

THE FORRAGER PODCAST · EPISODE 181

$200 One Weekend, $1,500 the Next. What Changed?

Maurissa & Blair Panning of Gray Duck Syrup Co. (Belle Plaine, MN)

Aired November 17, 2026 · Listen at forrager.com/podcast/181

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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 Maurissa and Blair Panning. I actually got to meet Maurissa earlier this year at CottageFoodieCon, which was the first ever in-person national cottage food conference.

Over 140 people came to that first event, and it was amazing, and next year's will be even better. Everyone I've spoken with, including Maurissa, has said they plan to come back, and I'd love to see you there, too. Registration for CottageFoodieCon is now open, and if you register this week with my coupon code FORRAGER20, you will not only get 20% off your registration, but you'll also get free access to my membership, Cottage Food Pro, for the next five months. That means that from now until the conference, you can join our monthly group calls and go through my pro tutorials so that when you show up in April, you have already worked through whatever you're stuck on right now. But again, you need to register with my code by this Friday, November 20th, to get the deal. To register, go to cottagefoodiecon.com and use the code FORRAGER20, that's F-O-R-R-A-G-E-R 20 at checkout. I hope to see you there.

All right. So I have Maurissa and Blair on the show today. They live in Belle Plaine, Minnesota and sell cocktail and mocktail syrups with their food business, Gray Duck Syrup Co. Blair had been making his own cocktail syrups for years, and after a work injury retired him from his previous career, he and Maurissa decided to turn the syrups into a business. They spent their first year as a cottage food business, but their first holiday season was so crazy that they quickly maxed out their home kitchen and were on track to exceed Minnesota's $78,000 sales limit this year.

So a few months ago, they moved into a commercial kitchen, which not only allowed them to take on larger events, but also opened up wholesale opportunities as well. They are now in five stores and continue to grow faster than they ever imagined. Today, you'll get to hear many of the smart decisions they made that helped fast-track their growth.

And with that, let's jump right into this episode.

David Crabill 00:02:32
Welcome to the show, Maurissa and Blair. Nice to have you here.

Maurissa Panning 00:02:37
Thank you. Thanks for having us.

David Crabill 00:02:39
All right. Well, Maurissa, I know I got to meet you at CottageFoodieCon this past April, and I'm glad to have you on. I was so impressed by your story when I heard it, and I'm looking forward to sharing it with all the listeners today. So take me back to the beginning.

Where did this journey get started for you guys?

Blair Panning 00:03:00
A couple years ago I got hurt at work and I could not go back to doing that job anymore, and we kinda needed a little shift. It started out kind of as a hobby. I made a couple of these things that we now sell just at home for our own consumption or to give as Christmas gifts. And one day I told Maurissa, "I bet people would buy this," and she kinda took that idea and just ran with it.

David Crabill 00:03:28
And when you say you got hurt at work, what was your work at the time?

Blair Panning 00:03:33
I did sewer and water excavations.

David Crabill 00:03:36
Okay. So not very correlated.

Blair Panning 00:03:38
No. Very different field. I fixed sewer lines and water lines in people's yards and in streets.

David Crabill 00:03:45
But it's interesting 'cause that's obviously very uncorrelated. But Maurissa, obviously you have a lot of entrepreneurial experience. So tell us a little bit more about your background leading up to this.

Maurissa Panning 00:03:57
Yeah. So I tend to change things often. So I went to school for law enforcement, decided that was not a good fit. I was working as an office manager for a construction company, and then started doing photography. Very short span of doing it as a hobby, and then decided to monetize it. That's kind of my bread and butter is how can we make money doing this?

And so I have been ... And I still do photography. It's year 10 for me this year. So, was doing that. That kinda led me into some social media management and product photography, so I have a few clients who I now do their social media. And then when ... It wasn't an opportunity at the time, but when this opportunity came to be, as soon as Blair mentioned that there might be a business here, I said, "We know how to run a business.

Let's do it." And so then we just kinda went nuts.

David Crabill 00:04:54
Yeah, you kind of just mentioning the photography business as this little side gig. I mean, it's a big business, right? Tell us a little bit more about that.

Maurissa Panning 00:05:05
Yeah. Yeah, it's gotten bigger and bigger. So when I started back in 2016, it was just me. And then over the last 10 years, we have grown. I now have eight people on my staff. We do all kinds of photography, with a kind of specialty focus on weddings and events. So now in addition to photography, we do wedding planning, coordination, videography.

We officiate weddings. We kinda do a little bit of everything. So that has just kind of exponentially exploded in the best way. And I'm very lucky that I now have, over the last, I would say, three to four years really, I have found some really good people who are like my right-hand people and have taken a lot off of my plate for that business, which is fantastic, and it's allowed us to take a little more energy and put it into this now that this is starting to go really well.

But yeah, it's been... It doesn't feel like 10 years. It feels like it started two days ago, but it's been quite the adventure.

David Crabill 00:06:08
Yeah, it's interesting that it's not just one business. It's like three businesses that you've built up over the past decade. And a lot of them very naturally tie into this cottage food business that you started, right? So what were some of the things and skills you had when you started this back at the beginning of 2025?

Maurissa Panning 00:06:29
The, so the biggest thing I think is the marketing and the kinda online presence, which is an ever-changing battle for anyone that does their own social media right now. We know that it feels like the rules and the algorithms and everything are changing constantly. But in working in events and weddings with the products that we make, which is cocktail and mocktail mixes, we kind of had a little bit of a built-in clientele there too, so that was very helpful.

For the first year we were bringing little wedding baskets to people when I would go work a wedding with our cocktail mixes in them. And so it was kind of just a natural... We were lucky in that we had an audience a little bit that way. And so when we started this, we were able to take the

social media part and the product photography and then a good fitting clientele and kind of have a head start a little bit.

David Crabill 00:07:28
And you haven't even talked about it in terms of your work experience, but it's obviously very correlated is your bartending experience from way back when.

Maurissa Panning 00:07:38
Yeah, so I, that was, I've always worked multiple jobs, and from parents who told me never put your eggs in one basket, and so I started bartending at 19 and was doing that on weekends for– I technically still do every once in a while. And so that was how we started making these at home, was that I liked to make drinks and Blair liked to drink drinks.

And so we would kinda come up with some fun stuff at home. We're both huge foodies. We're, being in Minnesota, the state fair is a little bit of a cult here, and so we love good food and good drinks, and it was fun to kinda have that date night where we were making them at home. And then it, yeah, it just kinda seemed like a natural progression a little bit.

David Crabill 00:08:26
And Blair, what was your perspective on this? 'Cause I guess it was your idea essentially to try to sell this, but it's not like you guys weren't busy. I mean, I saw last year you had, like, five weddings to shoot in one weekend, and I know, Blair, you also help shoot those events.

So, I just wanna hear, like, what did you expect this business to become and how did you feel like you had time for it?

Blair Panning 00:08:58
I guess I– we completely underestimated the time that would have to be dedicated to this, first of all. But when we started last year, the vision was, I would say, very small compared to what it has grown into. I just knew that I had one flavor that was really good, and that everybody that I gave it to for Christmas seemed to love it, and thought we could turn it into something that made a little extra money on the side.

And until about September of last year, we really only did a couple, like, small farmers markets and little, like, small town events near where we live. And it really wasn't until about September of last year that we started doing craft shows, and art fairs, and the bigger kind of events where thousands of people show up to buy stuff that we realized, wow, people really like this.

And production kinda quickly became an issue. Yeah, I don't know. It's been a wild ride that we weren't really expecting to blow up this fast.

Maurissa Panning 00:10:06
That spurred our transition from cottage food to commercial very quickly because we have three kids at home as well, and so being in our kitchen was becoming virtually impossible, and it was, it got to a point where it was like, well, do we sleep or do we stay up until 5:00 AM making cocktail syrups?

And so I had always wanted to make that jump in licensing, and I think it had kinda seemed like a pipe dream at first, and then it got to a point where realistically we had to make some sort of a change or we were just gonna lose our minds, I think. Yeah.

David Crabill 00:10:42
Okay, so that's interesting.

