

# Meggen Wilson with Pine & Palm Kitchen

**David Crabill:** Welcome to the Forrager Podcast, where I talk with cottage food entrepreneurs about their strategies for running a food business from home. I'm David Crabill, and today I'm talking with Meggen Wilson.

[00:00:11] But first, we need to talk about email marketing. As you'll hear in this episode, Meggen sends weekly newsletter emails to boost her sales and she recently switched to using Kit for email marketing. That's also the platform that I use for my fudge business and they recently introduced the best free tier that I've ever seen in an email marketing platform Which allows you to send emails to up to 10, 000 subscribers for free So if you still haven't hopped on the email marketing bandwagon now is a great time to do so. To get started and learn more, you can watch my free email marketing tutorial at [forrager.com/email](http://forrager.com/email).

[00:00:51] Alright, so I have Meggen on the show today. She lives in Whitefish, Montana and sells vanilla products and apple cider vinegar with her food business, Pine and Palm Kitchen. Meggen only started her cottage food business a year and a half ago, but it has already taken many turns and is growing rapidly. She initially sold at local markets using both Montana's Food Freedom Law and Cottage Food Law, but last year she transitioned into a commercial kitchen to sell online and ship nationwide.

[00:01:24] In this episode, she covers tons of business topics, including branding, Packaging, licensing, trademarking, organic labeling, sourcing, co packing, e-commerce, SEO, email marketing, and more. This episode is loaded with helpful advice, so let's jump right in.

[00:01:45] Welcome to the show Meggen. Nice to have you here.

[00:01:49] **Meggen Wilson:** Hi, David. Thank you so much. I'm excited to chat with you today.

[00:01:53] **David Crabill:** Well, Meggen, I know you've listened to the podcast a lot. You know how this goes. Can you take me back to the beginning of this journey? How did it all get started?

[00:02:02] **Meggen Wilson:** I'd be happy to. I started a food blog, probably 2018 2019.

[00:02:11] And along the way, I just thought I'd love to have kind of a physical iteration of the website and along my cooking journey, I really began to love canning and food preservation and I'd started experimenting with making apple cider vinegar.

[00:02:28] And totally by accident, I once bought 40 pounds of apples and peaches, and I had so many scraps left over. I Googled, you know, what to do with all this. And I learned how to make apple vinegar. And then I took a course online at Harvard on food fermentation, cooking with microbes, and I started making vinegar and it was really good.

[00:02:50] My husband said, it'd be really nice if you started selling this stuff. And so I started researching in the state of Montana to find out what I needed to do to start a little cottage business.

[00:03:01] And along the way, I had also started making vanilla products. I saw a chef on TV. Throw some vanilla beans in a bottle and pour a bunch of vodka over it. And I thought, well, that doesn't look very hard. And it actually is a lot harder than that. There's a lot more to making really good vanilla extract and vanilla paste than just sticking it in a bottle.

[00:03:21] So that's kind of how we got started.

[00:03:22] **David Crabill:** So you come from the food blogging world and why did you decide to start your blog in the first place?

[00:03:31] **Meggen Wilson:** I had had a real estate investment company for years, and very unexpectedly got an offer for my real estate company, and here I was, I was sitting in, you know, my early fifties, totally retired and I was like, what am I going to do?

[00:03:48] And. I'm always entertained. We always had big dinner parties. always just like when I did everything over the top. And my girl said, Mom, you need to start a food blog. And I was like, Oh, my there are 50,000 food blogs out there, whatever. But they encouraged me to do it. So we started it.

[00:04:06] **David Crabill:** So you. owned a real estate business. So you have, it sounds like plenty of business experience.

[00:04:13] **Meggen Wilson:** Um, when I started this cottage business, the first thing I did was I contacted our local small business administration office. I met with a really great mentor and he had had. 40 years of experience in the

restaurant business and in grocery stores. So he was the perfect person to talk with.

[00:04:33] And he actually put me in touch with a woman who's been on your podcast named Stephanie Wiley, and she had a cookie company. She went straight to retail and that kind of terrified me. I just thought, boy, that's a lot of resources and that big gamble. And so I thought I'd. Take baby steps. And so I started really doing a lot of research to see, was there a market for vanilla and vinegar? And crafted a business plan around those products and found we had a lot of demand. There was quite a big demand for it.

[00:05:07] So we really went the route of let's plan the business before we really invested a lot of our time and resources.

[00:05:17] **David Crabill:** So you reached out to the SBA and that's a fantastic resource, but I wouldn't necessarily expect someone with plenty of business experience or having run their own business for a long time to reach out to the SBA for help starting a business. So, why did you take that step?

[00:05:33] **Meggen Wilson:** I just knew we had a really great community college that had a big culinary school. And I started digging around on their website and noticed they had a small business administration

[00:05:45] and I can't say enough about, you know, community colleges.

[00:05:48] If you have one in your area and you're thinking about doing this, reach out to them because they know what's going on. the chamber and they work with the health department and cooperative extension offices with the county. And they kind of are a touch point for all of those places. Kind of everything comes together at a local community college.

[00:06:06] So I just knew that would be a great resource.

[00:06:09] **David Crabill:** And you said that you did a lot of research and. You know, figured out if there was demand for it. Can you dive in a little bit more into what you specifically did to prove that there was demand for this before investing a lot of money into it?

[00:06:24] **Meggen Wilson:** Well, I knew I wanted to do a proof of concept. And to do a proof of concept, we knew we wanted to do a farmer's market trial. And that's really where the cottage license came into play. So we were able to, you know, for a few thousand dollars. Get enough, you know, encouragement

from the SBA couldn't find anything online that anybody in the state that was making vinegar or making vanilla.

[00:06:54] And so I reached out, you know, I hired a graphic designer and we created a label. And then I reached out to the local health department and I said, how do I do this? How do I bottle this and get this all approved? And the vinegar, they said, well, That requires anything with high acid requires a completely different license.

[00:07:14] And usually cottage licenses will not grant anything pickled or anything with a lot of acid, a cottage license. So there is in Montana, the food freedom act, where basically you can sell anything you want. You just can't sell it online. You can't sell it retail. You can't wholesale it. You have to sell it face to face and you can sell it at markets.

