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Land of Milk and Honey

David and Marla Nowacoski Shorten the Supply Chain to the Farm Next Door

By David O'Reilly

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MAY 2020





Land of Milk and Honey

David and Marla Nowacoski Shorten the Supply Chain to the Farm Next Door

By David O'Reilly

Once upon a time less anxious than today—when the viruses worrying most Americans were merely on computers—David Nowacoski sold his interest in the investment firm he'd run for seventeen years, then found himself at a crossroads.

"I'd worked in corporate all my life," he would later recall, "and for the first time I didn't have to put on a suit and tie." Yet he was already restless.

He and his wife, Marla, poured themselves coffee and strolled out to the deck behind their Columbia Crossroads home in Bradford County. It was the first of April, a time of new life and beginnings.

To the left of their eighty-eight acres was his parents' retired veal farm, where he'd grown up before heading off to Penn State. Down the road was their church, where he taught Bible classes. Beyond that was Marla's parents' farm, and before them the eleven-acre lake where their three kids swam and fished for bass and catfish. He'd carved it out of thicket and swamp with a bulldozer.

"What are we going to do now?" he wondered aloud to his wife. Best friends since fifth grade, both were forty-eight.

"Well," Marla replied. "We have to eat."

David thought about that, started to nod, then broke into a smile. He does that a lot. "Yeah," he said. "We know how to make food. Let's *make food!*"

Seven years later, almost to the day, the odometer on his red

Dodge Caravan is turning 112,707 miles as David, gripping the steering wheel with blue nitrile gloves, creeps up a winding road somewhere between Wellsboro and Mansfield.

It's early April, three weeks since the corona virus scare has shuttered schools, restaurants, and workplaces across Pennsylvania and New York. His tired van is filled this Saturday morning with thirty-three red Igloo coolers, each wearing a name tag, and filled with the bounty of fifty-five farms and food producers from across thirteen Twin Tier counties.

Inside, bumping with him over these roads, are frozen bags of free-range chickens, cartons of organic eggs, glass jugs of organic milk, homemade shortbread cookies, organic sauerkraut, ravioli, pork shoulders, grass-fed beef steaks, whole-grain waffle mixes, maple syrup, lentils, beans, kale, mushrooms, cheese curds, salsas, wild-caught Alaskan salmon, chocolate Easter eggs, and, yes, locally made hand sanitizers for these troubled times.

"I know there's opportunity in chaos," David remarks to a visitor from *Mountain Home* along for today's delivery run. It's the ninth and last run of the week. "But we got hit so hard again this week. We've sold out all our eggs—300 dozen—all our milk and cream, and most of our bread's gone."

Home deliveries across 1,700 miles of rural roads every week is not what David and Marla bargained for when they resolved in 2013 to "make food." Nevertheless, they got up at

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In safe supply: David Nowacoski (facing page) drives 1,700 miles a week to deliver goods from Twin Tier farms and food producers to those shut in by COVID-19.

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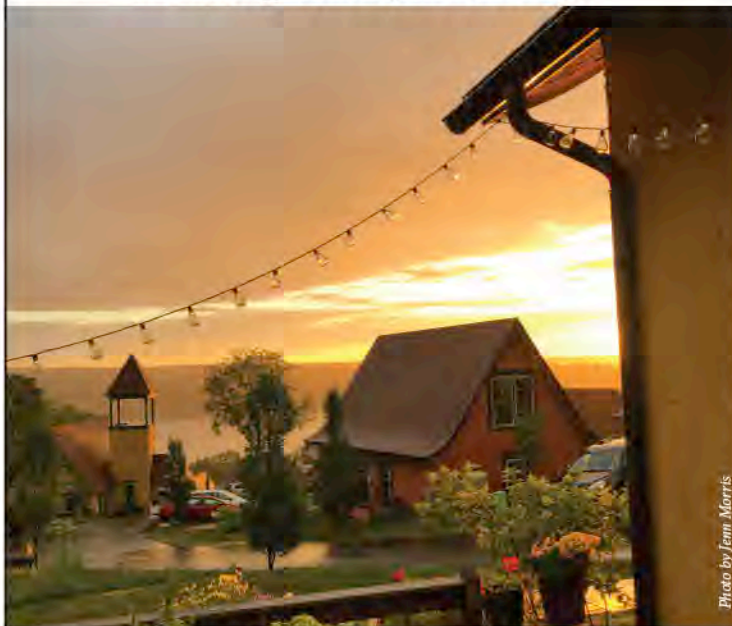


