



INTERVIEW

DENNIS WEST, co-owner, Nuto Farm Supply Inc.

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

- NAME:** Dennis West
- TITLE:** Co-owner
- COMPANY:** Nuto Farm Supply Inc.
- LOCATION:** Rice Lake, WI
- HOMETOWN:** Rice Lake
- YEARS IN PRESENT POSITION:** 40+
- PREVIOUS EMPLOYMENT:** n/a
- SCHOOLING:** Rice Lake High School, Barron County Campus
- ACTIVITIES/ORGANIZATIONS:** Grower member of the Wisconsin Potato & Vegetable Growers Association
- AWARDS/HONORS:** State and National Outstanding Young Farmer Awards
- FAMILY:** Wife, Sue West, and sons, Derek, Taylor, and Adam West
- HOBBIES:** Hunting, fishing, cross-country skiing, and water skiing

The warm days and cool nights north of the 45th parallel in Rice Lake, Wisconsin, aid in the growing and storing of Russet Burbank potatoes, according to Dennis West of Nuto Farm Supply.

“As for potatoes, we only grow Russet Burbanks, and they’re all late season,” West, a third-generation grower, shipper, and packer, says. “We don’t start harvesting until the middle of September, and just got done with harvest on October 12th.”

Known for the Kitchen Kleen brand of russet potatoes, Dennis is the co-owner of Nuto Farm Supply, running the operation with his brother, Brian, father, Donn “Hokey” West, who is 92 years young, and Dennis’ sons, Taylor, and Adam.

Hokey, who got his nickname from playing hooky from school to spend time on the farm, can still be found

at the office on any given workday. There is photographic proof of his hooky-playing days, with pictures of Hokey sitting on boxes of potatoes on a trailer when he was as young as 4 years old.

Dennis is proud of his family’s history and accomplishments, particularly a new packaging and grading shed with all-new equipment, and he agreed to answer questions for readers.

Above: Known for the Kitchen Kleen brand of potatoes, Dennis West is the co-owner of Nuto Farm Supply, a grower, shipper and packer of Russet Burbanks in Rice Lake, Wisconsin.



I understand Nuto Farm Supply is a 4th-generation potato grower, shipper, packer, and started in 1929. Can you give me a brief one- or two-paragraph history of the farming operation?

In 1929, my grandfather, Barron West, began farming with his brothers in Saronia, Wisconsin (just north of Rice Lake), to supplement his income as a gas station owner during the Depression.

My father, Donn “Hokey” West, joined him in the 1950’s. At that time, Barron and Hokey branched out on their own and moved to Rice Lake to grow potatoes.

My brother, Brian, and I joined in during the ’70s. Over the years, Hokey, Brian and I expanded our farm 20 miles south to a sandy, glacial outwash near Chetek.

The fertile soil in that area has helped us grow tasty, beautiful, well-stored potatoes.

Approximately 10 years ago, after completing college at the University of Wisconsin-Madson, two of my

Above: From left to right, Adam, Taylor, Donn “Hokey”, Dennis and Brian West run the day-to-day operations at Nuto Farm Supply in Rice Lake, Wisconsin.

sons, Taylor and Adam West, began farming with us and have taken on much of the responsibility of growing and selling the crop, as well as overseeing the construction of our new packing shed.

Speaking of the packing shed, does it incorporate new technologies, and if so, what are those? Our new packing shed is amazing. We are excited that it contains multiple artificial intelligence systems, automatic

palletizing, and new stainless tanks and conveyers.

All the new technology greatly increased our packing capacity along with relieving our labor strains that had arisen over the past few years. We used to employ 10-12 graders and were struggling for years to find help. Now three people working as graders give the potatoes a final check before packing and shipping.

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It was also exciting and fun to finally get to work on what we had visualized as our ideal warehouse. We worked in conjunction with Rietveld Equipment out of Illinois, whose representatives came to our location, took measurements of the building, and discussed plans on what we visualized.

Within a week, they set up Zoom meetings between people from our warehouse and those in Illinois, The Netherlands, Germany, Spain, and India, all discussing the best layout for our technology. It was great to be able to work with everyone at once to set up the warehouse that best fit our needs.

What is your storage capacity and how long can you store potatoes?

