



# FARMER TO FARMER

podcast



## **EPISODE 151**

**Siri Erickson-Brown and Jason Salvo of Local Roots Farm on Restaurant Sales, Chicories, Predicting the Future, and a Little Bit of Latin**

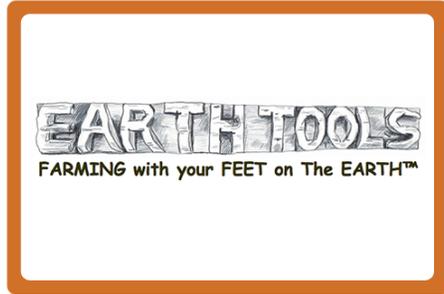
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Chris B: It's the Farmer to Farmer Podcast, episode 151, and this is your host, Chris Blanchard. Siri Erickson-Brown and Jason Salvo own and operate Local Roots Farm, 15 acres of diversified vegetables in the Snoqualmie River Valley, 30 miles west of Seattle.

With 60% of their sales to restaurants and the remainder going to a CSA and a farmer's market, Siri and Jason take a low tech, high touch approach to marketing. We get into the nitty-gritty of how they manage the restaurant sales, from crop planting to receiving orders and managing shortages and overages. Siri and Jason also explain how their multiple marketing outlets work together to sell a high percentage of what they grow.

All three of us dig into our Latin roots - and, yes, that's a pun - and Siri and Jason tell us about how that's influenced their choice of chicories as a major focus of their wholesale operation. We talked about how they use QuickBooks and other data to drive business decisions, and how they monitor business performance throughout the season to avoid surprises.



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Siri Erickson-Brown and Jason Salvo, welcome to the Farmer to Farmer podcast.

Siri E-B: Hi, Chris.

Jason S: Hi, Chris.

Chris B: So glad you guys could join me. Well, there's no reason for anybody else to know this, but I'll fess up 'cause it's nice to know that nobody's perfect. We've had a heck of a time with technology today, thank you so much for hanging in there with me, guys.

Siri E-B: No problem.

Chris B: I'd like to start off by having you tell us about Local Roots Farm. Where are you guys located, how long have you been farming, how much are you farming, and where are you selling it?

Jason S: All right. Those are all good questions. We are located in Duvall, Washington, which is about 30 miles east of Seattle. We're in a beautiful river valley that's on an uncontrolled river ... we flood. We grow about 15 acres of diversified vegetables, and we sell to restaurants, to a CSA, and one farmer's market, and we have a farm stand at the head of our driveway.

Chris B: You said you're on an uncontrolled river. What does that mean?

Jason S: That means there's no dams, no levies, nothing to keep the river in its banks when we get flooding. So, periodically, through the winter, any time between November and April, we could have a flood that covers anything from a small portion of our farm to all of our farm. It's not fast moving water, it's not an erosive flood, but it does cover our vegetables. It's just one interesting extra element that we have to deal with here that a lot of people don't, I guess.

Chris B: I'm looking at the map of your farm here, and I see that it's the Snoqualmie River and it's got kind of an oxbow shape to it. I'm thinking about flooding, and that must be kind of hard to manage.

Siri E-B: I'll jump in here and say we farmed on rented acreage in the same valley for four years before we bought our own land. In the time that we were on our first piece of property, we saw the two biggest floods that had ever happened on our



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river. So, when it came time to make the leap and buy our own farm, we were very familiar with what we were getting ourselves into.

We basically structure our year so we don't rely on any crops to come out of the field for sale between November 1st and sometime early Spring. We do have a climate that will enable year round growing. Maybe every other year, we won't get such cold temperatures that stuff freezes up, but anything that we leave in the field like kale or radicchio that we can't bring it and store, we're able to harvest and sell that in the winter months. We just sort of view it as a little bonus income, we don't count on it. That's how we've come to terms with the potential flooding constraint.

We also had to design all of our infrastructure and systems around it too. As Jason says, our whole field can go under water. That also includes our greenhouses, our propagation house. Even the barns that we have our cold storage in all potentially could flood.

Chris B: I'm not even sure where to start because you're talking about flooding in your packing shed, are you guys shoveling mud out afterwards? How do you maintain an environment that's suitable for growing and washing and packing produce?

Siri E-B: Like Jason said, it's not really ... The floods that we get aren't super destructive. There are certainly places in the river valley where, when it's flooding, the current is moving pretty swiftly, but, for the most part, it's like a bathtub effect. It's a very, very flat river valley. We're, I don't know, maybe 20 or 30 miles from the mouth of where our river enters Puget Sound so we're only at 50 feet of elevation. If you can imagine how slowly the river must move to go that far with such a small amount of elevation loss, it's just ... Anyway, yeah, it's not messy afterward.

We definitely get a light silt deposit in our field. We always tend to think of that as like the magic of soil building. All of our soils here are eluvial deposited, so we have super deep top soil with no rocks. It's all a result of historical floods. So, no, it's not ... I mean, it's disruptive. I liken it sort of to a snow day. It's like kind of fun, kind of annoying, but you know it's always possible that it's going to happen. You just sort of expect it, and that's how we deal with it.

Chris B: You mentioned having radicchio and kale out in the field and considering that a bonus if it doesn't flood. I assume you're not harvesting those crops once it does flood and then the waters recede?

Jason S: [00:06:30] I think the FDA changed some of the rules about what you're allowed to do with flooded produce after Katrina in 2009. I think when we started farming, they had said that ... There was like a two week period you waited and you could sell stuff again. After Katrina, they said, "No. Once anything is flooded, you shouldn't sell it." So, we followed that rule pretty strictly. Basically, anything that's , we'll never harvest and sell it again.

One of the things that that's driven us to do is invest a whole bunch in cold storage. We had a fake-out flood a couple of weeks ago, where they predicted a substantial flood that never materialized. We ended up, we picked 4000 heads of radicchio and put it in the cooler. We basically said, "How much can we sell in



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the time period before it'll start rotting?" and we picked that much. We've actually, we just got through that, or we're almost through it right now. We, last week, went out and just pre-harvested a whole bunch more to get ahead of the next time that they predict a flood that might reach all those crops.

Chris B: And your cold storage then is protected from the flood waters?

Jason S: No. So, water, in the seven years we've been here, I think we've seen water in the barn that has two of our coolers in it just once. So, what we've done in those situations is we put totes upside down on the ground and just elevated everything to get it off the floor. In the event of a really big flood, I think that we would probably do other things. We maybe would take everything and put them on a trailer, or put them in the back of the box truck to get them 30 inches off the ground.

Last year, we built a very large cooler where we're storing things in macro bins. Our strategy in that situation would be to actually put an empty macro bin on the floor and stack the rest of them on top. That would get us 36 inches of pre-flood before water got into any of the product.

Chris B: Do you guys live on the farm?

Jason S: We do, yeah. We have a house that was built in 1908, that has never been flooded. A couple of years ago, the county paid for us to elevate it. We've got an eight foot concrete foundation that we're sitting on, so we're way up in the air.

Siri E-B: That's partly because the way that they do flood forecasting and flood mapping indicates that even though we've had some pretty sizable floods, we still haven't seen what they would currently consider to be a 100 year event. The scenario Jason just described, where we would have to do all sorts of crazy things to get our product up high in the cooler, would be what we would be dealing with in 100 year flood. I think we all know all bets are off when it comes to weather events, but there is sort of a range of what's possible as far as how high the water can go. We probably will never see a flood that's several feet higher than the biggest one we've already seen. There's sort of this range of what we expect to ever have to deal with, that we've made peace with.

Chris B: Good. That's good that you've made peace with that. How did you guys' farm get started? I mean, you said you bought it seven years ago, land isn't cheap in King County.