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4:30 this morning to resume packing. Sixteen-hour workdays are now normal, because the pandemic has turned their idealistic business model—to connect local organic farmers and natural food producers to their communities and their customers—into a mission. No more do they sit in their big, white truck at eleven, far-flung, designated drop points in the Twin Tiers, waiting for customers to come collect the farm-fresh products they'd ordered online. It's door-to-door delivery now to more than 300 homes a week, up from seventy-five before the virus scare. And their high-minded mom-and-pop operation is overwhelmed.

"We're just getting slammed," says David. "We cannot source fast enough."

Still, the name of their business fits better than ever: Delivered Fresh.

Across the nation, small farmers who retail their own produce are reporting "off-the-charts demand—demand beyond what they can supply," reports Andrew Mefford, editor of *Growing For Market* magazine based in Skowhegan, Maine. Because of the coronavirus "a lot of people are not wanting to go to grocery stores," he tells *Mountain Home*. "But they want to be reassured there's food production in their own back yard in case the supply lines are disrupted. So, even as most businesses are screeching to a halt, there's unprecedented interest," he says, in "locally grown."

Kim Seeley, owner of Milky Way Farms in Troy, the organic dairy producer for Delivered Fresh, agrees. "After fifty-two years in the dairy business, people finally know I exist," he says. He stopped using pesticides two decades ago, after his eight-year-old son nearly died from eating a chunk of it. His advocacy for organic milk angers some conventional dairy farmers, he says. "But what are we doing poisoning our food supply?"

Delivered Fresh has "done a good job educating the public" about organic and natural foods, says Kim, "and allows us to reach a larger area." A lot of new customers, too. This week's order for 100 bottles of milk has depleted his supply.

David's tailored suits from his days at snazzy big investment firms like Merrill Lynch in Princeton and Bay Ridge in Binghamton (he managed qualified trusts and pension plans) gave way long ago to farmer togs. Today he's in a mustard-colored canvas work jacket, blue jeans, and a baseball cap that proclaims "WindStone Landing Farms," their separate (and equally demanding) poultry operation. On his iPhone's GPS, a crucial new "route optimization" app costing \$300 a month is sending him this way and that down dirt roads, past dairy farms—"that's a Jersey-Holstein mix," he says of a splotchy-looking cow—into pricey developments, through modest neighborhoods in crowded boroughs, and up steep rises that drop sometimes onto breathtaking valley views.

"Look at that. It's just so beautiful," he marvels at one pastureland vista of rolling green off Hills Creek Road. Moments later he spies the next home on his route. "Ah. This lady is so awesome," he exclaims as he comes to a stop. "She grinds her own grain to make bread and—oh, did you hear that?" He laughs. "My stomach's growling." He's been running for seven hours on two fried eggs.

Grateful home-bound customers have been leaving

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sandwiches, cookies, granola bars, and water bottles, some with touching notes. "Thank You for helping to save lives!" read one last week in Towanda. It was signed "Love" with a hand-drawn heart. "Thank you Delivered Fresh for working extra hard during these crazy times to bring us food. Stay Safe," read a post-it note in Ulster. But another house wore a grimmer sign of the times: "If you think you have been exposed don't come in. We are compromised."

David and his newly hired drivers never come in. These "crazy times" demand extra precautions, and he has imposed strict delivery protocols.

