

# Blending Coffee & Business with Jim & Crystal Whitmarsh

**David Crabill:** Welcome to the Forrager podcast where I talk with cottage food businesses about their strategies for running a food business from home. I'm David Crabill and today I am talking with Jim and crystal Whitmarsh. They live in Kasson, Minnesota, and run a coffee shop named Trail Creek Coffee roasters. Now back in 2017, they used Minnesota's cottage food

law to start this business from their home. And just after two years, they were ready to expand to a commercial space. And today they now have their own brick and mortar shop and are doing very well with their business. Now, Jim and crystal are the first coffee roasters that I've had on the podcast. I'm excited to have them on, and I look forward to learning more about how they grew their business. And with that, welcome to the show guys. Nice to have you here.

**Crystal Whitmarsh:** [00:00:51] Thank you. Thanks for having us.

**David Crabill:** [00:00:54] So Jim and crystal, can you just uh, walk us back to the beginning of this business? How did this all get started?

**Jim Whitmarsh:** [00:01:03] Yeah. Um, You have to go back quite a ways. Um, I think I was at work one day on my lunch hour on the internet and just happened to stumble across an article about how to roast coffee at home using a popcorn popper. And we, or I guess I thought what a great way to, you know, pick up another hobby.

Cause we were about to have our first child and, you know, needed one more thing to do um, because our life wasn't about to be busy enough at that point in time,

**Crystal Whitmarsh:** [00:01:33] But we were also about to need more caffeine,

**Jim Whitmarsh:** [00:01:36] That's true. Yeah we did need more caffeine. So you know, it kind of intrigued me, I thought, well, I'll give it a try and see what becomes of it.

I wasn't expecting it to turn into a business one day. I kind of looked into it a little bit more and found a great home roasting website where I was able to purchase our first popcorn popper has it, it's gotta be a specific type of popper. Most of the newer ones don't work very well.

You got to find one that's a little bit older that Has a little bit more power and, and has the right roasting chamber in it. But yeah, I was able to find uh, resources online and we got some coffee beans some green coffee beans and this popcorn popper and it was pretty cool. It was, something to do. And it gave us a little bit of coffee for ourselves. I think it was weird at first were used to drinking some of the, national coffee chains, coffee that was roasted much darker, and this was more of a light to medium roast.

And it had a lot of flavor which was really weird and it didn't taste like what we thought coffee should taste like. But come to find out, I mean, it's that's how coffee is supposed to taste. So

**David Crabill:** [00:02:43] So you're starting with this popcorn machine. Right. And do you know what the website was that you were looking at back when you got started?

**Jim Whitmarsh:** [00:02:54] so the search engine, it was just on MSN, but the, the website for the coffee was a sweet Maria's. They're actually out of Oakland, California. yeah, we basically got set up with the popcorn popper. I think like a four pound sample pack of, you know, four different varieties of coffee to get started with. And so, yeah, that's, that's essentially how we got started.

**Crystal Whitmarsh:** [00:03:15] And one thing that I would notice with the popcorn popper roasting was that it would get really smoky. So like Jim couldn't do it inside the house. Cause it would make this really it smelled good, but it just was pretty potent.

Yeah. So he would go out to the garage or in the winter time because we live in Minnesota and it gets pretty cold up there. He would roast it in the laundry room, in the house that we were in at that time. And I could still smell it coming in through like the venting I'd be down putting the baby to bed in his nursery, and I could smell that he was roasting coffee.

So um, that was just kind of funny, but also then as we played around with it more, we one Christmas, not too long after that, we wanted to give gifts to family and friends that had a little bit more meaning behind them. So Jim ended up roasting coffee for them and had literally three popcorn poppers going at once in the garage to be able to roast all this coffee for our, for our family and friends.

And we combine that with a world vision gift. And after doing that, we realized that people really enjoyed this coffee. They give us some really great feedback. And that's when the wheels started turning about purchasing more of a commercial grade roaster and starting a cottage food business.

**David Crabill:** [00:04:40] So when you started with this popcorn popper, I can't imagine it was that expensive. I'm thinking of uh, maybe, maybe it was a really high end popcorn popper, but do you remember what the uh, price of the popcorn popper was in contrast to the like small roaster you ended up buying.

**Jim Whitmarsh:** [00:04:57] I mean it was probably, you know, 25 or \$30 for this popcorn popper. It was one of the newer when I say newer, I mean, it was still, I think it was manufactured in 2007 uh, westbend air, crazy, And then actually, Crystal ended up going on. And I think she found uh, like one of the original westbend popper ii's on eBay And that'll actually, that actually has enough power to get you into a darker roast if you want to get into second crack. But the, the air crazy that we had would really just get you to about a medium roast. It would get you through first crack and that's about it. But Yeah. I mean, you can only do, you know, a half a cup at a time. And then once we realized after that, I think after that Christmas that we had given it as gifts and realized that could potentially turn this into a.

A side hustle or something. That's when I started exploring the possibility of getting uh, an actual coffee roaster and I had found a few like countertop models that you just use in your kitchen. Some of the reviews again had the same issues with smoke being generated and just not really being super ideal for what we were thinking we would be using it for.

And then that's about when I think I had stumbled across um, mill city roasters out of Minneapolis, Minnesota here. They were, I think they were kind of just getting going right about the same time actually. they had uh, a wide range of roasters from a 500 gram model all the way up to probably 20, 30 kilograms at that point in time. So yeah, I started looking into that more and I actually at the time I was traveling for work, I was able to go there and check out. they had a 500 gram and I think a one kilogram in their shop at the time that's when we decided to go with the one kilogram model. cause I was really new to the whole food manufacturing thing, and I knew that we weren't going to be able To do a whole lot as far as like wholesaling and retailing at that point in time, knowing that it was going to be set up in our garage, but they had kind of pointed me to the cottage food world.

And uh, from there then figured out what we were able to do with the cottage food license and that, that really helped to kind of get us launched. And then it just continued from there. We got to the point where uh, we were going to vendor shows and um, farmers, farmers markets and people seem to really take an interest in the coffee.