Siri E-B: Yeah. Jason and I were both in grad school, this was in 2005/2006, and I was sort of pondering my future. We had done some traveling in Europe, and growing a big vegetable garden in our back yard, living in Seattle at the time. I got a chance opportunity to work on a farm for a summer, where the grower I met had a farmer's market. From that one year internship, or not even a year, a couple of months during the summer, I met another land owner on the same road, who was essentially looking for a business partner to start a farm with.

So, he had already invested in a greenhouse and a tractor, and he had some fields that he was working and sort of growing stuff literally just to watch it grow, not marketing anything and really never even leaving his farm. That was



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our first farming situation. We farmed there in a partnership, kind of a creative lease partnership with the land owner, who was also a partner in our business. We farmed there for four years without having to make any significant investment. You know, we weren't paying a huge amount of rent. We would sort of wait til the end of the year and figure out how much money we made, and then arrange rent that way. We didn't have to spend a lot of money on infrastructure or equipment.

After four years, we had really built a pretty substantial amount of business reputation. We had maybe 100 or so CSA members, we were selling to 15 restaurants, we were at farmer's markets. So, when it was time for that partnership to die a natural death, that's when we had to decide whether we were going to invest in buying our own land and continue farming or really just kind of like go back to boring, normal life. So, we got really lucky with the farm that we ended up buying, but, it is true, land prices here are really expensive. We're really close to Seattle, we're only a half an hour drive away, so I think that it's down to that, with the fact that we have such ready access to a really flourishing metropolitan area that has a large appetite for locally grown produce.

I think we get a pretty good price for what we grow, but our cost of living is definitely higher than if we were a few hours away from the city.

Chris B: Why did you guys decide to farm in Seattle? What brought you to that area?

Jason S: As the name of our farm implies, we are both from the Seattle area. I was actually born north of Boston, but Siri and I both graduated from the same high school, Garfield High School, that my grandmother graduated from. Our moms both went to a high school in Seattle, the same one that you went to, Chris, Roosevelt.

Chris B: Oh, wow.

Jason S: Yeah. Kind of a trip, huh? So, we have been, we were high school sweethearts, we have been together since we were like prepubescent, basically. Not really. We didn't really choose the Seattle area as much as we just never wanted to leave it. We both love living here, we love ... It's just been a really fantastic place, and so when Siri had this opportunity to farm with this guy, our farm started. I think that one of the ways that our farm was able to sort of get going more easily than I think some other people, is that we had so many connections. Siri sent out an email just to everybody that we know and said, "Hey, I'm starting a farm. Join my CSA." When you've gone to grade school, middle school, high school, college, grad school in the same area, and all of your family is in the area, you can cast an extremely wide net of potential customers to get started.

Then, I think that got the ball rolling. I think it is, in large part, because of the long standing connection we have to the area. I don't think that we have ever considered farming elsewhere.

Chris B: So, having grown up in Seattle, and having periodically in my life kind of circled back to Seattle ... In fact, my mom and my stepdad and my sister all still live in the area. You know, we thought about farming there, and thought about



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starting a farm there, before returning to Iowa and doing it there. But, I have to ask, you know, so you guys, Garfield High School, one of two Latin programs in Seattle. Were you guys Latin students?

Siri E-B: Yes, we were Latin students. Jason and I, and two of our still to this day good friends, were the class of '97 Latin Club nerds of Garfield High School.

Chris B: I love it. I love it. Okay. This is so off of farming, but, you know, I was a Latin Club nerd too, all four years that I was in school. In fact, it was a trip to the National Latin Club Convention in Bloomington, Indiana, that was my first time that I'd ever been to the Midwest and the first time I'd ever seen a real thunderstorm and fireflies. Have you guys ever seen fireflies?

Siri E-B: I've never seen a firefly. I'm like such a West Coaster. I barely ever even leave Western Washington.

Chris B: You've got to come visit.

Jason S: I have seen fireflies, but not in Seattle.

Chris B: Siri, you've got to come visit. It's totally worth the trip.

Siri E-B: It does sound very magical. But only in the summer, right? And who can leave their farm in the summer?

Chris B: True. True enough. So, why farming? What was it that ... I mean, Latin Club, Garfield High School, you talked about being in grad school. How did you get from there to a vegetable farm in the Snoqualmie River Valley?

Siri E-B: That's a great question and I actually don't really have a clear answer for it. I think I've been sort of searching my whole life for something that felt like it would give back instead of make the world worse, and that's what got me, after I finished college, sitting on the couch for a summer being like, "What kind of job am I going to do that's not going to make me feel like crap all the time?" I went back to grad school for public administration - I have a masters in public administration from the University of Washington - with the goal in mind of working in government or nonprofit.

I think I'm very, very lucky that I got the chance to work on the farm when I did. Now, it seems like there's farming opportunities. Every campus in the US seems like they have a college farm, there's tons of classes in sustainable agriculture and food systems. When I was in college, there was none of that. The idea that you could go work on a farm was pretty ... Like I'd never heard of that. So, I feel really thankful that I found farming when I did. For me, I'm kind of ... What's the word that we use to describe ourselves, Jason? Pathologically anti-authoritarian. So, I don't ever want to work for anybody else, I don't like people telling me what to do, but I also didn't want to go into something like sales and start a small business just selling whatever.

I really love farming because I'm growing food, something that everybody needs. I think in the small farming movement, we are looking for a way to do food production with a lighter footprint on the earth. Even though I think I'm a



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lot less idealistic than when I started out, I still feel like, on the whole, I'm going to leave the world a little bit better than how I found it, and also nobody tells me what to do.

Chris B: Jason, did you just follow Siri, or was this something that captivated your imagination as well?

Jason S: No, I definitely just followed Siri. The first year that we had this farm, Siri started it, and I actually was an attorney very, very briefly. So, I worked. When we sat down and Siri's like, "Should I do this?" I was like, "Well, I'm going to have a job where I make money, so what a great opportunity for you to like, you know, see if this is the thing that you've been looking for for all these years." I, that year, was sitting in an office, being bored and hating my job, and Siri was having so much fun and was just incredibly energized about what she was doing. I was like, "Wow, I wish I was doing that."

So, the next year, I quit my job and I signed on to be a part of something that seemed really cool. Then, by the end of our tenure at the place where we were renting, I was fully invested and have never really looked back. But, I definitely got into it not because I was passionate about farming, but because I just was looking for something that was more exciting than a desk job.

Chris B: That's a pretty low bar. Your farm actually came to my attention at first because you guys grow a lot of chicories. You specialize in heirloom Italian varieties. What caused you guys to head in that direction?

Jason S: There's so many different places to start. So, we worked on a farm in Italy before we went to grad school. On this farm, it was an olive orchard, it wasn't a vegetable farm, but they had a lovely vegetable garden that we would go out and harvest food from, which sort of turned into ... We got back to Seattle and we would go to the grocery store, and a lot of the stuff was accessible, but it was either expensive or the quality wasn't any good. We were like, "Let's just grow it ourselves."

So, my dad's side of the family is Italian, I studied Italian in college, we've been to Italy a whole bunch, so we've got an affinity for the language and the food. I think the sort of cooking element of the food scene is one of the things that sort of brought us into farming. Then, a friend of ours, who was a chef, we sat down with him the first year and he was like, "You should grow this, you should grow this, you should grow this." We were going through the Seeds from Italy catalog, and we started growing all this Italian stuff.