You said you've always wanted to make that jump, and yet in the same breath, Blair, you're saying that you didn't expect it to become as big of a thing as it has been.

Blair Panning 00:10:57
All of it kind of happened at once, I think. So we didn't expect it, and we very quickly found ourselves staying up till 3:00 in the morning to make stuff for shows the next day, at 8:00 AM. I've gone to markets with product that was still warm that– 'cause I had just finished making it, and it hasn't even cooled yet.

And–

Maurissa Panning 00:11:20
And in Minnesota– there's, with a cottage food license, you're extremely limited. So that was part of the conversation, too, was is it... Are we better off getting onto retail shelves, or are we better off finding some options that don't require us to be there 24/7 selling our product? And so it was just kind of a culmination of all of those things that led us to realize that we needed to make a change, or this was not feasible long term.

I think the burnout was becoming very real.

Blair Panning 00:11:55
You're also restricted income-wise under a cottage food license here. So if we were approaching the limit for the amount you're allowed to make under a cottage food license, and it kinda just became a necessity because of that as well to shift to a commercial license.

Maurissa Panning 00:12:19
But we're very different mindsets in the sense that I am kind of a, "If you're gonna do something, you might as well do it level 100 and go nuts." And I think Blair was very happy with where we were at to begin with.

Blair Panning 00:12:32
I don't know what I'm gonna do later today, so I– we're very opposite.

Maurissa Panning 00:12:36
Yeah.

David Crabill 00:12:37
That's so interesting that you said that, Maurissa, 'cause that's one of the things that I noticed in looking into you and your story. It doesn't seem like you have any half level of anything. I mean, you're all in on Minnesota everything, State Fair, Timberwolves, your businesses, your relationships.

So do you feel like that is what has helped your businesses become as successful as they have been?

Maurissa Panning 00:13:07
Yes. I'm sure there's probably a diagnosis buried in there somewhere. But, yeah, it's been... I mean, it's, there's a lot of pressure when you work for yourself, right? And so I started the photography full time, right in the middle of COVID when I had kind of gotten laid off from my construction job at the time.

And so there is a necessity aspect to a little bit of like, this is, this has to pay all our bills. Like, we gotta figure this out. But I also, this, there's never a ceiling for me, I think. There's always room to do more. There's always room to grow. And I'm a very competitive person, so there's a lot of like kind of a competition aspect even just with myself of every weekend we're trying to beat our sales goal just a little bit or sell just a little more than we did the previous weekend.

Which is why I think partly, when we met at CottageFoodieCon, we had talked about, you did your lecture on scarcity and whether that's natural or forced scarcity, and that truly, I think, saved us a little bit. Because I was so excited to come home and talk about that. And we, my mindset had always been, we have to go to every event and every farmers market with a dozen of every flavor, and we have to be fully stocked, and we have to be ready.

And that led to a lot of late-night frustrations and fights over how late are we doing this and how much do we really need. And so it was a really nice adoption of that mindset and saying, "You know what? If we're out of something, we're out of it, and we tell people we're out of it." And we have not seen a difference, a decrease in sales at all.

Like, when we go to shows missing certain flavors, we sell the ones that don't normally sell. So it's been, that was like a changing–

Yeah ...

Attitude with how we've been doing things.

David Crabill 00:15:02
That's cool to hear that that's actually panned out for you and you put into practice. Now, we're talking about how maybe your personality trait has helped you be successful. What do you feel like has been the compromise of having that all or nothing approach?

Maurissa Panning 00:15:19
I think I drive my husband crazy sometimes. And then work-life balance is a huge struggle for us. That's a big–

Blair Panning 00:15:27
One.

Maurissa Panning 00:15:27
So with having three kids that are... So we have a 15-year-old, a four-year-old, and a two-year-old, so we're all over as far as their lives go, too. And so it's hard for me to turn off, and it's hard for me to put work on a back burner.

And thankfully Blair really is good at balancing that. And, on Sunday we took the day off to take the kids to the Renaissance Festival. And so it's just channeling my type A into scheduling family time versus always having to schedule work time, and just learning how to balance that and how to not stress my husband out all the time.

Blair Panning 00:16:07
It's a lot of, lot of working after the kids go to bed.

Maurissa Panning 00:16:09
Yeah.

David Crabill 00:16:10
Yeah. All right, so let's talk about what those first few months looked like. Obviously, going from, I think it was February of 2025 through about fall of 2025 is your, like, dedicated cottage food period, and that coincided mostly with your busy season as a wedding photographer.

So what did that first, say, three months look like with your cottage food business, and how did you take it– how did it take off?

Blair Panning 00:16:41
It was very experimental, and very kind of low stress, and just kind of "Hey, there's a market this weekend. We could try it out," or, "There's a farmer's market this week we can go to." But it was not a very consistent, week after week after week, full of markets. It was just kind of whatever we could squeeze in between our wedding schedule because that schedule had been kinda set in stone already.

So the first couple months were actually very relaxed compared to what fall ended up being like.

Maurissa Panning 00:17:17
And it was really DIY every single aspect of it. Like, we were printing our own labels for our mason jars, and we were just throwing out a table and a tablecloth and setting stuff on a table, and we didn't really have a setup or anything that was visually appealing.

I think we had bought our first tent on Amazon or on Facebook Marketplace for 20 bucks, and it was way too short, and people were hitting their head on it. So it was a low investment, low stress, low expectation, just kinda let's get our feet wet situation.

David Crabill 00:17:48
No, that's pretty interesting for you to say because before this business, you literally had your own branding company helping other people brand, and yet what you're telling me is that you didn't feel like it was very branded from the beginning. Is that right?

Blair Panning 00:18:06
It was not. And a lot of it was budget. We kind of made the decision to not pull big funds from Mind of Mo– from our wedding company to go into this. So it kind of started with the money that we had was the money that we were gonna use. So we started with cheap secondhand stuff, printing our own labels, whatever we could find for bottling.

Wherever had bottles in stock if we couldn't get them supplied to us.

David Crabill 00:18:36
You say bottles, but I know you mean jars, right? It started as a mason jar thing?

Blair Panning 00:18:41
Yeah ... Yes, we started in mason jars, which I am so happy to be out of. But yeah, so it kinda started like that. And then once fall hit and money from sales and markets started coming in, we quickly put it right back in into upgrading our setups and our tables and branded tablecloths and printed labels that looked much nicer than what our own– printer at home could produce.

Maurissa Panning 00:19:08
I kinda cringe when you look back over the photos from then till now, and it's like, "Oh my gosh, I can't believe we ever put that on a table."

Maurissa Panning 00:19:16
But I think the, but I think the flip side of that coin is that it's so easy to get intimidated when you see other food producers that have, like, this perfect...

We still, two years in and, like, a lot of money in, and we're still intimidated, I think, sometimes by other things we see and by other setups and other labeling. And it's such a good reminder that that is so much less important than the product you're putting out. And, we had sales that we were

so impressed with when we were printing address stickers and slapping them on a jar in black and white and calling it a day.

So it's hard to look at now. But it, I mean, it did what it was supposed to do.

David Crabill 00:19:58
Yeah, I mean, there's no arguing that it worked, even though it was relatively rudimentary. And, you mentioned the product, but I would imagine, your relationships, your interpersonal skills, this is a very market or pop-up heavy business from the beginning, right? So I'd imagine that had something to do with your success.

Blair Panning 00:20:23
Being able to talk to people is a big part of it, and relate to whoever's in front of you and just get along with them seems to really help drive sales. And explaining that there's not one way to use this because what I started it with was old-fashioned mixes in mind. And it has really grown into coffees, mocktails–

Maurissa Panning 00:20:50
Cooking.

Blair Panning 00:20:50
Cooking. Yeah, you can do... The number of things that we've found that you can do with the product has really grown from what I originally had in mind, too.

Maurissa Panning 00:20:59
Well, and I think we're lucky that we're in both an area and a time where people really like supporting local small businesses, and I feel like since COVID that has stuck around here, which is fantastic.

