

Farmer to Farmer

Producer Shares Valuable Learning Experiences



PHOTOS COURTESY OF NAMI MOON FARMS

Chris Holman at Nami Moon Farms in Custer, Wisconsin.

by ANDREW FRENCH

What started as a seed of an idea in 2009 at Genna's Bar in Madison, Wisconsin, has blossomed into a profitable small-scale and diversified farming endeavor for two ambitious young farmers. Maria Davis and Chris Holman run 40-acre Nami Moon Farms in Custer, Wisconsin. As a former Arabic

linguist in the Army, Chris selected the word "Nami," meaning growing, rising, or resurgent, and Maria picked the word moon. They filed the paperwork for their new farm in 2010.

The story of their first year in business was one of putting a lot of miles on their vehicles. The farmland they had found to rent was in Steven's Point, 100 miles away from

where they lived and worked at their day jobs in Madison. That year they worked all week in Madison and drove to the farm on weekends to set up everything for the next week of chicken-tending for Maria's mother, who played an integral role in getting the young couple's farm started.

An even more hectic part of the year was the 10 or so times that they had to bring their birds in for processing at the USDA-certified processing plant. They worked all day on Tuesday and drove to the farm to sleep a couple of hours, then got up and loaded 400 birds, brought them to the processing plant, drove back to the farm and then traveled 100 miles back to work on Wednesday. These days Chris is a full-time farmer and Maria is the executive director of Worldbuilders. Her work on the farm is facilitated by a somewhat flexible schedule.

Nami Moon Farms exemplifies the smart and thoughtful growth that beginning greenhorn farmers should aspire to. The moves that they have made are well thought out and reflect a purpose-driven effort to increase efficiency and profitability within a budget. They focus on raising their birds to create an outstanding product and have over six years in the field testing and perfecting their systems. They are working toward incorporating their philosophies into their practices more, but with an eye on the business side of things and the bottom line. I talked with Chris in detail about what he thinks makes Nami Moon Farms, and small farms in general, tick.

Why did you start farming?

We essentially began farming because our desire to grow some of our own food turned into an opportunity to start a farm when a customer wanted 40 chickens per week. We threw our savings and efforts into getting started.

What were two of the main challenges you found when you began to farm, and what were two of the main rewards?

The first challenge was land, which then led to the second challenge, distance. Land was expensive, hard to find and far enough away from where we were at the time that we decided to ask Maria's folks if we could rent some of their land that had never been farmed. We figured if we were going to end up being over an hour away if we stayed in Madison, that being about two hours away wouldn't be much different. That said, our first year we drove over 12,000 miles between Madison and the farm in order to make it work. Those were the craziest days.

What products does Nami Moon produce?

We produce 5,000-6,000 Freedom Ranger broilers, 200-300 Broad Breasted Bronze turkeys, 100 Narragansett heritage turkeys, and we have a chicken layer flock of 400-plus hens of different hardy type birds, a duck layer flock of around 200 Khaki Campbells and three sows. We want to be raising around 30 (Gloucester Old Spot/Berkshire) pigs per year from them. We also have a high tunnel (30 x 72 feet) for high-value vegetable production, and we raise several perennials like asparagus, berries and rhubarb. I have been growing corn and, soon small grains, in order to have feed crops for use on the farm. We are expanding our high tunnels this year so that we can keep birds in them over the winter and create a rotation where we have manure and cover crop in one tunnel each year to help prep that tunnel for the following two years of production.

Joel Salatin talks about having a "mother-ship" product that leads sales and supports the rest of your farm endeavors as you take them on. What is your mothership, and what led you to begin to focus on this product?

Poultry accounts for about 75 percent of our sales. We started with it because we wanted to do livestock, and given the distance it was easiest to take care of. We chose Freedom Rangers to stand out in the marketplace and because we wanted to raise pasture-raised birds, so they needed to forage well.

What would you say are the challenges and rewards of raising poultry for market?

Challenges are the usual; predation, getting a final size and weight that works best for you, death in general and everything you can't predict. The rewards include having a superior product in the marketplace. We are able to farm the way we want to, and we have produced a series of products that have grown our farm quite a bit in a short period of time.

Can you talk a little bit about the evolution of your poultry production systems?

We used to grow out batches of 400 chickens at a time. That became problematic because we had to have many more processing dates. We changed our group size to raising 1,500 at a time. That means we can bring in birds over a week and a half and get them all done at once. When we process 1,500 birds, we bring in 500 birds on Monday, pick them up Tuesday, bring in 500 more Wednesday, pick them up on Thursday and then bring 500 in again on Monday and pick them up on Tuesday. It's a long week. When we started out we had bunches of 400 birds that were often a week or longer apart. That meant a lot more processing trips interrupting the rest of farm work. Not that processing doesn't take up time now, but knowing which weeks we will be processing heavy long beforehand helps me to plan around those times. This helps with labor and time spent driving, preparing for processing dates, etc. We also used to try and mitigate predation through a variety of approaches that didn't work. Now we have guard dogs that work well and keep predation near 0 percent. We used to move the shelters around a lot to mitigate the damage done to the pasture, but now we leave them in place and then till and plant the areas that they beat down so that weeds are suppressed and we can have some forage and seeds available for them the next time they end up in that area.

