



**NAME:** Bryan Bula

**TITLE:** Owner

**COMPANY:** Bryan Bula Farms, LLC

**LOCATION:** Grand Marsh, WI

**HOMETOWN:** Born in Antigo, but has lived most of his life in Grand Marsh

**YEARS IN PRESENT POSITION:**

Twenty-five

**PREVIOUS EMPLOYMENT:** Farm manager for the family farm, Gary Bula Farms (still current in this position)

**SCHOOLING:** Adams-Friendship High School, and UW-Madison Agricultural Short Course

**ACTIVITIES/ORGANIZATIONS:** Member of the Wisconsin Potato & Vegetable Growers Association and American Angus Association

**AWARDS/HONORS:** Several corn and soybean yield awards from Allied Coop and a The Little Potato Company

**FAMILY:** Wife, Lacey, who has a business management and software developer degree; and children, Ayziah (24), who's in cosmetology school, Jaiden (22), in his third year of school for physical therapy, and Kera (20), who's in her first year of school for marketing

**HOBBIES:** Bear hunting with hounds, deer hunting, and snowmobiling

8 BC'T January

# INTERVIEW

## BRYAN BULA, owner, Bryan Bula Farms

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

*"It's the country in me,"* Bryan Bula says about why he stuck with farming after graduating from high school and enrolled in the Agricultural Short Course at UW-Madison. "I don't know what else I'd see myself doing. I don't think I could handle working indoors."

Bula was one of the first five potato growers contracted by The Little Potato Company when it opened a facility in Deforest, Wisconsin. Those growers included Bryan Bula Farms, Taterland Farms, Flyte Family Farms, Kevin Sigourney Farm, and Coloma Farms.

Now several other Wisconsin potato growers also raise Creamers for The Little Potato Company.

At a young age, Bryan started out by farming some dryland parcels on his parents' farm and then began renting small parcels from neighboring

properties with corn and soybean rotation.

While in college, he began gearing up for a beef cow-calf operation with rotational grazing on irrigated pastures.

Not one to rest on his laurels, Bryan also embarked on custom sprayer work, purchasing a 126-foot self-propelled spray rig and using it to do work on the family farm. He also picked up additional spraying

**Above:** Bryan Bula poses in front of a John Deere 8345 R, his main tractor for potato planting and harvest.



work on canning crop acreage for Lakeside Foods, and seed corn acres for Kaltenberg Seeds, now called DSP (Diversified Seed Producers).

**What was it like growing up on Gary Bula Farms, and what were your responsibilities?** I worked on the farm after school and on weekends helping plant potatoes and, in the fall, helped harvest the crops at our Wisconsin farm.

I was running a big disc tractor by the time I was in 7th grade, and was cutting, raking and baling hay before that.



I spent a lot of my summers through middle school and high school going to Benton, Missouri. In 1993, my parents established a farm in southeast Missouri, and I'd go down and help during harvest to run the piler, load trucks, and as I got older, run the potato harvester.

Then, we grew potatoes in Dixon, Illinois, for McCain Foods, so I spent a couple summers hilling potatoes down there.

I enjoy going back to our family farm in Missouri more now than I did then. After Lacey and I married and

*continued on pg. 10*

**Above:** Bryan Bula is shown with his father, Gary, in the image above and mother, Lynda, in the photo at left, both of whom instilled a solid work ethic in him. "Mom taught me and my family that farming isn't always about the work done in the field; the office work is just as important," Bryan says. The John Deere 4430 that Bryan and Gary are standing next to is the first new tractor purchased by Gary and Lynda Bula and is still being used today. It was the first second-generation John Deere in Antigo at the time, and the first with air conditioning. It cost \$12,500 with 30 hours on it, and now has 14,000 hours and is still going. Gary's mother scolded him for spending so much money at the time, but it may have been worth it because he says, when he dies, he'd love it if they'd bring in a backhoe, dig a hole, and bury him in it.



Bryan Bula digs a sample of Creamer potatoes that he raises for The Little Potato Company.