But people, I mean, they wanna see the face behind the product, and they wanna hear the story, and they wanna know how this came to happen, and we get asked all the time, like, "How'd you get into this? How did this start?" And we still see that difference because now we have a few staff members who also go out and do events for us, and it's never quite the same, both with sales numbers and just, like, overall experience.

We're able to make connections with event organizers, and other foodie producers, and other people that... Your staff will never do things the same way you do, and it's not because they're not good at their job. It's just that this is your baby. And so, yeah– Yeah ... It's just never quite the same.

David Crabill 00:21:54
We should talk about the product itself because it's a pretty unique product relatively speaking. It's not like your standard product that has been done a dozen different times, right? And so in that way it's kind of a new product to people I would imagine. I don't know if you have a whole bunch of direct competition.

Maybe you do in Minnesota, but you tell me.

Blair Panning 00:22:16
No. We have one company that, I guess you, some people would consider competition, but it's, they do not produce a syrup like we do. They do a different style of drink mix, and it's a concentrated frozen mix. So similar but not really the same. Different flavors, different kind of, Clientele.

So a lot of people will buy from both of us. Both very unique though in the sense that everyone attending these markets really has not seen something like what we're selling before.

Maurissa Panning 00:22:49
Yeah, and ours is a essentially a simple syrup. So a really, a unflavored simple syrup is an ingredient in most craft or classic cocktails.

And with ours, we just wanted to kind of reinvent that concept and take all of the fresh and natural ingredients that go into a good cocktail and bottle it so that consumers would just need to add either their spirits if they were making a cocktail or their Sprite or club soda or lemonade if they're making a mocktail.

And the other kind of brands that we've found in Minnesota, the way that they do that is by freezing and bottling. And for us, as a cottage food producer, that wasn't an option. And so when we came up with this concept of doing flavored simple syrups, it kinda just naturally worked because they are naturally preserved and naturally shelf stable, and so that allowed us to operate under the license we needed.

And then we started with I think four flavors, and then it went to eight, and now we're at eight year-round flavors and two seasonal flavors that rotate every couple months. And it's just really, yeah, it's fun. It was a struggle for us because we drink cocktails, and we kind of assumed that everyone did, and it turns out that we're in a time where a lot of people do not drink anymore.

And so we kind of pivoted in figuring out some other ways to use them. Obviously mocktails were a very easy transition. But in meeting more and more people, we eventually had food trucks that started using some of them for marinades and sauces, and then we had people that were using them as coffee sweeteners.

And so we really kinda tried to think outside the box and experiment a lot, and now we have, pages and pages of recipes– Yeah ... On our website of all the different things you can do. And we had, a neighbor injected his Thanksgiving turkey with one of them last year.

Blair Panning 00:24:43
That's probably the craziest thing I've heard–

Maurissa Panning 00:24:44
Yeah.

Blair Panning 00:24:44
Somebody do with it.

David Crabill 00:24:46
Yeah, so the nice thing about having a unique product is that you don't have competition. But more often than not, I consider a super unique product to be kind of risky because people aren't looking for it in the marketplace. It's not... People might see it, they don't even know what it is.

What's that been like?

Maurissa Panning 00:25:07
It's, we definitely have days where we're next to some sourdough bread that is gone in an hour and a half, and we're like, "Oh man, that would be nice." But I think the two biggest challenges for us are, number one, a lot of times people will see our signage and they think syrup, like maple syrup.

And so then they walk up, or they think, especially when we were in mason jars– Yeah ... Is this honey? Is this jam? Like, what are we looking at? And then our product is really heavy. So we have a lot of times where we have people tell us, "Oh, I just don't wanna carry it," or "I'll come back later 'cause it's heavy."

And so it's a lot harder than getting someone to carry a package of cookies or a loaf of bread. So those two things were definite, and continue to be challenges.

David Crabill 00:25:53
But now that the heavy thing, that sounds like an excuse to me. Do you think that's an excuse?

Maurissa Panning 00:26:00
I agree 'cause our solution to that was that we would bag it up for people and put their name and phone number on it and say, "Come back up before you leave." And we would just keep it under the table, and sometimes people take us up on it, and sometimes we realize that they are just not interested and they can walk away. So yeah.

David Crabill 00:26:17
Now the one thing I will say that you do have going for you with the product is that it's... It may be unique, but it ties into something that people already do, right? It's just, it's an add-on. It's not like its own separate product in that way, right?

Maurissa Panning 00:26:35
Right. Yeah.

Blair Panning 00:26:36
And it's fun. I've, what I've learned is people think it's fun. People love drinking cocktails, but not making them at home, and what they find from us very quickly is that it makes it super easy to make a drink at home.

David Crabill 00:26:49
And also what's unique about this too is that I think most people might have taken this concept and just... It's not that unique of a concept. It's a syrup, right? It's all in the branding you have around the syrup because other people might be producing something similar and just be branding it as a pancake syrup or something.

Have you thought about that? Is that like... It just seems like a total branding play to something that's actually relatively common, or is there something you think that is really unique about your syrups?

Blair Panning 00:27:25
A little bit of both. I would say the uniqueness part is that we use fresh fruit juices, fresh herbs, and like kind of really go crazy on flavor. Whereas we have seen other simple syrups at markets before, but not branded remotely closely.

Maurissa Panning 00:27:47
The branding is the most fun part for me. That's like where my passion lies.

So Blair gets to make everything. I get to make it sound fun and look pretty. And it's... We knew we wanted to go with a Minnesota theme. And the gray duck is such a Minnesota cult classic that when we came up with that and the logo, we stuck with it. And so then we just really kept that going because there is this like dead set Midwestern thing on like you are Minnesota proud and you are from here and like this is our family.

And so when we were coming up with flavor names and different little add-ons, we kept it really as an homage to Minnesota and the Midwest and people really love it. So that's worked really well too.

David Crabill 00:28:35
Yeah. It's very easy to see, I mean, your product names. For one, you've chosen to name your product names creative names, and they're all very Minnesota themed. So give us some examples of that.

Maurissa Panning 00:28:47
We have our Boundary Waters Berry, we have our Gopher Gold, which is kind of a nod to the Minnesota Gophers. We've got–

Blair Panning 00:28:54
Northern–

Maurissa Panning 00:28:55
Blaze ... Northern Blaze. All of our flavors are–

Blair Panning 00:28:57
Twin Cities Citrus ...

Maurissa Panning 00:28:59
Yeah, tie into Minnesota or, like, kind of the Northwoods, which is personally our happy place and kind of our escape. And so that's worked really well. And then we've also tried to be a little bit edgy and a little less prim and proper, so with descriptions of our flavors and even kind of our new thing we added. The beginning of this year we started doing, we call it On The Edge, and they're just salt and sugar blends that you can put on the rim of your glass.

And so we've been a little bit more edgy. We have actually gotten bit a few times because of that. Our catchphrase is get ducked up, and that is not always a perfect fit for some of the more kind of upscale events that we apply to, so we have actually been turned down a few times because of that.

And we just decided, nope, this is our brand and we're sticking to it, and not everyone is the perfect fit, and we understand that. Not every event is the perfect fit. But those that see it love it, and find it hysterical, and we've rolled with it.

Blair Panning 00:30:02
And we've found that online too, kind of the sarcastic and edgy responses get a good kick from the, our followers and– Yeah ... People that do follow along like kind of the attitude that is portrayed online.

David Crabill 00:30:19
Do you feel like the branding is just something you're doing for fun? Like you're naming all these things creative names. Do you like it just 'cause it's fun, or are you intentionally doing that because you think that it'll sell better?

Blair Panning 00:30:35
I would say both. I would say both. Yeah. It's fun. So we, and we have, we have a fun time coming up with new product names and the new name for our new seasonal gift box or whatever it may be. And I do think it directly ties to selling itself then.

Maurissa Panning 00:30:54
We've just always kind of assumed that if we're having fun, then making it, then the people who are buying it and using it are also gonna have fun.

And so it's fun to think about, we use that little catchphrase on our koozies and our shirts and stuff like that. And so it's fun to think about someone's hosting family for whatever the event is, and they've got their little koozie and they're showing off the names and yeah. We just figured if we were having fun and it made us giggle, then chances are other people are gonna feel that way, too.