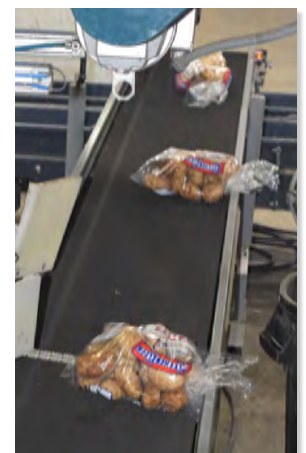
Our storage capacity at our packing facility is approximately 40 million pounds, and we have additional temporary storage if needed.

Because we only grow Russet Burbank potatoes, our shipping season doesn't begin until mid-October.

Since Burbanks store so well in our climate-controlled bins, we can ship superb quality potatoes well into August (storing for 10 months).

Are you, Brian and Hokey all still full-time with Nuto Farm Supply?

Brian and I are still very much



involved but have been transitioning more and more responsibilities to Taylor and Adam over the years.

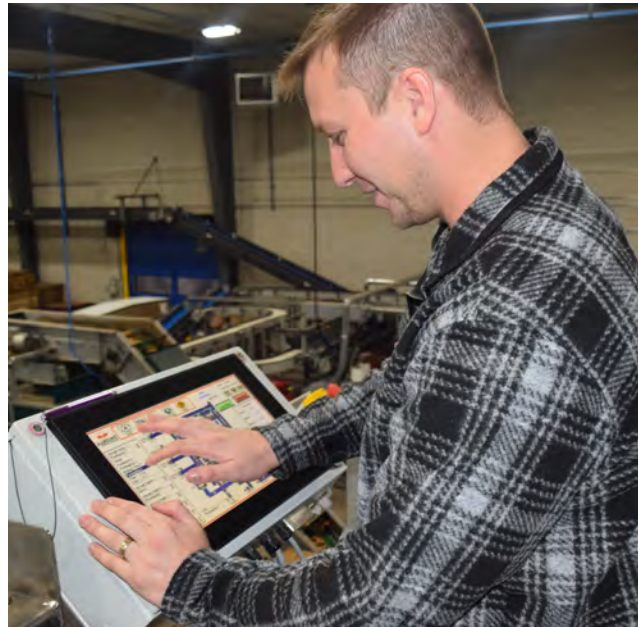
Hokey is now 92 years old and comes to work daily to keep an eye on everything.

Above: Bagging potatoes has come a long way at Nuto Farm Supply from the early days of manual field labor to the modern Volm M12 V automatic bagger/packager that is set up to run two lines simultaneously.

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Are there other family members involved in the operation, and what are each of your titles or specialties?

Brian is a certified crop adviser and concentrates on planting, growing, and harvesting the crops. He also markets our rotational crops, primarily field corn and soybeans.

My son, Adam, is an agronomist. His focus is growing a great crop of potatoes from planting through harvest, but he also plays a vital role with corn and soybeans.

Taylor specializes in potato warehouse management, which includes storage, washing, packing, shipping, as well as potato sales and marketing. This was (and still is) my main area of work.

Hokey's wife, Carolyn, Brian's wife, Michele, and my wife, Sue, have been a crucial part of our farming operation throughout the years, pitching in wherever needed with bookwork, trade shows, advertising, seed corn, etc.

Left: Russet Burbank potatoes are sorted off the field in this historic photo at Nuto Farm Supply.

Right: Taylor West, shown here at a control panel in the new pack shed, specializes in potato warehouse management, which includes storage, washing, packaging, and shipping, as well as sales and marketing.

Taylor's wife, Emily, and Adam's fiancé, Kenzie, have their own full-time jobs outside of the farm but are always willing to help in any way that they can.

Why do Russet Burbanks grow so well in Rice Lake Wisconsin? Does it have to do with the soil or being north of the 45th parallel? The Rice Lake/Chetek climate offers warm days and cool nights, which produce a great tasting Russet Burbank potato. Also, the soil is a mixture of silt loam/sandy silt loam that grows a great tasting potato that stores well.

What is your total acreage? We farm close to 5,000 acres of crops each year, of which 625 acres are potatoes, 800 are dedicated to soybeans and roughly 3,000 acres are planted in corn. The remainder consists of hay/pasture, which provides habitat for animals.

We are also part of the Midwest



The Kitchen Kleen Russet Burbank potatoes are washed before being conveyed from a warehouse to the new packing shed at Nuto Farm Supply.

Food Alliance, which is dedicated to promoting sustainable farming practices, and we have partnered with our local electrical co-op to plant butterfly and pollinator sanctuaries on 15 acres of land.

How did the Kitchen Kleen brand evolve, and has it come to denote quality or be recognized nationwide?