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**Interview . . .**

*continued from pg. 9*



It's all in the family for Bryan Bula, shown with daughter, Ayziah, above, and wife, Lacey, center in the second photo to the right, along with their son, Jaiden, and daughter, Kera. Each of them has worked on Bryan Bula Farms in one capacity or another.



while we were raising our children, it wasn't feasible for me to go back to Missouri as often, so I primarily stayed here.

I started growing Creamers for The Little Potato Company, in 2016, and a

year later, they asked me to fill a void at the plant in Deforest by growing a summer crop fresh off the field in southeast Missouri.

In the summer of 2017, I traveled back to Missouri, renting land from

my parents, and grew 36 acres of Creamer potatoes. I would dig at night with a Grimme harvester when the temperature was cooler and load them early in the morning for delivery to the Deforest plant the following day.

That year was a success, but when I went back in 2018 after I had my crops planted, it was an awfully hot year. Once vine killing occurs and you're digging in the heat of July, the quality of the potatoes can rapidly diminish.

That, in combination with the costs of trucking and shipping, prompted us to come to a mutual agreement and abandon trying to grow a summer crop in that part of the country.

**How many acres of potatoes do you grow for The Little Potato Company and Alsum Farms & Produce, and on what rotation?** In 2024, I raised 420 acres for The Little Potato Company, including a summer crop and a storage crop, and a 36-acre field of A-size yellows for Alsum Farms & Produce.



**Left:** Creamer potatoes are harvested in the fall for storage on Bryan Bula Farms.

**Above:** Bryan Bula raises 50 head of beef cattle like this red angus cow and her calf.

I'm on a two-year rotation, sometimes three, with green beans, soybeans, field corn and seed corn contracted to DSP, Henry Farms, Allied Coop or United Grain in Westfield.

**Do you continue to raise beef on the farm?** I recently decreased from 200 down to 50 head of beef. I used to do some AI (artificial insemination) breeding, but now I rely on my bulls. I market our calves in Bloomington, Wisconsin, at the Bloomington Livestock sale barn. I enjoy the beef and find raising cattle relaxing and a change of pace.

**Did you and your siblings each buy land from your parents?** I'm continuing to build up acreage of my own. Throughout the past several years, I have bought and developed irrigated land and have some dryland as well.

My parents are currently working on transition planning, which may lead

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*“We farmers pride ourselves on how straight a line we can drive, even when it comes to mowing the grass in our yards. We have that mindset.”*

**– Bryan Bula**

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to me and/or my siblings purchasing some parcels from them in the future.

**Is your wife involved on the farm?** She is, and without her, I couldn't do what I'm doing today. She works a full-time job and handles all the paperwork side of the farm business, such as payroll for employees, paying the bills, handling all the accounts receivable, assisting with insurance, and preparing and completing the farm audits.

Lacey will even run a tractor, help disc, drive the combine, hill potatoes, mark the field ahead of me, plant, and cut and bale hay. There's not much she won't do to help, including loading semis late at night for next-day deliveries.

**How many people do you employ?** Aside from my wife and myself, I have two full-time employees, one is my brother-in-law, and the

*continued on pg. 12*



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**Interview . . .**

*continued from pg. 11*



other a good friend. I also have several part-time employees, and I hire migrant workers during the summer and fall months, but it seems like, by the time we're through the season, they're working year-round.

**Was it tough obtaining financing and branching out on your own?** It was tough, and I relied on my parents in the beginning to help me get started. Even though I was dedicated to making it work, I couldn't have branched out without them.

Starting out, I had to borrow equipment and was given the opportunity to rent and farm their land, but now that I'm established, I'm able to return the favor and let them utilize some of my equipment.

As far as financing, I started out small, and initially, with my parents' help, I was able to get financing by them cosigning. Throughout the years, I have built up and retained equity and am able to obtain financing on my own.

**Above:** Various harvest images show: red potatoes being windrowed on Bryan Bula Farms, a Spudnik 6160 windrower digging in front of the operation's Spudnik Airsep Harvester, and Lacey Bula driving bulk truck under a harvester.