It turned out we really loved eating it, and loved the story of chicories in general. I mean, I don't know how much you know about it, Chris, but all of the different radicchios are sort of ... Like the modern seed breeding sort of happened in Belgium, and this Belgian guy went to Northern Italy and started showing people how to do the more rapid, modern selection process. Each one of these towns in the Veneto region of Italy selected their own strain, like from a wild chicory to what we know. They're so different and they're all unique to a particular town or area within a state in Italy.



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So, in addition to being beautiful and delicious, they have a cool history. Then, on top of that, they grow really well for us here. I think our climate in the Snoqualmie Valley must be similar enough to that of the Po River Valley in Italy that it works for us. It's, I think, partially, having all that has driven a lot of our restaurant sales, which have turned into 60% of our income these days.

Chris B: Yes, I didn't realize that all of the names of the different varieties of chicory were that closely associated with different regions or different towns in Italy.

Jason S: Treviso is a town, Castelfranco's a town, Verona's a town, Chioggia's a town. Each one of the strains that you're familiar with is actually ... It's radicchio di Treviso, it's the radicchio of Treviso, and the other one's radicchio di Castelfranco. Each one of those towns has like a little festival celebrating their type of radicchio. It's really cool.

Siri E-B: This is a nice little tie in with our shared love of the classic and the Latin language. When we first started growing these chicories that we were buying from Seeds from Italy, the Franchi brand, that are imported for distribution here in the States, I just bought like every variety that they offered in the catalog. Because I had a background in Latin and speak a little bit of Italian, I was able to decipher some of the nomenclature that I think even a lot of other folks who were growing radicchio in the States at the time hadn't quite figured out the difference between *precoce* and *tardive* and...

There's such amazing specialization in these varieties in Northern Italy that they're really bred not just as different types, but different times of year, down to even just like there's one for a July harvest, an August harvest, a winter time harvest. So, we did a ton of trialing, but also sort of sleuthing through what all of the different words on the seed packet even meant, to try to figure out which ones would actually grow and form a head at the time of year that we were hoping to harvest.

So, we're now working a little bit with John Navazio who is the breeder at Johnny's right now. He's been working on radicchio varieties and winter hardy radicchio with some other growers in the Pacific Northwest for quite a few years. He came out to visit our farm over the winter, and we got to show him, and help him actually figure out some of the naming stuff that he hadn't fully put together in the past. So, it's pretty cool that the language thing can be an avenue to success with vegetable growing.

Chris B: I'm having such flashbacks to 1988, in Latin class, and going, " Latin is not really a dead language, it's not really a dead language."

Siri E-B: Yeah, there's the *precoce* and there's the *precossimo*, right? There's the early and there's the super early.

Chris B: Oh, okay, we're not going to go down that road 'cause I have a feeling that the vast majority of our listeners would find this tremendously boring if we turn this into a Latin class.



So, now, the chicories, are you doing some of the forcing varieties as well? I understand that ... I don't know this firsthand. I have some experience with Belgian endive, but of course that's not really an Italian chicory, or at least I wouldn't think of it as being an Italian chicory. But, I understand that that's a large portion of kind of the chicory culture in Northern Italy.

Jason S: So, the last couple of years, we have grown ... The Treviso tardivo is the forcing strain within the Treviso genus I guess, or whatever you want to call it. That's the one where we dig up the whole plant, bring it indoors in the dark, and then it grows ... Like, because you've dug up the root and all, it continues to grow, and in the dark it works the same way that they do Belgian endive. In Northern Italy they have hot springs, and so they're putting the roots in warm water while the leaves are still outside in the cold air to force the growing. Belgian endives, I think they put them in sand, or they put them in just pools of water, or nothing at all.

We have done that to varying degrees of success over the years. I think what we're trialing this year is we're actually ... We found that we've had the nicest ones are the ones that we just left in the field and walked away from. I don't know if it's because it's always cloudy here in the winter, but they end up looking pretty well blanched in the heart, and they look the nicest. We get the biggest ones when we haven't brought them in, although I think ... I know you interviewed Chris Field from Camp Rosso Farm a while ago. He has a much nicer ... He has invested a lot in the forcing set up, and I'm sure his results are better than ours.

But, ultimately, what it is, you know, it's going from sort of taking energy from the soil for growth, and then whatever it's stored up in the root that it's putting on new growth. When you do it in the dark, you get like a darker red on the leaf and a lighter white on the rim of each leaf.

Chris B: What other Italian vegetables are you growing? Have you branched out beyond just the chicories?

Siri E-B: In reality, what we've done is actually scaled back, not specifically on specialty stuff, but as our farm has grown, and we've gotten older and jaded and had children, I think we've just looked for ways to simplify. The fact that there is such a big demand for the radicchio, and we seem to do a good job, and we really love it, we've more specialized than sort of branched out. When we started out, you know, we grew just a little bit of everything, which I think is pretty typical for new farmers getting started. You know, try to see what people like, what does well, and you can really drive yourself crazy trying to be an expert at 100 different crops.

So, we still have a very diverse farm because we have the CSA, but as far as every little different novelty thing, we've gone the opposite direction in the last four or five years. Sorry if that's not exciting.

Chris B: It's not that exciting, but it's also reality, right? I mean, that is ... I remember when at our farm, we were very identified with carrots. At one point, I figured out that we were making so much more money on beets per pound, in terms of



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our net, not our gross. I got really excited about growing beets and less excited about growing carrots, even though that was the vegetable that was on our truck. You know, I think that is just part of the reality of growing older and of maturing the farm business.

Siri E-B: We don't have the problem of romanticizing what we do. We're business people and trying to make good business decisions, and so we're not afraid to give up on something that is maybe not profitable, even if it's something we really love. I will say the things I've always shed a tear about is broccoli raab or *cime di rapa*. I just loved, love it. It's not a profitable crop for us by any stretch of the imagination, but I have a fantasy about having a little backyard garden so I can grow and eat that stuff ... you know.

Chris B: I'm going to let you in on a hint, Siri, that is once you've farmed, having a little backyard garden is almost impossible because you're going to try to grow like a foot of broccoli rabe, and it's just not going to work because you're going to plant 20 feet of broccoli rabe, and then you'll have more than anybody could possibly use.

Siri E-B: Right. Well, I challenge you. I could eat twenty row-feet of broccoli rabe probably in a week, but ...

Chris B: Okay.

Siri E-B: I get your point.

Chris B: Now, you said that restaurants are 60% of your sales right now. That's a huge percentage in restaurants. It seems like kind of the opposite of what I usually hear from farms that have a CSA, and a farmer's market and an on farm stand. I'm curious why you've continued to keep those other marketplaces open when the restaurants are such a successful outlet for you?

Siri E-B: Oh, that's a great question. As restaurant sales have grown, we've asked a lot of tough questions about the other outlets that we do maintain. We've been steadily scaling back our farmer's market presence, because when we look at the amount of labor involved with market attendance compared to driving a route and dropping off orders at restaurants, or even the CSA, it's just a much more time consuming way to sell an individual head of lettuce or a bunch of carrots. So, markets are kind of fading into the past for us, but we really like the complement of restaurants and CSA, and then having something like that farm stand or farmer's market to sort of take the overflow.

As much as we try to have really a consistent supply of any given crop for restaurants from week to week so that the same items are always appearing on our fresh sheet, it's nice to have a second, if not a second and third outlet to sort of take up any excess or vice versa. So, for us, the way the interplay of those three types of sales outlets has worked has been really great. I think we have a very efficient ratio of what we grow to what we sell. There's very little waste that goes on on our farm, even though we continue to be a ... I don't know if you call 15 acres medium size, but I think we end up selling a high percentage of what we grow compared to other farms of our size.



