start with the farmer's market and the CSA. We actually started with the restaurant. We didn't know that that was going to be so difficult, I guess. I think we just had the mindset that restaurants would be higher volumes, most consistency, so we started off with that. What it ended up doing was it just pushed our quality to a really high level because we always thought we had to have the best stuff because we were sending it to these fancy restaurants and these chefs. Only later on, we decided to start marketing directly to individuals with our CSA and the farmer's market.
- Chris Blanchard: When you guys are marketing those restaurants and retail establishments, you're taking your own deliveries there. You're not doing that through a co-op or a food hub or anything like that.
- Shawn Kuhn: We are delivering in downtown Madison twice a week. My business partner's actually out delivering right now. We actually started off with a home-built refrigerated van, had a CoolBot unit on it and a little generator and air conditioner. This year, we actually bought a long refrigerated truck. We liked having the opportunity to walk the product in through the restaurants ourselves and make small talk with the chefs and have that connection, I think, is what this is about. It's not just the food, but it's also the fact that it's a circle of support between the restaurants and the farmers, and it's friendship; it's a lot of different things. We really like doing it that way.



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- Chris Blanchard: I'm just curious, did you guys start off with the refrigerated vehicle, because a lot of times, if you're located so close to your market, people don't see that as being a necessity.
- Shawn Kuhn: At the very beginning, we were delivering in our cars with just the air conditioning blasting. I guess I would say we've always been pretty paranoid about food not being refrigerated. I do know a lot of other people make a lot longer deliveries without refrigeration, but especially because we were doing a lot of salad greens, we just wanted to keep that quality as fresh as possible. I would say we made the refrigerated van about two and a half years into our farming career.
- Chris Blanchard: Not to get too nuts-and-bolts right off the bat, but tell me a little bit about that refrigerated van. A refrigerated truck, of course, it's a refrigerated truck. You buy that as a package. How did you guys go about refrigerating a cargo van?
- Shawn Kuhn: We just insulated. We did the foam insulation and then just the wood box on the inside of the van. It's basically, I know a lot of people will understand what the CoolBot is. We got an air conditioning unit that's mounted with the rear end facing out. There's a cabinet on the back of the door with a little Honda generator that powers the A/C unit, and the CoolBot basically tricks the A/C unit into acting more like a commercial cooler. We can actually get it down to, depending on the temperature outside, between 40 to 50 degrees Fahrenheit inside.
- Chris Blanchard: That was an installation that you guys did yourselves.
- Shawn Kuhn: Yeah. A company estimated it would cost \$8,000 to make our van into a refrigerated vehicle. Starting a farm with a tight budget, we didn't have the money to do that. We did that set-up for a lot less.
- Chris Blanchard: A tight budget; that's another thing with starting a farm straight out of college. How did you guys finance your start-up?
- Shawn Kuhn: We gathered a small amount of start-up capital, mostly from ourselves and our close family. A year and a half, two years into it, we graduated on to one of the FSA micro loans. That actually allowed us to buy a couple of pieces of equipment. We started off right away using a lot of the funds to build a bunch high tunnels. After that we moved to buying a tractor and a couple of other pieces of equipment.
- Chris Blanchard: Tell me about the production systems there at Vitruvian Farms. You mentioned a tractor scale operation with, I think you said five acres of vegetables, and then you've got some high tunnels. Can you flesh out what that looks like for us?
- Shawn Kuhn: Right now we have about 10,000 square feet of high tunnels. They're all trellised or about half of it, that space is trellised greenhouse tomatoes during the summer. We use all the high tunnels for early spring and late fall salad mixed production. We've got about three or so acres outside devoted almost strictly for all of our baby leaf salad greens, everything from the lettuces, the spinach, arugula, mizuna, different brassicas, and then probably about an acre to two



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acres or so devoted to CSA crop. For the salad, we're turning the land over at least two times per year. We're using a tractor. We're using a 45 horsepower tractor to do our primary tillage with a rototiller or with chisel plow. Then we come through with the rototiller and pull a bed-shaper behind it from Buckeye Tractor. We're utilizing a lot of stale bedding. We're growing all of the salad on 45 inch bed tops.

We have a couple of harvestings, pieces of harvesting equipment. Harvesting is one of the major jobs on our baby greens production. We started doing everything with just hand cutting with knives and graduated to the Quick Cut Harvester made by Farmer's Friend, and then we actually bought the Harvest Star. It's a push harvester made by Sutton Ag. We're actually just in the stages now of looking to go up one further step in terms of harvesters just because of how much labor it can save.

We don't have a ton of processing equipment. What we do have is all geared toward salad mix. We have a couple of pieces of equipment custom fabricated for us including a baby greens washer with a reel, and then a baby green air dryer, which is a big conveyor belt and a couple of fans that move air from below the greens to get them really dry. Otherwise, our washing system is pretty much just done by hand.

Chris Blanchard: I'd like to circle back and actually talk about your salad mix production from start to finish because I know that for using the kinds of harvest tools that you're talking about, and I want to make sure that we take time to describe each of those tools for the listeners, you've got to do a solid bed. That's a really important piece right there. You're not looking at three rows of salad greens 15 inches apart. You're looking at really a solid bed of greens. You said you guys are doing raised beds using the Buckeye bed shaper. What happens next? How are you getting the seeds in the ground?

Shawn Kuhn: We're planting with the Johnny's Six-Row Precision Seeder, but that's just the hand-pushed seeder that can lay up to six rows, I takes about two and a quarter inches apart at a time. We end up doing about three passes on our raised bed with the Six-Row Seeder. A lot of the salad greens are eighteen rows on the 42, sometimes 45 inch-wide bed.

Chris Blanchard: The weed control for that pretty much has to be done in advance, right?

Shawn Kuhn: Yeah. We definitely try to knock out most of the weeds with the stale bedding process. After we shape the beds, we're looking to irrigate those for at least two but hopefully three weeks to get that flush of weeds germinated, and then we come through and just really shallowly cultivate with a rototiller, trying not to go more than two inches deep. Once we do plant and the crops are 10 to 14 days old, we come through with a really thorough hand weeding. Everything is also given a final pre-weed immediately before the harvest. There's a lot of hand weeding that goes into the salad greens, even when you're doing a stale bedding.

