

MEET YOUR FELLOW TILTH PRODUCER, KAI OTTESEN

Tilth's Kelsey Maki chats with Kai Ottesen of Hedlin Family Farms, Mt. Vernon

Kelsey Maki, Tilth Producers of WA, Seattle, WA

Although Kai Ottesen works on his family's farm, his journey to farming is an unusual one. Kai grew up in Juneau, Alaska where food (save fish and a few seasonal blueberries) arrives on a barge after three days at sea. "There is just a whole different standard, a whole different starting point regarding what food looks like when it finally makes it to Juneau," says Kai. After completing a degree in English & Environmental Studies, Kai decided he was happiest with work that challenged his body as much as his mind. With that, he set off to join his uncle and aunt, Dave and Serena Hedlin of Hedlin Family Farm, as the fourth generation on their family farmstead. As Kai puts it he decided to "just go farm."

Were you ready to farm when you got to Hedlin?

I moved down here in the summer of 2006 without a lot of preconception. I had a vague sense of what was involved - weeding, moving pipe, cutting cabbage - from visiting on summer vacations and holidays. I've learned pieces of the operation season-by-season and year-by-year.

What are you doing on the farm nowadays?

My roles have morphed based on my skill set and strengths. My main responsibilities now are in sales and marketing for both wholesale and farmers markets. I'm proud of the connections we've made, like our relationship with the Skagit Valley Food Co-op. We'd been certified organic for a couple years and hadn't done a blessed thing with the coop. One year we ended up with a vast quantity of cauliflower and approached them as an outlet. The folks at the coop liked our product and now, they are probably our single biggest customers. Those kinds of connections have been really fun to make.

We also hear you dabble in pigs.

Kevin Mores, who was working at Hedlin and had grown up eating dried meats in his grandparents butcher shop, was a major inspiration to raising pigs here at the farm. One day, Kevin picked up a pork belly from Lopez Island and made pancetta that Serena later cooked up with swiss chard and balsamic vinegar. Despite being an on again and off again vegetarian, I tried the creation. I had no idea meat could taste so good and soon after, Kevin and I

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got into raising pigs. We raised four pigs and didn't know where we were going with the project (we may still not know). After the first year we applied for a business loan on credit, which was as much to go through the motions to see what it entailed as anything. Today we are up to 17 pigs.

What piece of farm equipment would you rather not go without?

My favorite piece of farm equipment is the little pre-row mono fin vacuum seeder. It's a dream. I can get my plant basing exactly as I want it, my depth just as I want it, and it's quick to swap out. It's a remarkably accurate machine.

What is your favorite crop to grow?

When it comes together, cauliflower. I think because it's so difficult and when I can get it right, I feel like I can get just about anything right.

Five years in, do you still consider yourself a young farmer?

Yeah, absolutely - I'm not 30 yet and I've got too much left to learn to be old.

Any advice for farming newbies?

Tap all possible resources! Go to conferences, and get to know farming neighbors and ask them questions. I didn't come here with a farming background, I came here as an English major who liked the idea of farming. Sometimes what we believe going into a new situation turn out to be true, and sometimes we have to completely recalibrate. Go in with an open mind ready to learn and be ready to acknowledge when you're wrong.

Kai will present at the 2011 Annual Conference on business planning for the beginning farmer. Read more about Kai & Hedlin Family Farm at www.tilthproducers.org.



Kai Ottesen of Hedlin Family Farms.