[00:07:34] So we got the vinegar approved. We knew we were making it safely. We were checking the bacteria levels and the pH we had beautiful pH. It wasn't, not a really highly acidic vinegar. You know, When you buy commercial vinegar and you take a shot of it, it just burns your throat.

[00:07:52] This is a very soft, very floral vinegar, but it still makes a great vinaigrette. And it's just, really good. It has a lot of bacteria in it. And then they approved my vanilla paste and my vanilla sugar. And then we added the extract. The extract wasn't ready for a year. It just takes that long to make it. So we reached out to the local farmer's market and they approved me. They gave me a booth. And so we set up shop and We could not keep products in stock. It was absolutely a line every single Tuesday night at the Whitefish Farmers Market. And about a month into it, a local organization reached out to me and said, Hey, we're having this big fundraiser and the chef wants to use your products.

[00:08:36] So within a month of launching this company, we had chefs in the Valley using our products at fundraisers. And that was pretty cool. It was pretty cool to see you. Company's name printed on a menu at an event. So we felt very encouraged and just kept plodding away and kept going to every little pop up market, any little thing I was invited to, you know, I'd get on Facebook to look for festivals and things like that.

[00:09:02] And anything where I could showcase the products, I went, I just totally hustled that first summer.

[00:09:07] **David Crabill:** And what summer was that?

[00:09:10] **Meggen Wilson:** That was 2023. And you said you invested a few thousand dollars into this, is this before you started selling at the market?

[00:09:19] because I needed to pay the graphic designer. I didn't want to just go on Canva. I wanted something really beautiful. I wanted a label that absolutely stood out. And so I worked with this graphic designer, you know, I went around and looked at wine labels and just anything that was really beautifully put together.

[00:09:41] And the two of us worked together and we came up with this black label with gold. And that's a pretty expensive label to print.

[00:09:48] And then we decided since we hired someone to make this label, we wanted to trademark it.

[00:09:55] So we trademarked Pine and Palm Kitchen, the font, the labeling. on every single product that we make. And we even did kind of a pop up product. We made a honey berry shrub and it was sold out and absolutely beautiful. I just kind of wanted to test the market, see if that was something I wanted to do. So we even trademarked a product that we only made, you know, a few hundred bottles of, and then.

[00:10:20] We looked into making an apple cider vinaigrette, and I can talk about that later, about what that's like to work with a co packer. we Invested all that money mostly with the graphic designer, the bottles, the labels, and then all of the commodities that you need, you know, vanilla beans. Bought our vanilla beans from a co-op where they were buying fair trade vanilla beans.

[00:10:44] I was sourcing them in Uganda, Papua, New Guinea, Madagascar, and bourbon to beans. Tahitian beans. We wanted something really incredible. Smokey and floral and really oily fat beans. I didn't want beans from Amazon. I wanted really, really special vanilla. So that costs some money. The apples cost money. The bottles cost money. and of course, the trademark attorney. That Was a little bill to pay,

[00:11:11] And I have not paid myself yet, which, you know, most entrepreneurs. Don't pay themselves for a few years. So I'm, I'm still working for free,

[00:11:19] **David Crabill:** So the trademarking, did that happen after you started selling?

[00:11:24] **Meggen Wilson:** about the same time. And it actually happened because Somebody messaged me on Facebook and said, I think I saw your label. It was. Like somewhere in Indiana, like I'd shared my product and someone thought someone had ripped off my label. And I didn't, I think that was true, but My husband's an attorney and he's like, I think we need to protect this brand.

[00:11:47] And So we decided to have everything trademarked and most people, you know, I don't know that you necessarily need to do that, but You know, I already had a website that was a big asset. And So we just thought, let's just protect the whole brand. So That's why we decided to hire the trademark attorney and just.

[00:12:05] protects all of those labels and the brand.

[00:12:07] **David Crabill:** Yeah, so it's good to know that you did all the branding up front, because labels and your photos, I mean, your products look phenomenal, and your labels have this really luxurious feel to them. I mean, it's really an on point brand. Although I would say it doesn't really feel like a proof of concept to me.

[00:12:25] Like I invested a lot of money. And resources like you could have, you know, just bottled up apple cider vinegar and brought it to the farmer's market just to see if there was demand for it. Right? Like, Why did you feel the need to go full in on this brand before you sold even a single bottle?

[00:12:44] **Meggen Wilson:** Well, That's really funny. Um, It does seem a little bit backwards, you know, kind of with that expression, you can't read the label from inside the bottle. I knew the vinegar was absolutely incredible. I knew it was just. This beautiful vinegar. And we were using Pacific rose apples, Fuji apples, and local honey, Chris.

[00:13:03] And they're just gorgeous, organic apples. They weren't sprayed with copper. So we knew what was going in the bottle was a premium product. And I knew what I needed to charge to be able to make money. And If I just put it in a bottle that I ordered off of Amazon and put a label that I designed online myself.

[00:13:24] I knew I could not charge 15 a bottle for 375 milliliters of apple cider vinegar, just knew it. so in order to charge that amount, I knew we needed a really beautiful bougie label to go with it. and so that's what we designed. And that is really where I want the brand to be. I want it to be a premium brand.

[00:13:48] vodka we use is local vodka from a great distiller. It's not just, you know, hooch off the bottom shelf at a liquor store. It's a really incredible vodka and the beans were, you know, fair trade sourced beans that are incredible. So the commodities we're putting in the bottle deserved a really beautiful label.

[00:14:06] And that was really important to me too. have that brand look absolutely gorgeous. And Luckily, I'm in a town in northwest Montana that has a lot of tourist traffic. I'd say 80 percent of my customers in the summer were from out of town. they come in and they spend money.

[00:14:27] So I knew I had a kind of captive audience and I thought, if this works here, then we'll see where we can take it. Then, you know, maybe The goal was always to put it online on my website. So We were able to charge what we charged and. You make a profit on the bottles and put that beautiful label on it.

[00:14:46] So that label was everything. And every person who walked up to the table said, this is a gorgeous bottle. And I said, thanks. We worked really hard on that label. So That was a big part of our strategy.

[00:14:57] **David Crabill:** Now, it's great that you had a captive audience with tourists, but that's also a challenge, right? Because, obviously, they're probably only there during the summer, I'd imagine.

