



INTERVIEW

LUCAS WYSOCKI,
assistant maintenance manager, Paragon Potato Farms

By Joe Kertzman, managing editor, Badger Common'Tater

NAME: Lucas Wysocki

TITLE: Assistant maintenance manager

COMPANY: Paragon Potato Farms

LOCATION: Bancroft, Wisconsin

HOMETOWN: Bancroft, Wisconsin

TIME IN PRESENT POSITION:

Three weeks

PREVIOUS EMPLOYMENT:

Wysocki Family of Companies rotation program, and before that, Polaris Industries—Indian and Slingshot brands

SCHOOLING: Bachelor of Science in mechanical engineering and working toward a Master of Business Administration (MBA) at the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh

ACTIVITIES/ORGANIZATIONS: Board member of United Potato Growers Co-op and on Advisory Committee for Mid-State Technical College Agriculture School

FAMILY: Wife, Becky, and two sons, Jace (4) and Carter (2), with another child due in February.

HOBBIES: Powersports (snowmobiles, motorcycles and boats), snowboarding, and restoring automobiles and motorcycles

One of the nation's premier potato and vegetable operations,

Wysocki Produce Farm of Bancroft, Wisconsin, is an integral part of Wysocki Family of Companies, which also consists of RPE, Inc., Paragon Potato Farms, and as co-owners and partners, Tasteful Selections, LLC and Central Sands Dairy.

A family operation now in its second and third generations, Wysocki Produce Farm had its start when brothers Louis, Francis and Greg Wysocki partnered with their father on his small dairy farm and converted the operation into a potato growing business in the 1950s.

Over the years, crucial partnerships were formed with Nick and Dianne Somers of Plover River Farms and Jeff Sommers, who worked alongside the owners to propel the farm into a nationally renowned operation.

The Wysocki Family of Companies (WFC) ownership group consists of Russell, Jim, Gary and Bill Wysocki, Kirk Wille and Sommers.

"Louis and Avis Wysocki are my

grandparents, Gary and Liz are my parents, and I have two younger siblings, Anna Hausler and Rosie Wysocki," says Lucas Wysocki, assistant maintenance manager of Paragon Potato Farms.

With a degree in mechanical engineering and working towards a Master of Business Administration, the future looks bright for Lucas, but he doesn't take anything for granted.

Lucas has been doing his due diligence in making the rounds

Above: As the assistant maintenance manager for Paragon Potato Farms (aerial view), Lucas Wysocki (inset) is responsible for ensuring the operations team can efficiently run the plant to maximum capacity.



through the WFC rotational program, working in and soaking up experience and knowledge in each facet of the operation.

He's only been in his current role with Paragon Potato Farms for a few weeks, but he helps ensure the operations team is running the plant at maximum capacity and always has his eye on the end game.

Luke, you currently work within the Paragon Potato Farms segment of WFC, which is the flagship of the packaging operations. How many hundredweight of potatoes is Paragon Potato Farms grading and/or packing, and what types of potatoes? In the two sheds that

Paragon Potato Farms encompasses, we produce approximately 2 million hundredweight per year of reds, yellows and russet potatoes.

Are most of the potatoes grown by Wysocki Produce Farm, and how many other farms do you package for? Yes, Wysocki Produce Farm is the largest of the 10-plus potato growers that participate in our pool program today, and we are actively looking to bring any interested growers into the mix.

How many acres of potatoes and what varieties does Wysocki Produce Farm grow? Other vegetables, and how many acres of each? We grow 24,000 total acres of crops each year.

Above: Taken in July 2017, the image features the Wysocki Family of Companies owners along with this issue's interviewee, Lucas Wysocki (far right), and Nicola Carey (top, seated), business and agronomy analyst for Wysocki Produce Farms. The owners, from left to right, are Jeff Sommers, Kirk Wille, Gary Wysocki, Jim Wysocki, Russell Wysocki (top, white shirt) and Bill Wysocki.

Potatoes make up most of that mix, with 8,000-9,000 acres per year.

That acreage is roughly equally divided between our main three customers, Frito-Lay, McCain Foods and the fresh market through our RPE, Inc. business.

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We also grow about 2,000 acres of corn for silage and 1,000 acres of alfalfa for our Central Sands Dairy partnership.

We will typically grow 6,300 acres of green beans, peas and sweet corn, and we raise 5,000 acres of corn and soybeans for the grain markets. We have also recently added kidney beans to our rotation, which has been a fun new challenge.

Is Paragon Potato Farms still co-owned by Nick and Dianne Somers of Plover River Farms and WFC, and if so, why does the partnership not only exist, but also work so that it's mutually beneficial? Yes, the Somers have been a fantastic partner of ours going back to 1978. The key to making the partnership work is for both sides to focus on ways that each one's efforts benefit the other.

By working together in the early years, we were able to gain enough volume as a partnership to become a year-round supplier, thus providing a value to the end customer and increasing the value back to the farm for both parties.

That same mindset continues today—continually exploring ways to increase the total value in the supply chain to help all sides.

I believe you've rotated departments, learning your way at RPE, Inc., and have been a technical agronomist for Wysocki



The Tasteful Selections and Old Oak Farms brands give RPE, Inc.'s marketing and sales teams several potato and onion packaging, variety and heating and serving options to offer customers.

Produce Farms and now an assistant maintenance manager for Paragon Potato Farms. At what age did you start working for WFC, and how have your roles evolved and changed until present day? I grew up working on the farm. If I remember correctly, my first actual paycheck was for mowing grass when I was 14 years old.