My father, Hokey, introduced the Kitchen Kleen brand label in the 1950's. We only pack Russet Burbanks in that brand so that consumers, chefs, etc., will always have consistent taste, texture, and cook time in every bag or box they use.

We conducted an extensive regional ad campaign in the 1990's that included TV, billboard, and radio advertising to promote the taste and quality of Kitchen Kleen potatoes.

How many people does Nuto Farm Supply employ? We have approximately 30 full-time and 15 or more part-time employees who work with us in our farming, growing and packing operation.

We are truly blessed to have a group of people who are dedicated to producing and delivering a quality potato. It is a privilege to work with so many conscientious, talented people. It's because of them that everyone can enjoy Kitchen Kleen Potatoes. We couldn't do it without them.

You are a late-season potato grower. Why, and where do you, therefore, fit into the marketplace? We begin harvest in mid- to late-September and try to finish by October 10th.

Once the potatoes are in storage, we put them through a three-week curing process where we run air and humidity through them. This is important with a Burbank to ensure that it can withstand the washing process and remain healthy once in a box or bag.

Once the curing process is finished, we begin shipping and continue to

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– Dennis West

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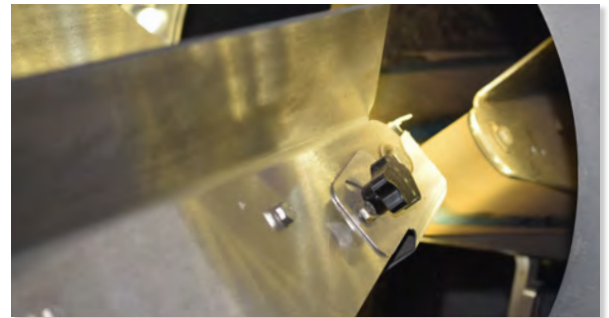
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ship up until July, approximately 10 months.

Do you have a shipping arm of the operation, and if so, how many trucks? We have trucks, but mainly for fieldwork and hauling. Some of our customers have trucks in our area and will backhaul their own product. If we need to find a truck, we use independent local truckers that we work with closely.

Have packaging demands from retailers and consumers changed over the years, and if so, in what ways? I remember loading bag after

bag of 100-pound sacks on trucks as a kid, and now I can't recall the last time we even packaged one that large. Consumers are purchasing for convenience and quick consumption, so they are pushing for smaller bags and easy-to-make meals.

Along with bag size, being locally grown is also a driving force to what decisions consumers make at the store, so a Wisconsin-grown Russet Burbank helps reduce the carbon impact for the Midwest.

What about quality control—what are you doing to ensure fresh, clean,

Above: Nuto Farm Supply's new packing shed includes multiple artificial intelligence systems such as the automatic and optical sorters and graders shown here.

bruise-free potatoes? Does it start in the field, and if so, in what way?

Quality always starts in the field. Adam and Brian spend countless hours discussing and deciding everything from field rotation to the way the fields are worked in the spring, a meticulous irrigation plan in the summer and how to gently harvest in the fall.

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In the 1960's, Nuto Farm Supply delivered potatoes within a 150-mile radius of Rice Lake.



Donn "Hokey" West, who is presently 92 years young and still goes into the office most days, sits (top-left) on a load of potatoes. Reportedly getting his nickname, Hokey, because he played hooky from school to spend time on the farm, this may be photographic evidence.

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Having conscientious people controlling the equipment makes all the difference in the world.

Once in storage, proper air and humidity is necessary to keep the potatoes fresh, and our new packing line has many updates to ensure

minimal drops to produce a bruise-free potato.

What do you foresee on the horizon for the farm in terms of technology, operation and progression? We have been very ambitious over the last few years. We are now going to perfect

Above: Bagging and packaging technology at Nuto Farm Supply extends to an Upmatic bagging machine in the first image, and an IPLA palletizer in the second photo.

what we have and continue to focus on delivering a superb-quality, great-tasting potato. **BCT**



The West family began supplying RPE LLC, of Bancroft, with 8-10-ounce Burbank Reserve potatoes packaged in 5- and 10-pound poly bags under RPE's renowned nationwide commodity brand, Farmer's Promise.



Above: Hokey West is shown (left) in the 1950's with a load of 100-pound sacks of Kitchen Kleen Potatoes.

Left: Potatoes are harvested by hand, in the late 1940's, at a Nuto Farm Supply field in Radisson, Wisconsin, just northeast of Rice Lake.