



INTERVIEW

MICHAEL HELBACH,

managing member, Helbach Farms, LLC

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

NAME: Michael Helbach

TITLE: Managing member

COMPANY: Helbach Farms, LLC

LOCATION: Amherst, WI

HOMETOWN: Amherst

TIME IN PRESENT POSITION:
20 years

PREVIOUS EMPLOYMENT: n/a

SCHOOLING: Amherst High School

ACTIVITIES/ORGANIZATIONS:
Wisconsin Potato & Vegetable Growers Association (WPVGA), Amherst Market Animal Committee, 4-H swine leader and St. Maximillian Kolbe Catholic Church

AWARDS/HONORS: FFA-Star State Farmer, 1992; McCain Champion Storage Grower Awards in 2002, 2003, 2006, 2013 and 2014, and 2nd Place, 2007; McCain Awards for Field Direct Champion in 2002, 2007 and 2015, and 2nd place in 2003, 2013 and 2017; and McCain Foods Bruise Free winner, 2000

FAMILY: Wife, Debra; daughter, Abigail (17); and sons, Gabriel (14) and Andrew (10)

HOBBIES: Fishing, skiing, and watching my kids show livestock and play sports

"It's been all my life. We were Dad's help when we were young," fondly recalls Michael Helbach of Helbach Farms, LLC, in Amherst, Wisconsin, "helping as early as I can remember on the farm. Then, right out of high school, I was full time."

When Mike went full-time on the farm after high school, his dad, Bob, put him to work in the office. "He said to learn the office first, which is why he put me in that position—I don't think he liked doing it," Mike recalls.

"Having worked in the fields as a kid, the first thing he had me do as an adult was the book side and then transition into the field and everything else that's involved in the operation," he adds.

"As kids, we had a water-drive irrigation system with winch pulls and guns. Now everything is automatic. Now we have telemetry on irrigation systems," Mike relates.

Helbach Farms has been a mainstay in the Amherst, Wisconsin, area, dating back to the 1930's when Mike's grandfather, George, started farming.

It was primarily a dairy back then, although they grew 8-10 acres of potatoes annually and sold them

throughout Central Wisconsin.

In 1974, Bob and his wife, Helen, took over the farm, transitioning it from dairy to vegetables. In 1980, Bob began raising potatoes and later became one of the top growers of processed spuds for Ore-Ida Foods, winning "Top Grower" and "Bruise Free" awards.

Mike and his brother, Kirk, officially joined the farm in the 1990's, eventually taking over the reins of the now large potato growing operation from their dad.

Above: Mike Helbach, managing member of Helbach Farms, LLC, took a work break after his kids came home from school to sit on the truck tailgate with them. From left to right are Gabriel, Abigail, Mike and Andrew Helbach.



While Kirk is the storage manager, and Mike the farm manager, Bob is still involved on the farm, as well, driving tractor and semi-hauling corn, as well as taking on the role of consultant for his boys.

What an incredible heritage for you. What do you take pride in regarding the farm, Mike? What I take pride in is having the biggest thing be our word, and in being honest and growing a decent crop. We normally have an above-average crop and keep the farm nice and neat. We have a nice-looking place.

Do you look at yourself as a caretaker, in a sense, of the land? We try to, you know. In the wet years, it can be tough. It seems like you are going backward sometimes. We try to do the best we can, keeping fertilizer and erosion in check, doing our best with water and fertilizer management.

For groundwater and nitrates, spreading things out as far as we ever have with more applications but in smaller quantities—the same amount of product going out, but spreading it out. That is important

so it does not leach.

Are you mainly growing processing potatoes for McCain Foods? And how about for Heartland Farms? Others? Our split is approximately 25 percent for The Little Potato Company, and 40 percent production in chipping potatoes. The rest are processing potatoes for McCain.

Above: Mike Helbach's dad, Bob, runs tillage ahead of the potato planter.

The chipping potatoes go to Heartland Farms. We have contracted with Heartland since 1994, which is when our expansion started on the farm.

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We only had a couple hundred acres before that, but we expanded, and in a few years, we had 700-800 acres dedicated to Heartland Farms. It has been a good working relationship for us.

My dad worked with Dick Pavelski's dad, Albert, on a few things, too. They bought stuff together, and we took corn there for a couple years. We have a nice, long history with the Pavelski family.

How has it been growing small spuds for The Little Potato Company? It's going well. It is a learning process, a challenge. I consider it almost a hybrid crop that falls somewhere between fresh market and chip stock.

You really have to watch it, micromanage that crop, its appearance. With the little potatoes, appearance is strict. And cleaning the crop up out of the ground—it is such a smaller crop, so the digging chain

Above: Potatoes are planted on Helbach Farms, LLC, in Amherst, Wisconsin, which grows about 900 total acres of spuds for Heartland Farms, The Little Potato Company and McCain Foods.

is a lot smaller.

With small chain spacing, you bring in a lot more foreign material and try to separate it going into storage. Trying to find the right equipment for the process is a challenge.