[00:15:06] **Meggen Wilson:** Yeah, a lot of them own second homes here. So they're, you know, I had a woman from Missoula who was just here and she came in and bought a few bottles and then she met me at a parking lot a few months later. She drove up from Missoula and bought a case of vinegar. So, you know, Once we got them, we kind of got them hooked.

[00:15:30] And everybody said, do you ship? And I said, I don't ship, I'm under a cottage license and I can't ship. And That's when it really hit me. I've got all these customers, I'm saving all their data on square. You know, that was My payment processing thing. And however you collect your customer's data, it's really important to remember that's another asset that you have for your company. And so I had all these email addresses and phone numbers, and so I could email them my newsletter and the emails I would get back or can you ship, Can you send me a case of that vinegar?

[00:16:02] Can you send me six things of your vanilla paste? I wanted to send it for Christmas presents but I couldn't. So we knew we would probably need to start transitioning to a commercial license. and That was a lot sooner than I'd

planned. I had not planned to have to go commercial so quickly. I was perfectly happy going to the farmer's market.

[00:16:21] So It's important to save that data. Every customer at the farmer's market. Get that email. It's so important to have it.

[00:16:28] **David Crabill:** You got their data, but, did you also get their permission to send them an email? Or did you just send them let them use the unsubscribe link at the bottom if they wanted to?

[00:16:38] **Meggen Wilson:** Yeah, so they would get follow ups from me and you can unsubscribe, but also on my table I created a QR code. And the QR code would take people to recipes that they could use with the products. So We would sample, and I know, you know, this from all your customers. The thing that's so important about being at a farmer's market is you have to be on, you have to really sell.

[00:17:00] So you have to bring samples. So we had this gorgeous vanilla sheet cake with a vanilla buttercream frosting. And so we sampled that at the farmer's market. And then we also sampled my apple cider vinaigrette so I had a QR code that took people to me so that was also a great way.

[00:17:17] Once they're on my website, one of the first prompts you'll get is, would you like to sign up for my newsletter? so that's another way. Somebody can give me their email address. So that QR code definitely drive traffic to the website, which was great. But again, it reiterated to me, I need to get this product online.

[00:17:38] **David Crabill:** Now, before we delve into the commercial side of your business, You know, as you mentioned, Montana has the food freedom law. They also have an older cottage food law. Were you doing everything under the food freedom law?

[00:17:48] **Meggen Wilson:** No, we had the vanilla paste and our vanilla sugar approved by the health department. We did not get the vanilla extract bottled until late in the summer, and that we did under Montana Food Freedom, but we knew we were going to take that commercial pretty quickly. And then, This year we launched the vanilla maple syrup, so we already had a commercial license for that, so we didn't have to worry about that under the cottage.

[00:18:18] That was a newer one. We did get that under the cottage.



[00:18:23] **David Crabill:** And why did you do some things under the cottage food realm and some things under food freedom? Like, why don't you just do everything under the food freedom law?

[00:18:33] **Meggen Wilson:** I liked Knowing I had some kind of a license. It just felt there's something about I don't know checking boxes I don't know. Maybe that's just, you know, it's only \$40 to get a cottage license. So it did feel like I was letting the health department know, you know, I really do want to get things licensed.

[00:18:55] And so I liked going through that step. I liked knowing that they approved the labels. That was important to me.

[00:19:01] **David Crabill:** And while we're talking about permits and everything, I, I saw somewhere You got a HACCP plan for your vinegar. So that's never been discussed on the podcast before. Can you tell me what that process is like? Cause I've always felt like it's very intimidating.

[00:19:15] **Meggen Wilson:** It is intimidating. luckily remember I told you about that. early on that fundraiser that I was invited to with my products, and there was a woman there from Fermented, and they had launched a line of Fermented vegetables, all highly acidic,

[00:19:33] and I reached out to her and I said, how do I get this vinegar licensed? And so she said, come to my commercial kitchen. So I came and met with her and she walked me through the steps. And You can now ask chat GPT to do it for you and they'll write out a plan.

[00:19:49] But basically You just have to put in practice. in writing what the steps are when you're taking the pH and you have to write down your pH every single day, week, until you bottle. And then Once you're bottled, where are you storing your bottles? Is it in a cool storage facility? Do you have rodent traps there?

[00:20:10] Just like you would in a commercial kitchen. So It's just writing a plan saying I'm measuring my pH. I'm Not having any bacteria in my products and submitting that to the state health department. It sounds scary, but it's really if you have somebody helping you and holding your hand, it's not that hard.

[00:20:29] I think mine was eight steps.

[00:20:31] **David Crabill:** And when does a business reach a point where they would need a HACCP plan?

[00:20:36] **Meggen Wilson:** Only if you're dealing with highly acidic foods do you need it. So really only if you're pickling or doing vinegars, under commercial license or under resale wholesale manufacturing license, and then you'll need, of course, your serve safe, certificate for your food manager, your food handling certificate as well. So that they go hand in hand.

[00:20:57] **David Crabill:** And speaking of licenses, you know, I think you're the first person on the podcast that sells extracts. And of course The issue with extracts is they contain alcohol. So, alcohol licenses or liquor licenses. Did you have to deal with any of that?

[00:21:14] **Meggen Wilson:** So when we got started, the Department of Revenue with the state of Montana didn't know what to do with me. They hadn't had anyone apply for a manufacturing or retail license to sell extract that was manufactured in the state. And so. The health department said, well, you know, no one's going to get drunk drinking vanilla extract at \$15 a bottle.

[00:21:37] so the Department of Revenue and the health department kind of had to figure out what to do with me. And It took about six months for them to figure it out. And so I'd email and say, where are we? And they're like, okay, well, submit this to the department of revenue.

[00:21:52] So I'd submit my ingredients and send them my bottles and send them samples. And, and then finally. The Department of Revenue said, okay, we're just going to categorize her in a different category because a liquor license is at least a six figure investment if you can get one. so I would either have to attach my business license to a distillery.

[00:22:16] which didn't help me or I was going to have to pay six figures, seven figures, you know, wait for a license to go up for auction. Well, no one's going to do that. That's probably the worst business. You know, Why not just go ahead and open a bar? So the department of revenue said, okay, she is a food manufacturer.