What would you do differently if you could start over again in regards to raising poultry?



Chris Holman has experimented with growing corn for feed.

I'd get dogs earlier, and I would try to target the best markets first so that I didn't waste time in poor markets.

I am interested in your experience sourcing chicks and selecting the correct breeds for your purposes.

We work very closely with Freedom Ranger Hatchery for our broilers, and I have a variety of options through them. We've stuck with what has worked so far, but there are different colors and breeding flocks and performances to explore with their products. We initially were told to get chicks through a different hatchery, but they were run in a much less friendly manner, they charged more and were not willing to work with us or answer our questions. The Freedom Ranger was the breed we chose early on. As for turkeys, we have had more success with the Broad Breasted Bronze breed, and I think it may have something to do with their color and ability to be camouflaged. We have our dogs now of course, but in my experience lighter-colored birds were preyed upon at a higher rate. We have had other colors and sources for poult, but their performance was inferior. We started duck egg layers with Indian Runners, but they were insane, so we moved to the Khaki Campbell and noticed an immediate difference in our ability to manage them well. We have experienced a variety of egg layer breeds, and now we opt to have a majority of larger, hardier birds that

produce slightly less than a Leghorn, for instance. Other birds don't handle the winter well in our system.

I know you have been experimenting with growing grains for feed for your livestock.

I have been able to grow corn pretty well. Small grains are a new venture this year, and I've switched my approach to being more experimental in nature so that in the future I can know what will grow best in my soils. The corn in the first year was great, but I lost it all due to my lack of knowledge, timing of harvest and other factors. The second year my corn harvest was okay, but the moisture percentage was all over the place, so I sold it to the feed cooperative right away. The third year was an experimental patch of open-pollinated organic corn (Wapsie Valley 85). We have won some grants along the way too, and this year will be the first year that I'll have all of the equipment that I need.

What is your business philosophy?

Our business philosophy is complex, I suppose. I would say that we farm in order to provide a significant portion of the sort of lifestyle that we want to live. I don't think you can start to separate anything from underneath farming's umbrella. For instance, people tend to look at off-farm income as some sort of indicator that you're not successful as a farmer. I would argue that given the current structures that farmers are working within, off-farm income is almost unavoidable for most. That said, profitability for the business is extremely important. At a bare minimum, we need to be able to keep farming. Ideally, the farm stops needing money out of your pocket in order to cash flow itself through the season. Profitability beyond that is re-invested, so it becomes harder to see at times, but refining how our farm's profitability determines its path forward is a big part of our philosophy. It's also why we publish our numbers for anyone to see. We believe that the sooner farmers can remove the mystery behind the accounting side of running a farm business, the sooner we can start to have the sorts of conversations that lead to a higher probability

of any given farm's success. In many respects, this sort of thing is an attempt at changing the culture within agriculture. Outside of these things, it is very important for us to do well by our land, our water, the wildlife – nature in general. We also have high expectations for ourselves when it comes to how we treat our animals and how our animals are processed, and we are constantly trying to learn more so that we can improve ourselves and our business in every area. We believe in transparency, as there's no better education about what it is we do, how we do it and why, than an honest and straightforward conversation about any aspect of our farm. We believe in sharing our story because it's how people can connect with us, and while being authentic is important in order to tell that story well, it is a willingness to share the good, the bad and the ugly that, I think, really wins people over. Not that we look at this as some sort of marketing approach. Rather, we feel that how we demonstrate who we are is what resonates with people. Of course, our philosophy would include providing the highest quality products that we can produce to our customers. All of these things are reflected in our larger philosophy of wanting to re-connect with people, with the land we are around, and with ourselves. We believe in community, a willingness to help and be helped and the spirit of cooperation.

I know a lot of small farmers struggle with the higher costs of purchasing organic feed for their livestock. At this point on my farm I purchase organic, transitional and local conventional, depending on a variety of factors. What are your thoughts on this subject?

There is plenty to discuss here, and it is very complex. I think organic feed is a limiting factor on most farms for reasons of cost and availability. Much of the organic feed that farmers can purchase is imported into this country, so there are issues there. There is an organic premium one can strive for, but if you cannot find it then you have a product that you are likely selling at a price below the cost of production.

Cash flow is a pretty big issue for a beginning farmer to navigate. What do you feel are three other obstacles for beginning farmers, and what do you think are ways to overcome them?

