



# INTERVIEW

## CHRIS ANDERSON, owner, Thunderstruck Farms

By Joe Kertzman, managing editor, *Badger Common'Tater*

- NAME:** Chris Anderson
- TITLE:** Owner
- COMPANY:** Thunderstruck Farms
- LOCATION:** Plainfield, WI
- HOMETOWN:** Plainfield
- YEARS IN PRESENT POSITION:** Thirty-five
- PREVIOUS EMPLOYMENT:** T.I.P., Inc., and Ideal Stainless Systems
- SCHOOLING:** Tri-County High School
- ACTIVITIES/ORGANIZATIONS:** Wisconsin Bison Producers Association, Minnesota Bison Association, and Wisconsin Potato & Vegetable Growers Association (WPVGA)
- FAMILY:** Wife, Denise, and three daughters
- HOBBIES:** Collector cars, and car cruises, shows, and meets

*A new grower member* of the Wisconsin Potato & Vegetable Growers Association (WPVGA), Chris Anderson of Thunderstruck Farms became involved in the industry because of neighbors helping neighbors, and his ability to build stainless equipment, machines, vehicle and implement parts, and even catwalks and conveyors.

Chris's introduction to the WPVGA came around the same time as an interview with Rod Beggs of Midwestern Potatoes, who was showing off his freshly fabricated bin-filling line that meets Wal-Mart's new packaging requirements for boxing 5-pound bags of potatoes.

"Rod and I graduated from high

school together and have been buddies for a long time. He wanted a bin filler built," Chris relates. "I also built a box stacker and pallet feed for him."

"He put a new auto grader in, and it's 8 feet in the air," he adds, "so we had to disassemble the line, rebuild a section, and reassemble it to fit. I even built some conveyors and a catwalk system for him."

Beggs sold the prototype bin-filling line to the Soik's of Myron Soik & Sons, and Chris is currently building a crate washer for Helbach Farms that washes and sanitizes the crates in

**Above:** Chris Anderson of Thunderstruck Farms in Plainfield, Wisconsin, raises corn, soybeans, and bison. He's shown here in front of his 1979 Steiger ST-310 with an 855 Cummins engine that he uses for tillage.

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which little potatoes are stored.

### CHEESE EQUIPMENT

Chris fabricated stainless cheese equipment for 18 years while employed by Ideal Stainless Systems and has a knack for building and fixing equipment.

“Neighboring farmers bring trucks over to get welded or fixed,” he says, “and I build dump truck bodies, whatever people come up with. I have two part-time guys helping me, and I’m surprised how much stuff is coming in.”

Chris grew up on the family dairy farm in Plainfield, Wisconsin, where he now raises corn, soybeans, and bison, and does custom fabrication work.

“In addition to milking cows, I worked

off the farm all my adult life until about 10 years ago, first with T.I.P., Inc. until 1996, and then I went to work for Ideal Stainless,” he relates.

“When I left Ideal Stainless, my boss asked me to come back. I said I didn’t want to come back, but I’d build their stainless cheese equipment from my shop at the farm, and that’s when I got busy building a bigger shop and buying all the welders and lathes,” Chris says.

### Are you the founder of Thunderstruck Farms, and how did you come up with the name?

Thunderstruck Farms is a second-generation crop, bison, and fabrication business. I didn’t name the farm until we got involved with bison.

**Left:** Corn is harvested on Thunderstruck Farms in Plainfield, Wisconsin.

**Right:** In addition to corn and soybeans, Chris Anderson of Thunderstruck Farms raises 50 head of bison as part of his cow-calf operation, selling the calves when they’re about six months old. He does keep some bison as butcher stock for meat.

In the early days, every time we had a thunderstorm, the farm got struck by lightning. Once, it blew the tape out of the answering machine and left grill marks from the bottom of the answering machine on the table.

Where our phone box came in the house, they had old wooden fuses with copper ends, and that’s why we kept getting struck by lightning. My wife’s grandfather finally took them

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As part of a fabrication project for Midwestern Potatoes, Chris Anderson built the catwalk around the operation's grading and sorting line.

out and installed porcelain fuses, and we haven't had a problem since.

**Can you give me a brief history of Thunderstruck Farms?**

We were originally a field corn and dairy farm. My dad started here in 1957 when he got out of the Korean War. His family is from central Illinois, but land there is so expensive, you either inherit it

or you can't afford to buy it.

Dad and his three brothers moved up here and "grew rocks." There were so many rocks in the fields that his two brothers said "to heck with it" and went off to Iowa. Dad stayed here and toiled in the rocky, sandy soil.

In 1989, I graduated from high school and bought out my mom and dad.

We got into beef and raising crops, and then, when my first daughter was born in 1996, I sold out of the dairy business. When she was two years old, in 1998, we got into bison and sold off the beef part of the business.

I read an article in Wisconsin State Farmer about George Voss, who was a bison producer. My wife and



Big machinery at Thunderstruck Farms includes a 3788 International tractor for planting, a tractor-trailer used to haul corn and soybeans to Wolf River Grain in Stevens Point, and a Case International 9260 set up for tillage.

I visited him and four other bison producers in the state and decided to start raising bison.

We bought a few heifers and a bull. We do a cow-calf operation, selling the calves when they're about six months old, and we do keep some bison as butcher stock for meat.

**What propels you to make a living raising corn, beans, and bison?**

Farming's in my blood; it's a passion. Some years, you don't do so well, and some you do. Regardless, every spring when the weather gets warm, I'm aching to get out in the field and turn dirt.

**How many acres of corn and beans do you have, and who are your customers?**

We grow 200 acres of corn and 200 acres of soybeans on rotation, so a two-year rotation between corn and soybeans, and we have other ground for alfalfa and pasture mix for animal feed.