David Crabill 00:31:24
So I'm still trying to get a sense for how this thing really took off. You said it was very rudimentary from the beginning branding wise. It was super simple. And, you weren't even super focused on it because you were in the middle of this other very, very time-consuming and weekend-focused business of photography.

So, what did the first event like or the first few events look like? And, kinda how did it grow?

Blair Panning 00:31:54
I think really the biggest thing is once people taste it, they feel like they have to have it. It's really a big difference from your store-bought simple syrup or your store-bought grenadine or margarita mix. And there's just a huge taste and flavor of the freshness of it and everything that it's...

It just blows people away and they feel like they have to have it.

Maurissa Panning 00:32:22
Yeah, we knew we wanted to do that right away. So from the very first little farmers market we went to, we were doing samples. Because it's not, as we kinda talked about, it's not a self-explaining product. And that was a little bit of a challenge because obviously it's not like we can make someone a drink.

Like, they're having to try the product itself and use their imagination as to how they would mix this and kind of create something with it. But I would say the foot to the gas pedal, so to speak, was holiday season. So once we got into that first, like, October through December last year, it went from zero to 100 because it is such an easy thing to gift.

And yeah, we were blissfully underprepared– for that. Like, we were crying trying to keep up with it.

Blair Panning 00:33:12
We had grandmas with 15 adult grandchildren, and she would buy 15 bottles and get one for each of her grandchildren. Yeah.

Maurissa Panning 00:33:22
Yeah. The holidays were what did it, and seeing, like, having that success over the holidays showed us that, like, this could really actually be something, and it gave us the green light to, like, invest in it and go big.

David Crabill 00:33:36
So was there a certain market that you remember being like a turning point?

Blair Panning 00:33:42
Yeah. Yeah.

Maurissa Panning 00:33:44
We have PTSD, actually. No, I mean–

Blair Panning 00:33:47
Not PTSD. We were... I was prepared for it, but it was a $50 little craft market in a gym. And that was the first one where I did over $1,000 in sales. I did $1,500 in, like, five, four or five hours, and–

Maurissa Panning 00:34:08
And we were coming off of farmers markets where we might make 60 or $80 and be thrilled with that.

Like, we were very happy.

Blair Panning 00:34:16
Yeah. And then at that same time, Maurissa was at an event that she did, I think, almost $900, and they were both in the middle of this– or the start of the holiday season. And it was such a shift from all of the sales that we had seen in the summer. And it was kind of our intro to holiday season, and we just realized that, like, holy cow, I don't know how we're gonna keep up doing this.

Maurissa Panning 00:34:44
'Cause we had gone in optimistically bringing, like, every mason jar we had made that day. And we split it up, and we took it all, and we came home with, like, nothing. And it was the excitement of, "Oh my gosh, we just sold out of something for the first time," and then getting home and going, "Are we gonna do this every weekend?"

Like, how are we gonna do this?

David Crabill 00:35:07
So wait, so this happened in October?

Blair Panning 00:35:10
Yeah, it was like end of October-ish. And it was the– really the first kind of start of holiday shopping kind of weekend that we had, that we had.

Maurissa Panning 00:35:20
Huge eye-opener for us. I assumed December was when we would sell our holiday shopping stuff, and we actually saw a decrease last year the last two weeks before Christmas.

So end of October and November by far the most holiday sales. Yeah. And then the last two weeks of Christmas, it kind of felt like if people hadn't shopped by then they were going to Target or Walmart. They weren't coming to see us. So that was, yeah, one of the many things we're still learning, I think.

David Crabill 00:35:49
When was your previous event before that? This October event where you sold out, when was the last time you had sold the product before that?

Blair Panning 00:36:00
I mean, every weekend I– in October I was doing kind of an event.

Maurissa Panning 00:36:04
Like a farmers–

Blair Panning 00:36:05
Market ... A farmers market or like a smaller show in a gym, but it was just kind of your average couple hundred dollars, and it really hadn't hit holiday shopping yet.

David Crabill 00:36:18
So I'm just trying to see, like you had, you had sold just a weekend before. There was nothing that changed about your market setup, was there... There was nothing about the event itself that sounded particularly special. It, you just think it was timing alone was what did it?

Blair Panning 00:36:36
I think timing was the biggest thing. It was really kind of the end of October, beginning of November, and it really, I noticed a shift from people just shopping for themselves to people out Christmas gift finding–

Maurissa Panning 00:36:49
Yes ...

Blair Panning 00:36:49
At these markets.

Maurissa Panning 00:36:50
And we had come off of, I think, back to school time. Things had– like, had slowed down too.

Not that, not that our sales had changed dramatically, but like just the number of people we saw. Like, we'd be at a farmers market and go, "Oh, there's like no one here today. It must be back to school, Labor Day-"

Blair Panning 00:37:08
Yeah ...

Maurissa Panning 00:37:08
All of that stuff. But no, like we were... It'd be different when now we take on some events where we know going in, oh, there's gonna be 3,000, 4,000, 5,000 people here.

It's gonna be crazy. These were such bizarre outliers where we did not expect, because our vendor fee hadn't gone up, our marketing hadn't changed, our nothing, nothing changed other than people were ready to shop. Yeah.

David Crabill 00:37:36
Yeah, so I'm seeing, this is a product that is a fun add-on and it's also extremely giftable, and it ties right into the holiday season. So these are all things that caused this particular brand and product to just explode. And so then you're left with nothing after that, and you had to figure out how to adapt.

I know this was a big turning point in your business. It's... Kind of walk me through the next few weeks there.

Maurissa Panning 00:38:08
Well, so the first– Late nights. Yeah. Not a lot of sleep. The first thing we came up with was doing gift boxes. And it was one of those why did we not think of this before situations. But we really started honing in on making them even more easily giftable. And we literally could not make enough for the remainder of the year.

So that was a no-brainer, and that shift was fantastic. We threw on a couple little extra. That's when we started getting koozies, and we started getting little like add-on little things that were easy to pair with our main product, and those did really well. And then that was when the conversation really turned to, we, I don't think we can do this under a cottage food license.

Like, there's just no way we can keep doing this. And so that became the number one task on the list of we've gotta switch our licensing.

David Crabill 00:39:05
And just to clarify, is that saying we can't do this because we have a sales limitation, which I know you do in Minnesota, or was it we can't keep doing this from home?

Blair Panning 00:39:17
A little bit of both.

Maurissa Panning 00:39:18
Above.

Blair Panning 00:39:18
Yeah for the, for the remainder of that year because we had done so little throughout the year, we were not close to that sales limit for last year. But we knew kind of if we kept with the same intensity we would hit it this year.

Maurissa Panning 00:39:36
So it was partly like– trying to not have sugar all over the kitchen floor every single morning kind of thing.

But then also I think it really opened our eyes to if we're having these kind of sales in person when we're at a market, like what would we be looking at if we were on a shelf in our local grocery store or if we were in a boutique or like what could happen if we didn't have to be there.

And so after we were... We've been very lucky in that we've met so many great people and have gotten so much great advice. And so before we had even thought about doing it, we had people telling us that we should really look into it. "You guys should really be in stores." And we get asked that, I mean, we were getting asked that question every single– little farmer's market.

Someone would go, "Well, can I find you at a liquor store?"

Blair Panning 00:40:25
Yeah, "Where can we get you?"

Maurissa Panning 00:40:26
And so we knew that that market was there if we tapped into it, and I don't say no to things, so it was just, "Well, then let's do it."

David Crabill 00:40:37
So you had to move into a commercial kitchen to get into wholesale, and so what did that process look like?

Maurissa Panning 00:40:43
That was the hardest part, without question. We knew we were not in a financial position to– build our own. We live in southern rural Minnesota, so there is just not a lot around. And it was... I mean, it– we had been tentatively looking for kitchen space all summer just because we, again, having three kids and doing this in your own kitchen is not ideal.

And nothing, nothing had presented itself. And we got very, very lucky in that a family that I knew who I had been doing their family photos for years, they make maple syrup, and they actually have a– very small commercial kitchen, on site on their property, and they use all of the same equipment we do.