Chris Blanchard: I remember back in the mid-90s talking to the folks at Red Cardinal Farm up in Stillwater, Minnesota, and they were one of the first farms to really ramp up the salad mix production and try to mechanize that year in the upper-Midwest. They



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talked about how when they got a mechanical harvester, they had thought that the harvesting was the weak link in their operation. What they discovered once they got the harvester, it was actually the weed control that was the weak link in their operation. The mechanical harvesting, of course, you're harvesting all the weeds. When you come in to harvest, you mentioned a couple of tools for that. You mentioned it's the Farmer's Friend. That's that one that's got the rotating brushes, and it's powered by a cordless drill, right?

Shawn Kuhn: Yup, powered by a cordless drill. It's got a reciprocating stainless steel blade on it, and then it's got a revolving macramé brush. As the blade is reciprocating, the brush is gently pushing the greens into this little basket. You dump the greens into a bin after that.

Chris Blanchard: How quickly are you able to harvest greens with that tool?

Shawn Kuhn: It's a pretty decent jump up. I would say we were doing maybe around 20 pounds, maybe 30 pounds an hour by hand with a knife. When we jumped up to the Quick Cut Harvester, someone who's really moving can probably do 100 to 120 pounds an hour pretty conservatively.

Chris Blanchard: Where does that fit on the skill-level scale? Is it something that you can turn over to just anybody, or is it something that you really have to have an experienced operator for?

Shawn Kuhn: There is definitely a lot of little nuances with it. The basic concept is pretty simple, and anyone can go out and use it pretty much immediately. What takes a lot of knowledge is knowing ... We do a lot of re-cutting on our farm. If you've cut that, there's a number of ways in which you can cut the crop too big or too small and then ruin the next harvest. In terms of the basic concept, it's pretty easy. In terms of doing it on a professional level, it actually does take a decent amount of training.

Chris Blanchard: If you're managing salad mix re-cut, and I'm a little bit surprised to hear that since you're going for that high-end, high-quality marketplace, because the concern there is that you end up with rotten leaves from the last cut or you end up with bits and nubs. How do you get that right?

Shawn Kuhn: That's really just a matter of being really particular with the first cutting. That's pretty much the majority of it. We're really particular with the first cutting, so getting the stems a half inch to an inch left on the ground and leaving as little plant material debris behind from that first cutting is what allows you to have a good second cutting, sometimes even a third cutting. We are really particular with what we bring in. It's allowed us to push out a really good product even though we're doing second and third cuttings. It's a lot more efficient to do it that way, at least that we've found.

Chris Blanchard: Tell me about the Harvest Star harvester that you mentioned that you guys upgraded to.

Shawn Kuhn: [00:17:30] That's a push harvester that basically it's on two large wheels and it's got a band saw blade, and then it's got a conveyor belt. You basically push the harvester right on top of the bed. The greens move up the conveyor belt and fall



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into two baskets. Basically, you have one operator harvesting and pushing the greens in the basket and then another staff member is grabbing the bins and running them towards the refrigerated vehicle.

- Chris Blanchard: You actually have the refrigerated vehicle right out there in the field.
- Shawn Kuhn: Yeah. We're throwing the greens immediately into a refrigerated van during the harvest. We basically just found the longer or the less amount of time that they spend in the heat, the longer they last.
- Chris Blanchard: What was the deciding factor for moving up to that HarvestStar harvester?
- Shawn Kuhn: [00:18:30] The Quick Cut Greens Harvesters can be quite hard on your back. When you see someone using it, the first thing you think of is that that's probably hurting your back. I would say we have a lot of younger staff on the farm, and it's a lot of staff that's normally only here for a year. Normally, it doesn't create a problem, but when I and some of the other founders were using them, it can eventually take a toll if you don't have a perfect form when you're harvesting. We wanted something you could harvest the greens standing up and then also something that would harvest them much faster. I would say the HarvestStar, we can harvest probably two to 300 pounds an hour compared to 100 to 120 pounds an hour with the Quick Cut Harvester.
- Chris Blanchard: When you say two to 300 pounds an hour, is that two to 300 pounds an hour per person or just two to 300 pounds per tool?
- Shawn Kuhn: It's two to 300 pounds for about a person to do.
- Chris Blanchard: Did you find that there were differences in what was required in terms of the actual culture or leading up to the harvest between those two harvesting tools in terms of what you had to do to get that bed ready to harvest?
- Shawn Kuhn: No really. The one thing is sometimes we'd come through with an alley cultivator to get the weeds growing in the alleys between the beds. That implement can push dirt up on to the ridges or the side of the bed to create a little ridge. You have to keep that from happening if you're using the HarvestStar just because you'll end up pushing the blades through a bunch of soil. Overall, it's pretty much the same set-up as we do with the mini harvesters.
- Chris Blanchard: Do you mind sharing what kind of an investment you had into that HarvestStar?
- Shawn Kuhn: The HarvestStar we bought used. It was right around \$8,000. I think brand new they go for between 12 to 14,000.
- Chris Blanchard: You've really got to have some dedication to doing the salad production and doing it in the solid beds and having those weed-free beds before you go out and purchase that kind of a tool.
- Shawn Kuhn: Absolutely, and you've got to have a really solid market. I think we didn't buy that harvester until we were doing six or 700 pounds of salad greens a week, and with plans to do a lot more. It definitely takes a decent amount of production to justify that piece of equipment.