[00:22:31] She's not and she's not a distiller. So I got a little, I don't want to say lucky, I mean We worked really hard on it, but it took six months to get the two entities to figure out what to do with me. So instead of paying hundreds of thousands of dollars, I think my license was 145 dollars, which was a way better result.

[00:22:50] So Once we got that figured out through the state health department, you just submit your recipe, submit your commercial label, and you don't have to put your nutritional information on your label till you hit 50, 000 per product. So until I sell 50, 000 worth of vanilla extract, I don't have to submit a nutritional label.

[00:23:14] Same thing on my maple syrup, same thing on my vanilla bean paste, etc. So that helps a lot. Now,

[00:23:21] One thing I've learned with these commercial licenses is you have to be really good at filling out forms.

[00:23:28] so many forms, it's like going to the doctor for the first time and they hand you 20 things you've got to fill out. It's very similar to getting a commercial license.

[00:23:36] **David Crabill:** Now, On the subject of licenses and everything, I noticed that you have your apple cider listed as organic on the label.

[00:23:49] you have to go through some complicated process to get that approved?

[00:23:53] **Meggen Wilson:** Yes, that is a very complicated process, and we wanted to do that on the vanilla, but I can't certify that the beans were organic. But lots of forms to fill out, lots of things you have to submit, lots of samples you have to send in. That's another heavy lift.

[00:24:15] **David Crabill:** How long did that process take and how much did it cost?

[00:24:20] **Meggen Wilson:** I would say that took a year and I don't know how much that costs off the top of my head. The whole licensing process, you have to pay licensing fees to the county, and then you pay really only a couple of licensing fees to the state. Most everything I pay is through the county, like, the commercial kitchen that I use.

[00:24:44] Their septic tank had not been approved for a commercial manufacturing kitchen, so I had to submit their septic plan. Then I had to have the water tested. Then I had to have the inspector come out just to approve the kitchen. Then they come out and they inspect you while you're manufacturing. So the county was much more hands on than the state was.

[00:25:06] **David Crabill:** What was the process like for finding a commercial kitchen to use?

[00:25:11] **Meggen Wilson:** That was the hardest thing because first of all I live in a very small community. And there was one ghost kitchen the next town over. I went and inspected it and I just knew everything we did was too sensitive to oils and smells. I couldn't have someone making burritos and hot sauce while I'm trying to bottle very delicate vanilla. That was not going to work. I couldn't store my vanilla there.

[00:25:42] There was just too much stuff going on so that we had to cross off right away. Then we couldn't find a church that would let me leave all the alcohol there. There's a lot of great churches. Commercial kitchens, and they're happy to, you know, lease them out on a Tuesday or Wednesday when no one's at church, but we couldn't store the alcohol there.

[00:26:01] So we were really looking at having to lease a spot and do all the things you have to do, but we would have to install a hood and a stove and we don't need a hood and a stove. I don't cook anything. I don't bake anything. I need a commercial, you know, high temp dishwasher. To sterilize my bottles.

[00:26:19] And that's really kind of it. Everything else just takes time and small appliances. So I got really lucky. I just sort of had a brainstorm that we have a lot of guest ranches that are empty in the winter and spring. And so I reached out to a small guest ranch and they really wanted to do pop up dinners and they would bring in chefs and they never had bothered to get their commercial kitchen license and it kind of was the impetus for them to go ahead and get their kitchen license.

[00:26:48] So we worked together to get that kitchen done and they had a fantastic commercial kitchen and I'm really lucky. I'm working remodeling out of a hundred year old timber frame barn. It's absolutely incredible. I can't believe that's where I get to go to work every day. But they had this, Gorgeous commercial kitchen and it passed with flying colors.

[00:27:08] So In the winter and spring, when their ranch is sitting dormant, I'm in their manufacturing and I can store all of my products there. So it's. perfect partnership that I have with this guest ranch.

[00:27:20] **David Crabill:** But you can't use it during the summer and the fall?

[00:27:23] **Meggen Wilson:** I can, they are very busy. I have gone in, I definitely run out of product and I'll have to, you know, run in a bottle or, make more. Vanilla bean paste. I mean, I was there in July probably every other week. It's not ideal because we're kind of on top of each other a little bit. But, kind of Things wind down for them in October. And that's when it ramps up for me.

[00:27:46] You know, we plan everything so that we're really ready to bottle January, February, March, April, and that will. You know, well, I ran out of inventory actually on December 8th this year, so I almost made it through the year, but we did run out of inventory. So we were totally sold out.

[00:28:03] **David Crabill:** Yeah, I mean, with you doing vinegars and extracts, I mean, there's Uh, fermentation period there, right?

[00:28:10] **Meggen Wilson:** Yes, six to eight months for the vinegar and sometimes it turns and sometimes it doesn't. I mean, Sometimes we've had vinegar that we've dumped. It just will not turn. It just becomes dirty water and we don't know if there's not enough yeast on the cider. We just don't know. So it's, Sometimes science and sometimes just nature is making me nuts.

[00:28:34] So we have dumped, trust me. Lots and lots of vinegar down the sink. The vanilla we extract for at least 12 months. Now I'm finding I like the vanilla much better at 18 months. It's much more mellow and I think it just has a bigger taste impact and kind of the same thing with my vanilla paste, even though I can make that in real time, it doesn't.

[00:29:00] Take any time, you're not extracting or anything. It's all made like a commercial, almost like a commercial blender. That I can make right away, but I'm so picky about it, I'll sometimes make a batch and I'm just testing, testing, testing, and we have to tweak because every single bean is different.

[00:29:16] We weigh them by the ounce, but sometimes they're a little more oily than others. So it just depends. They're very fickle.

[00:29:23] **David Crabill:** I mean, I can just imagine the production issues that that causes, right? If you are having to wait six plus months or 18 months, you know, and you're growing a business and then you're using a commercial kitchen where you're dealing with storage, like, can you just explain a little bit about how you've tried to make that all work?

[00:29:44] **Meggen Wilson:** So we actually store everything offsite. We'll start everything at the commercial kitchen at the ranch, and then we will transport

everything to our warehouse where everything is stored and it waits. It's in about 50 to 55 degrees storage on big industrial shelves. And That way I can. On my own, Go in and check things.