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I think if you're only doing one type of sale, whether it's just restaurants or just CSA, it's a lot easier to end up with a glut of something that you don't really have another way to move. With the fresh sheet, we can sort of play with pricing and say, "Oh, wow. We grew twice as much cauliflower as we needed and we don't want to overload the CSA. We can lower the price on cauliflower and move it to restaurants." Or we can say, "You know, we just have an extra couple of hundred pounds of cauliflower this week and we can keep the price high on the fresh sheet." It's a nice way to sort of be really efficient with product.

Chris B: How many restaurants are you selling to?

Jason S: I think that we've invoiced 100 different restaurants this year.

Chris B: Wow. You said you've invoiced 100 different restaurants this year, it doesn't sound like there's 100 different restaurants on your regular delivery route.

Jason S: No, we usually deliver ... We do two delivery routes a week, and there's usually between 25 and 30 stops on Wednesday and 15 and 20 on Saturday. Probably, between Wednesday and Saturday, 10 of the Saturday delivery, about half, also ordered on Wednesday. We're probably delivering to like 40 unique restaurants a week.

Chris B: Are you guys doing anything interesting as far as an order management system for the restaurants?

Jason S: No. I think we're like technologically pretty behind the times. We actually talk about this a lot. I send out an email. You know, they email me back or they text me back. I put it into an Excel spreadsheet to collate, you know, that generates our harvest list. Likewise, Siri communicates with the CSA by email, we don't take credit card payments. We sort of have thrown out the idea that if you go and you get one of these fancy order online, look like a slick, you know, modern business, that it actually, you lose some of the cachet of being a quaint, little podunk vegetable farm, which sometimes, you know, I think maybe that's part of what people are buying. You know, it's not just the vegetables, but it's the story. As soon as you start looking too slick, then the story starts to not seem like what people project it to be.

Chris B: I'm curious when you talk about maintaining that image of quaintness and sort of down-home, and all of those other things, do you feel like sometimes that holds you back in terms of what you could accomplish, or forces you into inefficient systems on the farm?

Jason S: That is a good question. No, I don't think so. Do you, Siri?

Siri E-B: I don't think so either. It's something we actually talk about quite a bit. We're very open to time saving, efficiency gaining innovations. I mean, we've bought a lot of tools that have created big gains in efficiency for the farm, we're not afraid to embrace new things. But, when it comes to the way that we communicate with our customers, whether it's our CSA customers or a restaurant account, I really think it's working. The way we're doing it now is



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working really well for us. We get our respective tasks ... I manage our CSA, Jason handles all of our restaurant bills, and we get the job done that it takes to keep it moving pretty quickly every week. Yeah, it's just not an area that we've identified as something that we need to change. Personally, I kind of like it. I don't love getting MailChimp emails. I'm much less likely to read that than I am to read something that's just written in plain type from somebody.

Jason S: Yeah. I'd just like to dovetail onto what Siri said. You couldn't remember what word I used... I used the word Podunk, which actually I think I was sort of being self-deprecating when I said that. It's just what Siri said about MailChimp, I think that part of the reason that people buy from us is the relationship. We're sort of personal friends with a whole bunch of the shops that we work with, we're personal friends with a lot of our CSA members, and by sending an actual email rather than through a service, it does have more of a familiar, friendly vibe than a slick Silicon Valley startup web email service does. I actually think that that personal connection is one of the things that drives sales for us.

Chris B: I suppose especially in a place like Seattle, where so many things are kind of high tech and low touch, that might be a niche there that really does make sense.

Siri E-B: Well, so far so good. We're not planning on changing it. You know, we also weren't planning on getting a whole lot bigger than our current size. I think, you know, if we were suddenly going to double in size, I think there are points beyond which you can't continue to use such a low tech system, but, at this point, we don't see ourselves going there. So, you know, stay the course.

Chris B: Are you guys handling your own distribution into Seattle?

Jason S: Yes. We do. We have a couple of delivery vans and we have our workers that do it. It's actually funny, Siri and I were talking about this, about what we think our farm is doing good at and what our farm is not doing good at. We think doing our own distribution is something that I think we do a pretty good job with. You know, there's all these food hubs, and co-ops and things popping up. I'm actually on the board of a grower's co-op here in the valley, and a lot of the selling points, why you would want to sell to a food hub or a co-op, is because the distribution and delivery is so hard, or so costly, or so time consuming, or whatever.

I think, in part, it's because we're so close to Seattle, and, in part, it's because I think we always basically are sending a full van in. But, for the local food hubs that we sometimes sell to, they pack on almost 30% on top of our sales price, or like the price that the customer sees, because that's what it costs them to run their distribution, and billing and all that stuff. We break it down, we're like, we're spending more like 4% or 5% of the total sale on the cost of the driver, and invoicing, and doing all that stuff. So, when we sort of compare, you know, should we sell to a food hub or should we keep doing what we're doing, we realize doing our own distribution is very efficient for us.

Chris B: And, again, with having that kind of high touch, hands on relationship's probably really important for you as well.



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- Jason S: Yes. I think having it be one of our people or me doing the deliveries, chatting them up and being like, "Oh, yeah, this crop is going to be ready soon. I know that last year you were really into buying whatever, it'll be back in another week or whatever." You know, that's the kind of thing that you can't ... It's much harder to outsource. I'm not saying you can't, but it's definitely more difficult.
- Chris B: When you guys were getting started, you mentioned that Siri was able to reach out and contact a lot of your friends and your community members from all of the years that you were in school there and the community that you had built before you started farming. Did that include the restaurant accounts, or has that been something you guys have worked to pick up as your farm has grown?
- Siri E-B: It's been a little bit of both. A lot of our success is attributable to just being in the right place at the right time. We got started in 2007, right at the beginning of the sort of second wave of the local food movement. We did have some connections in the restaurant world, but then we also just made some new connections by being at the farmer's market and having some unusual products. One of the customers that has been with us since our very first year is a vegetarian restaurant in Seattle that found us at the farmer's market, really liked our pea vines, and has now been a very good customer for 11 years. So, it's a little bit of both, you know?
- The nice thing about working with restaurants, especially when ... Well, this is when we were young and childless, so we'd dine out a lot, getting to know the people cooking, not just the restaurant owner or the head chef, but the sous chef or somebody else working in the kitchen, and then when they move on to another restaurant, they would bring our business with them. So, it's been a pretty organic growth in our restaurant sales.
- Chris B: [00:37:30] Is there something special that you do to cultivate those restaurant sales? Because I would think in Seattle that you would have a lot of competition for that. I mean, there's no lack of small, local vegetable farms in the area west of the Cascade.
- Jason S: Yeah, that is a darn good question. We sort of marvel a lot at how rapidly our restaurant sales have grown over the years and how ... We had this scenario this summer where we were understaffed, and our restaurant orders were ... We kept getting larger orders than we could deal with, and I was like, "I'm going to raise the price and try and get some people to stop ordering from us." I raised a whole bunch of our prices and our orders didn't shrink at all. Yeah, right?
- Chris B: I love it. So much for supply and demand, right?
- Jason S: Right. Well, I mean, it just shows that demand is more elastic than we thought.
- Chris B: All right. Spoken like a grad student. Nicely done.
- Jason S: Yeah. Right, thanks. I hope I got that right. I might have said it backwards. But, you know, I mean, so we ... I mean, partially, I think if we're doing anything special to cultivate the restaurant accounts, part of my answer is no. We, for a while, have been trying to figure out how to slow them down. When we said,



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"Hey, we don't want to make our farm any bigger," and restaurant sales kept growing, we were like we can either cap that or start cutting out other ways that we sell.