- Chris Blanchard: How many pounds of salad greens are you guys doing a week now?
- Shawn Kuhn: This year, we were doing, during peak production, we do a little bit less in the summer just because it's a lot more difficult to do a lot of these cold loving plant mid-year, but during the height of the growing season in spring and fall, we're doing over 1,200 pounds a week between salad mix, baby arugula and baby spinach. We are looking to bump that up to maybe 1,500 hundred pounds or so this fall as we start exploring a couple of new customers potentially in Milwaukee.
- Chris Blanchard: That's no small amount of salad greens.
- Shawn Kuhn: It's a decent amount.
- Chris Blanchard: You guys are harvesting the greens. The greens are coming into these plastic totes. You're putting them straight into the refrigerated truck out in the field. That vehicle comes in. You're unloading them in the packing shed. What happens next?
- Shawn Kuhn: Next we put a little bit of water, wash water, right on top of them just to get a little bit of evaporative cooling going, take a little bit of the heat off them. They're organized and stacked into our walk-in cooler. Then we wash the whole harvest in a series of batches just because it's so much, we can't wash it all at once. We separate the greens out so you have a nice diversity in each mix. Then they get an initial wash in an old stainless steel milk bulk tank.
- Then they get transferred by hand into where someone's scooping them into our custom built salad washer. That's pushing the greens under a large bud reel. It's a little contraption that pushes the greens under water, and a stream of water brings any floating objects out of the mix into a little drain. Then we take the greens and put them into one of two salad spinners, 20 gallon salad spinners, to get the majority of the water off.
- After they're spun, they're emptied onto our food grade salad greens dryer, which is a big conveyor belt with a bunch of fans pushing fans from underneath the salad with a bunch of dehumidifiers actually running in the room so that we get the final packaging dryness that we found really helps the greens last a long time. They're packaged in the three pound bags, boxed, and stored in the fridge, shipped out the next day to all of our customers.
- Chris Blanchard: You guys only do the bulk salad greens. You're not doing any packaging in clam shells or individual retail bags.
- Shawn Kuhn: We're only putting a small amount of stuff into retail bags for the farmer's market and our farm pickup. We are not currently licensed for the consumer packaging for a grocery. Everything that we sell to a grocery is sold in bulk, and then they handle the salad greens. That's one of the things we might, when we build a new building, we might scale up and start doing consumer ready packaging.



- Chris Blanchard: Talk to me about weather with these greens. I feel like the last two years, in particular, have been in the upper Midwest, dominated by extremely wet springs and crazy weather throughout the summer. With salad greens, your seeding schedule is pretty rigorous. How are you guys making that work with the crazy weather that we've been having lately?
- Shawn Kuhn: I guess the first thing I do when I wake up in the morning is I look at the weather. It's with using the Precision feeder, we're feeding the salad greens twice a week, every week from ... I think this year we started the end of March all the way until, I'll be finished in about a week or two. There's a lot of plantings to do every single week. We're just trying to manage the soil moisture as best as we can. Sometimes a planting gets moved around by a day or two. Once in a blue moon, we have to skip a planting just because the soil is too waterlogged for too long of a time.
- Basically, we have the raised beds which allows the soil to dry out if it's been really wet. We try to come through there and lightly stir up the soil with the rototiller just a little bit so it can dry out by the end of the day and, hopefully, plant. With the salad greens, you really are at the whim of the weather sometimes. They are a really fragile crop. There's at least, I would say, one storm a year that you end up losing a lot of the leaves to. They get damaged by hail or heavy rain. We try to insulate ourselves from those things as much as possible by moving the harvest date around. If we think a heavy storm is coming, we might harvest some things just a little bit earlier or push the harvest back slightly so as to let the damage heal.
- Chris Blanchard: I suppose that's something where the investments you've made in the mechanical harvesting, makes that shuffling around a little bit easier just because you're that much more efficient with getting the harvesting done. It's not like you have to shift an entire day's work out of the way in order to move that harvest date around.
- Shawn Kuhn: The harvest typically takes the first three or four hours out of the day. That's the idea with thinking about moving up another notch is that we could theoretically get harvest done a little bit faster and try to avoid those extreme weather events, if need be.
- Chris Blanchard: How are you managing pests out in your salad greens? Flea beetles are such a problem here, and I think almost everywhere for salad greens producers. What are you guys doing to keep that under control?
- Shawn Kuhn: At the beginning, flea beetle is pretty much the only pest we seriously worry about with the salad greens. Pretty much everything else is in and out before any pests develop. We used to fight that with the insect barrier, the Agribon lightweight row covers that you put over the crop and you physically exclude the flea beetles from entering the brassicas. We moved away from that both because we were getting a lot of other damping off, a lot of beds that were too wet, and also those row covers, displayed an immense amount of plastic waste. They're made out of woven plastic material. We really didn't like how much waste we were creating. We looked into organic biological pesticide.



We really like using Entrust for the flea beetles. Honestly, it seems like they've gotten less bad throughout the years. I don't know if that's because we're doing a good job of managing some buffer strip and keeping some space on the farm for beneficial insects or if it's because of some reason like that. We mainly control them with Entrust, and we only have to utilize that a couple of times per year. That's basically just a fermented bacteria that you spray on the crop.

Chris Blanchard: On your Instagram page, I think I saw a picture of you guys using shade cloth out in the field to keep the crops cool during the summertime.

Shawn Kuhn: Yup. Yup. That's something that we've been thinking about for a while. It's just something that we've never really gotten around to doing. We started playing around with it this year, and I think next year we're going to actually try to build a major big cloth system for the middle of the year. Like I said before, all these salad crops are really cold loving crops. A lot of them germinate a lot better when it's cooler. Mid-year there's normally a little bit of a slump. We're looking for any way we can to close the gap on that and have a more consistent supply. I think utilizing some 30% shade cloth seemed to work pretty well so far. I think we'll build some more of that next year.

Chris Blanchard: With your customer base with being restaurants in a hip town like Madison, have you guys had any pressure towards getting a GAPs certification or any sort of a food safety audit done there?

Shawn Kuhn: I would say the majority of the pressure on that is internal. It's something that we've looked into and we've got some consultation from a professor at the UW. We didn't have a conversation with the distributor once about what it would take to sell to them and they ask for GAPs certification. That's something I think we're just going to naturally build up to probably after we build a new facility. We're renting our land right now. The first step is purchasing either this piece of land or another piece and then settling down there for good, and then building a processing facility that's up to full GAPs code. That would allow us to do a lot of other things as well. No one specifically asked for it. It's just something that we see as a good idea and something that some future expansion might require.

Chris Blanchard: Just on the subject of labeling and what customers are asking for and that regard, I noticed that you guys didn't become certified organic until 2016. Why did you wait so long?

Shawn Kuhn: It was definitely a matter time and money, I would say. Starting the farm has been an immense amount of work. We started it literally from scratch. None of us had farming experience. None of our immediate family was farmers either. We literally started from nothing. There's a really big learning curve there. We started following the organic practices a number of years beforehand, but just didn't have the time to take the final steps, nor really the demand.

