



**NAME:** Ian Miller

**TITLE:** Owner and farm manager

**COMPANY:** Paul Miller Farms

**LOCATION:** Hancock, WI

**HOMETOWN:** Hancock, WI

**YEARS IN PRESENT POSITION:** Five years as farm manager, and 13 years as an irrigation and IT (information technology) tech

**PREVIOUS EMPLOYMENT:**

Heartland Farms

**SCHOOLING:** Tri-County High School and Mid-State Technical College

**FAMILY:** Wife, Kayte, and children, Blake (10), Joslynn (7), and Allie "Peanut" (4)

**HOBBIES:** Farming, spending time with family, and golfing (when I have time)

8 BC'T June

# INTERVIEW

**IAN MILLER**, owner and farm manager, Paul Miller Farms

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

*Like a beacon or badge of honor*, the sign at the intersection of Beechnut Drive and 4th Avenue in Hancock, Wisconsin, points the way to Paul Miller Farms and reads, "In 2022, this farm produced 7,241 tons of potatoes, 17,530 tons of carrots, 5,217 tons of sweet corn, 2,267 tons of snap beans, and 578 tons of peas for the world."

There's another sign a short distance away on Beechnut announcing one's arrival at Gramma Miller's Farm Market, open May-October, where the Miller family sells fresh produce and flowers in season, and other goods. A four-acre field is dedicated to specialty crops for the farm market.

Combined with the "Paul Miller Farms" sign, the multi-generational potato and vegetable growing operation is a welcoming place and one with a storied history in the Central Sands area of the state.

The farm's namesake, Paul Miller, was inducted into the Wisconsin Potato & Vegetable Growers Association Hall of Fame in 2021-'22 and has been active in the industry for nearly 60 years.

Paul was a field supervisor for the Green Giant Company in Arkansas and Oklahoma before leaving, in 1967, to become farm manager for Badger Growers, a 1,000-acre green bean and sweet corn operation located in Hancock at the time.

## HIS OWN FARM

In 1974, he leased some land and started his own farming operation. In addition to raising snap beans and sweet corn, Paul grew potatoes for

**Above:** As owner and farm manager of Paul Miller Farms in Hancock, Wisconsin, Ian Miller wears many hats, as the GPS technician, for one, and controlling day-to-day operations, maintaining the irrigation systems, coordinating spraying and fertilizer applications, and running the potato planter, harvester, and other equipment that needs to be operated throughout the summer.



American Potato, which later became Basic American Foods.

In 1990, he bought all assets of Badger Growers and made Paul Miller Farms, Inc. into an 1,100-acre irrigated potato and vegetable operation.

Paul Miller Farms has grown alongside the family and includes Paul's son, Todd, daughter, Michelle, and grandsons, Jordan and Ian, the latter of whom is this issue's interviewee.

Ian qualifies, "My father, Todd, manages our farm market and controls the distribution of anhydrous ammonia to other farms around the area. My aunt, Michelle, is the secretary/treasurer for our organization. She also helps with managing the farm market."

"My cousin, Jordan, runs our sprayer and one of our carrot harvesters," Ian explains. "He also helps with the potato planting process."

"My cousin, Makenzie, is starting to learn the bookkeeping end of things and helps with our fresh peas harvest operation," he adds, "and my cousin, Austin, is learning things from the mechanical side of the farm."

**What is your own history with Paul Miller Farms?** I started working full-

time after high school. We had been growing potatoes for Ore-Ida and continued with McCain Foods when they took over.

We started growing carrots for Birds Eye foods in the mid-'90s and have worked with Green Giant, Seneca Foods, Lakeside Foods, Razorback Farms, Hartung Brothers, and Midwestern Potatoes over the years.

**Did you grow up on the farm?** Yes, I grew up helping with what I could after school and in the summertime. After high school, I took a more

**Left:** Brussels sprouts are grown along with several other specialty crops on a four-acre plot specifically planted each year for fresh produce to be sold at Gramma Miller's Farm Market, in Hancock.