**Bottom:** Bryan Bula contracted Hinze Excavating to clear and level a site for his new potato storage facility and office building.

The first time that I recall being truly sick to my stomach, signing loan papers for a significant amount, was when I upgraded to a new sprayer rig. I was uneasy for a few days.







**Above:** Potato trucks with E-Z Tarps are lined up at Bryan Bula Farms.

**Right:** Bryan Bula finishes the second hilling of potatoes while enjoying the sunset.



Nowadays, to buy that same sprayer, it's double the money.

Back then, it was \$235,000, and as I recall, they gave me \$30,000 for a trade-in, so I was signing my first big loan for more than \$200,000 at a very young age.

**Do you have a trucking arm of the operation, or how are your potatoes shipped?** I have my own trucks—three semis and five trailers—that two gentlemen who work for me use to haul back and forth when delivering product to Deforest.

**Does it take trust for operations like Alsum Farms & Produce or The Little Potato Company to work with a young family like yours, and how do you build that trust?** It takes a lot of trust. I think the relationships I have with Alsum's and The Little Potato Company (LPC) have been built through many years by continued honesty, dedication, hard work and integrity.

We're not just business partners but, in a sense, like a family because we try to do business the best we can, no matter the situation. If it is a tough year, we work together to get through it so that it works out for both parties.

**How many square feet will the new storage facility be and for how many hundredweight of potatoes?** My building site is where my favorite spot on the family farm always was

*continued on pg. 14*

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**Interview . . .**

*continued from pg. 13*



growing up. It is just north of Gary Bula Farms near where my home is now.

The new storage and grading shed will be 172 feet long by 110 feet wide with a 24-foot ceiling, so potatoes will be stored in boxes 20 feet high. I will be able to store at least 80,000 cwt. (hundredweight) between two bins. Right now, I rent four bins from my parents, which hold less than 80,000 cwt. combined when storing boxes.

There, I can stack four boxes high, and in the new building, I will be



able to stack five boxes high.

**Why is that important?** I'm growing with The Little Potato Company and increasing acres. The goal is to have the capability to store potatoes long term or until next year's summer crop comes off the field.

All of us current growers are moving, or have moved already, in the direction of long-term storage in boxes for LPC. That's their goal—a year-round supply of potatoes.

My growth, what I'm building—a new storage facility for crate storage, and office—is to grow

**Above:** A Larrington Ag trailer is used for loading summer crop Creamer potatoes for The Little Potato Company direct from the field straight into crates.

with The Little Potato Company. That's where I'm growing.

It's way more work with little potatoes. There's a lot more handling involved, especially when storing in boxes. Shipping takes longer and more truck power because of the boxes. With A-size potatoes, we may ship 10-20 bulk loads a day, and with the little Creamers, it's, at most, eight loads a day.

If you have 100 acres of Creamers, it's like 200 acres of russets as far as workwise and storage-wise. Crates cut your storage in half. There's more equipment involved, and it slows the process down when boxing everything.

We take the summer crop directly off the field into boxes for LPC. The Larrington Ag trailers can go right into the field with crates, and we run the potatoes into them, crashing the pulp temperatures down below 50 degrees for 24 hours. Shipping Creamers to LPC happens within days of digging. This past summer, we dug and shipped 100 acres in a week.

**Have you upgraded equipment or technology?** The newest implements are the Larrington Ag trailers that

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we purchased when I started doing a summer crop again for LPC. There's less skinning of the potatoes when running them directly off the field into crates.

As far as technology goes, back when I first started driving tractor for my parents, you held the steering wheel and followed row markers. We farmers pride ourselves on how straight a line we can drive, even when it comes to mowing the grass in our yards. We have that mindset.

Autosteer has made it easier. You don't put in as many hours in the tractor seat, and you're not as tired as you were after holding the wheel and white knuckling it all day.

We had smaller equipment and worked long hours. Each year, we've increased acres, and in doing that, we've had to resort to purchasing larger equipment. Now, we struggle trying to get large equipment down township roads. It's common to have escorts each way.