One of the interesting things is that a lot of the restaurants that we deal with really prefer to buy local food when possible but organic is really not a huge priority for them. I think part of the reason is that a lot of people conflate the local and organic idea and just assume that people who are growing locally are organic, which is obviously not the case. We didn't have a lot of restaurants



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really demanding it. We did have a couple of groceries, some co-ops that really wanted us to have a certification. There wasn't a huge push from our customer base to get that. It was more something we just really wanted to do.

Chris Blanchard: Again, your restaurant sales, far outpace what you're doing to the retail food establishments, to the food co-ops really. You guys have 40 restaurants and just a couple of food co-ops, right?

Shawn Kuhn: Yeah. The bulk majority is all going to restaurants.

Chris Blanchard: When you guys started the farm, did you intend to be as focused as you are on salad greens? Was that something that you guys identified as a need in the market in 2011?

Shawn Kuhn: No. When we first started, we really did not have any idea of which products would be successful. Going back to how little we knew, I basically just bought a little bit of everything from Johnny's Selected Seeds the first year that we planted and planted a lot of things including weird things that I didn't even know what they were, like borage. About midway through the season, we were looking around at what looked sellable. We just had this one row of a mixed lettuce that we had planted that looked really good. We cut it and bagged, brought it into who became our first customer and they liked it. It was after that that we started learning salad mix really worked as a local product because you could sell its freshness factor. Because there's such a noticeable difference with greens that are harvested the day prior with greens that were shipped from far away and most likely already a week old by the time you get them, we started touching on that salad would be a really easy thing to expand into with restaurants and they kept demanding more. We slowly moved into it more and more.

Chris Blanchard: Let's talk a little bit about marketing to restaurants. How did you break into that market in the first place, and then how have you continued to expand your presence in the marketplace over the last six years?

Shawn Kuhn: It was really, really difficult at the beginning. It started with a lot of cold calling restaurants. Normally when you call a restaurant, you end up talking to the host or hostess. When you ask them if you can talk to their chef, there's usually a lot of confusion that happens. It evolved from calling restaurants and just showing up with product. Eventually it evolved into me showing up at the back door of restaurants with a bunch of free samples. I learned that when you show up, as long as it's not during rush hours, with a bunch of free samples, the chef is normally happy to see you. We picked up customers pretty slowly over the first couple of years.

I would say about two years ago, it shifted to the point where we started getting calls from restaurants that had heard about us and knew about us and wanted to bring our stuff in. It was a really steep curve to get into the restaurant market, but then a lot of the restaurants start putting your name on the menu, and a lot more people start hearing about you. It's become easier now when a restaurant opens in Madison and does local food, a lot of times we'll get a call from them, which we're really grateful for.



- Chris Blanchard: I think it's something that is both a blessing and a curse working with the restaurant marketplace is that it's a small world, and everybody knows everybody else.
- Shawn Kuhn: Absolutely. We've been lucky enough to establish really good relationships with pretty much everyone that we work with. So far, we've got a really good thing going with this community.
- Chris Blanchard: Do you live on the farm?
- Shawn Kuhn: No. I actually live downtown in downtown Madison. We have the reverse. We live downtown and we commute out to the country to work on the farm.
- Chris Blanchard: You mentioned that it's rented ground. I think you said about a total of 10 acres or so; five acres of crops and then some additional pasture ground?
- Shawn Kuhn: Yeah, about that. That's all encompassed on about a 45 acre parcel of land. We're actually utilizing about 10 acres total between everything.
- Chris Blanchard: How did you guys find 10 acres of ground to rent that close to Madison? If you're in Madison, you can hardly turn a corner here without running into an organic vegetable farmer. It seems like there would be a ton of demand for any small parcel of land that was available.
- Shawn Kuhn: I think it was just a matter of luck. The very first year we started, we were on a separate piece of land. It was someone that we got hooked up with through the Land Link program and the Farley Center. We did one season, which was actually in Waunakee, a little bit a ways away from here. We were thinking about taking on another business partner which would have allowed us to purchase land right away. This person notified us of this piece of land that we're now currently on was for sale. We looked at it with the realtor, didn't buy it, but when it was sold, the gentleman who bought it contacted us and asked us if we wanted to use the farmland in the back, and we said yes. That's how we got here.
- Chris Blanchard: [00:38:00] You must have some pretty nice flat land for doing the kind of salad mix production that you're talking about.
- Shawn Kuhn: There is a decent amount of slope out here that's flat enough for us to work it, but there's a little bit of a hill going on back here.
- Chris Blanchard: You mentioned this idea of bringing on a business partner. Now, you actually started with yourself and two friends, right?
- Shawn Kuhn: Yeah. At the beginning, technically there was four of us total. There was myself and three friends. One person exited early on and then Tommy, Craig and I did the majority of the building of the farm until Craig left, decided that farming wasn't for him. That was about the end of last year. Now it's just Tommy and I that own and manage the farm.



- Chris Blanchard: How did you guys structure a business that you owned with four people and then allowing for the opportunity for people to come and go from that partnership?
- Shawn Kuhn: We structured it as an LLC. I'm not sure if I would have done it that way. Looking back, I don't think starting a small business with four people is necessarily a good idea. It's a lot of different visions and a lot of different ideas or thoughts on how things should be done. We structured everyone leaving as a small buyout.
- Chris Blanchard: How did you solve that visioning issue? I think about the challenges that oftentimes exist even between spouses, people that are that close and that aligned, I think it would be really much more challenging to try to get that vision straight and divide up the responsibilities and the accountabilities with a group of friends.
- Shawn Kuhn: I guess we just fell into our own little niches on the farm, and honestly been a learning process of just figuring out how to make different idea meld together when there's a lot of different ways you can go.
- Chris Blanchard: With that, we're going to stop here, take a quick break, get a quick word from a couple of sponsors, and then we'll be right back with Shawn Kuhn from Vitruvian Farms in McFarland, Wisconsin. The Farmer to Farmer Podcast is generously support by Store It Cold's CoolBot. The CoolBot has changed the way that farmers think about cooling facilities for their vegetables by making it possible to cool a walk-in cooler with a window air conditioning unit with massive savings on the front and an ongoing electricity and maintenance costs.
- Now, they've taken another step forward and created a turnkey refrigeration solution: an energy efficient walk-in cooler designed for easy assembly by you in hours, not days. I know from experience how much time and energy can go into building a not-so-great homemade walk-in cooler, still gives me nightmares, or looking for a used one that's still in good condition. Save yourself time and money, make your produce stand out in the marketplace when it lasts on store shelves, in restaurant walk-ins, and in your customers' refrigerator drawers because you sold it to them cold. If purchasing the CoolBot, please use the code FTF at checkout to double your CoolBot warranty at no charge or mention Farmer to Farmer and receive an exclusive discount on your walk-in cooler; storeitcold.com.
- Perennial support for the Farmer to Farmer Podcast is provided by Vermont Compost Company, makers of Fort Vee and Fort Light potting mixes for certified organic transplant production. While it's hard to think about next year's potting soil in the middle of the current season, you don't want to miss participating in Vermont Compost Company's all pre-buy program. When you order Vermont Compost potting soil for next year's growing season now, you can save significantly on the finest potting soil that I have ever used. There are many great options for significant savings.
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ship on one of these shared truckloads, they offer discounts on the purchase of your potting soil, plus because they consolidate the orders, growers save significantly on shipping fees, or to get the best deal possible on Vermont Compost potting soil, order a full truckload. If you don't need a full truckload yourself, get together with your farming friends and neighbors and order a full truckload together. Visit their website for more information, vermontcompost.com.