So at one point I was doing their family photos and I mentioned something about us wanting to get into a kitchen space, and they said, "Well, why don't you just come here and use ours?" And so we– started renting space from them, and that took the hardest piece of the whole puzzle off of our plate because the rest of the process is really not crazy complicated.

It's just finding the space to use was really hard.

David Crabill 00:41:51
And, you got fortunate, right? But what if you had not had that personal connection?

Blair Panning 00:41:58
It would be a very expensive rental space probably, that is really kind of the downside of all of it, and we got fortunate with that. But at the cost to just rent time in a kitchen around us, they have these community kitchens where it's for people like us who can't buy a kitchen.

The cost just to rent eight hours is astronomical.

Maurissa Panning 00:42:25
Yeah. Yeah.

Maurissa Panning 00:42:27
To the point where, like, we have one of our good friends makes chocolates and is in a very similar situation, and she's spent the last year trying to build out a kitchen because she's in the similar situation. And, it was kind of like, do we use a church kitchen where our hours are super limited and we can get in two nights a week?

Do we take out a home equity line of credit and try and rent space? Like, what do we do? And so thankfully we found the solution we found. But I mean, it was a lot of thinking outside the box. We had looked into some very unique possibilities before we found the people we did.

David Crabill 00:43:08
And when you started producing in the commercial kitchen, I mean, you made it sound very ideal. Was it just a smooth transition and moving into that?

Maurissa Panning 00:43:18
No.

Blair Panning 00:43:20
It's... I mean, in the sense of, like, how moving into the kitchen went is very smooth. Everything that he uses to produce maple syrup is just kinda your standard, like, steam kettle and, like, filling pots and all of that. And it just worked flawlessly with what we had. But–

Maurissa Panning 00:43:40
It's still not...

I would say it's still not perfect in the sense that we are at the mercy of their schedule, so the– Yeah ... They do that full time as well, so we can kinda get in when they can't. Obviously, being very similar industry, we have the same busy season, so right now he's prepping for holidays too, so we're kind of at their mercy.

And then I think one of the biggest hiccups is that the storage space there is extremely limited, and they run a big operation. So we are hauling a lot of things back and forth. We... It's not quite so smooth as it would be– Yeah ... If we were paying to rent space elsewhere where we would have our own fridge and our own storage and our own everything.

Like, we have to be very understanding and aware of space there. So a lot of packing up, hauling, producing, hauling empty stuff back. Like, just, yeah, there's just a lot of extra steps right now. It sure beats being in our kitchen, though.

David Crabill 00:44:42
But even if you're renting a shared kitchen, typically, right, the storage is an add-on cost on top of everything else. So you might even feel inclined not to use that option even if you were in a shared kitchen.

Blair Panning 00:44:59
Yeah. We have found other options for storage. Going through the licensing, we found what was allowed and what wasn't allowed and like there's a lot of what we learned is what a lot of companies do is if you have a temperature-controlled and rodent-controlled storage unit, those are allowed.

You can rent storage units or different storage spaces as long as it meets all of these certain standards. So those are different options that we utilize too.

David Crabill 00:45:27
And I know that you have intentionally decided to hold onto your cottage food license as well, correct?

Maurissa Panning 00:45:34
Yes.

Blair Panning 00:45:35
For now, until they change the rules.

Maurissa Panning 00:45:36
For now, until they change the rules again. But yes. So some of our smaller stuff, like our salts and sugars, we still make almost exclusively under cottage food. And then it's just been nice to have the options on the nights where we aren't gonna make it to the kitchen, and we need to make a batch, and we know that it's going to our farmers market, and then we just have our cottage food stuff on one side and commercial on the other.

We had to start a second LLC for that. So we have half of our stuff running– well, not half, but we have some stuff running under one business and some running under another for licensing purposes. So, I'm sure a lot of states are similar, but Minnesota likes to change the rules often. So we are learning something new all the–

David Crabill 00:46:25
Actually, most states aren't similar. Minnesota is particularly strict about all that stuff, and it is–

Maurissa Panning 00:46:31
Is– it is just crazy.

David Crabill 00:46:33
It is a major outlier. So most people don't have to deal with some of the headaches that come from trying to deal with the MDA and everything, so–

Maurissa Panning 00:46:43
It's a lot. It is a lot. And they've been very helpful, so I don't wanna knock anybody. It's just a lot of moving pieces all the time.

David Crabill 00:46:51
All right, so when did you actually get into the kitchen? Was it before... I mean, I would assume it was after your busy, heavy holiday season happened.

Blair Panning 00:47:02
Yeah, last spring is when we started doing that when we– 'cause we had, we were so busy for the holidays that we finished the whole year under cottage food in our kitchen. And then January we started looking, well, we had already been kind of looking, but really, really started looking and transitioning towards that kitchen.

David Crabill 00:47:22
Well, so I'm curious here now. You went through the whole holiday season, max capacity, working out of your home kitchen, and it's... We talked, it's a very giftable product. So when January hit, did you just see everything fall off? I mean, you had built up so many orders. You just... Did you see it collapse?

Blair Panning 00:47:43
Yeah.

Maurissa Panning 00:47:44
We had been able to make just enough to keep up, and we had nothing left. And then between just everyone hitting pause, I mean, again, we're in Minnesota, so people truly do hibernate come winter. So between there weren't a lot of events going on, quite honestly, and us deciding we were just gonna take a break.

We– And so we really didn't do anything in January.

Blair Panning 00:48:10
From Christmas to about the week after New Year's, we kind of took off all together. Got some much needed family time in. We went to just a little vacation rental with the kids to kind of celebrate the end of the year. And when we came back, the fall off was drastic sales-wise.

Markets went back to being $100 in sales. We kind of learned really quick that, oh, yeah, no, it's everywhere kind of falls off after Christmas. And it took quite a while to kind of shift and get back into those numbers that we were used to seeing.

Maurissa Panning 00:48:48
Yeah.

David Crabill 00:48:48
It's interesting. We're recording here at the end of September, and so you still just kind of haven't quite hit that second holiday season, which we can forecast is gonna be a lot bigger than last year's. But do you guys see this as being a full-time, year-round business for you?

Like, have you, have you adapted during the past few months to try to make it something that is not just gonna be focused so much on just one period of the year?

Maurissa Panning 00:49:18
Yeah, this summer was a night and day difference. We really shifted from farmers markets into like town festivals and events and bigger stuff. So we kept on one or two of our small farmers markets where we had built a following essentially. And then we really shifted our focus into getting the most for our money and the most for our available days.

And so we did comparable... Last year it was all little teeny farmers markets. This summer we did Twin Cities Pride Festival and Taste of Minnesota and huge events where we were seeing 5 to 10,000 people at a time. And so our sales this year were astronomically different than they were last year, and I think also just a much better use of our time, 'cause we can only be in one place at once.

And so we had made this decision that if we're gonna sacrifice a Saturday, then we wanna make sure that it's a Saturday where we're making enough sales to make it worth it. So I think that combined with the fact that we now know about slow season, and I had gotten very used to that working in weddings.

Like my slow season was January to May, and it turns out that we have the same slow season. So– knowing that going into the holidays, I think drastically changes like how we put aside money and what we plan for.

David Crabill 00:50:46
So it sounds like you moved from maybe doing weekly markets back in 2025 to this year looking for bigger events, maybe annual events. So do you feel like you're shifting from recurring customers and just mostly dealing with more of, like, finding new people, getting in front of new eyeballs this year with the big events?

Maurissa Panning 00:51:14
I think it's mostly new, but we've been, we've been thoroughly impressed with how many repeat customers we have that come find us at the big events. Oh. So we're trying to stay relatively local to the Twin Cities with most of what we do. And we, I think because we put an effort in to make sure that our social media and our website always list where we are, we have people at every single event that'll mention that they came to see us and to get their stuff.

But I think the biggest eye-opener for us with the weekly or even, like, bi-monthly events was that our product isn't something that people use up in a day. It, for most people it lasts them a month or two. So for us to be at the same market every single week just really didn't make sense because we're not something that people– are going home and eating that night.