**Right:** A bird's-eye view of Paul Miller Farms shows an enormous pile of carrots, the largest crop grown by the operation annually.

essential role as a farm hand, learning the irrigation end of our operation and starting to really understand all the steps for growing crops from my grandfather.

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This is where I learned most of the practices that we still employ today. We have improved on these aspects over the years with the help of technology, but they are still the same basic steps.

**Do you have any favorite memories**

**of the farm from when you were young?** My favorite memory is when I was around 9 or 10 and I helped unload potatoes that were cut for seed. This was my job when I got home from school. I would hop in a belted trailer to pull boards and unload seed potatoes.

**Above:** Ian Miller plants Snowden potatoes destined for the Top Tier Ingredients potato flake and flour plant in Hancock, Wisconsin.

**What are some of your daily duties as farm manager?** My main job since I returned to the farm 13 years ago has been to maintain the irrigation



Farmers love to line up their trucks, and the Paul Miller Farms family is no different.



systems. I have also been the GPS technician since that day.

Now, in the last 5 years, I have adapted to the role of controlling day-to-day operations. At the same time, I also coordinate all our spraying and fertilizer applications. I run our potato planter and harvester, and any other equipment that needs to be operated throughout the summer.

**What are your main crops and how many acres of each?** Carrots are our main crop, raising around 800 acres per year. We grow 450-500 acres of potatoes, 800-1,000 acres of corn, beans, and peas, and we also raise 25-30 acres of fresh market peas per year.

We plant a small amount of fresh market peas every day or two, and then harvest, wash, bag and deliver them around the state daily starting in mid-June.

**Who are your main customers for potatoes and vegetables?** Most of our carrots get delivered to the Birds Eye food plant in Darien, Wisconsin. We also have a small contract with Del Monte Foods for carrots.

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**Above:** The sign says it all at the corner of Beechnut Drive and 4th Avenue, in Hancock, pointing the way to Paul Miller Farms.

*“Watching everything go full circle is very satisfying to me. With running the planter, irrigation, and harvester for potatoes, I get to see every step firsthand.”*

**– Ian Miller**

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Almost all our potatoes get delivered to McCain Foods. Depending on our available acreage, we do send potatoes to Midwestern Potatoes, in Plainfield, for fresh market processing. All our peas (aside from fresh market), beans, and corn get delivered to Seneca Foods for different plants throughout the state.

**What varieties of potatoes does Paul Miller Farms currently raise?**

We primarily grow Russet Burbank potatoes for McCain Foods. When we have available acres for the year,

we send Goldrush to Midwestern. This year, we are raising a few acres of Snowdens for the Top Tier Ingredients dehydration facility, in Hancock.

**How many total acres will you be harvesting, and in what crop sequence?**

We will be harvesting 25 acres of peas starting around June 15th until about July 6th. After that, we go into harvesting 470 acres of potatoes starting the first week of September.

Shortly after that, we will begin our carrot harvest (end of September to early October). This will last until sometime around Thanksgiving or the first week of December. Seneca Foods usually starts harvesting our peas, beans, and corn in the middle of June.

**Do you have new equipment or technologies that you are either excited to use or have been using?**

We've had the same technology for the past few years—GPS-guided tractors for all our field operations, and our carrot planter, the potato planters, and seeding and liquid applications are controlled through our Trimble Guidance screens.

All liquid applications for row crops (hilling, spraying, etc.) are also controlled through the GPS screen. The one thing that we have added over the last few years is a new irrigation system that will hopefully make my job a little easier so I can focus on other aspects of the farm.



**Above:** The three-row ASA-Lift carrot harvester is shown sitting idle and in action at Paul Miller Farms.

**Left:** Farm progress takes on a whole new meaning in this three-panel photo of Ian and Kayte Miller's children, from top to bottom, Blake, Joslynn and Allie.