We're back with Shawn Kuhn from Vitruvian Farms in McFarland, Wisconsin. Shawn, we talked a lot about salad greens in the first half of our conversation. What other crops do you guys focus on for sales to your restaurant accounts?

Shawn Kuhn: [00:42:30] We're also growing a pretty decent amount of tomatoes, cherry tomatoes, slicing, sauce tomatoes, a lot of heirloom tomatoes. We're doing a couple hundred pounds a week of those to restaurants. We also sell some oyster mushrooms and we sell a decent amount of microgreens, which is a newer part of our farm.

Chris Blanchard: Mushrooms, that's something that's completely different from vegetables. I can understand, microgreens have a different production cycle and a different set of constraints on it than growing crops in the ground outside does or even the same thing can be said of growing tomatoes in the high tunnels. Mushrooms is a complete departure. How does that fit into your operation?

Shawn Kuhn: It's something that we got into just because there are a lot more vegetable growers around here than there are mushroom growers. We thought there would be an opportunity there to grow some gourmet cultivated mushrooms. Right now, we're growing almost exclusively oyster mushrooms. We grow them by pasteurizing certified organic straw. You heat that to 165 degrees or so for about an hour. We pack the straw intermixed with grain spawn or the little mushroom mycelium into some polyethylene bags, and we hang them in a mushroom room that's humidity and temperature controlled. We harvest mushrooms a couple of times a week and sell those to some of our restaurant customers.

Chris Blanchard: Has that been a popular item for your restaurant customers?

Shawn Kuhn: Yeah. We definitely could be growing a lot more. The only limitation right now is we don't have enough space because they're not something you could just grow outside. They really do need to be in a humidity controlled area, either a covered greenhouse type deal or an inside room. We're hoping to build more space because there's a lot of other mushrooms that we'd like to be growing as well that we don't have space for.

Chris Blanchard: Is that something that you're doing year-round or is that only in sync with your outdoor production cycle?

Shawn Kuhn: The mushrooms we're actually doing year-round. Because those are inside of our processing building in their own space, we're able to ... since we keep that whole space heated, we're pushing the mushrooms out all year.



- Chris Blanchard: You mentioned also, going out from something like the mushrooms, which I would think of as being very controlled because you've got it in a completely enclosed building, heat and humidity controlled, so the microgreens, you said you've gotten into the microgreens relatively recently, right?
- Shawn Kuhn: [00:45:30] Yeah. We really started doing it on scale about last fall. We were talking about weather before. Last summer was not very kind to us. We had some weather incidents, and we ended up losing a lot of salad in the middle part of the year. We were looking for something that we could plant in a short amount of time and get some return to recover some of those losses from. Microgreens had always been on our mind, but we just never really saw a pathway into the market. Last year we just decided to push it. We found a really fortunate customer with UW Hospital. They actually purchased a lot of our microgreens for their salad bar and started exploring some of our restaurants and selling live trays. Now we grow a lot of microgreens in a controlled greenhouse. We do those year-round as well.
- Chris Blanchard: That's a nice way to keep the cash flowing through the wintertime.
- Shawn Kuhn: Exactly.
- Chris Blanchard: Had you guys done the sorts of mechanization with the microgreens that you've done with your outdoor salad mix production?
- Shawn Kuhn: The microgreens was pretty much all by hand. We think it's pretty efficient doing it on the scale that we are right now, just keeping it by hand.
- Chris Blanchard: Just talking about going through the winter brings me to the question of are you guys an economically viable operation? Are you and Tommy making a living from Vitruvian Farms?
- Shawn Kuhn: This is the first year where I would say that's pretty true. Tommy and I have definitely been taking out as little as necessary to live, to squeak by, I would say, which is definitely difficult when you're working a lot and you're also on top of that not bringing home a big paycheck. This is the first year where the main goal has been to solidify our own personal finances and start taking home what you consider a normal paycheck, I guess. I would say at this point, we are looking good on a profitability basis. There's just so much infrastructure that it takes to start a farm from scratch. I think that's why it has taken a number of growing seasons. We have a number of full-time staff hired. We pay them about as well as we think we can right now. We're starting to come into a good zone, I would say, financially.
- Chris Blanchard: The staff that you have on your farm, are they year-round to match your year-round production, or do you guys really contract during the wintertime?
- Shawn Kuhn: There's definitely a big contraction. Most of the staff starts around mid-May. They start filtering out, we actually just had the first one leave last week; they start filtering out around this time. We only keep on as many as we need. This will be the first year that we're trying to keep one of our staff members with us. It's definitely a struggle to get people to return. There's a huge benefit there,



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not having to retrain people every single year. We're trying to keep enough things, enough income going through the winter that, hopefully, one day we can have all of our managers work straight through the winter and retain them for every year.

Chris Blanchard: I would think that in a place like Madison, where there are so many organic vegetable farms, and frankly, so many really great organic vegetable farms, that it would be hard to find employees to come and work on your farms because there are so many options for people to pursue.

Shawn Kuhn: It hasn't really been too difficult. A lot of the people that work on a seasonal basis are students. They're also the people not necessarily looking to do agriculture long-term. Some of them are. There's a lot of people just with an interest in learning more about where their food comes from and how this farming thing works. I think a lot of them don't necessarily expect it to be as difficult as it is. We didn't either, but we haven't really had a problem finding student labor, I guess you would call it.