We tend to sit on a shelf. So it was kind of a trend of the first couple weeks of a farmers market would be great, and then we'd have a lull for a month, and then at the end of the season we'd have people come back and stock up, and then it was just a lot of downtime. Whereas with these new ones, we're just seeing so many people that haven't heard of us before– Yeah ... That it makes way more sense.

Blair Panning 00:52:26
And–

David Crabill 00:52:27
Well, as long as we're on the topic of– big events, we gotta talk about the state fair. I know you guys are as big of fans as, of the state fair as anybody could be.

Maurissa Panning 00:52:38
It's a someday, it's a someday bucket list for us. I am a fanatic, much more than Blair who got dragged into it, my biggest fear is that I don't wanna ruin going to the fair as an attendee, and I fear that working it might do that for me. Our Faxon Farms, our maple syrup people, we love them.

We use them in one of our flavors, and that's whose kitchen we use. They're at the fair every year, and I believe have been for at least for three, four, five years. And they love it. So we, it was joking about it last year, and then this year it was a half joke, half we should really consider this.

Blair Panning 00:53:17
I've heard it's about a six-year waiting list– Yeah ... To get in.

Maurissa Panning 00:53:21
So they're very strict, for good reason, with who they let in. And someday, I think when our kids are not two and four, it might be a little more appealing. 'Cause I said if we're... My rule is if we're gonna do it, we're gonna go big and we're gonna get a camper and we're gonna sleep on site, and we're gonna live at the fair for 12 days.

And I think I'm alone in loving that idea, so we will see where we land.

David Crabill 00:53:46
Yeah. And just to clarify here for people who aren't familiar, the Minnesota State Fair is the largest state fair in the entire country, so it is, it a little bit exceptional in that way. It's also not surprising because the amount of support that there is for local food in your area is just crazy.

I mean, the number of cottage food businesses I know in Minnesota is just off the charts, and then obviously that's where CottageFoodieCon was this year and will be next year. And so, yeah, the, it's not just an easy like, "Oh, yeah, let's maybe do the fair this year." It usually, even for other states that have smaller state fairs, normally a cottage food business or you...

Now you're a commercial business, but you'd have to get to a pretty large threshold of being established before you're ready to tackle something like a state fair.

Blair Panning 00:54:44
And they have, very kind of strict, the fair itself about, like, you have to be prepared for, to see this many millions of people and expect–

Maurissa Panning 00:54:56
Yeah, you're, you cannot sell out. Like, you will not be invited back if you run out. So you have to be... I mean, that we, that's kind of the biggest thing is, like, we would have to be prepping all year to be ready for it.

David Crabill 00:55:09
During your slow season, it's perfect.

Maurissa Panning 00:55:12
Yeah, it'll be perfect. And it's always 100 degrees that time of year, so we'll just, you can sweat and– Yeah ... Do your best. But someday, someday we're gonna make it.

David Crabill 00:55:22
Well so you added these bigger events this year during the summer that kinda helped boost your sales, but also you added the wholesale piece too. So, walk me through that.

Maurissa Panning 00:55:35
So we started very– well, they're all really small.

Blair Panning 00:55:38
They're all very small.

Maurissa Panning 00:55:39
We're still very small. We ended up at two very little, like, kind of mercantile style local Minnesota makers. So one is actually in a mall space, and the other is just a freestanding store in downtown New Ulm. And then we've seen a few really cool partnerships. Riverview Coffee right here in Belle Plaine, where we live, we actually partnered with them to do a flavor that's exclusive for them.

And then we had a few different restaurants now over the summer that have partnered with us and done some featured cocktails with our stuff. And so it feels really cool to know that a restaurant found our stuff good enough to use in a, in a cocktail. And, we did a Mother's Day weekend where the restaurant and the bar were using our spicy margarita mix to make their margaritas for the weekend. And they let us know on Monday that they had more sales in spicy margaritas than they did in food over the course of the weekend.

And so that was, like, the ultimate compliment. Yeah. And has given us our to-do in our next slow season, because that is... It's time-consuming to reach out to these retailers, and try and meet with them, and bring stuff, and show them what you can do, and we just haven't found the time yet. And so that is how we'll be using January through March of 2027.

Blair Panning 00:57:06
While stocking up–

Maurissa Panning 00:57:07
While making stock.

David Crabill 00:57:09
So do you feel like most of your wholesale connections have come through just cold leads, just reaching out to people? Or have they been your own personal connections from the wedding industry or, other business relationships?

Maurissa Panning 00:57:25
I think it's mostly trying us in person. I think we honed in on events taking places at wineries, breweries, and restaurants pretty quickly because we learned that our clientele is people who eat out and drink out. And so it was, it was that shift in making sure that we had people trying stuff who might actually really use it.

And I think when you start out and you're so small and it seems so foreign that that would ever even be a thing. Like, I never thought that we would be partnering with a restaurant to make a featured cocktail each month. That was just completely out of left field. And then once you kinda do it the first time and you realize, well, no, that, like, this is doable.

We can do this. And so kinda that shift in confidence too, like once a couple people try it and you know they like it and you realize, like, no, we, I think we really are doing something well here. We can, we can roll with this. Yeah. And so we, I think we underestimated ourselves for a while.

David Crabill 00:58:29
Well, so you're coming up on your second holiday season. I'm sure you're bracing yourself to some degree, but what have you done to get prepared for it?

Blair Panning 00:58:39
Absolutely not.

Maurissa Panning 00:58:40
Not as much as I should have. No, I mean, it was nice because we really kept good records last year, and especially– I think we started in July was when we really started realizing we needed to track cost versus return and things like that. And so we started out beginning of last month really looking at numbers and kinda marking out what our must-do events would be for this year.

Spent a lot of time talking to vendors more experienced than us about what are your must-do events in the holidays, and just kind of trying to keep that mindset of we don't need to be in 20 places every single weekend. Let's hone in on the ones that we think are really gonna be worth our time and energy.

And then we're current project is that we're redoing our displays for markets, so we've been, spent the last week and a half kinda brainstorming what we're gonna change and what we wanna shift.

Our product has changed naturally, so now with our new licensing, we have new labels, new bottles, kind of everything that looks a little bit more elevated, and we wanna build a display that matches that.

David Crabill 00:59:48
You kind of jokingly said 20 places at once there, but I saw you did do, like, seven events in one weekend. Is that right?

Maurissa Panning 00:59:56
We did. Will we ever do it again? I don't know. Yeah. But we did it, and it was successful. That's part of... I think part of the reality of where we live is that we have to cram events in three months because the weather does not cooperate for the rest of the year.

Blair Panning 01:00:14
And it seems like on any given weekend there's either nothing going on or there's everything going on.

Yeah. So you gotta kinda pick where, what you wanna do.

Maurissa Panning 01:00:24
But that's been a big, that's been a huge learning curve for us this year because obviously when you bring in staff, you're paying people. So we had plenty of events that we learned afterwards that paying someone to be there was not worth it.

And so that will be one of our challenges next year, is kinda trying to determine where we send people, which ones we do ourselves, do we drop some, do we add some? But yeah, it's, I don't know. I feel like we're just constantly learning more things every day, and most of it comes from mistakes or things that we, in hindsight, won't do again.

But I don't know. That's just, that's... Again, I'm nuts, so it's like when I see an event, I wanna be there. If that means we send someone else, we send someone else, but.

Blair Panning 01:01:10
It's about every week that we have a talk where she goes, "Do you wanna do five this weekend?" And I say, "No, do you remember– what last time was like?"

And she goes, "Yeah, but– I think we could do it."

David Crabill 01:01:21
It's just like kind of having a baby. After you have the baby, you're like, "Never again," but then–

Blair Panning 01:01:25
You–

Maurissa Panning 01:01:25
But eventually you do it. Yeah, it'll be fine. You get through it.

Blair Panning 01:01:29
We have expanded quite a bit this year, so I, we do in fact now have enough setups and displays to do– up to five events at a time.

Maurissa Panning 01:01:40
Properly.

Blair Panning 01:01:41
Properly.

Maurissa Panning 01:01:42
Properly.