After school and my time spent at Polaris, I joined the company five years ago when I was 26 years old. Since then, I have spent time in each facet of the organization, IT (information technology), human resources, finance, farm operations, packaging and just recently in our sales organization.

In each spot along the way, I've tried to learn from those working in each division what exactly it takes for them to do their jobs and the reasons behind it all.

Our other two next-generation owners will also complete this same rotation program to develop well-rounded leadership within our company.

How did your education help you? You know, I get this question quite

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often, and I think I use my education from the University of Minnesota every day.

I learned a lot about the world outside of potatoes and outside of our community and gained lots of friends and relationships that I continue to lean on all the time.

Although I don't do a lot of hard-core engineering analysis in my day-to-day job, I do use the problem-solving strategies and logic process every day.

Engineering is more about the process of problem solving than anything else and the process of identifying a problem, gathering information, making a hypothesis and then, as a colleague once told me, "doing math or data stuff" to prove or disprove that hypothesis, which is hugely valuable no matter the challenge.



The 2015 photo shows potato harvest on Wysocki Produce Farm. Of the approximately 24,000 total acres of crops grown, 8,000-9,000 are devoted to potatoes each year.

What do you believe are your strongest skills? I bring an ability to separate out the emotion and focus on business-critical information to make quick decisions that help our team members focus on tasks that help the company.

What are your day-to-day duties? I'm currently responsible for maintaining our Paragon location and ensuring our operations team can efficiently run the plant to maximum capacity.

I do a lot of scheduling with my team so we can catch all the balls and work



The flagship of the Wysocki Family of Companies packaging operations, Paragon Potato Farms handles approximately 2 million hundredweight per year of red, yellow and russet potatoes.

with the rest of the WFC divisions to ensure we are moving in the same direction as a company.

RPE, Inc.'s tagline is "Responsible Farming. Innovative Solutions."

What does responsible farming mean to you and how do you believe WFC embodies that? Responsible farming encompasses a lot and has been a focus of the company's owners for many years.

We know we have a responsibility to the land and environment that we farm, to ensure the soil is healthy and productive, and that no harm comes to those people and animals in our areas.

We have a responsibility to all our team members to provide an inspiring workplace and security for their families. We have a responsibility to our past generations of owners to continue upholding the legacy they started.

We are also responsible to our future ownership to pass on to them an even better business than we received.

What innovative solutions does the company bring to the table? Through our work with Tasteful Selections, we have been able to be on the forefront of the changing consumer demands by offering easy-to-prepare meal solutions.

We have also recently brought in Eagle River Seed Farm to provide excellent quality potato seed for ours and other farms early in the supply chain.

Dr. Mike Copas and our agronomy team are always hard at work to bring new varieties to our partner growers that benefit them and our final customers.

We are also bringing machine learning into our potato packaging facility as well as other automation in order to ensure we get the most value we can from the potato crop.



Potatoes are bagged, boxed, shrink-wrapped and ready to ship from Paragon Potato Farms.

Our farming focuses on the best soil health practices as well as using the latest precision ag tools to quickly disseminate and gather information across the operation.

How about new technologies in machinery, grading, sorting, packaging, etc.? We are always looking to improve our plant

efficiency and accuracy through new technologies.

Currently, we are looking to add a new grading system utilizing AI (artificial intelligence) and machine learning, as well as working on projects in house to automate some tedious manual processes.

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Above: Seed potatoes are cut for planting at the Wysocki Family of Companies seed house.

Right: Parting shot: the bulk trucks are in line and ready during potato harvest on Wysocki Produce Farm.



Does WFC co-own Tasteful Selections, and what does the brand embody and add to the overall business plan? Yes, along with our CSS Farms partners, we co-own Tasteful Selections. The company

embodies fresh and flavorful potato solutions for our customers and completes our product offering to be a full-service supplier.

Are there other aspects of the company I've missed? One of the

biggest differences I've seen in our company compared to my time outside the industry is the amount of effort that is put into being a true partner in business, trying to help our grower and packer partners

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What do you see as current trends in potato packaging, and what's being done to meet demand? And how about through Tasteful Selections?

We are seeing a definite shift away from large bag sizes to single-family-sized packs and a focus on easy to prepare/value added.

We are also seeing is a greater focus on environmentally friendly packaging solutions, which can be anything from recyclable/compostable options to elimination of packaging altogether.

Have things changed tremendously in the short time you've been with the family of companies, and if so, how? Very much so—in the five years I've been with WFC, we have merged farms with Paramount Farms, almost doubling our farming operation and adding another shed to Paragon Potato Farms.

We have also restructured our Board of Directors and changed our company management structure to align and integrate our business units to maximize synergistic value.

Tasteful Selections has continued to grow, and we have added Eagle River Seed Farm to our family of companies.

The adoption of precision ag has started to bring on a great level of change to our everyday farming activity where a tractor now has more computing power than horsepower!

You get to see all aspects of the operation—from field work to sorting, grading, packaging and shipping—so, what's your favorite part? Through the rotation program that we've developed, I feel like I have been able to see all aspects of our company. I enjoy the operational side of the business the most, but I honestly think my favorite is to see the entire process from beginning

to end and the contributions of the entire team.

What are you most proud of in your family's operations and heritage?

I'm most proud that the values that Louis instilled in the company back in the beginning have helped to create a business that has kept our family together.

We have 25 family members with ownership in our holding companies and six owners of our operating company, but we also have another 11 family members that work in the business in different roles.

What do you hope for in the future?

That I can give my children a similar opportunity to what I've been afforded. **BCT**



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