



NAME: Charlie Husnick

TITLE: Vice president

COMPANY: Baginski Farms, Inc.

LOCATION: Antigo, WI

HOMETOWN: Antigo

YEARS IN PRESENT POSITION: Two

SCHOOLING: Fox Valley Technical College

ACTIVITIES/ORGANIZATIONS: Wisconsin Seed Potato Improvement Association, United Potato Growers of Wisconsin, Potatoes USA Board of Directors, Saints Mary & Hyacinth Parish Advisory Council, and Antigo Center Court Club

AWARDS/HONORS: 2024 Wisconsin Potato & Vegetable Growers Association (WPVGA) "Young Grower of the Year"

FAMILY: Wife, Chelsea

HOBBIES: Traveling, hunting, hiking, "old man's basketball league," and spending time with family

Above: Harvest was in full swing during a recent visit to Baginski Farms, Inc., where Charlie Husnick, vice president of the operation, took time to pose for the camera holding certified russet seed potatoes.

INTERVIEW

CHARLIE HUSNICK, vice president, Baginski Farms, Inc.

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

There's a familiarity and family atmosphere that permeates Baginski Farms, Inc., in Antigo, Wisconsin. That's not a stretch. Mike Baginski, owner of the operation, is a fourth-generation potato grower and represents the third generation raising certified seed potatoes.

In 1962, Mike's father, Ted Jr., his grandfather, Ted, and two uncles, John and Florian, transitioned from growing chip stock potatoes to seed potatoes. Through the years, they managed to create a solid business and a customer list that's remained loyal to the seed potato farm.

Mike has surrounded himself with those who are familiar, trustworthy, and hard-working. Four of the guys

in the operation—Mike, Brian Bolder, Jeff Sinkler and Cory Chrudimsky—all went to high school together. Mike, Cory and Brian are the same age, and Jeff was two grades ahead of them in school.

Charlie Husnick, whose mom worked with Mike's father-in-law, began mowing lawns for Baginski Farms when he was 7 years old.

"Sometimes when mowing, I'd see the potato harvester and trucks coming down the road. I would time it just right so that I'd be mowing the very last strip of grass closest to the road when they all went by," Husnick remembers.

Charlie wasn't a total stranger to potato farming. His grandpa and great-uncle were table and chip stock growers but had retired, in 1999, when he was only five years old.

Twenty-six years later, Charlie is



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vice president of Baginski Farms, Inc., in Antigo, president of the Wisconsin Seed Potato Improvement Association Board of Directors and sits on the Finance & Policy Committee of the Potatoes USA Board of Directors, as well as on the United Potato Growers of Wisconsin Board of Directors.

Charlie, it's incredible that you started mowing lawns for Baginski Farms when you were 7 years old. What has your progression been since then on the farm? I was hired at 7 by Mike's wife, Erin, to mow the farmyards and landscape. That lasted until I was about 12 years old when, one day, Mike picked me up in his truck, took me to a tractor, and taught me how to use a PTO (Power Take-Off) mower to mow field edges.

From then on, I spent every summer helping with normal farm tasks and learning what it takes to have clean warehouses and equipment and why cleanliness is so important on a seed farm.

I also spent many summer days tagging along with Mike to learn how irrigation operates and how it's used on the farm, as well as how the field and farming process works. I went to Fox Valley Tech after high school and learned a wealth of farming information and concepts.

I started full-time after that, in 2015, and have been trying to take on whatever responsibilities Mike needs

me to ever since, from crop planning to field management and navigating the everyday tasks it takes to keep a seed operation going.

Was Baginski Farms your first experience on a certified seed potato farm? It was. Though my grandfather, Ken Husnick, grew table stock and chip potatoes for over 50 years in Antigo with his brother, Don,

Above: The Baginski Farms' main operation is located in Antigo, Wisconsin.

they retired when I was very young.

So, for me, I would say, yes, that I have grown up in agriculture, but that is because I was fortunate to be able to grow up working on Baginski Farms.

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At the time, I viewed it as getting to drive cool things and having fun on summer days. Looking back, I think all those early days lit a fire and started a passion for agriculture that I am grateful to still have today.

What types of certified seed potatoes are raised on Baginski

Farms, how many acres of each, and on what rotation? We grow about 325 acres of russets, 100 acres of red potatoes, 150 acres of yellows, and 50 acres of whites. We are on a three-year rotation with soybeans and oats to follow.

We have raised sweet corn in

the past, but it is rare that those contracts are available in Antigo due to the risk of early frost and, thus, making for a short crop.

What is the farm's position in the market, or its specialty area, and who are your main customers?

We ship directly to other growers who plant those potatoes for their commercial production. We ship seed to 16 different states annually and have been extremely fortunate to have a great customer base, with some of them doing business with the Baginski Family for all three seed-growing generations.

Many of these customers are considered family and friends, rather than just clients. We are also very fortunate to have great partnerships with companies like HZPC, McCain Foods, and Simplot to supply them with high-quality seed potatoes for their own customers.