We make sure there is no scab or silver scurf, which are major issues to control. It is tough.

The little potatoes bring another dimension to our farm, giving us three different sectors—the chipping and processing potatoes and The Little Potato Company acres are all different dimensions.

Did you have to update machinery, methods and storage for the Creamer potatoes? If so, what specifically? Absolutely, we got a new set of digging equipment, basically, with two different types of chain. With the wet years we had in 2018 and '19, it was crucial be able to dig both large and small potatoes at the same time.

With the small harvest windows in



Blushing Belles, grown for The Little Potato Company, are sampled for vine kill.

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those years, it helped tremendously that we could perform both operations simultaneously.

We bought a whole new line of grading equipment to maximize running time and do big and little potatoes at the same time.

Unless the weather is close to perfect, like this year, then we don't have to grade both sizes at the same time, and we didn't.

But we still need different grading equipment. We went to a Surge Hopper with the little ones because they bruise easier, and Even Flows.

In 2020, we bought a VACS Mobile from Lockwood. We started out with a Clod Hopper the first couple years, but the VACS Mobile has saved us time with protectivity and efficiency.

Is row spacing different, and did you only have to restructure certain fields? No. A lot of the growers are spacing rows at 32 inches. We stayed at 36 inches and have not seen a difference. We figured we would stay where we were operating at 36 inches and change it if we had to.

We wanted to go into this as low cost in first few years as we could, to see how that worked out.

How many acres of potatoes are you growing in total, and what varieties?

We are right around 900 acres of



Mike Helbach (left) and his son, Andrew, check the sets on chipping potatoes.

total potatoes. McCain's are Russet Burbanks, we grow Blushing Belles and Baby Boomers for The Little Potato Company, and Heartland's stuff is a lot of Frito-Lay varieties.

Is it all in the Amherst, Wisconsin,

area? We stretch from Amherst to Waupaca down on Highway 54. It's about a 12-mile radius that we farm, from highway J in Plover to 54 in Waupaca, and Amherst Junction down to Wild Rose.



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Above: Russet Burbanks, reserved for McCain Foods, are harvested on Helbach Farms.

What type of rotation are you on, and with what other crops? We are on a three-year rotation between potatoes, field corn and snap beans/soybeans. We grow 3,500 acres of field corn, green beans and soybeans.

What have been the biggest changes in technology over the past 10 years, Mike? The largest advancements

have been in telemetry of irrigation, GPS and going from steering to implement steer or self-steering implements. Tractors have gotten more elaborate as far as electronics, for good or bad.

What type of storage capacity do you have for potatoes? We can store about 70,000 hundredweight. We

own about 70,000 100-pound bags ourselves, which the little potatoes go into. That would be at full capacity, because we store them 10-12 feet high, not much higher.

The other potatoes we store are all for Heartland Farms. They own the buildings.

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What family members work on the farm? Kirk is part-owner and works on the farm. My brother, George, is a silent partner. He is a pilot for United airlines.

My nephew, Zach, who is George's son, works on the farm, and my cousin (my dad's nephew), Pat Truzinski, has been with us over 30 years. We have some part-time truck drivers who are family members.

How are the duties split between you and Kirk, and is there a typical day for you, Mike? He takes care of all storages, basically from seed on through harvest. So, he handles the seed side and then storage after harvest. Kirk runs irrigation in summertime, and then back to storage for potatoes and corn in the fall, running the corn dryer on that side.



There is not a typical day for me. I can't imagine what you'd call a typical day on a farm. My main duties are on the financial and agronomy sides, and overall operations management of the farm.

Above: Mike Helbach's family, from left to right, Debra, Gabriel, Andrew and Abigail, help cut potato seed.

How was harvest this year? Harvest was a thousand times better than the last two years.



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What is your main focus now that harvest is over? The focus now is on year end. In December, our year end consists of putting numbers together, a production schedule for the following year and getting the next year's inputs.

I think you have three kids, and your brother has two. Are any of them interested in working on the farm when older? Yes, I have a daughter and two sons, and Kirk has a daughter and a stepson. Maybe they will work

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Left: Blushing Belles are harvested for The Little Potato Company on Helbach Farms.

Above: Row spacing is checked on Blushing Belles grown on Helbach Farms for The Little Potato Company.

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“Trying to bring in the next generation, working on that succession plan, that is our hope as members of the farm.”

– Michael Helbach

on the farm. My youngest talks about it, but he is only 10 years old.

They're involved in FFA and 4-H.

It is fun for the kids, and we enjoy it as a family. I will still be involved in fairs and showing animals after my kids have graduated out of it. I will find a way to stay involved.

Is there anything you hope for the future of the farm? Trying to bring in the next generation, working on

that succession plan, that is our hope as members of the farm. All members agree that it is important to keep this farm going. That is one of our main goals for the next generation.

Hopefully, it will get a little better. It could turn quickly. There are not a lot of farms left, and it is tough to make it work all the way through to the third, fourth and fifth generations. **BC'T**



Left: A pile of Baby Boomers is started in storage at Helbach Farms.

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