**Crystal Whitmarsh:** [00:07:20] So yeah, I got to the point where um, I was just going to say, Jim was, you know, he would commute an hour and a half, one way to work and then he would get home and we would have dinner. We get the kids to bed and then he would roast coffee in the garage until like midnight, you know?

And then I remember like packaging coffee in the kitchen and just having bags of coffee all over and bags of green coffee. That's what we call coffee that hasn't been roasted yet, like sitting in our bedroom, like it was just all over. And so finally we were like, we need to either decide to like scale back or push forward and, and find a commercial space.

**David Crabill:** [00:08:06] Yeah. Definitely a homegrown operation with humble beginnings, for sure. So when you were using the popcorn poppers, I mean, do you think that you could have started any kind of side business with those machines or do you think the production of them just isn't practical for anything other than personal use?

**Jim Whitmarsh:** [00:08:32] Um, I think it would have been pretty tough to start any kind of a cottage food business with the popcorn poppers. It just, yeah, they just don't have the capacity. It was enough for us, for our personal use and just being able to kind of play around with the popcorn popper.

**David Crabill:** [00:08:47] Well, I asked just because I I've seen a picture of this roaster that you got, which I think it was called a micro roaster. So it doesn't even do that much, but it looks like quite the contraption. Like, I feel like that's like an exhaust vent and it didn't look cheap. Do you know what H how much you spent on that, that piece of equipment.

**Jim Whitmarsh:** [00:09:06] Yeah, it wasn't cheap. it was a few thousand dollars at that time. But yeah it definitely boosted our production even nowadays, I mean, We still have the one

K roaster in our shop here. And we use it more for a sample roasting. So when we get a new coffee we're roast small batches on our, on our one kilogram and. Profile new roasts or new coffees and figure out where those coffees are best roasted at, you know, at what roast levels. Um, But yeah, it was definitely uh, you know, at that point in time it was an investment for sure.

But I knew even if, you know, even if I had decided that we, we didn't want to take the, the business any further um, it would make a good roaster just even, just for us to have for our, for our own consumption.

**David Crabill:** [00:09:49] So do you think that somebody kind of needs to be ready to make that investment or is there a way for them to do you think they could use the popcorn popper to at least prove that they want to move forward with the business like you did? Or is there another option, like you said, there were those countertop options.

Like what, what should somebody be thinking about if they're trying to start a coffee business?

**Jim Whitmarsh:** [00:10:12] Yeah. I mean the popcorn popper is definitely a good, a good starting point. And then from there, I think you could probably use that countertop roaster and make that work for a little bit. once you kind of really get into the, to the roasting aspect and if you're really enjoying it and want to make a business?

out of uh, um, at some point you're probably going to have to make a decision of, am I going to just continue with the countertop roaster or, you know, I've, I've got, it looks like I've got enough demand that maybe I could get something a little bit bigger.

it really just depends on how much of, you know, how much of it do you want to do?

**Crystal Whitmarsh:** [00:10:47] And how much time do you want to spend producing your product?

**David Crabill:** [00:10:53] So just a quick comparison, we'll get into, you know, your brick and mortar coffee shop later, but you now have a bigger roaster in your shop. Like how much does that cost and how much does that produce in comparison?

**Jim Whitmarsh:** [00:11:06] Oh, man, there's a big difference. Yeah. So we just got a, we just got a bigger roaster it's from the same manufacturer, mill city roasters um, it's a 10 kilogram it costs about as much as a. I guess like a midsize luxury car. Um, and I D I don't know if I mentioned it earlier, but I do this full-time crystal works in a large healthcare system Rochester. we both work in the business together, but I'm the one primarily doing most of the work.

I mean, I do all the roasting and packaging. Crystal does a lot of the social media and marketing stuff and business networking. But a lot of my time. It's been behind the roaster.

**Crystal Whitmarsh:** [00:11:45] So we had to figure out how to get Jim more time away from the roaster. Cause he was roasting like six days a week.

**David Crabill:** [00:11:53] like how many bags of coffee can a one kilogram roaster produce? And I guess the 10 kilogram could probably produce 10 times as much, but I mean, you tell me, I don't know. What, how, how, what, like what's the production quantity looking like with these roasters?

**Jim Whitmarsh:** [00:12:09] So with, with the one kilogram roaster, I was able to get about 16, 12 ounce bags per hour. And now with the I'm able to get closer to a hundred bags an hour. So it's quite a bit, you know, quite a bit more production. So my. My time behind the roaster is a lot less these days. I'm probably roasting on average two days a week instead of six or potentially seven.

**Crystal Whitmarsh:** [00:12:36] It's kind of the cool thing about coffee roasting is I feel like there's multiple levels to it, right? Like there's the popcorn popper, which is enough to roast for, you know, yourself or there's the countertop roaster.

If you want a little bit more yield from your roasting, and then we have the one K option, you know, and there's even a few other options in between the one K and the 10 K. But the 10 K just made the most sense for where our business is at in terms of growth right now.

**David Crabill:** [00:13:06] and it sounds like it's not just the. Quantity, but also the quality, right? Like you can, I mean, maybe it's the same with the 1k and 10 K, but I, it looked like there was a jump in what you could do with the popcorn pop, of course, in comparison with the commercial roaster.

**Jim Whitmarsh:** [00:13:26] there are, people that have modified their popcorn poppers to make them a little more sophisticated. But yeah the one K and the 10 K the thing that I like most about them is there's a lot of data on them that, that I'm able to pull off with them to use.

When I'm roasting on the one K I can uh, develop a profile for a coffee. And then I can, I can take that profile and transfer it to the 10 K. so there's really, In the, in the end result, there's virtually no difference. I would say the, the, the biggest difference is just with roasting a bigger batch of coffee.

the target temperatures Are elongated a little bit. So your, your overall roast time is just a little bit longer, but you're still getting the coffee to the same temperatures and um, virtually identical when it comes to, how that final cup of coffee tastes after it's been roasted.