[00:30:05] Then we transfer everything back over to the commercial kitchen. We bottle everything for the extract and the vinegar. Not for the vanilla sugar. Not for the Maple syrup. And not for the paste. Those are all done the same day. We can manufacture and bottle all on the same day. But the extract and the vinegar definitely If you have to store it off site.

[00:30:28] There's just too many things going on in a commercial kitchen. It has to be stored in a temperature controlled facility with shelving where you can check your pH if you can, you know, see how your little beans are doing. And sometimes you add more vodka. Sometimes you add more beans. It just depends.

[00:30:45] that's the investment. But luckily we have three other products that we can make pretty quickly. And The vanilla paste right now is my number one seller. My vanilla maple syrup is my number two.

[00:30:55] **David Crabill:** Now, while we're on the topic of production, I know you've used, or tried to use a co packer, and I wanted to ask you a little bit more about that, because most of the people on my show have never tried to use a co packer before.

[00:31:09] **Meggen Wilson:** That was a really interesting process. So I mentioned before that I had that great apple cider vinaigrette. Every time we'd give out samples at the farmer's market, people would say, gee, I want to buy a bottle of this, not the vinegar.

[00:31:23] I don't want to just. Buy the vinegar and have to make it. And so I had a good friend who owns a very big company in Florida. And I said to him, you know, how do I get this stuff bottled? And He said, Oh, you need a co-packer. you don't have to have a co packer near you.

[00:31:36] You just have to find one that specializes in vinaigrette. So if you were making a spice rub, you would look for a co-packer that just specializes in making spice blends or preserves or whatever. And so I found a company in Washington state and I sent them a. Big check. And they do R& D. They do research and development with my recipe.

[00:31:59] And then they sent me back samples of the vinaigrette. And so This ties up capital for a while. This is a big check that you write to them and they have minimums on the order. You know, The minimum order I think was 10,000. And The beauty of it is you don't have to deal with the license. you don't have to worry about a license.

[00:32:18] They use their license and then they're just going to ship you a finished product and it's up to you to figure out Are you going to sell it online? Are you going to have a distributor and have it in retail stores? Are you going to try to? get it into retail stores yourself. That's up to you. So the Co Packer sent me the first formula and it was terrible.

[00:32:37] It had seed oils in it. It was absolutely terrible. It wasn't even close. They use granulated garlic instead of fresh garlic. They didn't use olive oil. For sure there's smoked paprika in it, and for sure it didn't have smoked paprika, maybe had regular paprika. So we sent it back, they made another one, it was a little bit better.

[00:32:55] But by the time they got the recipe kind of close to mine, it would have retailed for about \$20 to \$22. And as nice as it was, I don't know about you, but I don't want to pay \$20 for a ball of vinaigrette when I could make it at home for \$3. So we decided to part ways. They were really good. They did give me back my R& D investment, but that took probably eight months.

[00:33:24] To get to that point and really only get a couple samples out of them. So That was a big disappointment and I have people I know that have gone to a co packer and then they've come back and they're now self manufacturing and that you know, the co packer can't get the chocolate writer. They can't get the packaging right.

[00:33:40] or whatever. But clearly co packing is all over the country and it definitely works. It's just. Does it work for the product you're doing?

[00:33:48] And I'd love to be able to send some of these products to a co packer, but right now I'm, I guess maybe just too much of a control freak and I've worked so hard on my license. I kind of don't want to give that up right now. I like being in control and I like knowing every single thing that goes in the bottle absolutely.

[00:34:06] premium. I don't have to travel and be there for a production cycle. I can just make it myself and know that it's going to be exactly what I want.

[00:34:14] **David Crabill:** So you tried the co packing route, didn't really work, and why didn't you just decide to make the vinaigrette yourself?

[00:34:22] **Meggen Wilson:** because I have so many other things I'm making right now. And, this year. We still have vinegar in production, but I don't know if I'm going to continue with it in the future. We've had so much success with vanilla. I may sell out of the vinegar I have right now. And Like I said, it's a lot to get it licensed.

[00:34:46] It's a lot. To submit those P. H. S. And those bacteria reports. I just have so many other products that I want to develop. And my distiller and I have a couple of products we want to work on together. And So the vinegar, I don't know if that fits in and the vinaigrette the same way. I just don't know if it fits in with our business model right now.

[00:35:08] **David Crabill:** So let's talk about sales a little bit. You know, You mentioned that you started selling at the farmer's market and you were selling out, you couldn't keep things in stock. So where did it go from there? Where were you selling and how has that transitioned over the course of your business?

[00:35:23] **Meggen Wilson:** So the first year we did the Farmer's Market, which was Tuesday nights, and then I had a couple little, farm stand places that actually weren't farm stands. They were like beautiful old houses where they had gorgeous stores and they would do creator weekends and they would ask me to come and we'd sell and we'd do great there.

[00:35:42] We went to the Market Beautiful and that was crazy. We always had help and we had a line all night and we would completely sell out, load the cars and the trucks back up and, you know, leave those events after three days with nothing. I mean, Like 1 little jar of something. So that was really profitable.

[00:36:03] The 1st year we did really well and got most of our investment back then in year 2, you get a little tired of that hustle. It's a lot of events. and I'm. You know, I don't want to date myself, but I have three grown daughters, you know, one's in their thirties. And so I just am not as young as I used to be. And It really was taking a toll on me. And I just said to my husband, I just, just don't want to do this anymore at the farmer's market.

[00:36:29] And he said, yeah, I think we figured out we have a product, let's just get it licensed and let's get it online.



[00:36:34] So that's where we are right now. We've launched, The whole product. Line is on my website now, and that's primarily where we sell and people find me organically. They find me Through my social media channels. I have food bloggers I work with. So I'm going to the fancy food show so I'll be there.

[00:36:56] With a lot of products and the tastemakers conference, I'll be there as well. Promoting my website and my product line. So It's a lot, I don't wanna say it's necessarily easier, but it kind of is to sell online.

[00:37:09] **David Crabill:** So, you obviously came into this with plenty of blogging experience and online website experience. What do you feel like you've learned about the e-commerce side of it?