**Does your father, Todd, still deal in ASA-Lift vegetable harvester parts and equipment?** As of November 2023, we are no longer the ASA-Lift parts dealer in North America. (Spudnik is owned by Grimme, and Grimme also owns ASA-Lift, so Big Iron Equipment is the local dealer now.)

**What's your own favorite part of the growing season?** My favorite part of the whole operation is seeing the stages that it takes to produce crops, going from seed you stick in the ground to cultivation practices to the maintenance/watering progression of the crop and harvesting the final product.

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**Top:** Four generations of the Miller family include, from left to right, Todd, his son, Ian, holding his own son, Blake, and the farm's namesake, Paul.

**Bottom:** Any number of John Deere tractors can be seen at Paul Miller Farms hooked up to implements ranging from carrot bed shapers to spreaders and everything in between.



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Watching everything go full circle is very satisfying to me. With running the planter, irrigation, and harvester for potatoes, I get to see every step firsthand.

**What has Paul Miller Farms gotten better at as far as potato and vegetable growing in the time**

**you've been on the farm?** We have improved efficiency in most aspects since I've been here, from watering and fertilizer application to more precise seeding during planting.

I have cut inputs almost in half over the last four years. Better understanding crop water needs



**Left:** An aerial view shows potato harvest in full swing at Paul Miller Farms.

**Right:** Ian Miller has quite a little helper in his daughter, Allie, as the two inspect carrot quality in a Paul Miller Farms field.

through my work with moisture probes, I am not wasting water applied through the irrigation system.

**Can some of your equipment be adapted and used for both potato and vegetable planting and harvest?**

We have separate potato and carrot equipment for each crop. Some parts can be interchangeable, but each piece of equipment is specific to that crop.

**What are the biggest challenges of being a potato and vegetable grower today?**

The biggest challenges that we and almost all farms face are Mother Nature and the rising costs of equipment and inputs.

When it comes to coping with Mother Nature, you're at her mercy. As far as rising costs go, we are trying to produce the same quality crop with fewer inputs, and over the last few years, we have been somewhat successful at doing this.

**How many people does Paul Miller Farms employ?** We have seven full-time and 30 part-time employees.

**How far does your land stretch in any direction?** We are one of the luckier farms in the area. The farthest field that we own is only about five



Though the original reason for opening Gramma Miller's Farm Market was to sell peas, visitors can find a variety of fresh produce, flowers, garden decor, and baked goods, among many other offerings.



miles away. We rent land from other farms in the area for carrot ground, and we have raised crops up to 20 miles from our main farm.

**I see that Gramma Miller's Farm Market is still going strong. Who runs it, and is it mainly a fresh produce and floral retail store?** Our farm market is managed by Todd and Michelle. We have a small four-acre "garden" where we grow some of our own produce to sell at the market.

Things we sell are fresh produce, flowers, garden decor, and fresh baked goods. Our main reason for opening the market was the sale of our fresh peas.

**Are you immediately thinking about harvest operations after planting, and what needs to be done now to ensure a quality crop come late summer and fall?** After planting, my mind goes to timing of fertilizer applications, cultivation applications, spray applications, and application

of water. There are so many aspects that fall between planting and harvest to produce a quality crop.

Harvest does cross my mind, mostly all the work that needs to be done before harvesttime, but that is about as far as those thoughts go until mid-August or so.

**What do you hope for the fall harvest this year and/or for the future of Paul Miller Farms?** I hope that Mother Nature will be kind to us this fall for harvest and we can get the crops out in a timely fashion. As far as the future of Paul Miller Farms, I'm optimistically looking forward to the growth of our farm, our acreage, and ability to be as efficient as possible.

**Is there anything you'd like to add, Ian?** Thank you for choosing me for this interview. It is a great honor. I would like to give a special thank you to my wife, for without her, this would not be possible.



Ian Miller says without his wife, Kayte, "this would not be possible."

I'd also like to thank all the people who have worked at Paul Miller Farms to help make it what it is today.

I wish everyone a safe and successful growing/harvest season! **BCT**

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