"Here's the sequence," he'd explained earlier. "The driver comes to a stop. You open your door and leave it open. Then glove up. Find the cooler, take it to the customer's cooler, and transfer the contents. Close the lid. Sanitize the lid and anything else you touched. Now, the door [of the truck] is still open because you don't want to touch the handle with your gloves. So you step inside the van. Discard gloves into the trash can in the vehicle. Then sanitize your hands and close the door." Customers are also asked not to converse with the drivers, who began wearing masks in mid-April.

Now he starts that sequence. He steps outside, leaving the van door open. He finds the customer's nametag on a red cooler, then lugs it and a large spray bottle of sanitizer to the front stoop. A white cooler awaits—with a bulging ZipLoc bag on top. David grins broadly, makes a thumbs-up with his gloved right hand, transfers his foodstuffs into the customer's cooler, sprays the top and latch, and returns to the van. He pulls off his gloves, sanitizes his hands, and reaches for the plastic bag.

Inside are three small, golden loaves of homemade bread. "Thank you Delivered Fresh" reads the note with it. "I really appreciate the service." He pulls open the bag, pops a piece of grain-flecked bread into his mouth, and closes his eyes in delight. "Soooo good," he murmurs, and shares a piece with his passenger. It is light yet deep flavored, as good as bread gets.

A few finger-presses to the pricey new route optimization program on his

iPhone tells the family its order is delivered, brings up the next address, and informs his office of his location. Then he starts the engine and eyes the screen. "Where the heck are we going?" he asks its jiggling blue line, which settles down and points him up a hill. The iffy cellphone service out here has failed him and his drivers multiple times, so he now carries maps, an old Garmin GPS capable of picking up satellite, and a printed list of every customer's latitude and longitude precise to nine decimal points.

"How does Santa do it?" he jokes.

The next house is a big one up a gated drive, with two kids playing on a plastic swing set and their dad close by, shoveling topsoil onto raised beds. He keeps his distance but asks David if he saw his email offering to sell him blueberries.

"I saw it but didn't have time to read it," he answers. "I've been up since 4:30." The man says he can grow about 1,000 pounds a year. "Do you use any chemicals—fertilizers or pesticides?" David asks. No, the man says. "Well," says David, "I'll try to get back when I have some time," and with a wave heads down the drive.

"The power of branding and distribution that Delivered Fresh offers is hard to quantify," says Fred McNeal, owner of Farmer Fred's market in Monroeton and a grower of organic corn and pastured beef. He was one of the first wholesalers to carry the Nowacoski's poultry, and they sell about eighty pounds of his beef each week. "They probably represent just two to three percent of my business," says Fred, "but that's incredibly impactful because they give our highest quality products much higher name recognition and distribution."

"They're putting our products into hands we never could have reached," says Beth Ward, who makes her Maple Hollow line of botanically infused soaps and creams and lotions at her family's farm outside Troy. She grows and distills much of her own chamomile, bergamot, calendula, prunella, yarrow, roses, marshmallow and other botanicals. "We've seen our sales double" since the corona scare began, she says.

Delivered Fresh has also become a business lifeline for Liz McLelland, who for ten years has been turning out "baked goods with a British flair" at her farm near Mansfield. The quarantine has obliged her husband, a cabinetmaker, to lay off his employees, and she's closed the store where she's long sold knitting yarns and her Yorkshire Meadows line of treats. But orders from Delivered Fresh have surged, she says. She likes to imagine the house-bound seeking comfort in isolation by "binge-watching *Downton Abbey*" while snacking on her shortbread cookies, scones, and lemon curd.

Family farms have dotted the hillsides and fed the people of the Twin Tiers for generations, but they've seen a long decline in recent decades with the rise of agribusiness and especially big dairy. Might COVID-19 instill a new appreciation for local farms—and give a dramatic boost to old-fashioned farm to table?