[00:37:20] **Meggen Wilson:** Um, A little naive about how quickly things would sell. I really thought, you know, if I. Put all my vanilla recipes on there, you know, vanilla cake, creme anglaise, banana pudding, you know, even an old fashioned with vanilla maple syrup and chocolate bitters in it.

[00:37:39] I thought, boy, if I list that on my website, I'll get sales and you really. Don't you have to get, first of all, Google, you have to set up your business with Google, then you have to get Google reviews. Then you have to work with Shopify to get reviews and reviews really drive the traffic. And Then you have to, you know, get those ads if it's going to be on meta or whatever platform you're on.

[00:38:01] And I primarily am on meta for any advertising I do, but. you do have to be very strategic about who your market is, who's your demographic, and getting those repeat customers to come back and reorder. And of course, fall baking season, you know, is really starting. I have this joke, like the minute Trader Joe's puts out anything with pumpkin, kind of in late August, that's when my sales really tick up.

[00:38:27] We're kind of steady in January. It's a little quiet, but that's good because we're in production mode. And then really kind of midsummer, fall and all the way through the holidays, we ship like crazy. So that's really our busy season.

[00:38:42] **David Crabill:** So, if your big season is in the late fall and holiday time, do you think that's because your products are, like, really giftable?

[00:38:53] **Meggen Wilson:** Yes, and being a food blogger, you know that most blogs that have ad traffic, they all see spikes starting with September. We kind of call it September, you know, fall baking season. That's when people are really in their kitchens making their apple pies and experimenting and going to parties.

[00:39:14] and that's when people are most entertained in the fall and during the holidays. And that's when people are buying vanilla products. And it also is very, very giftable.

[00:39:24] I would say most of my orders from September to December are easily over a hundred dollars. So people are buying, you know, five bottles of vanilla or five jars of vanilla paste, which tells me they're giving them away because it would be really hard to go through that much, but you know, four ounces of vanilla paste, That's a lot of baking, so it's telling me for sure they're definitely gifting it.

[00:39:46] The vanilla maple syrup is the same thing. I mean, to have that vanilla maple syrup is a really great little gift to take, you know, to someone who's entertaining you or if you've got family coming over.

[00:39:56] So That's, I think, why our sales. Really spiked during Q3 now, you had mentioned that you run ads on Meta. feel like most cottage food businesses don't dabble in that, or if they do, they don't make any money on it. What have you learned or what do you know about ads?

[00:40:16] Well, I learned a couple of things. So I did hire a VA. She was in Alabama and she was doing Pinterest for me. She was managing our Pinterest account. One thing I learned very quickly is don't hire a VA that doesn't know a lot about food. She knew a lot about SEO, but she wasn't a food person. Those ads kind of didn't go anywhere.

[00:40:38] And they were Really placed in the summer when we didn't need to be placing ads. So I worked with my team and my web designer and really hunkered down on Pinterest trends and looked at. You know, Where SEO is in the fall, you know, when are people looking for vanilla? and then we decided to put ads on meta and not Pinterest.

[00:41:02] Pinterest is really expensive to advertise on. And I just didn't get a lot of sales from it. So we did, definitely see ads from Instagram and it's. Not a lot. We would spend a few hundred dollars and we would see a definite return on investment with those well placed ads. And it was, you know, women of a

certain age in a certain demographic who like wine, who like travel, who like baking.

[00:41:26] Those were our customers. And of course, my newsletter, if we'd send out a newsletter and say, Hey, you know, here's some recipes for our vanilla maple syrup. You know, We'd wake up and there'd be 47 orders the next day for vanilla maple syrup. So that e newsletter is a really important part of that as well.

[00:41:44] actually, it's funny that you advertise with a convert kit because we just switched over to a kit. Um,

[00:41:50] If you are able to get people's email addresses, and I think most people want to support you, it's a great way to stay in contact with your customer. You know, Give them recipes, give them ways they can find you. Let them know what's going on in your life. And One thing that I really found is as beautiful as my label is, people wanted to know me.

[00:42:11] They wanted to know what I was doing. You know, what's Meggen doing? Where is she traveling? What's going on in Montana? Where did she go hiking in Glacier Park this weekend? And so That relationship I have with my community and my customers is everything. Every single box that I ship out, I write a handwritten note.

[00:42:30] To every single customer, thanking them for supporting my small business. And Every customer is as valuable as the next. It doesn't matter if they order one thing or if they order 17 things. So That personal touch, I think also is a part of the reason why we're really starting to see success. It's just continuing to reach out to that customer and letting them know how important they are.

[00:42:52] And. You know, Being as authentic as I can, like this is something that I craft with my hands, all winter, all spring, so no one else is doing it. And I kind of like right now that it's not with a Copacker in Arizona or wherever. I like that I'm making it for my clients.

[00:43:09] **David Crabill:** So in your newsletter, how do you find the balance between focusing on your products or recipes versus focusing on yourself?

[00:43:18] **Meggen Wilson:** I usually have three parts to every newsletter. The first part is, you know, what I'm up to, if I've traveled somewhere, you know, just like I said, you know, if I have a really pretty garden in the spring and

summer and so, you know, what's growing in my garden and, our new recipe I'm experimenting with and, just whatever's going on in my life.

[00:43:39] And then The next one is usually, it's, kind of a, Just recipe just for people who are subscribers, kind of a subscriber only recipe that we haven't put on the blog yet. So they get first dibs at the recipe. And then we might as a follow up, we might have, you know, here's, autumn spices you need to have in your pantry or

[00:43:58] Super Bowls are coming up. Here's, you know, three great dips that are on my website that you might want to try out.

[00:44:04] So that's basically the newsletter. We don't hit people over the head with like, Hey, you know, 20 percent off if you buy three things of vanilla, it's just, it's always there. We always try to have the products mentioned somewhere. But it's a very soft touch. It's just a newsletter that I would want to read.

[00:44:23] So that's how I write it. And I write it myself.

[00:44:26] **David Crabill:** Are you able to tell when sales come from your newsletter?

[00:44:32] **Meggen Wilson:** Yes, on Shopify, they're really good about tracking social media, direct from the website. You know, Somebody just Googles Vanilla or if it's a click through from my newsletter. So Shopify gives you tons of analytics, tons of data. They'll tell you, you know, abandoned cart rates. Um, the worst is when somebody abandons a cart.