Siri eluded to we're going to leave the last farmer's market that we have been doing next year, so we're going to cut that out. But, even still, it's hard to imagine that restaurant sales won't continue to climb, just because of the way it works. I think, when it comes down to why that is, it's kind of really basic stuff. It's like I send the fresh sheet out exactly the same day every week, we always deliver what we say we're going to deliver, and I'm always communicating with all of our accounts about if we're short on something, or if we have extra stuff I'm texting them and saying, "Hey, I've got 15 pounds of extra cauliflower. I know you guys have been ordering it, do you want it?" You know, that kind of stuff.

I think it's customer service as much as anything else. In part, it's just because I think there's a lot of other farms that are also selling to restaurants in the area, but I think because we started earlier than most of them that we're generally competing with, you know, it's like Siri said, like the sous chef at this restaurant goes and becomes the head chef at another restaurant and they bring you with them. So, it's sort of like a virally spreading business. So, the longer you've been around, the more that like exponential growth, the more time you've had for the accounts to grow.

Chris B: I get a lot of questions about restaurant sales, and I think you really just hit on something that was really important, and that is you send out the fresh sheet on the same day at the same time every week, you stay in communication with your customers, you deliver what you say you're going to deliver, you ... Yeah. I mean, that's really it, isn't it?

Jason S: I think it is. It's actually, when I hear, you know, I get texts from my restaurants, they're like, "Oh, so-and-so shorted me this, do you have 25 pounds of beets," or, "I got this stuff, but they only gave me half, I got shorted," or they didn't bring it. Like, we're the go-to farm when other people don't follow through. I mean, it actually really blows my mind. If we're coming up short on something, I'm always like, the day ahead, I'm like, "Hey, we're short on this. Can I sub this thing?" or just, you know? I guess, I mean, I don't know, it's putting myself in their shoes and imagining how shitty it is to be, you know, at 4 o'clock and you're trying to prep stuff and an important component of your dish doesn't show up. I don't ever want to put one of our accounts in that sort of bind, and so I guess we just really try to get ahead on that kind of communication so that we never let anybody down. Under promise and over deliver.

Chris B: What does your workflow look like when you're working with restaurants? When are you sending out the fresh sheet, when do you get the orders in, when are you doing the harvesting, and how does that relate to loading up the deliveries and getting those out the door?

Jason S: That's a good question. We're really systematized when it comes to that portion of our farm. I send out my fresh sheet on Wednesdays and Saturdays, which are also our delivery days. So, if we start the week on Wednesday, we're sending out a truck that morning to do deliveries and I'm sending out a fresh sheet for



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people to order for the Saturday. We're harvesting and packing on Friday, delivering on Saturday, and then I start the process again. I send the fresh sheet out Saturday for harvesting and packing on Tuesday for Wednesday delivery.

Siri E-B: People just place their orders by email, so Jason gets up early on Tuesday and Saturday to input the last orders that have come in, collate them in the spreadsheet so we can print it out and have a tick list for the crew. You know, in the summer, the vast majority of our crops are picked to order the day before they get delivered, so we're not doing a ton of just like go out and harvest a bunch of cases of chard and then pull them off the shelf, it's like almost exclusively picked to order. But, at this point in the year, we're mostly just pulling anything that is being ordered, it's coming out of storage.

So, the workflow itself really is pretty seasonal. But, in the summer, our Tuesday harvest, which is our biggest harvest of the week, is kind of crazy. The day can go pretty long because we can't predict who's going to order. If a couple of those people who are not regulars all decide to order on the same week, it can be a pretty crazy day. We start at seven, we pick all the loose cut, leafy, prone to wilt items first thing. That stuff goes in and starts getting processed, and then, you know, it's just going down the list from most tender to most hardy. Our day can go as late as six. on harvest days.

That's sort of the thing that I think is like our biggest challenge in our week, is we can't just bring on an extra staff person necessarily to cover that Tuesday. That's why Jason was talking before about trying to get a handle on our restaurant growth. We don't want to say no to people, but we have to figure out a way to meet the challenge every Tuesday. It's kind of intimidating.

Chris B: [00:44:00] I'm imagining that when you have a Tuesday like what you just described, where several extra restaurants place orders, people that aren't ordering every week, and then all of a sudden you get a huge surge, that must result occasionally in product shortages. How do you guys manage that?

Jason S: You know, I'm really conservative about what I put on the fresh sheet. I just hate being in the position of having to tell somebody that we don't have something. So, as we've sort of evolved, and as restaurants have become a larger and larger share of the business, we sort of design the farm around the CSA, where we're like CSA gets the first pick. When the cauliflower's on, like we pick 300 heads of cauliflower and those go to the CSA, and then we start selling the excess once we check the cauliflower box for the CSA.

What that's driven us to do is take some items and just grow them in really large quantities so that we can feel pretty confident that we'll always have enough. Then, when we have that excess, if we put it in the CSA and then we are starting the restaurant cycle and it looks like there's still excess, we can put it in the CSA again as a sort of way to manage the overflow. Then, when we do come up with a shortage, I just always, I look and see who ordered last, then I sort of try and be extremely fair.

You know, I'm not going to play favorites with a restaurant just because they're a big account. If they got their order in last, then I say, "I'm sorry. These people, they were more on time so they got the last item," and I just work backwards,



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like chronologically, to just say, "Hey, sorry we didn't manage to get 30 pounds of broccoli for you. Just heads up, or you should order from somebody else." But, it doesn't happen that much, honestly.

Siri E-B: [crosstalk 00:45:50]. We're usually pretty on top of it. You know, a lot of our crew have been with us for many years, and so the people who sort of specialize in different crops are ... You know, we have a really good system for getting that information, oh, we're going to have, you know, the broccoli's on, we're going to have a ton of broccoli, and then deciding collectively how to manage it. When there are those sort of awkward in between things, where it's not enough to list it on the fresh sheet, but we know we have sort of limited quantity that doesn't have another home to go to, like in the CSA or to a market, then we know our regular restaurant accounts well enough to know who is most likely to want that, like who could put broccoli on their menu, who wants something special this week. Jason will reach out and make individual calls and texts, try to move just a little bit of something.

Sometimes, especially with tomatoes, we really manage tomatoes tightly because, in the Northwest, they don't grow amazingly well here. We do them all in high tunnels and we're always trying to get a pound of tomatoes to the CSA in the height of the summer. Tomatoes are one of the few crops that we'll just load flat on the restaurant delivery van, and they'll sell them off the truck. That's another way where we have something that's kind of tricky to manage supply, we won't even list it on the fresh sheet, but we'll still sell it to restaurants.

Chris B: This is kind of a fiddly question, but when you talk about loading stuff onto the van, with 40 different restaurants you might be dropping off at in any given week, that's got to be pretty tightly organized. In a delivery truck, if you're sending out a full truck, for that to all work, and now you're talking about having tomatoes that you're also selling off of the back of the truck, can you tell us a little bit about how you get all of that organized?

Jason S: Yeah. You know, it's funny, I've never thought about that as being ... It's a part of the delivery day that takes a pretty ... It takes a decent amount of time. In the wash station, where all of the lettuce comes in, all the lettuce gets boxed up, and the boxes of lettuce go on a pallet. They're all labeled for each restaurant, but they're not organized by the route. When the delivery driver ... Like we pull all the pallets out in the morning and then we organize all the boxes by restaurant. We have pallets on the floor, we've got tables, and we start sorting them.

It sort of serves two functions. One, the driver's going down and checking to make sure everything that is on our product list actually ended up in a box. You know, we catch mistakes that way. Then we load the van, starting with the last stop, and then working our way so that when you open the door at your first stop, the first restaurant's boxes are the ones in the back, and then as you pull those out, the next restaurant's boxes are now the farthest in the back.

