

GROWING BUSINESS FOR VERMONT FARMS

For anyone who's gotten light-headed applying wood finish to a kitchen cabinet, Andrew Meyer '92 has some advice: there's a better whey.

Puns involving wood finish and whey, a byproduct of cheese-making, are a constant source of delight for Meyer— and marketing fodder for an array of t-shirts, coffee mugs, and ads he's created.

No surprise there. His new company, Vermont Natural Coatings, produces a whey-based wood finish with a fraction of the toxic, dizziness-inducing volatile-organic-compounds of traditional finishes. The milky lacquer, which dries clear, is a hot product in the burgeoning green building market, selling briskly in more than forty hardware and green products stores around the country less than a year after the company opened its doors.

More surprising is the journey that brought Meyer to the boxy warehouse in Hardwick that doubles as the home of Vermont Natural Coatings and the other company he recently launched in repackaged form, Vermont Soy.

Before coming home to Hardwick, where he grew up on the family farm, Meyer worked in Washington as a staffer for Vermont Senator Jim Jeffords, specializing in agriculture. Meyer didn't like where things were headed in Vermont: the state's dairy farmers held hostage to commodity milk prices and more family farms closing each year. So like his boss, Meyer looked for ways of securing federal money for Vermont that would spur the creation of new agriculture-related companies and offer the state's farmers supplementary new markets for their goods.

One project that caught Meyer's trained eye was the research being done by UVM food scientist Mingruo Guo to produce an environmentally safe wood finish from dairy waste. To speed the promising product's development, Meyer and Guo collaborated on an appropriation request that eventually delivered a USDA grant to the scientist.

Ever on the lookout for ideas that would benefit his home state, Meyer also saw promise in a fledgling company called Vermont Soy, whose success had been

limited because it sold only one product: a finicky soy cake called tempeh.

Meyer saw two sources of potential in the company. If its owner, Todd Pinkham, were trained to make a more complete line of soy products, the company would have a larger market and could grow. If it used high-grade organic soy beans grown in Vermont, the soy products would not only have added cache, the state's farmers would have a new cash crop to take to market.

As farfetched as it sounded, Meyer knew the plan was practical. Whey-master Guo, who was just perfecting his wood finish, was also an expert in soy. And UVM Extension was more than capable of helping Vermont farmers grow food-grade organic soy beans, which had not been produced in the state.

Meyer helped secure a federal grant that allowed Pinkham to serve a two-year apprenticeship with Guo, where he learned to make an array of high quality soy foods, including fresh soy milk and tofu. UVM Extension also sponsored successful organic soy bean trials at six farms around the state.

To turn the whey and soy projects from good ideas into real jobs and income for Vermonters, all that was missing was an entrepreneur willing to take on the financial risk of launching one new business and expanding another.

Meyer, who wanted to move back to Vermont, decided to nominate himself for the job. He found investors, built the Hardwick facility, hired staff, and sponsored further product development. His risk—and foresight—have been rewarded. Only fourteen months after its launch, Vermont Soy is on the same success track as Vermont Natural Coatings, with booming sales in supermarkets around the northeast, most recently in twelve Whole Foods stores in and around Boston.

Twelve years after meeting Guo and astutely seeking federal support for Vermont and UVM, Meyer and his family are living happily in Hardwick. He's created ten well-paying jobs already in an area of the state that needs them, established soy beans as a viable Vermont crop with UVM's help, and even founded a non-profit, the Center for an Agricultural Economy, that could help grow other Vermont food companies.

As the enterprising entrepreneur himself might say, "Where there's a will, there's a whey."