[00:44:55] That always makes me sad, but so That data from Shopify is really important. And then every time somebody buys something, they get a prompt, once it's delivered to write a review. So that's another thing. And you don't want to buy something unless you see a five star review on it.

[00:45:12] So, you know, that's another thing you have to figure out is, you know, are you getting reviews and, you know, and asking people, Hey, if you like my product, please write me a review. I'd really appreciate it. And Usually they'll take them. 60 seconds to do it if you ask.

[00:45:25] **David Crabill:** Now, in terms of getting people to your website, obviously you come from this food blogging background, so I'd imagine you

have some experience with SEO already or search engine optimization, so what have you done?

[00:45:39] To try to get your website to rank or your new e store to rank for these products.

[00:45:45] **Meggen Wilson:** That's a great question. So I use key search and on key search you can enter basically any phrase and it'll tell you how many people a month are looking for that phrase. So say I enter vanilla bean paste. It will tell me how many people are looking for vanilla bean paste and then how hard the competition is.

[00:46:08] Are there Other blogs that rank higher than mine, like Epicurious or Food and Wine or, you know, Ina Garten that are just going to outrank me on Vanilla Bean Paste, or am I starting now to compete with those websites? And so, I wrote a blog post on like recipes using vanilla bean paste, 15 recipes using vanilla extract because people were searching for those terms and there weren't, there wasn't a lot of competition in those terms.

[00:46:34] So That tool key search, which I pay for every month, I have a subscription to. That's a huge tool that food bloggers use to make sure the recipes they're writing or things people are actually looking for and that, you can actually, rank on Google that people can find you and you're not going to be outranked by bigger blogs.

[00:46:54] my blog is certainly not one of the biggest food blogs out there. It's a little niche, but I think now that we've got the store up, that does kind of give me a nice weight. So I'm definitely seeing recipes I'm ranking for. And then I have other food bloggers. that will link to my site that uses my products.

[00:47:13] I write a food column for both of our local newspapers, the Whitefish Pilot and the Daily Inter Lake, and so those are great too, so people can find me through even just our local newspapers. That SEO is huge, really important for anybody who's, doing cottage and trying to figure out, okay, how can I have people find me once I can ship,

[00:47:34] **David Crabill:** I know a lot of the keyword search tools can be a little bit expensive. I'm just curious with the key search, how much are you paying for that?

[00:47:44] **Meggen Wilson:** It's not a bad month. I want to say it's \$25 a month for my premium subscription. And then I use Canva pro for all my Pinterest and

Instagram and Facebook posts. And again, that's probably around \$25. And then you have your server and your web designer. So you definitely have that infrastructure of all those digital tools that you need, but.

[00:48:11] That's kind of the cost of doing business, you know, I don't have a storefront. I don't have a brick and mortar. So for me, that's the stuff I'm paying for that really gets me out there in front of people.

[00:48:22] **David Crabill:** Now, do you use the keyword search to, like, steer the direction of your business in terms of, like, figuring out what next product you want to try out or see if there's demand for it with low competition?

[00:48:36] **Meggen Wilson:** That's a really good question. I actually use a different tool. Forbes Business Insight, and that tells me what the market share is on any given product. And so you can pay a subscription fee to that, and you can look up and see, you know, how many billions of dollars people are spending on vanilla every year, and who the big players are, and are people looking for organic products?

[00:49:02] Are they looking for just, you know, McCormick? You know, Are they perfectly fine with just buying whatever's at the grocery store? So that's a really good tool, and I You know, I think actually you can sign up to do research on that. Without having to pay a fee, but I do pay a fee just to have a pro version.

[00:49:20] The new products that I'm thinking about launching this year were suggested to me by. and I thought about them and I get lots of things suggested to me all the time. And some things I'm like, no, we're not going to do that. But a couple of things, you know, my distiller and I are like, well, that might be something we want to look into.

[00:49:41] So we're. Going to do a little R and D this winter and see if we can come up with a couple of items. And, you know, I talked about that honey berry shrub. We did that, but again, it was a high acid food. It was something I'd had to run through the state and I had to take pHs and I just, it's a lot of work.

[00:49:59] and Honey berries are really expensive to buy and I don't grow them. I'm not a farmer. So that was something that we tried out. It went really well. It sold, but I don't think we're going to keep that in production. So we retired that one.

[00:50:11] **David Crabill:** Well, speaking of other products, you obviously do the apple cider vinegar, you do the extract to do the vanilla paste of vanilla sugar, the vanilla maple syrup. And then you used to do this like berry shrub, but I also saw a cleaner that you sell.

[00:50:28] **Meggen Wilson:** Yes. We are out of that right now and we're out of it because my garden is under three feet of snow, it was really funny. I had a gal that was helping me with my house and she just had this spray bottle and she would clean things and I'm like, that smells amazing. And she told me how she made it.

[00:50:46] And it was just isopropyl alcohol and white vinegar and some essential oils. And then she just put all kinds of peels and flowers and things in it and just let it hang out. And then she just would stick it in a spray bottle. And so I made some of that and I had my graphic designer make labels for it.

[00:51:05] And we sold it at the farmer's market and it's not edible. So you don't have to get a cottage food license for it. You just have to write a disclaimer on the label that, you know, don't drink this. And so there's some legal speak on the label. And it's a really beautiful cleaner and there's, you know, not any nasty chemicals or bleaches in it.

[00:51:25] And that sold like crazy. So I'd love to keep that in production, but it's not a food product. So I just have to figure out where I am going. Have that where people can really get it in the quantities that they want. So sometimes we have it in production. Sometimes we don't just depend on when I get mint in my garden and the lavender and that we can actually manufacture it when I have time to manufacture it.

[00:51:51] **David Crabill:** So with you having these food products, and then also this cleaner, what is your vision for this business?

[00:51:59] **Meggen Wilson:** The vision is to continue to scale it. we would like to, By the end of the year, I'd really like to have, two part time people here working for me, helping me with labeling and production and shipping, so that I'm not doing everything myself, or my family when they come into town or my neighbors coming over and we have a labeling party.

[00:52:23] we would like to have 2 employees by the end of the year and then be able to scale where we're in our own warehouse with production facilities where we can really manufacture at a bigger scale. And I still don't really know

that. I have a desire to go into retail. You just lose so much of your margin in retail.