Siri E-B: I'll just say that, to Jason's credit, he also has the tick list that our crew uses to harvest and pack on Tuesdays is also organized in order of the route. So, he's got this like crazy spreadsheet that he can sort of expand and collapse, that has every account that's ever bought from us, and in order of where they would go



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on the truck. So, that's built into the system, so when the delivery driver on Wednesday morning is loading the truck, it's already done in order. They can work down the list and pack from last to first off the same sheet, it's not a separate system.

Jason S: Because we're going to pick all of the arugula, and head lettuce, and salad mix first, 'cause it's the most prone to wilting. So, the last restaurant to get delivered to might have ordered tons of lettuce and arugula, and so as the pallets go into the cooler, all of the restaurant stuff is sort of a jumble at the end of the harvest day. It gets sorted and organized by the order of delivery on the morning on delivery.

Chris B: As the guy who used to load the delivery van at Rockspring Farm, I found that a lot of times everybody would question like how long it took. You know, 'cause sometimes it was an hour, an hour and a half, to get everything fit into the van, in the right order, so that as I was driving that Sprinter through the twin cities, I was able to pull everything off with a minimum of fuss. We were talking about maybe 10 or 11 stops, you're talking about 40.

Jason S: More like 30 on our big delivery day. But, yeah. I mean, basically, it's like if you can imagine it's all a jumble in the cooler, we pull it out of the cooler, and then we start organizing. We basically make a pile of boxes that's for restaurant one, and a pile of boxes for restaurant two, and a pile of boxes for restaurant three. We go down the list, make sure that everything's that supposed to be going to restaurant one has in fact been packed for restaurant one, and then restaurant one's order goes into the van. Or, we should say restaurant 30 goes into the van first, and then restaurant 29, and then restaurant 28, and so on and so forth until you get to restaurant one, your first stop.

It gets sorted, like you said, it takes an hour probably, at least, on the morning that we do delivery, to sort everything out.

Chris B: Are you guys doing a standardized case pack? When somebody orders radicchio, is it always 10 pounds of radicchio, or can one restaurant order 6 pounds and another order 8 pounds and another order 13 pounds?

Jason S: For better or worse, it's the latter. People can order ... I have cases, so the way that I try and structure our prices is that, you know, we say, "About how much Treviso fits in a box? Okay, it's 15 pounds. I want to sell a 15 pound case of Treviso." That's the easiest way to pack and sell stuff. But, I also have ... People order all nonstandard sizes and we accommodate them.

Chris B: Do you charge more for nonstandard sizes?

Jason S: I don't, but I should.

Siri E-B: In a way though, we do, because if you order a standard case count, then you get a discounted price. I mean, if you're just ordering three each of 10 different things, then you're going to pay close to market price, but the discounts kick in when you order in a quantity that's more convenient for us to pack.

Chris B: Do you have a minimum order to make a delivery?



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Jason S: I don't. That's actually something that... So, I've always thought, you know, I'd rather have a carrot than a stick as far as motivation, so what I do is, for orders over \$100, I give a 10% discount. Just like 10% off of everything if they crack \$100. We're friends with a lot of people who have relatively small restaurants, and I don't want to say, "No, you've got to order, whatever, \$75/\$100 just to work with me." I try and encourage them to order more by making it a better price if they do crack that \$100 threshold.

There have been restaurants who are either in a really inconvenient location, or who have been hard to work with, who I have told that they have to meet a certain minimum, in part just because it's either cost us so much money to drive there, or whatever.

Chris B: What kind of planning work do you do with your chefs?

Jason S: Shockingly little, actually. For quite a few years, I would try and send out emails, say, "Hey, what are you interested in? What could we do better, what could we do worse?" I never really managed to engage with anybody about varieties, or really anything. People just said, "Oh, you know, we like what you're doing." You know, "Keep it up." I've sort of given up on trying to work specifically with anybody.

Although, that being said, we did have one account this year who just blew us up, and we are talking about ways that we can work with them to try and ... I was actually drafting an email to them today, to try and say, "Hey, you guys bought a lot of stuff from us. How can we make this work more smoothly next year?"

Siri E-B: And I just say we don't do any sort of preseason, you know, sit down with chefs to help us figure out how much to grow, what varieties, but I think we actually are doing that sort of market research all the time. You know, we're getting feedback in real time from folks, even if it's just in the form of like, "Oh, wow, this is really awesome. I want to buy a lot more of it."

I think, also, just attending farmer's markets in person for so many years ... I mean, we did the farmer's market grind for 10 years, and had tons of interactions with home cooks and restaurant cooks who'd come to the market. I think we've developed a pretty good sense for what people want or what sort of quality expectations. Yeah, I feel pretty good about how we get the information that we need to make good choices about crop planning and stuff like that.

Chris B: With that, we're going to stop here, take a quick break, get a word from a couple of sponsors, and then we'll be right back with Siri Erickson-Brown and Jason Salvo from Local Roots Farm in Duvall, Washington.

Announcement: Perennial support for the Farmer to Farmer Podcast is provided by BCS America. BCS two wheel tractors are real farming equipment for real farmers, and with PTO driven attachments like rototillers, flail mowers, rotary plows, power harrows, log splitters, snow throwers, even a utility trailer and a new water transfer pump, you've got the tools you need to get jobs done across the farm and across the homestead. On my own farm, we went through a number



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of so-called solutions for mowing and tilling before we finally got smart and bought a BCS. Even though we owned a four wheel tractor to manage our 20 acres of vegetables, that BCS tackled jobs that we simply couldn't do with a larger machine, from mowing steep slopes and around trees to working in our high tunnels. Plus, they're gear driven for years of dependable service. Check out [BCSAmerica.com](http://BCSAmerica.com) to see the full line up of tractors and attachments, plus videos of BCS in action.

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Chris B: And we're back with Siri Erickson-Brown and Jason Salvo from Local Roots Farm in Duvall, Washington. You know, as we talked in the first part of the show, a couple of things came out about, I don't know, some things that seemed like you're making some changes in the farm, you've slowed down with the number of farmer's markets that you're doing and now you're getting ready to drop that last one, you've really taken a pretty deliberate and focused approach with how you're managing technology and information flows. Talk to me about that. How are you guys making these decisions?

Siri E-B: I was going to save this for the lightning round, but I'm willing to confess right now that my favorite tool on the farm is QuickBooks. I've always been a QuickBooks user, even before we started farming. I had a little bit of small business experience in high school and college even, working for people who ran small businesses, and so it's been a really easy, familiar thing for me to use. We just track a lot of stuff. I didn't work on a lot of farms before we started farming, and the way that I've compensated for that is just by obsessively documenting and then analyzing what works, whether it's planting dates, or how much is something we brought to a market and whether we sold it or not and at what price, and all that stuff.

So, we spend a lot of time looking at things from a lot of different angles with the aid of just a ton of data. I'm not a fan of just collecting information for the sake of information. I like to use it and I'm always sort of thinking about how we can, not just how we can change, but how we can do something better, how can we get a better outcome. So, that's kind of the high level way of talking about it, but it really comes down to just like making those decisions in the off season about how much of a crop we want to grow. You know, could we have sold more of this, was it a struggle, what are we going to cut back on, what are we going to grow more of. Obviously it starts in the winter, but then just like every



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week, just looking at like comparing sales to the same week the previous year, and trying to figure out if it's off, why, and if there's anything we can do about it. So, I spend a lot of time, actually, in that role.

Chris B: I find it particularly interesting that you say you spend a lot of time in that role, and it sounds like you spend a lot of time in that role as the season's going on. That's not an easy thing to do, because it never seems as important to do that kind of work in July as it does to do it in December.