Perhaps. All across the country, people are waking up to the true cost of distant supply chains and mass-produced food. But small-scale, farm-grown nutrition brings its own cost. Organic carrots and bell peppers from Delivered Fresh are \$2.91 and \$3.08

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Passing promise: David Nowacoski's deliveries make the trials of pandemic seem diminutive. Notes and goodies from thankful customers (top) display the importance of his work. Kim Seeley (middle), the organic dairy producer, praises the educational impact Delivered Fresh has offered the community. Beth Ward (bottom) and her family show off many of the botanicals used in their products.



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a pound, for example, and whole organic chickens run \$7.12 a pound—three to four times the cost of conventional birds from Perdue or Tyson. To folks on limited incomes, pasture-raised, cage-free, chemical-free, and homemade foods can seem a luxury.

"When consumers ask 'Why is our food so expensive?'" says David, "my answer to them is: 'What corners do the supermarkets cut to make food cheap?'" Chicken in cages with an inch of space, growth hormones, grain instead of grass, antibiotics, pesticides, chemical fertilizers—all these help make Americans' food abundant and affordable, say the Nowacoskis. But it's "cheaped food," they argue. "The nutrient density of pasture raised animals who get fresh air and green grass is much higher than caged animals," says Marla. "And healthy soil produces more nutrient-dense vegetables."

Delivered Fresh's pricing structure is designed to support producers, they say. "I really believe small farms and family-owned businesses make up the fabric of our community," says David. "If we want to preserve the feel of our towns, we have to find ways to invest in them." They pay producers 85 percent of what they sell their items for at retail—well above the 40 and 50 percent discounts many wholesalers demand. The goal is steady cash flow, not high profit.

When their customers go to their website, deliveredfresh.store.com, to place weekly orders for local farm produce, they are given the option to donate to local food pantries. Three hundred and thirteen made donations in the second week of April.

Why do they do it? "Scripture says to love one another," David explains. "Your moral compass should steer you to compassion and generosity."

"They are phenomenal," says Sheryl Wilcox of Wilcox Honeypot. She and her husband are startup honey producers in Columbia Crossroads. "They're very selfless, always ready to promote other people's stuff above their own."

The Nowacoskis' resolve in 2013 to "make food" began not as an all-consuming delivery service but a wholesale poultry and preserved foods business. Their newbie naiveté still makes them laugh. "We started out with 250 chickens," David recalled in late March, with Marla alongside, over tea at their kitchen table. "Two hundred and fifty chickens? Hey, look at us!"

"We had no idea what we needed," Marla remembered with a shake of her head. Formerly a manager of corporate graphic design firms, then an at-home mom who preferred growing her own food to shopping, she had embarked on their homegrown canning business—dilly beans, salsas, soups—supposing six cases of jars would be plenty. And it was only when they started butchering their astonishingly plump turkeys in November that they realized their plug-in freezers weren't big enough to hold them. "We had no storage!" says David. "We were still butchering as the workmen were building our freezer barn over our heads." But the turkeys sold out in days.

By 2014 they were ramping up both operations. Marla's now comprises a store and commercial kitchen behind their house, with a behemoth, ten-burner, 650,000 BTU commercial stove and a wall of commercial coolers and freezers. Their WindStone Landing free-range poultry line—some organically fed, all with no antibiotics—has swollen meantime to 5,000 chickens and turkeys a year.

The entity now called Delivered Fresh emerged gradually—and unplanned—out of their poultry line in 2017. Supermarket chains were paying far less for wholesale poultry than it cost WindStone to produce, so they began selling at farm markets in Sayre and Wellsboro.

“They had a great following by the time we arrived,” remembers Tim Owen, who speaks fondly of the help Marla gave him and his wife, Liz, when they started selling their Grown Foods shitake, oyster, and lion’s mane mushrooms at an adjacent tent. “They would tell their customers about us,” he says, and explained to them the items that sold well at markets. “We think of them as our mentors.”