How many full- and part-time as well as seasonal employees work for Baginski Farms? The farm is run with seven full-time employees, and

Left: Mike Baginski and Charlie Husnick plant potatoes on Baginski Farms Inc. land. They run two six-row cup planters to make sure the soil is the perfect condition for planting.

Right: Cory Chrudimsky is busy hilling potatoes and applying side-dress fertilizer at Baginski Farms Inc. of Antigo, Wisconsin.



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we have three wonderful women, Jennifer, Cari, and Erin, in the office who are the real rockstars of keeping the operation in line.

We bring on another 10-15 employees, depending on the season, to help with planting, harvest, and shipping.

In a 2018 interview, Mike said he was able to assemble some of the best young guys available. Is that still true? Absolutely. As I said, the farm is run mostly with seven full-time employees. Jeff Sinkler, who has been working with the farm since he was young, manages our shipping and receiving, and all our facilities maintenance.

Cory Chrudimsky is our lead of operations and takes care of most of the rotational crop planting. He manages and applies our weekly regimented spraying program and oversees most of our fall field preparation.

"I think it's rare to have growers who are so willing to help each other through information and guidance, sometimes even going as far as helping one another get a crop harvested and stored."

– Charlie Husnick

Tyler Knutson runs our shop and takes care of all equipment maintenance for basically everything we have, as well as servicing our entire truck and trailer fleet for the transportation leg of the company.

Brian Bolder is a jack of all trades and can fill in wherever needed. We also have Mason Mullins, who is a young man going through his first full season working on the farm. He is similarly a jack-of-all-trades guy

and is learning to perform most farm tasks, from irrigation to fieldwork and equipment maintenance.

Stosh (Ted), Mike's father, also comes to the farm yet during the season and helps with whatever he can. He has years of knowledge of farming and on this farm specifically, so it's so nice to have that to count on at times.

Everyone on our farm has their own

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role but is willing to help wherever needed. There is no doubt that without these guys working together, the farm would not be where it is today. We often say that we spend so much time working together, it feels more like we're family than coworkers.

Is most of the Baginski Farms land on Antigo silt loam soil, and in the Antigo area, or is the operation spread out and on different soil types? Do certain potatoes or varieties grow better in certain areas? We farm three different areas. Our Antigo farm and surrounding

acreage is mostly Antigo silt loam, which makes it exceptional for growing potatoes.

We also farm about 10 miles to the north in an area we call Ormsby, which is also Antigo silt loam, but a little heavier ground.

Our other location is about 20 miles northwest of our farm, just into Lincoln County, called Doering. That ground is very sandy, not quite to the extent of the Central Sands, but it makes for great potato growing also.

Each area has varieties that do well there, so we are strategic when making the crop plan on where we place each variety.

Are there new technologies on the farm that aid in achieving a quality seed potato crop? Every year, technology seems to advance to give us a better edge on growing a crop as efficiently as possible.

Above and Left: A proprietary variety of russet potatoes is harvested at the Baginski Farms' Doering location 20 miles northwest of the main operation in Antigo, Wisconsin. The sandy soil there is ideal for raising potatoes.

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Interview . . .

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We've continued to make improvements to the equipment we use and to collect data on how we can be better farmers. We've been transitioning a lot of our irrigation equipment to low-pressure nozzle packages that more strategically direct the water and limit drifting on windy days.

We've also made upgrades to our shipping facility with automatic grading equipment that helps sort rocks and foreign material to ensure the customer is only receiving the quality seed they are expecting.

So, is the operation consistently becoming more efficient? Absolutely, every year we evaluate how we can become more efficient. Most efficiency comes into play in the field, but from there, we take a whole-farm approach from the field to storage facilities and general operations. If you're not capitalizing on efficiency as a farm, you are losing money every day.

Tillage seems to be the big focus lately, as practices are changing so quickly. We're always looking for the next best tillage method, focusing on



the best soil incorporation we can, managing run-off and soil erosion to protect the fields that we have, as well as the next field down the line.

Is there more of an emphasis now on environmental stewardship? Of course, as farmers, we want to be good stewards of the land. We want to protect the land we have and preserve as much of it as possible for the next generations to come so they can have the chance to farm also.

Above: Potato harvest is viewed from the tractor cab at Baginski Farms. In front of the windrower is the Husnick homestead farm, where Charlie's grandpa farmed and stored his crop for over 50 years.

Below: The windrower lays down trails of gold Colomba seed potatoes, a variety that many Wisconsin potato growers are known to source from Baginski Farms Inc.

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Your trucking arm of the business—Ag Logistics Inc.—is over 10 years old now. Do you do all your own potato trucking and to what areas of the country? How many trucks, trailers and full-time drivers do you have?

Most of our potatoes are shipped in our trucks, unless the customer has their own trucks to pick up. Ag Logistics was started by Mike as a service to our customers to be able to say, yes, we have that seed load for you, and we can also deliver it to your location.

It is one less job for the customer to coordinate, which is important to us. We have nine over-the-road trucks that travel across the country hauling mostly potatoes, but they are on the road year-long, hauling various commodities and products to keep busy.