**David Crabill:** [00:14:14] so let's go back to when you started this business you know, in 2017, you decided to go with the cottage food thing. You got this small roaster. So how much were you selling and where were you selling initially?

**Jim Whitmarsh:** [00:14:28] Oh, man. Started with friends and family. Yeah. Yeah. It really started with friends and family. Think back of us back to 2017 um, we, we were. I think we were looking for farmer's markets that we could get into. And

**Crystal Whitmarsh:** [00:14:41] they were pretty small there. The one we really wanted to get into was the Rochester farmers market, but they're a local growers market. So with

coffee, it's tricky because we don't grow our coffee beans, So we, we asked a couple of times and we weren't able to sell our packaged coffee there.

So we ended up at a small town farmer's market, just north on every Saturday. And we would sell. Like, we'd be excited if we sold like 10 bags of coffee, I think.

**David Crabill:** [00:15:12] do you remember how much you were selling the coffee bags for?

**Crystal Whitmarsh:** [00:15:17] \$10.

**Jim Whitmarsh:** [00:15:19] Yup. 10 bucks a bag at the time.

**David Crabill:** [00:15:22] Yep. That sounds like a pretty humble start to the business, but I mean, it, it sounds like you guys had quite the passion for it.

**Jim Whitmarsh:** [00:15:32] Yeah. I mean, we besides of the roaster. We didn't have a whole lot of equipment invested at the time. You know, we, we didn't have a uh, like a 10 by 10 canopy to keep us protected when the, when the rains would come.

**Crystal Whitmarsh:** [00:15:45] We had a folding table, like a card table that we would set up on. Oh gosh. It's kind of fun to think about that, where we started.

**Jim Whitmarsh:** [00:15:53] A couple of air pots for like sampling so people could sample our coffee. Yeah.

**Crystal Whitmarsh:** [00:15:59] Yeah. The sampling piece was really important because, small batch roasted coffee was kind of like a newer niche at that time. And so a lot of people just didn't really understand, like why is it so special?

And I think it took a while too so many people were used to a darker roasted coffee. It was just interesting, you know, they would ask for, do you have any coffee that's roasted darker than this? And we would have to provide a lot of education on. What makes a coffee and why we don't roast it dark So that you can taste, the multiple flavors of the coffee and enjoy the origin of where it came from and the differences between each coffee, rather than just roasting it.

So dark that it tastes like a smoky kind of burnt coffee flavor. I don't feel like we do that as much anymore.

**Jim Whitmarsh:** [00:16:54] Yeah. Most of our coffees in our offerings are, are in the medium roast range. We have a couple on the lighter side and then usually feature one dark roast. And really we don't even take it to a really dark level that I would call it a light French roast.

Just into second crack, a little bit, maybe 30 seconds to a minute But yeah, definitely not as dark as some of the dark roasts that you can find out there.

**Crystal Whitmarsh:** [00:17:20] Yeah. So I think we're passionate about educating and helping people to understand, you know, what makes coffee so good. And also understanding where it comes from.

Jim's definitely more of the technical side of our business. And then I I drive more of the outreach and just that desire to help others as well with it. So it's been just a neat combination.

**David Crabill:** [00:17:48] Yeah. So as you're. Started with this market. You, you know, you're doing the farmer's market, maybe some other events and educating people. I think one of the nice things about coffee is that it's very much a recurring business, right? You can get people who come back for more every single week. So did you notice that you were starting to develop customers like lifetime customer from this as you started to grow your business?

**Crystal Whitmarsh:** [00:18:16] Yeah, absolutely. We would have people come back and they would be jokingly saying this, but they would say that we ruined them because they can no longer drink their Folgers And so it was just funny. So then they would come back and maybe this time they would buy a couple of bags so that they didn't run out next time.

We also had one lady that we had met at the farmer's market and. Once we expanded into a commercial space and we could sell retail coffee there's a small business in that same town that supports other local businesses. It's a market type of business and anyway, she would go and she would just clear out their shelf every time of this one coffee that we'd have, and then they would reach out and they would let us know, all right, so-and-so came in and now we need more of this certain roasts.

So it's really cool to see that. And also in our small town of, you know, Kasson's population is about six or 7,000. We have a lot of loyal customers who continue to support us. They come in, you know, every couple of weeks and they'll stock up on coffee and it's just really fun to know the regulars and know what they're going to want in terms of their coffee too.

**David Crabill:** [00:19:31] So you were building this very organically, right? Building this customer base through events. I don't know if you sold anywhere else, but it was only a couple of years before you decided to move into commercial space. So how did you know that you were ready to kind of take the next step and move beyond the cottage food law? Were you hitting the sales limit or was there something else that kind of pushed you into that next phase?

**Jim Whitmarsh:** [00:20:02] We, we weren't hitting the sales limit at that point in time. But we had been keeping our eyes open for commercial spaces available because I do feel like that can be a barrier to entry. It's not always easy to find one, to find something that's available and then to you're almost always going to have to put some work into it.

It's probably not going to be turnkey for you. So, you know, we, we were kind of just playing the waiting game. And we had found out that there was going to be the building that we're in now that was, it was going to become available. It was like April of 2018. There was a thrift shop in the, at the space or in the space currently.

The, the couple that was running, it decided they were going to retire and, closed their shop. So we went to uh, the next city council meeting in town because the building is owned by the city you know, proposed renting the space.

And uh, I think it was just a day or two later, they got back to us and said, yeah, we'd love to rent, rent the space to you. And just figured out some terms and uh, you know, sign the papers right away, got on the, on the phone to find a contractor that would, that could come in and do the work for us to transform part of the space into uh, a food manufacturing facility.

And and then did some of the work ourselves that, that we were able to. But yeah, all in all, I mean, I think what really led us to, it was just knowing that this was going to kind of pave the way just to open up our options a whole lot more to getting into grocery stores and other businesses like, you know, restaurants and coffee shops and things like that.