In those days the Nowacoskis would say “No, sorry,” when shoppers asked if they sold beef or anything other than poultry and her canned goods. Then Marla had an epiphany. “No,” she replied one day, “but I know who does.” On the way to market the next week she stopped at Backroad Creamery in Mansfield and picked up some cheese. By November of 2017 she had about forty families texting her with special requests.

“It was getting a little out of hand,” she says. But their aggregator/delivery service was burgeoning. That December it got a name—Delivered Fresh—and in February, 2018, a website.

Everyone loves farm fresh food, it declared, but driving all over the county to get it is a bit of a pain. We understand...and we are going to make it a lot easier. We are over a dozen local farmers who are working together to make sure our community gets the freshest, most healthy food possible. Here is what we could bring you: milk, bread, eggs, vegetables, fruits, chicken, turkey, beef, pork, honey and even cookies!! Locally roasted coffees and tea blends can also be added.

They had two online orders the first week, two dozen the next. Then, miraculously, a *New York Times* reporter showed up in March looking to explain to city folk this thing called farm-to-table. The article appeared on April 6, triggering an avalanche of inquiries from prospective vendors as far away as Ohio.

They had to say no to most of them, but when the dust settled the Nowacoskis had newfound credentials in the organic food community. Since then, it’s been word of mouth, not publicity, that has swelled their website’s subscriber base to more than two thousand.

Now this middle-aged couple wonders if home-delivery across 1,700 miles every week can prove a sustainable business model, and debate whether to take out a federal COVID-19 loan to expand. “I hate debt,” David says. “It’s the ruin of so many farmers.”

They’ve reluctantly begun charging customers a five-dollar delivery fee to help offset their added costs. But that first wave of extra income got wiped out days later when their big truck burned out two wheel bearings in Wysox and had to be towed twenty miles. Call it a metaphor for stress. Still, they remain committed to their innocent resolve of seven years ago to “make food.”

“With any disaster like COVID, one of the most critical pieces is the food supply,” says David. “From that perspective, we [farmers] are the ones producing food and making sure that you get it. I hope people will remember.”

David O'Reilly was a writer and editor for thirty-five years at The Philadelphia Inquirer, where he covered religion for two decades. He and his wife, Birnie, moved to Wellsboro last fall.



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Weekends: Wagon Rides, Card Games, and Cornhole Tournaments (depending on participation)

May 30th: STONE SOUP 1 BETTER BAND & HORSESHOE TOURNAMENT—Saturday: 6:00 PM. Join us Saturday evening @6PM to enjoy the amazing stone soup that everyone will help prepare throughout the afternoon. Local BAND "1 BETTER" 7-10 PM. Cover charge for the band - \$5.00 per person for non-campers, kids under 8 free. Sunday 10 AM: help us raise money for Camp Good Day (camp for kids with cancer) by joining us for our 1st horseshoe tournament of the season.

June 6th: BIRTHDAY BASH 4-6 PM—(celebrate everyone's birthday) & DJ Biggie Entertainment 7-10 PM

June 13th - 14th: Wine & Cheese gathering—enjoy our Wine (any beverage) & Cheese with your fellow campers. You bring your favorite beverage, will bring the food.

June 19th-21st: SQUARE DANCERS & FATHER'S DAY PANCAKE BREAKFAST—Watch our Square Dance Club dance all weekend, they love visitors. You may be the next square dancer. Sunday: Father's Day Breakfast: Pancakes, sausage, coffee and juice. Dads eat free! Adults \$5, kids \$2. 9:30 AM in the pavilion.