Chris Blanchard: A lot of farm owners complain about the quality of labor that they're able to find, and exactly what you said, people don't expect to work that hard. Do you feel like being relatively fresh out of school and having come to it without a lot of experience, does that give you a little bit more sympathy or empathy with the employees that you hire and make you a little bit more tolerant of some of the vagaries that you might have with hiring young people?

Shawn Kuhn: Yeah, definitely. I definitely think we're at the point where when people say it's difficult to find good help, we can definitely feel out why they think that's true. I think we've always taken the stand that there's a lot of effect that the management can have on the culture of the workers. I especially always take it upon myself to say if something's repeatedly not being done correctly, how can we design a better system or give better directions or create a better work culture so that those things happen. I believe you can get really good work out of people. It's just a matter of motivating them and getting them to see the bigger picture, and then rewarding them when it's deserved.

Chris Blanchard: I did want to pivot back and talk a little bit more about your tomato production. That was something you said was an important crop on your farm for the restaurant sales, and you guys have, you said half of your 10,000 square feet of high tunnels in tomato production.

Shawn Kuhn: We are trellising them. We've got a lean-and-lower system going on. It's the first year we're doing that. Typically, in previous years, we've always cleared out the tomatoes around this time to do a fall planting of salad greens. This is maybe the first year where we tried to push the tomatoes on as long as they stay viable in the greenhouses. Tomatoes are another one where there's a really strong market for quality when restaurants can get the really heirloom tomatoes and we've just had a lot of demand for that crop over other things that we've grown.

Chris Blanchard: When you say that people are looking for quality in tomatoes, what does that look like for a restaurant?



- Shawn Kuhn: With a lot of heirlooms, they're just really prone to a lot of physical defects that can lead to, a lot of cracking, a lot of scarring, that can really diminish the quality if they're not managed properly with the water, with the nutrients. We're just trying to sell really I guess intact, not scarred, not cracked heirloom tomatoes of varieties that people find the space and the texture to be of high quality as well.
- Chris Blanchard: What kinds of things are doing to avoid the cracking and the scarring?
- Shawn Kuhn: Definitely I would say the number one thing is just by having them under the greenhouses. Those tomatoes, and a lot of the other tomatoes, when they're grown outside, number one, they're a lot more prone to disease. We're not spraying anything organic or otherwise to get these fungal issues off of our tomatoes just by keeping them under cover and keeping the ground dry and the leaves trimmed from the bottom, we can mitigate pretty much all of the normal fungal attack that you'd have to deal with with tomatoes. We're able to manage the amount of water that they get so they don't swell and blow up during a heavy rainstorm, and then just keeping the tomatoes really pruned and producing as efficiently as they can.
- Chris Blanchard: Are you harvesting those and holding them or do you pick them dead ripe and deliver them right away?
- Shawn Kuhn: We harvest them at a couple of different stages, but after they've started ripening, we normally harvest them. That's a key point with a lot of the heirloom tomatoes. If you try to wait until they're 100% ripe, by that time, most likely something bad has happened to the tomato. We try to harvest at some point after they've started ripening on the vine, and then we let them ripen up on their own in a controlled environment.
- Chris Blanchard: You said that you're not doing any sort of sprays, of organic or otherwise, for disease control in the greenhouse. Are you guys encountering other pest problems in the greenhouse, and how are you dealing with those?
- Shawn Kuhn: Yes, definitely the biggest pest problem is the tomato horn worm and then the tomato fruit worm. We're not spraying anything for those. I did introduce some beneficial insects, some of the parasitoid wasps, we brought in a little while ago. Ideally, we would have put those in the greenhouses a lot earlier in the season, but just have to run with it. Most of the control comes from finding the caterpillars and just manually taking them off the plants and getting rid of them versus try and use any sprays or anything like that.
- The other biggest issue that we have to deal with with the tomatoes is finding blossom-end rot. Blossom-end rot is normally related to calcium and water. With our irrigation, we're using drip line water from a well. The well just so happens to be really alkaline, really full of calcium carbonate. We've done a lot of soil testing and it's pushing the calcium levels of our soil so high. It's also pushed the alkalinity of our soil up to, I've read a pH of eight in one of our greenhouses. When you get to that point, the tomatoes really have a difficult time utilizing the calcium in the soil and distributing it properly. That's one of the things we're always trying to mitigate. We normally do that by adding



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elemental sulfur to the greenhouse. It's one of the few ways you can organically try to lower the pH of your soil.

Chris Blanchard: You oftentimes hear about water out in the Central Valley changing the composition of the soils out there. I don't often think of that as being an issue here in the upper Midwest.

Shawn Kuhn: I think the soil is naturally just a little more alkaline out here. One thing we've noticed, it seems that the more we irrigate our soil, the higher the pH goes. Normally farmers or a lot of farmers have to deal with the opposite problem.

Chris Blanchard: I guess that makes sense with the limestone underlayment that we're generally dealing with here in Wisconsin, or at least in southern Wisconsin.

Shawn Kuhn: Exactly.

Chris Blanchard: I guess that brings us to an interesting topic. You talk about something like salad mix where you're doing two or three crops a year and multiple cuttings on each of those crops out in the field. In the high tunnels, obviously doing stuff like greenhouse tomatoes. You're pushing a lot of product off of the farm. How are you guys managing your soil fertility?

Shawn Kuhn: At the beginning, we added a lot of rock minerals to the soil, a lot of rock phosphate and Greensand. We used to use alfalfa pellets, organic alfalfa pellets as our main source of nitrogen, but now we're actually utilizing a fertilizer made by Sustained, I think it's 5-2-4. That's basically a composted turkey litter. That's giving us a lot of our nitrogen and potassium. We're utilizing a lot of purple cow compost. We're adding that at about 20 tons per acre per year, being that to try to keep the organic matter levels high and trying to keep the micronutrients up as well.

Chris Blanchard: You're not doing composting on the farm. When you talk about 20 tons to the acre, this is stuff that you're purchasing in.

Shawn Kuhn: Right. We're buying that in. It's way more than we could produce.

Chris Blanchard: Twenty tons to the acre, that's a lot of compost.