I think we had fielded a lot of questions from people as we would meet them at farmer's markets and vendor shows like you know, Hey, can I, can I buy a bag of your coffee somewhere other than here? Or do I have to get it directly from you?

**Crystal Whitmarsh:** [00:21:49] And shipping, we had people that wanted us to ship, you know, Rochester. We get a lot of people from all over.

And so people come from like so many different states to come here and they would ask us if we could ship. And we're like, well, not yet, but we're, you know, eventually. So yeah, I think just all of those questions, let us to feel like there was the support out there for growing the business. And I think we just had the sense of if we wanted to grow, we had to make that leap.

And there was one guy, you know, I kinda I have a tendency to push Jim into things. Um, cause he was working this job that he wasn't super passionate about and It got pretty tiring for him to be commuting. And I wanted him to be able to achieve this dream of his coffee roasting business. anyway, we were having dinner with this one guy that we had actually met at an event here in Kasson.

And he was telling us, you know, about his story and how he realized that sometimes sliding glass door isn't gonna open until you get right in front of it to walk through it. And so that kind of helped us to just realize we needed to take that next step in order to be able to grow and really expand the business.

**David Crabill:** [00:23:03] So, do you guys remember or know how much it costs for you to make that transition from, you know, setting up this commercial space, getting the contractors.

**Jim Whitmarsh:** [00:23:15] It was probably. Yeah, it was probably like around 10,000 or so for everything. Um, And it really depends on your situation and what you have currently and everything, you know,

**Crystal Whitmarsh:** [00:23:27] we had to get our three comps sink, a handwash sink. We had the whole flooring in here was carpet. So we had to you know, get a washable floor swap out some the ceiling tiles. So they were washable

**Jim Whitmarsh:** [00:23:41] pretty much making every surface, washable was key.

**Crystal Whitmarsh:** [00:23:44] There was some plumbing work involved. So we didn't have a ton to do, but there was enough. And then we did all of the painting ourselves.

**David Crabill:** [00:23:54] When you guys were making that transition, was there. Any hesitancy. Did you guys wonder in your heads, whether you were making the right choice?

**Jim Whitmarsh:** [00:24:04] Every day.

**Crystal Whitmarsh:** [00:24:07] We still wonder that

**Jim Whitmarsh:** [00:24:10] no, I think it's been good

**Crystal Whitmarsh:** [00:24:11] And we did meet some hiccups. Like, oh gosh, getting a plumber out here was really hard. You know, we're a small business. So we're, it's not like a huge job. And so even just getting somebody to call us back to come and do the work was a challenge.

Getting the HVAC people out here to do the vent work was like, everything just took so much longer than we had envisioned that it would take. And so then you start to question like, all right, is this really the direction we're supposed to go? You know?

**Jim Whitmarsh:** [00:24:41] Yeah, it's tough, but I feel like it's necessary to question yourself though. Sometimes because it's easy to have these big lofty dreams without actually kind of analyzing them and figuring out, okay, is this actually something that one we can do? and two, we should do. But definitely. Yeah. I mean, there there's, there are still days where I, wonder, I mean, I feel like in any food business, or just any business that you start on your own. Just like coffee. I mean, it's, it feels like a rabbit hole. how far do you want to tumble down into it and how far you're willing to go.

**David Crabill:** [00:25:16] So when you got the commercial space set up, what do you think was the most challenging thing for you? To move the business forward or was anything surprising to you as you started to grow the business?

**Jim Whitmarsh:** [00:25:33] Well, crystal hinted at it earlier. I think getting the work done that we needed done I, it was just hard to play that waiting game and, and getting somebody here to do it.

**Crystal Whitmarsh:** [00:25:42] I think getting our name out there to, you know we signed up to do a lot of different community events. Um, and that was a good way to figure out what events were good sellers for us or networking. Honestly, one of the hardest challenges we've faced is a lot of larger businesses will say that they utilize local goods or support local businesses, but actually they're getting their coffee from regional. Coffee roasters or, you know, and part of that challenge too, is that the regional roasters have a little bit more

um, you know, they can provide machinery in their contract or, you know, different things like that, that we can't offer as a smaller business. So it was kind of more about making the right connections with, the right people in order to grow as well.

Like we, we got into one of the grocery stores in Rochester. we met the health market manager at event called the local feast event. And that happens once a year and they bring in different buyers on one of the days. And. It just so happened that he was in the market for a local coffee roaster, but then that helped because we may not have known to try to get into the health market side of the grocery store versus like putting our coffee next to, you know, a bag of coffee that might cost like half the price of ours.

But wasn't locally roasted, roasted, and probably not as fresh as what we're roasting it. Um, It might've been a challenge to, you know, I don't know how quick it would move next to that, but in the health market, it really seems to do well there. So that was a good realization and just a good connection that we made.

**David Crabill:** [00:27:34] Yeah, it seems like you guys have done a good job of making a lot of connections. I noticed that it seems, I mean, you're talking about how a lot of businesses don't actually support small and local businesses, but it looks like you guys definitely do. You have collaborations all over the place. As I was looking through your Facebook feed, it seems like you're constantly working with other businesses. So can you talk a little bit more about that?

**Crystal Whitmarsh:** [00:28:02] Yeah. So you know, I, and I think we've built those relationships over time and putting ourselves out there. But also just recognizing that in order for small businesses to succeed, we have to support each other. So A coffee shop in Rochester called St. James coffee. And they're a local nonprofit coffee shop and they have been a really good connection.

We actually connected with them right before COVID started. And um, thankfully they've made it because we were kind of nervous that they would end up shutting down. Another restaurant that we were working with was a local one in town here, and they ended up closing their doors, unfortunately during COVID. But we had met that owner through our church.

Um, what else we work with? We have some consignment that we work with local vendors. You know, signage and pottery mugs and jewelry just to be a spot where people can come and purchase their goods too. And then we have done some stuff with giving in the community.