Siri E-B: Yeah. I think maybe it's partly a factor of having had kids in the middle of the growth of our farm, in that when you're nursing a baby, you're sort of like, "Oh, what can I do? I could look something up on QuickBooks I guess." You know, trying to stay active, trying to maintain my role on the farm as a manager and decision maker while also being the parent of young kids, I think has pushed me in that direction. I've always had an affinity for it, but I think just this stage in our lives has, it's almost like sort of a silver lining to the whole motherhood thing that can really put a cramp in your farming style. But, it has given me the opportunity to spend more time diving into the books and the records for the last, I don't know, at this point it's been a lot of years. But, now it's part of my routine.

So, twice a week, Jason invoices restaurants. After that, I usually spend a half an hour or so kind of checking on reports. I'll always compare year to date sales for this year and the prior year, and track our progress over the year. That's really the one that I do on a weekly basis, and then I do some other stuff on more of a monthly basis. After we do payroll at the end of every month, I check on that, compare our payroll, you know, percent increase or decrease to sales increases or decreases. It's just kind of like a benchmark for ... I don't want to get to the end of the year and be surprised.

Chris B: Is that something that you engage Jason in, that monitoring and decision making process, as the year goes on? Or is that something you're really handling on your own, Siri?

Siri E-B: You know, it's a little bit of both. I will sort of be like, "Oh, hey, want to hear how we did this week?" You know, we talk about it. I think we have an interesting difference in how we like to approach change. Like I love change. I'm like, I want to change stuff all the time. Jason's like, "Don't change anything. Keep the ship on a steady course." So, I think for the most part it works, it balances out pretty well. I'm always looking for something we can tweak, and I think between ... You know, we kind of go back and forth a little about it and then land on probably the nice, happy medium solution to it.

Chris B: Jason, I just want to say I feel you, man. I feel you.

Jason S: There's a lot of dynamic tension we'll call it in our approach to a lot of things. A lot of times, you know, we'll get into an argument about whether we should do this or that, and then, in the end, we find some sort of middle path compromise, and it is hard fought. Then, in retrospect, we're like, "Oh, we're probably ..." Like, we got to this path, which is working, because we come at things from such different perspectives.



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Chris B: Has that always been the case? I mean, you guys, you talk about going from being high school sweethearts to then, if I'm counting the years right, about 10 years of not farming and doing other things, and now farming. I'm just curious, has that changed how your relationship works, now that you guys are on the farm?

Siri E-B: Oh, man. Who can answer such a question. I mean, yeah, I think that it's been a fairly chaotic last six or seven years for us. We described earlier our transition from being renting land to buying our own farm. In fact, that all happened in a really compressed amount of time, where we had a baby in October, in our last year as tenants, more or less got kicked off that farm. We were sort of drifting as homeless farmers with a brand new baby for a month or so, found out about the farm that we wanted to buy being on the market, and then pulled all that together, with a newborn, on a farm, with a very complicated USDA beginning farmer loan, and moved onto this property where like the house we live in had been uninhabited for seven years, so we were like squatting in a mouse infested house with a two month old. So, that was like how we started out seven years ago, on our own property. I honestly think it's almost been like we've been recovering from that ever since.

So, you know, it's hard to say what our relationship would look like with even maybe one of those stresses not in the picture. I think, you know, we've known each other for such a long time that we have a good combination of very, very open communication and dialogue and problem solving with each other, and also probably some pretty bad habits from dating since we were in high school. So, you know, we're making it work though, I think.

Chris B: You talked about having kids. You know, at this point, when you were going through this massive transition on your farm, having the first kid and now you've had another one, has that changed the farm for you guys?

Jason S: So, when Felix, our older one, was born ... The year before he was born was a very difficult year for us for a variety of reasons. You know, we were still working seven days a week, you know, 14 hour days, the sort of crazy grind that you do I guess when you're starting a new farm. It became really clear to us that, with a baby, we just, we weren't going to be available to do all of the little things that had to happen. I actually think that when Felix was born, we really deliberately said, "Hey, we have to make our farm bigger, so that we can hire more people, so that we aren't the ones doing all of the work all the time." That decision has actually sort of I think defined how our farm has been for the last seven years.

Chris B: It makes sense to me, what you're saying. It's certainly something that I found as our farm grew, that it was less of a burden on me year over year. But, trying to make those changes in the moment, with the kids, when your management capacities are all stretched to the breaking point, how did that go?

Siri E-B: Yeah. So, I think, in some ways, we're lucky that we have such a pronounced end to our growing season with the possibility of flooding. There's a solid two months where we're not farming. We're doing a lot of other things, we're planning and we're still selling, but, you know, we get to really reflect, and then



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make those changes or set the change in motion for the next year. The biggest thing that we keep coming back to, for the personal and farm sustainability, is our employees.

We've always felt really committed to the concept of helping other people get started in farming. We got such an amazing opportunity to start our farm with minimal investment, and really grow it in what was sort of an unofficial incubator setting. We had access to equipment and stuff that we didn't buy. So, when we eventually bought our own farm, we've been very deliberate in offering some more opportunities to our employees. We have a sort of standing offer to people who work for us for several years, who are interested in starting their own farms, that we'll offer them incubator space. I think just by putting that idea out there when we do our hiring and interviewing, I think we attract people who are committed to our farm and our mission. So, almost ironically, by saying, "We want to continue to be a training ground for new farmers who want to move on and start their own operations," in the process of that, we've also attracted some folks who know they don't want to start their own farms, but who do believe in the same approach to farming and personnel management that we do.

So, that's a really long winded answer, but I think we know we can't do it all ourselves. We know we can hire or train or support the talent of people who do a lot of stuff better than we do, and that's really the big picture management goal for us when it comes to staffing and farm organization.

Jason S: One of our primary goals with our farm is to grow not just vegetables, but other farmers. In fact, at the farmer's market that we're leaving, there are two farms, two people who worked for us who now have booths at that same market. We sort of feel like we've doubled our population at the market before we've left it. That's something that we feel really proud of. I actually think that a lot of that was an outgrowth of our recognition that we can't ... Once we had kids, we couldn't do it all. We had to get bigger, so we said, "Okay, let's grow more so that we can afford to pay more people." Once we started having people, we realized that keeping them around for an extended period of time was so valuable. You know, the brain drain that would happen at the end of every year, and then having to retrain was really emotionally time consuming.

As a believer in what we're doing from an intellectual standpoint, you know, if what we're doing is good, more of this is better, so let's get other people onboard. I think it does create an environment among our employees that they're like, "Hey, Jason and Siri are looking out for us and they're not just trying to make us work more so that they can make more money. They're saying, "Hey, we're going to take steps to sort of further your professional development,"" for lack of a better term, so that they can go on and start their own farms. I feel like I just said what Siri said, but less eloquently.

Chris B: Is there anything specific that you guys have done to promote keeping employees year after year, and to prevent that brain drain?

Siri E-B: You know, this is funny, Chris. We were actually talking about this very question at lunch today, before we started this interview. I actually, I don't think that there are any specific strategies that we have employed to try to retain



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employees, it's just sort of an overall ... We just want people to be happy to come to work. I shouldn't say that. There are some things that we do. We have our longest term employee, Kylie, make lunch for the crew every week day. It's just part of, you know, I guess kind of part of their compensation. Lunch comes with the job. So, super healthy, usually vegetarian, amazing hot lunch that she cooks every week day. We all eat lunch together. I think that's, you know ... We don't talk about work really, during lunch. We talk about life and other stuff, and funny videos on the internet. I think we just try to provide a relaxed environment where people really understand the why of everything that we're asking them to do. We're pretty transparent about all the finances, all of the crop planning decisions. You know, I think that whenever there is some deep unhappiness, we've managed to address it.