June 27th: KICK-OFF TO SUMMER—Saturday: Join us for a Charity meet & Greet Event (4-6 PM). Commemorative Glasses for Sale, all money & donations goes to charity. During the day, we will have the slip n slide out for everyone to enjoy leading up to the Charity event. Then 7-10 PM Music by Sam Pallet Band. Popular, local band playing Classic Rock music. Bring your lawn chairs and beverages to the pavilion! Cover charge for the band - \$5.00 per person for non-campers, kids under 8 free

July 3rd-5th: 4th of JULY CELEBRATION—Saturday & Sunday enjoy our FIREWORKS, both displays at 10 PM Saturday Evening: Ice Cream Social at 7:00 PM, \$1.00 for 2 scoops of ice cream and lots of toppings, followed by Camp Bell BINGO. Also, join us for Cornhole tournaments (sign up in the office). Sunday: Dance music provided by DJ Biggie Entertainment, 7-10 PM

July 10th-July 12th: SAWMILL FESTIVAL & ROUND HOUSE ROCKERS—Join us Saturday & Sunday for our 5th annual Sawmill Festival. There will be lots of activities and trophies for winners from different age group and activities. We had a PHENOMENAL Time last year. More details to follow. Join us in the evening for this popular, local, country western & rock band. Cover charge for the band - \$5.00 per person for non-campers, kids under 8 free.

July 18th: DEATH BY CHOCOLATE & KARAOKE—Join us Saturday afternoon for Wine & Art event, then in the

evening 6 PM for endless CHOCOLATE. Everyone can bring their favorite chocolate item. We will all share and die by chocolate. Followed by a fun evening of karaoke with DJ Biggie.

July 25th: WENDY OWENS MUSIC with JIM ANDERSON—Join us in the evening 7-10 PM for this popular, local band. Cover charge for the band - \$5.00 per person for non-campers, kids under 8 free.

August 8th: CHRISTMAS IN AUGUST—Celebrate with Santa. Saturday: 11:30 AM, lunch and photo with Santa (\$4.00). Followed by arts & craft project (free) and then a wagon ride to the ice cream shop with Santa (parents must attend to purchase ice cream). In the afternoon 4-6 PM, join us for a wine (you bring) & cheese (we provide) party with Santa (adult time with Santa). 7 PM - 10 PM, Tree lighting & Dance music provided by DJ Biggie Entertainment.

Aug 15th: NASCAR WEEKEND & PEDDLE CART RACES—Join us for the campground's 2nd annual peddle cart races. Heats by age group. Prizes awarded. Watch our Square Dance Club dance all weekend, they love visitors.

August 22nd: CHARITY LUAU POOL PARTY—Saturday: DJ BIGGIE (maybe a special guest appearance) for a Charity fund raising Party Time TBD.

August 29th: SOUTHERN EXIT BAND—Join us for our 7-10 PM listen to this popular local Country band. Cover charge for the band - \$5.00 per person for non-campers, kids under 8 free.

Sept 4th-6th: LABOR DAY WEEKEND CELEBRATION—Saturday: 7:00 PM, in the pavilion Ice Cream Social \$1.00 for 2 scoops of ice cream and lots of toppings, followed by Camp Bell BINGO. Also, join us Cornhole & Euchre (sign up in the office). Sunday: Dance music provided by DJ Biggie Entertainment, 7-10 PM in the rec hall.

Sept 13th: HORSESHOE TOURNAMENT—Join us Sunday at 10 AM for Horseshoe Tournament to find out who is the "Best" and who gets the "Horse's Ass" trophy. Food and non-alcoholic beverages will be sold. All money raised will be donated to our charity, "Camp Good Days" (camp for kids with cancer.)

October 10th-11th: HALLOWEEN WEEKEND—Decorate your RV for the Halloween festivities and win a prize for the Most Unique. Saturday: 11:00 PM, in the pavilion, Halloween Activity, free to all kids. 2:00 PM: Trick or Treat, Kid's Parade and Costume Contest. Don't forget to bring treats for the kids. Wagon ride at dark, weather permitting. Sunday, 7-9 PM Join us for a good old fashion Barn Dance.

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