Shawn Kuhn: It's definitely a generous amount. We've noticed that we're on a Dodge silt loam soil here. It feels pretty heavy, like a clay. We've noticed that having a generous amount of compost, especially towards the top of the bed, really helps minimize the amount of crusting that happens. With a lot of the rainstorms that we get and the heavy soil, if the soil crusts over, a lot of the little valley crops have a really tough time breaking through that crust. By having that extra compost there, we've noticed it really helps get the crop germinated.

Chris Blanchard: You mentioned that you're irrigating out of a well. What are you using for an irrigation system because for those salad greens, irrigation is almost everything with that, that timely water to keep that ... You can seed as often as you want. If you don't put water on it, you're not going to keep those crops running on time.



Shawn Kuhn: The property we're on used to be a tree nursery. The guy that had built the tree nursery had a fairly large, just some set-up for irrigating outside and we tapped into that. Most of our watering is overhead, which is, I would say is a necessity for the multi-row salad crop, but a lot of it's just manually opening valves and switching valves around by hand.

Chris Blanchard: With the overhead, are you just using traditional Rain Bird sprinklers with the (non-verbal). Is that out in the field or are you doing anything different with that?

Shawn Kuhn: Most of them are impact and that have that similar action that we bought from a farm supply store. We've experimented with a couple of other ones like Wobblers and whatnot, but the rotating 360 degree impact sprinklers work pretty well for us.

Chris Blanchard: In a lot of your advertising materials on your website, you talk about being a permaculture farm. I don't normally think of intensive salad green production and permaculture farm in the same thought. Can you talk a little bit about what being a permaculture farm means in your context, and how that fits into your vision?

Shawn Kuhn: For sure. Definitely I would say I started catching on to the idea of permaculture almost right after we started the farm. We knew we wanted to do organic and permaculture is grown out of that. Permaculture is the more long, firm vision of our farm, and what that means for us is just looking at the entire system of the farm, how do we take care of the soil as best we can and how do we take care of the people that are working here as best as we can.

In terms of how does that intermix with salad greens, we're looking at intermixing our salad green production with perennial crops. It's similar to an alley cropping system. We're trying to find how we can grow the annual crops that we need to grow for our cash flow along with soil preserving crops that are trees or shrubs that are planted for a long time so that we can decrease the amount of erosion, create a windbreak, create beneficial insects, habitat, and still produce a food crop, but move away from just having fields of only annual crops, and have at least intermixed.

As we grow as a farm, I think we plan on moving more and more into tree crops of various kinds. We're really just playing around right now and getting our feet wet with the perennials. The whole idea is just how can we turn over the soil as little as possible and produce food from it. It's a long-term idea. We're really at the beginning stages of doing it.

Chris Blanchard: Because you're on rented ground, and you mentioned that you're looking to make that situation either there or someplace else, a more permanent land tenure situation at some point in the near future, are there things that you're doing differently because you're on rented ground?

Shawn Kuhn: I would say not exactly. We've definitely put in some infrastructure that you really wouldn't want to do unless you own it, but sometimes you just have to make that hard decision and cross your fingers. Part of the reason we want to



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buy the land is because we do want to do a lot more long-term infrastructure here. We do have about a quarter acre orchard planted.

For me, I look at it as we could plant that orchard and maybe in a couple of years or a year we lose it, if this isn't the piece of property that we settle down on. I'm a self-learner, and I look at those couple of years as times to make the easy mistakes, and when we're ready to put the roots down for the farm on a permanent piece of property, we'll have a better knowledge base to draw from. We're trying to find a middle ground whenever possible. We're not investing stupidly on land that we don't own, but sometimes you have to have some infrastructure to make a farm with production like ours work.

Chris Blanchard: The restaurants and the retail establishments really form, I guess, the foundation of your marketing model, but you've also added a CSA recently and you've got a farmer's market that you guys do in Monona, which is a town that's pretty much still part of Madison. How do those fit in to your business and why did you decide to do those in addition to focusing on the restaurant retail establishments?

Shawn Kuhn: With the CSA, there's definitely the financial bonus of having some cash flow right at the beginning of the season to work with, especially because with our restaurant customers, we were planting late February in the greenhouses and harvesting the first crops in April. We have 30-day terms, and restaurants are known for not always paying on time. We had this large gap between working and actually having money to spend or pay ourselves with. We really like the aspect of the CSA for that, but I would say more importantly, we really just were looking to connect with people.

Part of the reason we started the farm was to flip the use of food as a gathering point for community. Food has always been that in the past. One of the things we noticed in college was that there's been a de-emphasis on eating together or at least spending quality time eating meals together. That can have ramifications in the rest of our society, so we're trying to bring people back together around the farm, around the food and selling the food directly to them was the obvious way to make that happen. We really like just being the end customer and talking with them and spreading knowledge about what we're doing. A lot of people are curious about food today. That was one of our goals. I think that really helps us fulfill that.

Chris Blanchard: How has having a CSA changed your farm this year?

Shawn Kuhn: The CSA really increased the amount of diversity of crops that we're growing. I would say that really increases them on difficulty because it seems like every crop has its own specific nuances, things you've got to know, pests, soil fertility issues and whatnot. It really keeps us on our toes in terms of knowing what we're doing out here, increases the difficulty a little bit. There's a lot of planning that it adds on to our year during the winter months, trying to schedule out to have 20 weeks' worth of boxes, have a good amount of variety and all crops that take different amounts of time that comes to fruition, planning those out in succession, takes a lot of time. A lot more planning and a little bit more difficulty, but I think overall, we really like learning all the different vegetables and fruit that you can grow.



Having a more diverse farm than just growing salad greens and tomatoes, I think for us, is also a really rewarding part of it. That's part of the reason why we have a couple of hogs and some laying hens. That's why we do the mushrooms. It's being in a place where you want to attract your customers to and inspire sense of community, it's a lot easier to do when you have all these different facets of the farm rather than just one major crop or so.

Chris Blanchard: How did the laying hens fit into your operation? How many of those do you guys have?

Shawn Kuhn: We have about 130 or so laying hens. We're pasturing them. They're really a really big side part of our farm. I wouldn't say laying hens, I just feel, is really profitable. I don't think we're losing money on them, but it's something we chose to do because pastured eggs are something that really bring people in. We sell produce out of our farm every Friday for a pick up. Eggs are naturally something that people will make a specific stop to get local organic pastured eggs. Although we're not making a lot of money on them, we really value the quality eggs as well. It's really difficult to find out of a store.