For the most part, I just think we're a nice place to work, people feel good about what they do. We get a lot of positive feedback from customers, from, you know ... I don't think we're doing anything magical, I think we're just trying to be good people.

Chris B: I think there's a certain magic to that.

Jason S: I think something that we are is we're really ... I think we believe, both of us very strongly, in honesty and transparency and just being totally open about everything that we're doing. You know, there's nothing that ... I think, you know, I've heard that there are some people who sort of feel concerned about sharing their finances with their employees, or any of that stuff, and we're just like everything is available to anybody. I think we try and make that really clear.

Then something that I think we both feel really strongly about is just fairness, you know? Whenever we're sort of talking about jobs, you know, it's never like ... I don't know how to put this. It's like we want to make sure that everybody gets the same opportunities and that nobody is getting one particular job that everybody hates, like it's never going to the same person. I think we defer a lot of that decision making and sort of stuff to the crew. I'd like to believe that they feel pretty autonomous about choosing the sort of jobs that they're doing, and sort of feeling like they can specialize and be really good at something, or if they prefer being a generalist and being able to do a little bit of everything, but that nobody is getting pigeon holed if they don't want to, and that everybody has access to the same opportunities for personal development and getting to do the jobs they like to do.

I mean, we try really hard to keep the work day reasonable. You know, I've heard a lot of your interviews with people who are like, "We only work four days a week." You know, we aspire to get there, and I think when you share that with everybody, we're like, "Hey, we don't want to be a 14 hour a day farm." ... We want to have predictable start and stop times so that our crew can make plans and have a life outside of working on our farm. I think because we always sort of put that idea out front, even if we don't live up to it, I think they know that we are thinking about them and care about them.

Chris B: With that, we're going to turn to our lightning round. But, first we're going to get a quick word from one more sponsor.



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**Chris B:** Jason, what's your favorite tool on the farm?

**Jason S:** That's a good question. I love the pallet fork attachment that goes on our tractors. As we've gotten bigger, being able to move things around on pallets has just streamlined things. I think that lifting heavy things is increasingly stupid to me, and so as long as there's a mechanical way to move heavy objects about, I just think it's the best way to go about all of that. You know, so much of what we're doing is just moving something from here to there and back again, so let's make it easy on ourselves.

**Chris B:** Siri, you already told us that QuickBooks is your favorite tool on the farm. Do you guys do anything special with QuickBooks to make sure that Jason is able to access the version and get invoices out, and you're still able to come in and follow up and get the reports that you need to follow up?

**Siri E-B:** Okay. True confession here. I just updated from the 2009 version of QuickBooks for Mac, which my bookkeeper, who helped me with payroll, was like, "How have you been able to keep using it? They haven't supported that for five years." So, you know, no, we don't do anything special because I don't think we know how. Jason just uses my computer to invoice, so it's all just one desktop software. We're not doing any online stuff, partly because actually the reporting functions are better on the desktop version, but that's the long answer. We just share a computer for that, for QuickBooks, and it works great.

**Chris B:** Jason, what's your favorite crop to grow?

**Jason S:** Well, I mean, it's ... I think it's Castelfranco radicchio is my favorite crop. Radicchio generically, Castelfranco radicchio specifically.

**Chris B:** That's the one that's white with the flecks of red and green on it?

**Jason S:** Yeah, it's more like ... Yeah, it's buttery yellow at its heart with flecks of red, exactly, and it's shaped like a ... It's tulip shaped, the head. They call it the Tulip of Winter.

**Chris B:** That's really nice. Siri, what's your favorite crop to grow?

**Siri E-B:** This is a really hard question. It's like, well, what month is it, because I have a new favorite. But, I think I'm going to have to say tomatoes. When we were home gardeners, I just got super into tomato chat rooms, geek world, and we grew tomatoes under a lamp, like a seed starting rig in a closet in our 400 square foot apartment in Seattle. I've just been a total tomato nerd for a long, long time, and I love to eat tomatoes. I think we do a pretty good job at them, even though we're in the gloomy Pacific Northwest.



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- Chris B: Not an easy crop in that neck of the woods. Siri, what's Jason's farming super power?
- Siri E-B: I think Jason's farming super power is a confidence that he can solve any problem. I mean, I don't know if I were left to my own devices how big we would have gotten or how highly mechanized we would have ever become. Tractors are not my passion, but Jason is just ... He can tackle any mechanical problem. Not to say he's like a whiz bang mechanic, but, you know, the first tractor we ever bought, we had to immediately replace ... What was that thing, Jason? The overrunning clutch something something?
- Siri E-B: Anyway, he just looked p the plans online, and got in there into the oil bath, and fixed it all up, and I was like, "Who is this guy? I didn't know you could do that."
- Chris B: Jason, what's Siri's farming super power?
- Jason S: I'm really glad you asked Siri that question first, it gave me a minute to think about it. Siri can see into the future. She is so good at seeing small trends and knowing what micro adjustments we need to make today to prevent problems down the road. She's very decisive, she can say, "Here's five options. I think this is the right one that we should do," and then I think that she just needs to convince me that she's right, and she usually does.
- Chris B: Jason, if you could go back in time and tell your beginning farmer self one thing, what would it be?
- Jason S: Man, you know, that is a really tough question. What would I tell myself? Will you ask Siri first, I think I want to think about it for a second.
- Chris B: [01:19:30] Okay. So, Siri, go. Since you're decisive, we're going to stick it on you.
- Siri E-B: Yeah. If I could go back in time and tell my beginning farmer self one thing, it would have been to do a better job with weed control in our early years. I think, you know, it's easy when you're just like in the weekly harvest and market grind to be like, "Oh, whatever, you know that stand that I never picked, I'll mow it next week," and then all the weeds go to seed and you're like, "Well, now I'm going to be dealing with that for the rest of my likely life." Kind of a grumpy way to end the interview, but, you know ...
- Chris B: I would tell my beginning farmer self the same thing. I mean, it's just such a ... Weeds are everything, right?
- Siri E-B: Yeah.
- Chris B: And not having weeds is everything. I think it's ... Well, I'm not going to go on about it, this is your guys' part of the show. Okay. So, Jason, you're on.
- Jason S: I'm up, okay. So, I would go back and I would tell myself that mechanization is not necessarily the best way to solve problems, and that creating better systems is a better way to go about it than buying a new shiny whatever to undo a bottleneck.



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- Chris B: Jason and Siri, thank you so much for being part of the Farmer to Farmer Podcast today.
- Siri E-B: Thanks, Chris. This was awesome.
- Jason S: Yeah, super fun.
- Siri E-B: I was hoping that one of us was going to get to throw in a little *semper ubi sub ubi* or something, but, you know, next time.
- Chris B: *Nosce te ipsum carborundum* is the one that I kind of keep falling back on, right?
- Siri E-B: Yes, right? Isn't that the truth.
- Jason S: Although, I think the one that we say the most is *alea iacta est*, when we're like, "All right, can't go back now."
- Siri E-B: *Or de gustibus non disputandum est*, right? Because ... there is no accounting for taste.
- Chris B: Very cool. Thank you so much.
- Siri E-B: Yeah.
- Jason S: Yeah, Chris. Thank you. This was really cool.
- Chris B: All right, so wrapping things up here, I'll say again that this is episode 151 of the Farmer to Farmer Podcast, and you can find the notes for the show at [Farmertofarmerpodcast.com](http://Farmertofarmerpodcast.com) by looking on the episodes page or just searching for Local Roots. That's L-O-C-A-L R-O-O-T-S. And remember, *q* I put the translations on the show notes page for the things that we were all saying at the end of the show.

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