We have a big of coffee called the landing light roast. And that one, we donate \$5 from each bag sold back to the landing in Rochester and their company. They're a nonprofit that helps people facing homelessness. There's another organization called project legacy and they help youth of color with things like tuition or rent to be able to help them succeed through college or finding jobs or just kind of finding a better place for themselves in the community.

**Jim Whitmarsh:** [00:29:39] Um, Yeah, we try to um, we've done collaborations with local breweries. So they'll Take our coffee beans and steep them in their beer to make like a coffee lager. I mean, I feel like the possibilities are endless.

**Crystal Whitmarsh:** [00:29:54] You just have to, it's, it's kind of like building those relationships with the people first and then eventually making The connections with your products, you know?

And some of it happened by chance, like one this local brewery, south by Southeast, she was visiting her lawyer in town here and saw our sign for our building and then contacted us. and then others we've worked harder for, by reaching out and understanding that not every retail is going to produce a connection, but um,

**David Crabill:** [00:30:26] The other one that I don't think you mentioned that I wanted to ask you about was you let someone sell baked goods in your shop.

**Crystal Whitmarsh:** [00:30:34] Yes. Oh, yes. That's a good point. Yeah. So we, yeah, so we know we've gotten to know and really through our coffee business and through some different networking groups, but other cottage food bakers. and actually through COVID is kind of when we are just like through the winter, which is our slower months, I think it was Jim's idea to bring in different cottage food makers for an added cause we don't make our own baked goods.

That's just, you know, another thing we didn't want to take on, but we might as well support another business. So.

**Jim Whitmarsh:** [00:31:08] A lot of people are interested in coming into the shop and grabbing a coffee beverage and then pastry or a baked.

Good to go along with it. Yeah, I just was brainstorming ways that we could collaborate with other businesses too. And thought well, how cool would it be to have. Pop-up bakers here with, with their baked goods and we can create you know, an event on social media for, so that our followers and their followers would know that we've got this Saturday morning shop hours going on, where people can come in and grab a cup of coffee and a baked good. And

**Crystal Whitmarsh:** [00:31:40] yeah, it's almost like cross-marketing too know just to build each other up. And, you know, maybe there's a customer of theirs that didn't know about us and vice versa. there's a lady in town here who baked cinnamon rolls and sells them under cottage food. And then another guy who makes these amazing cookies

uh, we try to, we try to mix it up a little bit with who we bring in, but we figured that would be a good way to support the community without trying to overextend ourselves to if that makes sense.

**David Crabill:** [00:32:10] Yeah, no, it's very cool to see how your cottage food business, you know, turned commercial and now you're supporting even more cottage food businesses. So I can definitely see how these collaborations, I mean, of course they're nice because you're giving back to the community, but I'd imagine they also are helping grow your business as well..

**Crystal Whitmarsh:** [00:32:31] Yeah, absolutely. And I think like just customers enjoy coming in and finding out about other businesses too, but also like they want coffee and a baked goods. So in that sense, that helps us because I don't know, it just brings more people in the doors too.

**Jim Whitmarsh:** [00:32:49] on any given weekend. I mean, you know, we're, we're open kind of limited hours and we understand that. But we would have people that I don't know, three or four people, maybe every weekend that were coming in for the first time that maybe they had just heard about us and wanted to stop in and support us. So, yeah, we were, we were always thrilled to see that.

**Crystal Whitmarsh:** [00:33:07] We would promote, you know, when we have another cottage food baker in here with us, we would promote it through an ad on Facebook too.

And I would just target it based on mileage within the area, you know, within 50 miles of Kasson and that actually would bring in a few new people. That would be like, oh yeah, I just saw the event on Facebook. I've never been in here before. So I think that helped as well.

**David Crabill:** [00:33:32] Was that a Facebook ad or was that a Facebook boosted post?

**Crystal Whitmarsh:** [00:33:37] It was a Facebook ad

**David Crabill:** [00:33:39] How much were you spending on the ad?

**Crystal Whitmarsh:** [00:33:42] only like I would create the event. A week ahead of time and I would spend maybe \$10 total.

**David Crabill:** [00:33:51] That's pretty good. If you're getting new people in on \$10, I don't typically hear of \$10 ads working that well. And did you just know that it was working because that you just didn't have that kind of new traffic before you started running the ads?

**Crystal Whitmarsh:** [00:34:09] Yeah, I mean, just based on, you know, the people that would come in and say that, you know, they saw it because of the event on Facebook or the ad on Facebook. So I didn't keep track of numbers super close, but it must've been doing something. And then the reach to, I mean, it would reach, I don't know, anywhere from like 1500 to 2000 people is what it would say.

I didn't want to spend a lot, not knowing how well it would work. And it seemed like the \$10 ad worked fine.

**David Crabill:** [00:34:41] Yeah, it certainly sounds like it. Well, now, speaking of Facebook, you also, I noticed I've done a lot of Facebook lives every week when you are open. Um, So like how long are you open each week? And. How did you stumble onto the Facebook live concept and has that, I imagine that's been effective since you continue to do it, but can you just talk a little bit about that?

**Crystal Whitmarsh:** [00:35:05] Yeah. So we are now we are summer hours currently. We're open from 10 to two on Saturdays. Over the winter, we were open Thursday afternoons for

a couple hours and then ten to two on Sundays as well, just to give people more options to come in. The Facebook live concept, honestly, I picked up from.

You know, before, so pre COVID, we actually had a boutique that rented out space in this building. And she would always go live whenever she was open. So I kinda caught on to that?

concept a little bit. I tried it a couple of times, and to be honest, I don't enjoy going live. It may cause me a little anxiety.