Land. We need better programming on this. Few do it well, and no one is doing it on a national level. I'm pushing a program in the National Farmers Union that will hopefully do this if it is taken up. Second would be knowledge. We have a lot of beginning farmer programs out there, but there are few that do any meaningful follow up. I'm of the opinion that getting started is difficult, but moving past where you are after a year or two of hammering away on your farm is far more difficult for many. We need to be able to help farmers through this secondary stage of their farm's growth so that we don't lose them. There are also too many sources out there that are borderline plug-n-play options for farming that are not realistic, but they are heavily marketed and become popular enough that I'm sure people attempt to mimic what they are seeing in a book or on a website, and they fail spectacularly. To me, this is reminiscent of snake oil salesmen, but with a slightly higher possibility of what's sold being successful/workable/real/etc. Lastly, themselves. Farmers can often get in

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the way of their own success. Those who are in direct-marketing and don't want to market, for instance. There are also those who rigidly adhere to what they want to do in the world as a farm business, and this creates problems as they refuse to adapt to their reality based on their predetermined framework. Business is the key word here in that I think farmers often have to compromise their own beliefs/desires on things in the short-term so that they can have better long-term success. This can be like us using conventional feed in order to try and grow our own or it can be like farmers who grow X for the market because that's what they like to grow vs. growing what the market wants/needs/has room for. Hubris can be an issue. Deliberate ignorance can be an issue. Ideology can be an issue, especially as it pertains to community relationships and participation in organizations. I think these last things have less to do with an individual farm's success but more to do with the things external to the farm that can affect the farmer and the farm directly.

In five years where do you think the farm will be?

Probably in a similar spot. We have maxed out our local processors' ability to process poultry given that the rest of the state is also funneling through the limited options we have. We'll likely grow more hogs as the profit margins are better and processing is easier to come by. I won't grow crops at any appreciable scale on our property, and maybe not at all because I think that land would be better suited to raising animals. It's closer to everything the animals need, and planting

crops would require a rotation, which then takes time away from that land in terms of livestock production. If I can grow crops on land nearby, then I never have to worry about whether or not I'll have a pasture established in time to put animals on it. Permanent pasture, intelligently used on a rotating basis is something

that also just seems to make sense as well. We'll have more agritourism involved and five years will go by quickly.

What importance do you place on having a diversified farm? Is it more important for a small-scale beginning farmer to have a niche or to diversify revenue streams?

Seventy-three percent of all farms in the United States are grossing below \$50,000 per year. Their net, assuming a 20 percent margin, would only be \$10,000 per year. This reality drives home the imperative that everything one does as a small farmer should be diversified and niche. Diversification equals more revenue streams. Niche equals a higher margin and better gross profit overall. If you are not niche, you will not last. If you are not diversified, you are gambling with your future given the dominant paradigm and reality.

How have you kept your farm running economically for six years?

The farm pays for itself. We have put money in since we achieved our break-even point years ago, but these are targeted purchases that empower the farm and are optional investments. We have taken loans out, but we try to have only one loan, and we never want to be in a debt-equity position that would endanger the farm should something like high interest rates come back and eat up our equity should there be a difficult year or five.

It seems that a lot of young farmers start out with high ideals and ultimately are run out of business as their cash flow dissipates, and thus the business fails. Do you think

that your stress has been lessened due to your acceptance of the reality in which you work, namely the need to make money and to do so costs cannot be more than sales? For me, for instance, I have two goal paths – on one side I have the tangibles: Happy hogs, healthy land, then interconnected ecology. And on the other side I have the intangibles: Profitability of the business, growth of the business and community engagement. In that way I have tiers of importance – happy hogs and profitability are most important to me, but I still have my other goals to meet throughout the years. Do your thoughts run along these lines as well?

It's really tough to farm, period. It's very difficult to make money at it, too. So, if I were to hold on to some rigid outlook that wasn't profitable and which

constantly created worry and stress, I'd have to change my outlook or just stop doing what I was doing. As a couple, I think our pragmatism here has definitely led to less stress by comparison, but even saying that shouldn't take away from the fact that it has been very stressful to start a farm, to work with your partner, to also work together on a shared vision or at least a vision of constituent parts that are, hopefully, not in conflict very often. I don't know that we would have been able to find a place in the market with birds that cost \$6 per lb or more. Then again, maybe necessity would have influenced us like it has so many times before. All I know is that we've done the very best we could with the circumstances we were working within and with our own knowledge levels, etc. It's not perfect by any means, and one can always find something that can be done better, but I'm proud of that path even if some might find things to criticize. I'd welcome those critiques because I think they help us to think about how we might do things differently.

Andrew French is a livestock farmer and permaculture designer based in western Wisconsin working on developing a viable model of regenerative pig farming from farrow to finish using a whole systems design approach. He can be reached at fullboarfarm@gmail.com. Visit fullboarfarm.com for more information.

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