Like I said, they are fun to have. Having some animals around is definitely a plus for our visitors. People who are bringing kids along, the animals are normally an attraction point as well. We are utilizing them to the best of our abilities to improve the land. They're being pastured on land right now that's not in vegetable production, but it might be an orchard production at one point. We're trying to look forward in years to see how we can improve the land before that happens.

Chris Blanchard: And doing a little bit of nutrient transfer by running that corn and soybeans through the chickens.

Shawn Kuhn: Right.

Chris Blanchard: With that, I think this is a good time for us to turn to our lightening round. We're going to get a quick word from one more sponsor and then we'll be right back. This lightening round and perennial support for the Farmer to Farmer Podcast is brought to you by BCS America. A BCS two wheel tractor is the only power equipment a market gardener will need. With PTO driven attachments like the rototiller the flail mower, power harrow, rotary plow, snow thrower, log splitter, and more. You name it, you can probably run it with the versatile BCS two wheel tractor.

The first time I used a rototiller, it was way back in 1991, and it was mounted to a BCS two wheel tractor, and it spoiled me for life. When you get behind a BCS, you can tell that it's built to the same commercial standards as four wheel farm tractors, and it has many of the same features. I've used other tillers and mowers, and I spent most of the time that I was using them thinking about how much easier things would be with a BCS. Check out bcsamerica.com to see the full line up of tractors and attachments plus videos of BCS in action. Shawn, what's your favorite tool on the farm?



- Shawn Kuhn: I would definitely say the HarvestStar. I had the suspicion that I would really like that tool. I've always been in charge of the salad greens harvest. I did a lot of harvesting on my hands and knees with the knives and then a lot of harvesting hunched over with the Quick Cut Harvester. Moving over to the HarvestStar to an upright efficient harvest was really a joy for me. I would definitely say based off of how much salad we're harvesting, the HarvestStar Harvester is my favorite.
- Chris Blanchard: Your farm is named Vitruvian Farms. What is Vitruvian?
- Shawn Kuhn: Going back to when we started it straight out of college, and we were thinking about starting it our last year, we wanted something that sounded unique, something that sounded different, I think there's a lot of similarly named farms, something that would stand out. We were inspired by the Renaissance and the classical period. We were looking for being part of the local food movement. Vitruvian just crossed our minds. The first thing you think about is the Vitruvian man, the drawing by Leonardo da Vinci. That's the long-haired man that's in a circle and a square.
- Leonard da Vinci was trying to draw a man in perfect proportion of a man in balance. He was doing this inspired by the words of a philosopher named Vitruvius who lived in the 1st Century BC in Rome. He was an architect. Vitruvius thought that human work needs to embody the best values of balance and beauty. We traced that all the way back and settled on Vitruvian Farms with the intention of creating a farm that was in balance with nature and a beautiful place to bring people to.
- Chris Blanchard: You mentioned being in balance with nature. Do you feel like you've got a life in balance running a farm?
- Shawn Kuhn: That's been its own change for sure. Starting a farm has definitely been a major character builder. I think that there were a lot of really difficult points. It's things that we're through most of those, and we're at the point now where we're able to look back and really appreciate how difficult it's been because it really makes us value what we're doing here. It's been a constant evolution of understanding why we're doing this and what we're doing it for, that I hope keeps growing.
- Chris Blanchard: This doesn't feel like a lightning round question, but do you have a family?
- Shawn Kuhn: I have a significant other. No family and kids yet.
- Chris Blanchard: Is your significant other involved in the farming operation?
- Shawn Kuhn: She actually manages the bees on the farm. We have six bee hives and she helps with that, helps with some gardens for the bees, and she has been known to help out from time to time.
- Chris Blanchard: Shawn, what's your favorite crop to grow?
- Shawn Kuhn: [01:12:30] I would say right now, anything that grows on a tree.



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- Chris Blanchard: Just so you know, salad mix does not grow on a tree.
- Shawn Kuhn: Right. It's probably because I don't have a ton of experience with trees right now, so they're just really interesting and not at all difficult or a part of any part of labor that I don't want to do. I'm just really intrigued with trees. If I had to pick one, I would say the pawpaw tree.
- Chris Blanchard: Which is a good one just for its name alone. We haven't talked a lot about Tommy's role on the farm, but let me just ask, your partner, Tommy, what's his farming super power?
- Shawn Kuhn: Tommy's farming super power is attention to detail and management. I would say he's really focused on creating a quality product, he's really focused on creating an efficient system. I think a lot of times I'll come out of the blue with an idea, something that might seem a little crazy at first, some new venture; we should start growing oyster mushrooms or we should start an orchard. Over time, I think Tommy really finds out how to make that into an efficient profitable part of our business.
- Chris Blanchard: How awesome to have somebody like that as your partner on the farm.
- Shawn Kuhn: Absolutely.
- Chris Blanchard: Finally, Shawn, if you could go back in time and tell your beginning farmer self one thing, what would it be?
- Shawn Kuhn: It would be that it is going to be a lot harder than you think it is.
- Chris Blanchard: Shawn, thank you so much for being part of the Farmer to Farmer Podcast today.
- Shawn Kuhn: Thanks for having me.
- Chris Blanchard: Wrapping things up here, I'll say again that this is Episode 137 of the Farmer to Farmer Podcast. You can find the notes for this show at farmertofarmerpodcast.com by looking on the episodes page or just searching for Kuhn, that's K-U-H-N. The transcript for this episode is brought to you by Earth Tools, offering the most complete selection of walk-behind farming equipment and high-quality garden tools in North America, and by Rock Dust Local, the first company in North America specializing in local sourcing and delivery of the best rock dust and bio char for organic farming; and by Local Food Marketplace, providing the integrated scalable solution for farms and food hubs to process customer orders, including online ordering, harvesting, packing, delivery, invoicing, and payment processing. Additional funding for transcripts is provided by North Central SARE, providing grants and education to advanced innovations in sustainable agriculture.

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Finally, please let me know who you would like to hear from on the show through the suggestions form at farmertofarmerpodcast.com, and I will do my best to get them on the show.

Thank you for listening. Be safe out there and keep the tractor running.