But it does help for some reason, it, it must have to do with the algorithms, but I'll go live And someone will be like, yeah, I forgot you were open until I saw your live video. And then they come at like, at least one person which for us is significant enough. Like we, we celebrate every new face that comes in the door, you know? Um,

**David Crabill:** [00:36:09] And what are you talking about on these lives?

**Crystal Whitmarsh:** [00:36:13] You know, so typically I'll just, I'll jump on and let people know, Hey, you know, we're open. This is, these are the coffees we have on the shelf. And oftentimes I'll just go through and talk about each coffee and the tasting notes. And then also I'll share different things from our the other vendors that we have in here on consignment, like the jewelry stuff, or, you know, if we've gotten some new pottery in some of our, our merchandise I'll share on there, my kids, if my kids are being goofy and making a Fort I'll usually flash them on the live to

um, people seem to enjoy seeing that as well.

Um, We've done giveaways on Facebook live. We've also done, well, maybe not live, maybe that was just the video, but like, you know, how to make an espresso drink or steam, the milk, that kind of thing.

**Jim Whitmarsh:** [00:37:07] I think we did like how to make a batch of cold brew a couple of years ago.

That was probably our first Facebook live video. Or was that even a live or did we might've prerecorded that one? I don't remember now.

**Crystal Whitmarsh:** [00:37:19] Yeah, But yeah, the videos really seem to gain a lot of traction.

**David Crabill:** [00:37:24] Yeah, I know that Facebook really likes to promote lives in particular for whatever reason, those play really nicely with their algorithm. But you mentioned your uh, going live and showing your kids. And I know you mentioned earlier in the episode that you started a family right around, I think exactly the same time you were like trying to start this business. So that sounds kind of crazy.

**Jim Whitmarsh:** [00:37:50] Yeah, it is. We were expecting our first child uh, in September of 2014. And it was only a few months before that, that I had seen the, video about roasting your own coffee on a popcorn popper. So, you know, I mean, at that point in time, I didn't have any visions of, of where we're at right now, obviously, but I thought, oh, this would be

something cool to do, just to try. But yeah, it certainly has been interesting, starting a business with a couple of young children, too.

**Crystal Whitmarsh:** [00:38:27] Yeah, we would, when we were at the smaller farmers market, we would bring the kids. So we would all go to the market and they would play outside. While we would sell coffee. Now that we are we're at the Rochester farmer's market now as a concession vendor with our coffee carts.

And so it's, it's busier. So typically I'll hang out at the shop with the kids and, and Jim will we'll go to the farmer's market, but the cool thing about. Building a business and raising kids is that the kids get to be involved. Our customers know our kids, they our kids like are very social. Like they're not afraid to talk to people.

And I also think like, as they get older too, I'm excited to teach them about business and what that means with financials and managing a budget. And you know, hopefully they can be really good coffee baristas so they can work for us. Hopefully they want to work for us. I think there's just a lot of benefit in, in that.

And um, yeah, it's cool. They know that when they're at school Dad is, is working in the coffee business and it's, it's kind of a neat thing for them to witness that.

**David Crabill:** [00:39:44] Yeah, I can tell it's definitely a family run business through and through and along those lines you know, you, you guys chose to basically start this together and both work on, on this project and how has it been when trying to run this business as a, you know, business partner?

**Crystal Whitmarsh:** [00:40:05] Well, we're still married. Um, Actually, I don't know. I feel like it's gone. Okay. I think we understand each other's strengths and weaknesses, which helps us to work together better. I'm more of the like lofty goal. I come up with a lot of really great ideas and then Jim brings me back down to earth um, a lot of times uh, but I think we balance each other out really nicely.

It was interesting when we were at Thursday's first, a couple of years ago, working together in a 10 by 10 space, you kind of bump into each other a lot and it gets really busy and we just had to work out a system for like who would take money and who would pour samples and you know, all of that. But it's still has its challenges.

**Jim Whitmarsh:** [00:40:56] Yeah, I think it's nice. I mean, we, we know what we're responsible for and what we have to do. And, um, but the cool thing is you know, with our, with our phones, we both have um, our business email address, access and social media access. So if somebody. Sends us an email with a question or sends us a message through social media.

We can, you know, we can both see it and respond accordingly. Or if I can't respond because I'm busy, crystal can respond and vice versa. So um,

**Crystal Whitmarsh:** [00:41:27] I think communication has been really important. I mean, there's been times where like, as a married couple, sometimes I assume that my husband knows what I want without me saying it.

Um, So sometimes I'll forget to communicate things with him. And I've noticed that it's just important to Communicate everything so that we're both on the same page about things. And we use a shared calendar so that if you know, events come up, like we can put them on the calendar and we're learning that we both need to check it cause different, things they'll show up on there and, oh, Hey, you didn't tell me about that event on Saturday that you're providing coffee for, you know?

So also we get to spend a lot more time together than what we were before when Jim was working uh, so the corporate job because he can flex his schedule a lot more now. And even if it means that we're doing business things, so we're working, but it doesn't really feel like work a lot of the time. Um, at least we get to do that together. We get to go and make coffee deliveries together. And I just feel like we see each other a lot more.

Which is one of, it was one of the motivating factors for starting the business too, is to have more time together.

**David Crabill:** [00:42:37] So you said that you're doing events as well as running directly out of the shop. so how big of a portion of your business are the events like the Rochester market?

**Jim Whitmarsh:** [00:42:51] Yeah, So, right now the Rochester farmer's market is every Saturday in the summertime from. May through October. so that's like our biggest event because it's, it's every Saturday. There's a, a really good turnout of people that, that come to support all of the local farmers and vendors that are there.

So there's a lot of prep work involved in that. And then, because we have that on Saturday and our shop is open. I feel like my bigger prep days are Friday, I mean I'll typically roast the coffee for Saturday on Wednesday or Thursday. But I'm usually at the roastery pretty late on Friday evenings, getting the vehicle packed up with all the stuff we need for the market on Saturday.

And then it's pretty late night and a, in a really early morning. I would say that's, that's our primary event. We with COVID and everything. Most everything's, well, most, everything was canceled last year with the exception of the farmer's market. And so this year um, we've kind of been slow to get back into other events just because we don't want to overdo it.

That coupled with um, getting into a couple of more grocery stores now here locally, that's, that's been a pretty big opportunity for us to sell some more product.