Baginski Farms is one of several certified seed potato operations to come together and form the Wisconsin Potato Coalition that



oversees the early-generation seed potato operation at the State Farm in Rhinelander. How is this helping ensure an adequate supply of high-quality seed potatoes for Wisconsin's \$350 million potato

industry? The Wisconsin Potato Coalition was formed as a partnership between Baginski Farms Inc., Schroeder Bros. Farms, J.W. Mattek

Above: The Baginski Farms crew and a guest golf at the 2020 Spud Seed Classic in Deerbrook, Wisconsin, including, from left to right, Charlie Husnick, Mike Baginski, Cory Chrudimsky, Wally Eagle of Nutrien Ag Solutions-Great Lakes, and Tyler Knutsen.

& Sons, and Eagle River Seed Farm, in collaboration with the University of Wisconsin, to operate the farm

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Above: Potatoes are graded and stored at Baginski Farms Inc. in Antigo.

and help maintain Wisconsin's status as an elite foundation seed potato producing state.

Cody Bandoch is the farm manager there, and he is doing a great job navigating the recent issues that have hit the potato industry with virus being a main concern.

This year, they harvested their third crop at the farm, and with clean summer readings and good yields so far, they are excited to continue to grow at the Lelah Starks Farm and continue producing clean early generation potato seed.

You and your crew must take pride in working for such a diversified seed potato operation. What are you most proud of? It's extremely rewarding to experience all parts of the growing season, and to see the crop come out of the ground in the fall. It's amazing to see what everyone's months of hard work and dedication produces.



It must also come with its challenges—what is the toughest part of putting out a quality seed potato crop each year? Each year brings new challenges. Recently, the Midwest growing region, along with

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Above: Charlie Husnick, who started mowing lawns at Baginski Farms Inc. when he was seven years old, operates the potato harvester. "Mowing lawns lasted until I was about 12 years old when, one day, Mike [Baginski] picked me up in his truck, took me to a tractor, and taught me how to use a PTO mower to mow field edges," he recalls.

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Interview . . .

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most growing regions across the northern United States, have been battling increased PVY (Potato Virus Y) levels in their seed lots due to migrations of transmitting aphids.

That has been a battle to keep seed lots clean, so a lot of focus has been given to spray plans and management decisions to keep our lots in foundation or certified status.

As far as being a manager, what do you feel your own main roles are in conjunction with your team?

Communication is key. It's easy to get caught up in the day-to-day tasks, but I feel that it's just as important to share decisions and provide information the guys need to get tasks completed, therefore making sure we are doing things as efficiently as possible.

At the end of the day, we are all



working towards the same goal. If I can provide them with the necessary tools to get the job done, it will keep the farm moving forward.

Is it a constant learning experience for you, Charlie?

Every day is a learning experience! I'm fortunate to be in an industry with so many knowledgeable people who are willing to share that knowledge. I learned right away that you can't be afraid to ask for help or be afraid to make a mistake, because that's how we learn.

What do you like most about growing foundation-class seed potatoes in Antigo, Wisconsin?

The location is key. Antigo is mainly isolated from commercial growers to keep our seed fields clean, and the commercial growers who are in the area really help by managing their fields to mitigate viruses and disease, so they don't spread to seed fields.

Above: Jeff Sinkler (left) and Cory Chrudimsky (right) went to high school with Mike Baginski, owner of Baginski Farms Inc., in Antigo. Sinkler, who has been working at the farm since he was young, manages shipping and receiving, and all facilities maintenance. Chrudimsky is lead of operations and takes care of most of the rotational crop planting. He manages and runs the farm's weekly regimented spraying program and oversees most of the fall field preparation.

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What do you like most about the potato industry? The community. The potato industry is filled with wonderful and knowledgeable growers who have been farming here for generations. Oftentimes, I'll call up a neighboring grower just to talk or to ask about an issue we are seeing, and more times than not, that grower has seen that problem before and provides insight into how they handled it in the past.

It's cool that we can collaborate here as growers and help one another. I think it's rare to have growers who are so willing to help each other through information and guidance, sometimes even going as far as helping one another get a crop harvested and stored. We need that collaboration to keep the potato industry moving forward.

You are the president of the WSPIA Board. Why is it important for you to be involved? Involvement is critical to keep the seed industry progressing. I feel it's important to give time to these organizations, as they're the ones representing us as growers and ensuring we have what's needed to run successful businesses.

Such involvement also presents a great opportunity to meet other growers from around the state, country, and world.

What do you hope for your own future and/or the future of the farm? I hope to continue doing my part in keeping the farm progressing forward, maintaining a great customer base and producing a high-quality, disease-free seed crop.

Mike has three kids who are in high school and college, and it would be very cool to watch and be a part in helping that 5th generation move forward. Farming is evolving so fast with technology, who knows what farming practices will be in 5 to 10 years! **BCT**



Above: Two Ag Logistics semis are staged in front of the Baginski Farms truck shop.

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