It's amazing how much you can get done in the field. Two years ago, I bought a 24-row John Deere corn planter due to the short period between planting a summer crop for LPC and planting of the storage crop. I have a small window of about

**Above:** The John Deere S670 four-row combine is used during corn and bean harvest on Bryan Bula Farms.

two weeks to plant grain crops and needed something with the ability to get the job done quicker.

*continued on pg. 16*



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**Interview . . .**

*continued from pg. 15*

**How was the 2024 growing season for you?** Quality was generally good but varied according to field and soil type with the heavy rains we had. Yields were fair.

Last year's crop fared better in a dryer year. When you can control your water, you have a better outcome, and this year, we had a significant amount of rain during the growing season but a nice, dry harvest.

We ran into some hot days digging when we'd have to shut down early and go back at it the next day, which made for a long harvest season. But we had a nice dry spell that carried all the way into harvest. I was able to jump right into soybeans, and I combined a thousand acres in a week and a half.

**Do you have any successes or challenges you want to share?**

Successes include growing my operation. I guess I'm proud



**Above:** Links on the chain of the Spudnik 6621 AirSep potato harvester are close together for digging Creamer potatoes for The Little Potato Company.

of where I am today with growth. I've come a long way.

The big challenge every year is trying to figure out how I can grow a better-

quality product for the companies I'm growing for—not only are they going to reap the benefits, but so am I.

It's a challenge to always have a

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healthy and safe season year in and year out. You don't do risky things for the most part. Just because we can get the job done quicker, is it worth it? I used to take more risks, but as I get older, I realize it makes more sense to take the time to do it right.

I like to take time to maintain equipment before it goes down the road, check tires, complete annual DOT inspections, generally keep things up to snuff. It's not only for the safety of me and my employees on the farm, but also for other vehicles going up and down the road and ensuring the safety of pedestrians.

**Do you go back to the home farm and help Gary and Lynda, or do your siblings or other family members come and help you out?** Yes, I'm one of the farm managers and am there daily. I help manage fertilizer applications and irrigation across the whole farm, assist in putting a crop plan together—what gets planted where and on what rotation—and work with seed and canning companies along with planting and harvesting of all crops.

There are three canning companies that the farm works with, and I'm the main contact person. I also help determine how many acres and what varieties of seed corn we plant, and in what locations, and I'm one of the main contacts for spraying potatoes, corn and beans.

I work closely with the large New Chester Dairy located right near the home farm on lining up all applications and applying manure to fields ahead of planting of our crops.

I split time between Gary Bula Farms and my own operation. It works with employees, too. I'll take my employees to help get things going down on the home farm, and my dad shares employees to help me get things done.

**Even though you've been exposed to farming all your life, is there still room to grow and learn?** There's always room to grow and learn.

I think the annual Grower Education Conference & Industry Show that the University of Wisconsin and WPVGA hold in Stevens Point, and the breakout sessions, are invaluable.

The Hancock Agricultural Research Station and all the research that happens there on an annual basis, and especially with technology taking off as it has, just makes it easier to keep up. If we don't keep up with technology, we'll be left behind fast.

We always want more tools in the toolbox, and I don't think that ever stops. Sometimes we farmers feel like we've hit the end, but we work through it and advance.

**Do you plan to expand or grow the farm, or what do you hope for the future of the operation?** My new

storage and office facility is obviously a big jump in growth, though we might be able to expand one more time on that site again in the future.

I want to expand acres to the point where I'm eventually on a three-to-four-year rotation between potatoes and other crops. That's growth enough right there.

When increasing acres, we had to make changes. My kids helped on the farm when they were in grade school and high school; they'd help during the summer with washing and sanitizing warehouses and equipment, helping with the cattle, and I would even wrangle them up to help grade potatoes.

I do enjoy potato farming. It has its challenges and struggles, and it can definitely be worrisome, but I don't know what else I see myself doing. Again, it's the country in me. **BCT**

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