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*“Farming’s in my blood; it’s a passion. Some years, you don’t do so well, and some you do. Regardless, every spring when the weather gets warm, I’m aching to get out in the field and turn dirt.”*

**– Chris Anderson**

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Mainly, I contract all my field corn and soybeans to Wolf River Grain in Stevens Point, which used to be ADM Grain. Previously, I raised snap beans for the local Razorback Farms cannery.

As far as bison products go, the meat is to anyone, local guys who want to buy it. I sell the calves to Dan Meyer of Hidden Bison Ranch in Minnesota, but I haven't sold animals to him in a few years.

COVID hurt the industry, and a lot of little butcher shops that were certified through WDA or USDA inspection programs went out of business. Everything funneled to the big processing plants.

Now, it's a challenge to secure butchering dates. Some of the butchers have a two-year waiting list to get in. The calves aren't born yet, and you need to make

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an appointment, which obviously makes it difficult.

**How are you able to continue providing the same customers with quality produce?** Well, we try to do everything the right way. As far as meat goes, the bison are given quality feed, and on the corn and bean side of it, we follow proper fertilizer requirements and husbandry of the land.

I'm very particular about things, too much so. My wife says I have OCD, that I'm obsessive-compulsive.

**So, you grow your own bison feed?** Yes, for the most part I do, but for winter feed, I have a guy in Bancroft that I rent land from, a retired dairy farmer, who still bales hay. So, I buy hay from him. I also hire him to bale some of my hay up that I don't green chop.

I'm green chopping animal feed from May to October, every day. It ties you down a bit, but it's kind of fun. I go out there, lay down a green row of feed for the bison each day, look at the animals and watch as they eat.

I plant a mixture of peas and oats, or a pasture mix for green chopping. Some fields are already established with pasture mix and alfalfa.

**How many head of bison do you have, and what is the market like for bison meat?** I have 50 head and the market is strong. You just need to market it yourself, which is a challenge right now as far as finding a qualified butcher and a timeslot for butchering.

**I understand you're a member of both the Minnesota Bison Association and the Wisconsin Bison Producers Association. Why is it important to be involved?** Just so you have a handle on prices. There's



**Above and Left:** Stainless steel equipment Chris Anderson of Thunderstruck Farms has recently built encompasses everything from a 40-pound exact weight cheese cutter sold to Tillamook farms in Oregon, a dump trailer, and a skid steer mounted pressure washer fabricated for Midwestern Potatoes, LLC.

an auction once a year in Albany, Minnesota. The only time of year that the auction house doesn't have any other auctions is the Saturday after Thanksgiving.

That auction sets the tone of what prices are going to be. It's nice to be involved in the associations to stay in the loop and know what the prices are.

Everyone has different techniques they use to care for the bison, like controlling worms, worming them twice a year. It's nice to know what other producers do to take care of their animals.

**I see bison steaks at the farmer's market in Stevens Point sometimes.**

**Do you sell at farm markets?** No, I haven't done farmer's markets yet, but it's something we might get into. We're getting enough animals. The problem is quantity—you need a lot of animals.

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Snap beans are planted for Razorback Farms in Almond, Wisconsin.

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We used to have our own little store here on the farm when my kids were babies. That's something we'd like to do again, get the milkhouse converted back to a meat store.

We're in the process of getting that fixed up and open again, especially

if I can get into a regular timeframe as far as securing dates for butchering.

**How many people does Thunderstruck Farms employ?**

A couple of part-time guys, and my wife and kids help. My oldest daughter is on her own, my middle

one is in college in Stevens Point, and my youngest is a senior in high school, so I'm losing my help.

My wife is stepping up, and Brian and Augie help me out in the shop.

**What do you like most about working the land and raising animals?**

For animals, my favorite time is spring when the calves are born. Bison only have 40-pound calves, born red so that they blend into the landscape and predators don't see them. At only 40 pounds, there are no calving problems.

As far as crops, spring planting and fall harvest time, sitting in the combine harvesting, those are my favorite times of year. I just love the seasons.

**What are your biggest challenges on the farm?**

My biggest challenge is getting everything done as a one-man operation. What I figured out is that it's time management. I plan what needs to be done and when. I make lists.

**Above and Left:** Chris Anderson says he's proud that two of his daughters, Brooke (welding) and Morgan (at the milling machine), have been fabricating with him in the shop.





**You're surrounded by ag producers, including many potato growers, in Plainfield. Is it a good group to be a part of?** Absolutely, sometimes these guys are so helpful. I can't believe how much they go out of their way to help a small guy like me. I had a tractor go down, and I saw Dalton Beggs from Patrykus Farms at the gas station. He asked if I needed help getting my tractor pulled home, saying, "I'll send my guy over."

That was my tillage tractor, and they not only sent a guy over to help with the tractor, but they worked up two fields I didn't have done so I could get them planted. When I asked what I owed them for their time and fuel, Zach told me not to worry about it.

They rent some of my land. I work 200 acres, and I rent out 120 acres to Patrykus Farms.

**Are you hoping to expand Thunderstruck Farms or your services in the future?** I absolutely hope to grow. The fabrication business has grown every year since I started it.

Now, if things continue, it will be a challenge to find someone

trustworthy who can think on their feet. You need to do some design work in your head or on paper while you're fabricating.

**What do you wish more people knew about vegetable growers in the area?** I don't think people realize how much work is involved, not so much the people around rural areas, but when you get into big cities, I don't think they have a clue how

**Above:** Soybean harvest is underway at Thunderstruck Farms.

much work it takes to raise a quality steak or a potato to feed a family.

They say, "You guys are making a bunch of money," but don't realize how much money is invested in equipment and land, and how much work it takes to produce a quality crop or raise a healthy animal. **BCT**

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