**Crystal Whitmarsh:** [00:43:58] We are catering a couple of weddings this year with the cart. I'd say most of our business is still the wholesale production of the coffee.

**Jim Whitmarsh:** [00:44:07] With, with COVID too, with our, our online sales. Saw an increase there with people working from home more and needing more caffeine to fuel their day.

and then we promoted free local delivery within a 20 mile radius of the roastery here. And we do free shipping on orders over \$40. So yeah, we keep busy with what we're currently doing

**David Crabill:** [00:44:30] So, what are you guys currently pricing your coffee at? I know you said it was \$10 a bag way back. When, what is it today?

**Jim Whitmarsh:** [00:44:39] right now. It ranges from 12 to 14, depending on the coffee. And then some of the couple of the coffee givebacks that we do. Um, those are 14, light roasted Ethiopian coffee that we charge 14 for. Cause that one's a little bit more. And then most of our coffees are at 12.

well, green, green coffee prices have started to increase here lately and we also have upgraded our packaging big time from when we first started and we actually have some compostable and biodegradable bags now. So yeah, we're, we're probably going to be needing to increase our prices by uh, you know, a dollar or something per bag here soon.

But I feel like still pretty uh, you know, a pretty fair price for, for a bag of small-batch roasted specialty coffee.

**Crystal Whitmarsh:** [00:45:24] Yeah. We try to still stay competitive,

**David Crabill:** [00:45:27] And these bags that you've gotten, where are you getting those from?

**Jim Whitmarsh:** [00:45:33] Right now we're getting them from a company out in California. It's an eco bag. A hundred percent biodegradable as well as a home compostable or, or you can take it to a municipal facility if you've got one available.

**Crystal Whitmarsh:** [00:45:47] it has been interesting. We've had trouble sourcing bay. During COVID, it will order, you know, so many bags. And then when we go to reorder those bags, aren't available.

So we've had kind of a shuffling in the style of bag that we use. We're kind of just getting whatever we can, but trying to get the, the biodegradable and compostable ones. So,

**David Crabill:** [00:46:10] How has your packaging changed over time? Or can you remember? Like, what was it like when you first started out?

**Jim Whitmarsh:** [00:46:17] Yeah. So the first bags we had when we first started we were using a it was a craft bag um, and it had a polyliner around it, but it didn't have a de gassing valve and it just had the tin ties. So we um, we didn't have, heat sealed bag. And then we progressed to a block bottom bag with a zipper pouch that we could heat seal the top had a degassing valve for coffee to offgas in the packaging.

**Crystal Whitmarsh:** [00:46:43] And on the on the first bags we had, we purchased labels. So Jim like designed the labels on the computer, and then we bought them from a, like a label company and stuck them on, on there.

And now we're stamping our bags with our logo and then we have our own label printer that he uses to print off the information about the coffee and the ingredients and all of that stuff too.

**David Crabill:** [00:47:07] Yeah, I noticed that your logo and branding I feel like it's been nice from the beginning. Like it looks very nice. Is that something you designed or did you hire that?

**Crystal Whitmarsh:** [00:47:19] Actually kind of a cool story. My brother-in-law designed the logo for us. So he has an industrial design degree and we were, when we were first kind of talking about this and that we would need a logo. We told him the name and then uh, that we wanted something kind of outdoorsy to match with it.

And he took it from there. So we've been thankful. He's helped us with various things and big redesigns and some other posters and things along the way. And we get a lot of compliments about the logo. Super thankful for that.

**David Crabill:** [00:47:52] How did you come up with the name trail Creek coffee roasters.

**Jim Whitmarsh:** [00:47:58] It's a real original. Um, so at the subdivision that we lived in at the time when we started all this was trail Creek, so it kind of just rolls right off the tongue. So we thought, you know what we had, we had a couple of different um, names in mind and this one just seemed to seem to stick really well.

**Crystal Whitmarsh:** [00:48:15] So, and we started out as just trail Creek coffee. And then we added the roasters because we had enough questions on, people were getting kind of confused, like, well, are you a coffee shop? And especially at that time as a cottage food business out of our home were like, no, we're not a coffee shop, but we roast coffee.

So that was helpful. And just distinguishing what it was. We did.

**David Crabill:** [00:48:39] I meant to ask earlier, but how are you getting your green beans? Like where, where do you source those out of?

**Jim Whitmarsh:** [00:48:46] We're really fortunate to have a very large importer here actually in St. Paul or Roseville um, cafe imports they import coffee from all over the coffee growing world. And it really has just allowed us to utilize them as a reliable source of coffee so that we can focus on, roasting the best that we can.

Um, Back when we first started, I think One of Crystal's lofty dreams was to travel the world to these coffee, growing regions and import the coffee ourselves directly. Which I think we quickly learned was uh, no small feat, um, but having cafe imports so close cause we can, we can either have them ship pallets of coffee to us, but just as easy for me to take a trip up there a couple of times a month and grab three or four bags of coffee

**David Crabill:** [00:49:34] Well, how big are these bags?

**Jim Whitmarsh:** [00:49:36] it, depending on the origin of the coffee, they're either 60 kilogram bags, which is about 130 pounds. Or uh, most of them are 69 kilograms, about 150 pounds. So yeah, there. Big bags.

**Crystal Whitmarsh:** [00:49:50] When we first started, like from sweet Maria, as we would get like 20 pound bags?

**Jim Whitmarsh:** [00:49:56] one pound up to 20 pounds.

**Crystal Whitmarsh:** [00:49:58] And then after that, we bumped up to cafe imports has a sister company called La Bodega, and we could get 50 pounds from them and shipped right to our door, which was really nice. But then we were going through them quickly. So then that's when we made the shift to going to pick up the larger bags.

**David Crabill:** [00:50:18] So as you think back over the past few years, are there any stories or moments that really stand out to you, maybe interactions with customers or anything that, that seems like a highlight over the last few years?