[00:52:45] I just don't know it. You know, It's great to say, Oh, I'm in 17 grocery stores, but if you're not making any money, that doesn't do you any good online. I keep a hundred percent of the money at a grocery store. I have to split 50 percent of it with the grocer and the distributor. So a lot of money doesn't come back to you.

[00:53:02] So We'd eventually like to scale the company. and see where that goes. And If it gets bought out, that would be great. If not, I love what I do. I absolutely love the products. I think they're beautiful. I love the food blog. But yeah, We want to continue to scale it this year and next year.

[00:53:19] And kind of, I have a five year plan and we'll see if my five year plan works out. So far, We're right on track.

[00:53:26] **David Crabill:** So you think you might sell it at some point?

[00:53:30] **Meggen Wilson:** Yeah, if we had an offer, we would be open to selling the company. you know, I hope at some point to get some grandbabies. So it'd be fun to be able to travel some more. especially because we're so holiday centric, you know, the thought of traveling in November and December is kind of scary when you really, you're basically in retail and you've got to be open, you've got to be shipping.

[00:53:53] So unless we had a pretty nice day. Warehouse with people working, it'd be hard to travel over the holidays. So It'd be nice to hand that off, but we're not in a place to do that quite yet. We're still a couple of years away from that, this year's a big scale year. We're really looking to scale now that we've got everything online and it looks good and we're fully licensed and we.

[00:54:13] pretty much knows the products we're going to discontinue and the ones we're going to stick with.

[00:54:17] **David Crabill:** And it's interesting because your products are currently listed on your food blog, and I think you said that you have a plan to separate that out at some point?

[00:54:26] **Meggen Wilson:** We do, we're actually rebranding the food line and I can't say what the name of that is yet because um, we're trademarking everything and making sure no one else has it. but We want to have the food



website stand on its own, because if you just go to my website right now, you have to kind of, you know, find the dropdown menu and find my store.

[00:54:50] And it's a little clunky and WordPress and Shopify do not play well together. They fight each other. And When we first set up the store, Oh my gosh, like my search engine or my search bar on my website, wasn't working for like a month. And so There were lots of things that were problematic. So I really just want the food.

[00:55:09] Brand to stand on its own. And then we'll of course have tons of backlinks back and forth between my food blog so that people can still find those recipes and, you know, all those things that really drove them to the product in the first place, but I think it would be a better user experience for people to just go straight to the website, buy the product.

[00:55:28] Put it in their cart, click done And then I could put my ad network back up on my website, which would definitely pay some bills, as well. So that would help support, you know, all of my digital bills that I have to pay, if you will, these. Tools that I have, I had to take down my ad network because I just thought it was tacky.

[00:55:47] So here you are buying something from me, but you have to scroll through all these awful pop up ads. There's nothing more irritating than being on a food blog that's cluttered with ads. So we're going to separate them out and that rollout is probably June or July. That takes a while, so that'll be a while before it's ready to go.

[00:56:04] **David Crabill:** Well, You've only been doing this for a year and a half, and You have had a pretty amazing trajectory of your business in that period of time. You've done a lot of things. So what have you learned and what would you recommend to a new cottage food entrepreneur? Who's just starting out?

[00:56:20] **Meggen Wilson:** The first thing is really make sure you have capital. I think it's really important that you start off not putting anything on credit cards, have cash in the bank, and really start off with like \$5,000 that you can invest in your company. The next thing is that first year, you have to hustle and sell.

[00:56:42] so many times I'd go to the farmer's market and I'd see people sitting in their little stool, sitting back and, you know, on their phone, not engaging people. I mean, you've got to be out there with samples and smiling at people

and, Hey, where are you from? Or what are you looking for? and. Really Engaging people to get them to come to your booth and try things out and give them those samples, reach out to, you know, there's all these little newspapers that are desperate for content, little regional magazines, you know, anywhere you can to get your name out there.

[00:57:14] People love to connect with local producers. They love that. Nobody wants to buy, you know, a cake mix from a big, huge corporation. They want to buy your cake. So, Connect with everybody you can in your community, and reach out to your community college.

[00:57:27] If you have a college in your town, reach out to your small business administration, any tool you can find that will help you be successful, reach out to them. You never know what little nugget you'll find. And then I've also found other producers in my community have been incredible. Everybody from chefs at the.

[00:57:47] Most hoity toity restaurant in town, you know, all the way down to somebody, like I said, who's just cranking out salsa in a little diner. Everyone has been really collaborative and helpful. So reach out to local people and, you know, where are you buying your bottles? Who's printing your labels? Do you know somebody who can help me, you know, make juju?

[00:58:08] The more people you talk to in your community, I think the better you'll be.

[00:58:11] **David Crabill:** Well, Thank you so much for coming on the show. Now, if somebody would like to learn more about you, where can they find you or how can they reach out?

[00:58:21] **Meggen Wilson:** , They can find me on Instagram, on Facebook and on Pinterest or blue sky at pine and palm kitchen. They can go to my website, which is [pineandpalmkitchen.com](http://pineandpalmkitchen.com).

[00:58:34] I do have a guide on how to, you know, start a craft food business from scratch. It's on my website. I know you're probably going to do a link in your show notes. and of course, you can sign up for my newsletter and you can also DM me, message me. I'm happy to chat with anybody. You know, I'm just happy to share any little nuggets you might need if you have a question or point you in the direction of something like, what was that thing you said?

[00:59:02] And, you know, I'm happy to share that. with you.

[00:59:04] **David Crabill:** Great. Well, thank you so much, Meggen, for coming on the show.

[00:59:08] **Meggen Wilson:** Absolutely, David.

[00:59:10] **David Crabill:** That wraps up another episode of the Forager Podcast.

[00:59:16] For more information about this episode, [forager.com/podcast/134](https://forager.com/podcast/134).

[00:59:23] And if you're enjoying this podcast, please take a quick moment right now and leave me a review on Apple Podcasts. It doesn't have to be a long review, but it's truly the best way to support this show and help others like you find this podcast.

[00:59:34] And finally, if you're 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](https://cottagefoodcourse.com).

[00:59:46] Thanks for listening, and I'll see you in the next episode.