David Crabill 01:01:43
Yeah, but this also means hiring somebody to be at the events, 'cause I imagine you can't be at five events at one time. So, we haven't really talked about that piece of it, the pricing of the product. You've talked about having issues keeping things in stock at different times of the year.

But I mean, is this seeming like a sustainable business from the financial side of it? Like, does this seem like you have a really good margin on your products, or you have enough overhead to actually be able to pay people to either produce a product for you or be at events?

What have you learned, or what have you changed, or how is that side of the business looking?

Maurissa Panning 01:02:29
We just raised prices again in the last month. I think we realized in comparing to similar products that we were underpriced, so that is helpful going into the holidays. But we're... I mean, our margins are pretty, pretty nice. Like, our product is not crazy expensive to make.

I would say that the bottling and labeling is about as expensive as the ingredients. So that has been a struggle because the cost of all of that has gone up pretty astronomically since we started. But other than that, I think the staffing is the biggest challenge, both in finding people and finding ways to make sure that it's worth it to pay staff to go out and do events.

'cause it's, I mean, it's sales. Like, you have to be able to pitch the product to sell it, and some people are very good at that, and some are not. And we've gone, we've had both experiences now at this point. Yeah.

Blair Panning 01:03:32
That and then trying to get ahead in stock. We've slowly been building up the amount of stock that we have in excess, but you– we don't have the money to do three months of inventory all at once and just– have it sit on a shelf.

So we kinda have to balance where the money goes each month. But we've been slowly building it up throughout the year to try and prep for this holiday season.

Maurissa Panning 01:04:02
Yep.

David Crabill 01:04:04
You're saying the ingredients don't necessarily cost that much, but with a product like syrups, I'm looking n– not at the ingredient cost, but at the cost of production, like the cost of the time that it makes, takes to make the product. Usually it's significant. I don't know about your particular product, but usually it's a fairly laborious product to make, a syrup, a jelly, anything like that. It... Would you agree with that?

Maurissa Panning 01:04:32
We would, and we're not... I can assure you we don't factor our time into the equation as much as we should be. So we still view ourselves as free labor a lot of the time, which is, yeah, not the best part of how we run our business right now.

Blair Panning 01:04:53
Sometimes a necessity.

Maurissa Panning 01:04:55
Yeah.

David Crabill 01:04:56
And you said you raised prices again, so just recently. So how many times have you raised it, and what are you raising it up to, and has there been any customer reaction, backlash, drop-off in sales, anything like that from the raises?

Maurissa Panning 01:05:14
So we raised, we've, this is our third time raising our prices, and it came with another change. So when we first started, and we always had up until now offered two different sizes. First it was two sizes of mason jars, and then it was two sizes of bottles. So we always had a small and a large. And then in this...

And actually I would argue we were told pretty consistently the first year that we were underpriced. Like, we heard that from a lot of people and were just afraid to make the jump. And so going into last holiday season, we upped our price on everything by, I believe, a dollar.

Blair Panning 01:05:52
$2 ...

Maurissa Panning 01:05:52
Or $2.

Blair Panning 01:05:53
$2.

Maurissa Panning 01:05:54
Just to see what would happen, and no one batted an eye.

And then this most recent change actually was snowballed by the concept of not bringing two sizes to events anymore. So we kept our small bottles, and they are now either online only or as part of our gift box sets that we'll have for the holidays. And then at all of our in-person events, we switched to just bringing one size bottle, partly for our purposes to keep up with making enough, and then partly because we did have staff going out, and it just made life easier for everyone. And so then at that same time we did increase by another $2-

Blair Panning 01:06:39
$2 ... On both. So we are now at $21 a bottle, and comparable with competitors, and looking at online prices for people who make similar products, we are still cheaper I'd say than stuff I find across the nation online.

Maurissa Panning 01:06:59
But what that allowed us to do is we had never offered any sort of a bundled discount. And so now with our increased prices and only having one size, we now do a discount on three bottles. So people get a slight, I think it's three for $57 if they buy three bottles in person. So it's, this was week three since this– Yeah ... Change was implemented over the weekend, and Blair and I were both working events, and I would argue that 75% of our customers bought three or more bottles because of that little perk. And so our average sale has gone from, I think previously it was right around like 29, $30 on average per customer, and now it's up to like 46.

Blair Panning 01:07:47
I think it was lower than that. I believe we were around $25 an average sale. And now it's in the mid-40s is our average sale now. And I would argue that anybody who was going to buy the small size before who now doesn't know that we od, offered a smaller size just buys the bigger bottle.

So that has increased $5 a sale or whatever it comes out to be.

Maurissa Panning 01:08:10
Yep.

David Crabill 01:08:11
This is kind of fascinating to hear. I actually had a similar thing happen when I sold my fudge. I sold out of my very small size, and then once I sold out of that, people just started buying the one pound boxes because that's all I had left, and I was like, "What? Why haven't I just been selling one pound boxes all day?"

So it sounds like you made that decision for practicality reasons to make it easier for yourself, but maybe unintentionally it's also increasing the average order value as well. Well.

Blair Panning 01:08:42
And I haven't noticed anyone yet bat an eye at the price tags. I–

Maurissa Panning 01:08:48
And they, and they– as we get into holiday season, it'll be even more so. Yeah. I mean, people just spend more money with the holidays.

David Crabill 01:08:55
The $21 price, it honestly, it sounds like a horrible price to me because it's not like a nice clean 20, but then it's also like well other– under the next clean price of 25. It sounds like you could it be 22 and nobody would care.

Maurissa Panning 01:09:15
We intentionally avoided... So years and years and years ago, I took a class about how pricing something at $19.99 is better than pricing it at $20, and kind of the mentality that goes into that. And so we intentionally went from 19 to $21 and, like, avoided that $20 plateau. And because we have little add-ons that fall into, like, that 8 to $15 range, what we've learned is that if people have $40 on them, they're much more inclined to just spend it and, like, add on a little accessory or grab a koozie or grab a salt or whatever.

And then we also started doing incentives where, because our three-bottle deal was $57 and we would constantly have people ask if they could have a koozie. So then we said, "Okay, if you spend $60, you can have a free koozie." So now we've seen where people were gonna spend... They feel like they're getting two deals.

They feel like they're getting a deal on three bottles, and they're also getting a free koozie by adding one more thing on. And it's, I'm glad they see it that way. I don't think it's as big of a deal as people find it to be, but it's just naturally pushed our sales to that next little bracket.

And finding things like koozies where we buy them in bulk now and we pay 15 cents a koozie, and it gets us six more dollars in sales on every customer was just such a no-brainer.

Blair Panning 01:10:45
And then on your original point, going to $24.99 seemed like too big of a jump to make at once.

David Crabill 01:10:52
Well, and then also, I don't know if this is intentional, but it seems like you just skipped over the natural, like two for 40 would be kind of a natural thing that I think a lot of people would consider doing.

Maurissa Panning 01:11:07
No, so we had never had trouble selling two bottles, but we very rarely had people buy three. And so the mentality was, we don't need help selling two, we need help selling three. And so that's where we kind of figured let's just make it be three and push people a little further, and–

Blair Panning 01:11:24
And everyone who–

Maurissa Panning 01:11:25
Everyone does it.

Blair Panning 01:11:26
Everyone who was buying, gonna buy two before now goes, "Okay, well now I have to find the third one that I want."

Maurissa Panning 01:11:32
Yeah.

Blair Panning 01:11:33
And we hear a lot, "Well, if I get one, I might as well get three." So it, people love a deal, so– Yeah ... I don't think it matters as much what the deal is, it's just that you have something that makes people feel like they're getting more for their money.

David Crabill 01:11:48
Well, these are really high average order values for a business like this, and so it's very clear to see how this could be a very successful business. I mean, it already is a very successful business, but you're still kind of at the beginning of it. You're still developing it. You're coming into your next holiday season.

So looking ahead, what are your plans? What would you like it to become?

Blair Panning 01:12:14
I would like more, I think going into next year, I would like to focus more on wholesale or retail partners. There's a couple different places that we're looking to get into that maybe serve our product on site or that we don't have to spend the time being at in person. Although it is fun to sell it in person, I, expanding on that is really, I think, where the next step lies.