**Jim Whitmarsh:** [00:50:34] I would say when we're out sampling and people are trying our coffee for the first time or, or even just trying specialty coffee for the first time. Some of the reactions are priceless because we'll get everything from, wow, this is, this is really great coffee. This is amazing to do you have anything darker than this?

**Crystal Whitmarsh:** [00:50:52] Or it's just coffee tastes like coffee. Yeah. So everybody's palette is different. I think that's what that taught us. And we don't get offended if someone isn't like your coffee's amazing, you know, but we do get excited when, when people really love it.

**Jim Whitmarsh:** [00:51:09] yeah, the ultimate compliment is if, somebody comes back to us and said, oh, I, love your coffee so much.

I bought another bag to share with a friend or a family member or to, you know, to take over to for Thanksgiving or Christmas. I feel like a lot of times it's when you're trying to start a business and you're in it can be a struggle.

So hearing stories about people. They're sharing how they found your coffee or, or when they first had your coffee or the fact that they're sharing it with other people. I mean, that's feels pretty good knowing that, they liked it enough to want to share it with somebody else.

**David Crabill:** [00:51:44] Well, I can tell you guys have done a great job of getting those customers on board and educating them and growing your business. Yes. So where do you, I know crystal, you're the dreamer. So where, where do you guys see this business headed in the future?

**Crystal Whitmarsh:** [00:52:01] Good. You asked the right person that question. Honestly, well, it's just been an interesting journey, you know, we um, if you were to ask us that even. A year ago, I would have told you that we wanted to transition our current space into a full on coffee shop with hours, you know, every day of the week. But recently we've had uh, another business moved to town.

Who's running a gift shop and a coffee drive through, and she's going to use our beans, which is amazing. She came up to us and really respected us and just said, Hey, how can we help each other out? So I thought that was really cool. So now I don't know, I kind of almost see us shifting more into, and Jim might disagree, but into more of targeting that wholesale market um, we did one roasting 101 class, which was really successful.

So I could see us doing more classes on how to roast. you know, we had a small group come in and Jim provided some education. They got to have coffee and they got to roast coffee and then take home a couple of bags of coffee. So that was a really cool, just roasting experience. So that's something that we'll continue to provide also building out some form of coffee bar in this space so that we could maybe do another type of class with like different brew methods and how to brew coffee and do some cupping things that way.

So I see us kind of just like gearing more towards that and hopefully. Becoming a little more hands-off so that we can just have more time as a family too, but also I still have that dream of going to the coffee farms. So we are doing a coffee farm trip to Belize in February of next year we're going to go and harvest coffee on a newer coffee farm and process it with them and roast it with them and they roast it on a wok over a fire.

And so like, it'll be a really neat experience. I think there'll be able to educate us on, on the coffee growing side, and maybe we can educate them on the coffee roasting side. So maybe not necessarily. An importing type of business, where we import the beans directly, but getting to go and at least visit the farmers and have that experience too. So I don't know, maybe Jim's got other dreams.

**Jim Whitmarsh:** [00:54:30] I have all kinds of dreams. I can't shut my brain off. Most of the time I'm thinking, you know, lying in bed at night, thinking about different things we could do. I really like from like a coffee roasting standpoint, I can flex my schedule around as needed for our family.

And I'm not necessarily. Needing to be here at a certain time every day. Which I think that aspect is really nice. So yeah, I think that we'll do, we'll continue to grow the roasting operation and like crystal said, wholesaling I feel like there's a lot of opportunity in the area for that growth.

And then who knows? Yeah, we um, the full coffee bar cafe has uh, seemed like it's taken a back seat here recently, which is probably uh, a good step back just to, to take a look and see other opportunities that we can grow and, but still stay. You know, still keep that family time that we have um, just everyday reminded how quickly our kids are growing up.

And they're probably going to be out of the house before we know it. So we really want to just try to spend as much time with them as I can. And I'm sure I know crystal feels the same way, so yeah, right now we're just kind of focused on growing what we're currently doing we're definitely open to, to new concepts and things as, as different opportunities are presented to us. I mean, we'll definitely weigh everything out. And

**Crystal Whitmarsh:** [00:55:48] we have talked about at some point maybe trying to do a drive-through coffee place, but

**Jim Whitmarsh:** [00:55:54] yeah, I feel like that's pretty far away.

**David Crabill:** [00:55:56] Well, I can tell you guys are very passionate about it and you've certainly done a great job building it to this point now um, if people want to reach out to you, how can they get in touch or find you?

**Jim Whitmarsh:** [00:56:09] Probably the easiest way is going to our website [www.trailcreekcoffeeroasters.com](http://www.trailcreekcoffeeroasters.com). We've got a, you know, a shop there where you can order our coffee.

**Crystal Whitmarsh:** [00:56:18] You can find us on Facebook and Instagram at [trailcreekcoffeeroasters](https://www.facebook.com/trailcreekcoffeeroasters), and then email is great too. It's just [trailcreekcoffee@gmail.com](mailto:trailcreekcoffee@gmail.com).

**David Crabill:** [00:56:30] Well, great. Thanks so much for coming on the show today. I mean, I could tell you. You are a great asset to your local community and you're giving back as well. So it's just, it's really cool to hear your story and how you've built this up from totally nothing to quite the business today. And I'm looking forward to seeing where it goes in the future.

**Crystal Whitmarsh:** [00:56:52] Awesome. Thank you.

**Jim Whitmarsh:** [00:56:52] Thanks for having us, David.

**David Crabill:** [00:56:56] That wraps up another episode of the Forrager podcast. Clearly Jim and crystal are really good about constantly seeking new opportunities and collaborations in their business. Now some of them may not always pan out, but they keep following what is working, and I think that's a big contributor to their success.

For more information about this episode, go to [forrager.com/podcast/37](http://forrager.com/podcast/37)

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And finally, if you are thinking about selling your own homemade food, check out my free mini course, where I walk you through the steps you need to take to get a cottage food business off the ground. To get the course, go to [cottagefoodcourse.com](http://cottagefoodcourse.com).

Thanks for listening. And I'll see you in the next episode.