Maurissa Panning 01:12:44
And then somewhere down the road, I think we both would love to have the conversation about having either co-packing or something that kind of takes some of the production off of our plate. Again, right now that feels like we're talking about 10 years down the road. Yeah. But you never know. That's something that definitely will be on our radar eventually if we can get there.

Blair Panning 01:13:07
I think I would rather find funding and start a production line than give it to co-packing and kinda lose control of all of that [01:13:17] David Crabill: Are you concerned that the quality of the final product would not be the same?

Blair Panning 01:13:22
I guess that's always a concern when you give up control of something, whether it's making product or having somebody else take pictures under your name. The quality of it is always kind of on your, on your mind.

David Crabill 01:13:36
And I would say it's also somewhat inevitable. I mean, if you're familiar with co-packing, you do have to use their ingredients. What, it could, it could, it will ultimately somewhat change the product to some degree, so–

Blair Panning 01:13:52
Within our shift from cottage food to commercial, we had to change ingredients already, and I would say that those changes are noticeable to us, but probably not the customer. So would anybody else notice if we shifted to a co-packer? Who knows, but we would be able to tell.

Maurissa Panning 01:14:11
Well, and there's the... I mean, I think there's the financial aspect of it, too.

Obviously, that's a huge cut of your profit, and so we've kind of been weighing the pros and cons of, like, what things are the best things to pass off without having to give up so much of your profit. And I feel like co-packing might be, like, the last thing, just because if we could find an alternate way.

And that's kind of one of the things we talked about was instead of hiring for events, which is what we've been doing exclusively, hiring one or two people that can help produce would be equally helpful, I think, at this point.

David Crabill 01:14:47
So you were kind of thrown into this in a way, and you came into it with a fair amount of entrepreneurial experience, but you also didn't expect the mass interest in your products and building this as quickly as you have.

So, do you have any advice for other entrepreneurs that are maybe looking to start a similar type of business? A canned good, bottled good business?

Blair Panning 01:15:14
Sure, yeah. Marry someone who's really organized and has, is really smart. It's pretty easy then.

Maurissa Panning 01:15:21
No, I think... Thank you. I think talking to other people, picking other people's brains, putting yourself out there, whether it's networking events, classes, things you can do. We had no idea about how many programs or opportunities existed when we first started.

And I mean, I tell him once a week, like, "Thank God I went to CottageFoodieCon, because I learned so many things." And I think just being able to pick brains of other people and not be afraid to ask questions, don't be afraid to sound dumb, don't be afraid to ask people for cold, hard truths about things.

Because there were a lot of things that I think had we just admitted we weren't professionals and asked, we would have saved time and money. And then also just having a realistic, like, what is your intention with this? Like, we kinda knew going in that Blair didn't have a full-time job anymore, and so we could either do this and have it be fun, or we could do this and have it pay some bills.

And we had said we would give it one summer to determine whether or not that was realistic or not. And so we knew in the back of our minds that we wanted this to grow if at all possible. But I think knowing going into it, like, is this something you want to be a hobby or is this something you want to be a job?

Because there's, I would argue, two very different ways to approach it, and knowing that ahead of time will save you purchasing your sixth market setup like we just did. Yeah. And yeah.

Blair Panning 01:16:57
No, I don't know. But it's still been a bit of fun, too. It's– It–

Maurissa Panning 01:17:00
Is very fun ...

Blair Panning 01:17:01
It's–

Maurissa Panning 01:17:02
It is fun. If you're not having fun, you shouldn't be doing it.

David Crabill 01:17:05
I mean, looking back on it, what has this latest business meant to you?

Blair Panning 01:17:13
Well, it's really been the first one that kind of, I get to call partially mine. Everything before this was Maurissa's and I worked a day job. So it's really the first thing that I kinda put my name on, so that's obviously a little bit different. But it's just, it's been a wild experience for me going from working for somebody else 50 to 60 hours a week to now working just for us.

Maurissa Panning 01:17:39
100 hours a week.

Blair Panning 01:17:40
100 hours a week, yeah.

Maurissa Panning 01:17:41
But I mean, I love the fact that we, our kids have never been in daycare, which is a love-hate on a lot of days, but we've gotten to be with our kids every single day. We didn't miss first steps, we didn't miss first words. Like, we get to make our own schedule, and we get to be at any game we wanna be at, and any, anything that they need.

And so the freedom of having that with both of us having backgrounds where we didn't always have that was amazing. There are plenty of days where I wish my kids were in daycare, but we're almost to all of them being in school. We're getting there. But yeah, I think just being able to have such...

I mean, you're so passionate about it. It's your project. It's your baby. You did it all. And so being able to go do that and cash a paycheck at the same time is pretty cool, and then knowing that if you wake up that morning and you're not feeling it, then you can snuggle with your kids and watch TV and not go to work that day, and that, and it'll be okay.

So having the freedom that comes with that is pretty cool.

David Crabill 01:18:46
You say that, Maurissa, but I know from your social feeds that that's not necessarily the reality of– you don't say no to anything, right?

Blair Panning 01:18:58
That mentality is our weekday mentality, but we never miss events– or clients or anything like–

Maurissa Panning 01:19:04
That. No. It's... Having kids actually did help because it does make you pause and realize that life goes fast. And as much as I want to do everything, it's a good reminder that it goes real quick.

And that was the push for us to hire. I mean, we never would've hired staff, otherwise we would've been doing it 24/7. And last summer was the first summer where we really didn't do anything with the kids, and we realized that we were work, work, work, and then the kids, we got to see

them a couple hours, every couple nights.

And that we decided that wasn't how we wanted to keep moving forward. So we've gotten creative. Now sometimes it's Blair is working Apple Festival, and I'm shopping Apple Festival with the kids. So it's kind of a happy medium. But yeah, we're... That's a constant battle is finding balance, but we're working on it.

David Crabill 01:19:57
Blair, do you feel like this business has changed you at all?

Blair Panning 01:20:00
Yes. I would argue that before this I was very much not a self-starter. Although I did always work kind of in an area where I was unsupervised and kind of left out on my own to– do stuff, and I'm fine with that. It's just, it's a very big change knowing that at the end of the day you get all of the return and you get to see everything that comes of it versus doing it for someone else has really kind of shifted my mindset from just getting up and going to work to, like, it's hard to stop thinking about it sometimes.

And, you're always thinking of ideas, and we're laying in bed and it's midnight and I'll just, "Hey, you know what I just thought of?" And it never did anything like that before. Yeah.

David Crabill 01:20:56
It's fascinating to me because clearly Maurissa kind of dragged you into this. This is not the path that you would have taken by yourself. And so I'm just curious, Blair, like who do you think that a cottage food business would be good for? Or are there certain people that you feel like, hmm, maybe shouldn't do a cottage food business?

Blair Panning 01:21:22
I think if you've got an, if you've got a plan or you've got an idea for a product, sometimes all you need is, like, just to be pushed off that ledge and– 'cause I was afraid to take the jump. And Maurissa just kinda pushed me. And she said, "We'll figure it out as we go." And especially under cottage food, I would say you don't need to focus as much on, like, the labels and everything we kinda figured out as we went, and we just spent the money that we had, and we only did what we could afford to start.

So it's not necessarily a huge financial risk. It's just putting in the time and the effort, where you can at first to see, try it out and see what's gonna come of it before you really make it a financial investment.

David Crabill 01:22:09
Well, thank you both so much for coming on the show. Now, if someone would like to learn more about you, where can they find you or how can they reach out?

Maurissa Panning 01:22:18
Yeah, so it's, our website is grayducksyrupco.com, and then you can find us on Facebook, Instagram, and embarrassingly enough, TikTok, if you really are bored. But yeah, you can order online from us. Our phone number and email are right on our website, so you can reach out anytime.

David Crabill 01:22:34
Awesome. Well, thank you so much for coming on and sharing with us today.

Blair Panning 01:22:39
Thanks for having us.

David Crabill 01:22:43
That wraps up another episode of the Forrager Podcast.

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