

NAME: John Mattek

TITLE: President

COMPANY: J.W. Mattek & Sons, Inc.

LOCATION: Deerbrook, WI

HOMETOWN: Antigo, WI

YEARS IN PRESENT POSITION: Fifty-eight years of farming, 27 years as president

PREVIOUS EMPLOYMENT: Hooper Highline Corp.

SCHOOLING: University of Wisconsin-River Falls

ACTIVITIES/ORGANIZATIONS: Past Wisconsin Seed Potato Improvement Association (WSPIA) Board of Directors, Wisconsin Potato Coalition member, Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP) Producer-Led Watershed Protection group member, and Neva Town Board supervisor for 28 years

AWARDS/HONORS: Frito-Lay Supplier of the Year, and Frito-Lay recognition for 45 years of partnership

FAMILY: Wife, Marsha, married for 51 years; children, Katie, Jill, and Matt (Johnny, a U.S. Marine, was killed in Iraq); and grandchildren, Bryce, Brynn, Bode, Johnna, JordiAnn, Scottie, Johnny and Jones

HOBBIES: Being with family and attending grandchildren's events, and enjoying hunting and fishing, especially with friends of 65 years, Dave and Don

Interview

JOHN AND JIM MATTEK, Owners/Operators, J.W. Mattek & Sons, Inc.

By Joe Kertzman, Managing Editor, *Badger Common'Tater*

Family is what holds together a sixth-generation seed potato farm, along with hard work, relationship building, knowledge, some luck, lifelong employees, friends, and customers, and the foresight to embrace innovation and pass knowledge down from one generation to the next.

That's according to John and Jim Mattek of J.W. Mattek & Sons in Deerbrook, Wisconsin, located in the heart of the state's quality foundation and certified seed potato acreage that also includes Antigo, Bryant, Crandon, Crivitz, Eagle River, and Rhinelander, among other towns

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and regions.

Since the 1800's, farming has been a way of life for the Mattek family. James W. Mattek operated a dairy and potato business. His sons, Eugene and James J. Mattek, concentrated their efforts on potatoes and were early pioneers in the certified seed program.

In 1960, the farm became incorporated and continued to raise quality foundation and certified seed potatoes.

James J. Mattek's sons, John and Jim, currently own and operate the 1,600-acre potato farm on a three-year crop rotation with oats and clover. The Mattek's are always looking for new and promising varieties.

Family continues to hold the farm together, including Jim's son, Charlie, John's son, Matt, and their nephew, Mitch, becoming integral parts of the multi-generational certified seed potato farm.

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Above: It's "all hands on deck" during seed potato harvest at J.W. Mattek & Sons in Deerbrook, Wisconsin. The photos were taken on September 25, 2026.

NAME: Jim Mattek

TITLE: Vice president

COMPANY: J.W. Mattek & Sons, Inc.

LOCATION: Deerbrook, WI

HOMETOWN: Antigo, WI

YEARS IN PRESENT POSITION: Fifty years of farming, 27 years as vice president

PREVIOUS EMPLOYMENT: Greenheck Fan Corp.

SCHOOLING: Northcentral Technical Institute

ACTIVITIES/ORGANIZATIONS: Past WSPIA Board of Directors, SpudPro Committee member, Wisconsin Potato Coalition member, Wisconsin DATCP Producer-Led Watershed Protection group member, and past director of St. Wencel's Catholic Church

AWARDS/HONORS: Frito-Lay Supplier of the Year, and Frito-Lay recognition for 45 years of partnership

FAMILY: Wife, Deb, married for 46 years; children, Abby, Erin and Charlie; and grandchildren, Jack, Max, (our special angel, Klare), Ruby, Emily, Gracie, Lilah, and Annie

HOBBIES: Family gatherings and attending grandchildren's events, hunting, fishing, skiing, and all outdoor activities



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Above: Then and Now: J.W. Mattek & Sons was incorporated in 1960 and continues to raise quality foundation and certified seed potatoes today.

What do you mainly credit for your family's ability to keep the operation going strong for six generations? Jim: Hard work and keeping up with anything new have kept our operation going strong. **John:** Excellent family, people and employees keep the operation going strong.

As early pioneers in the certified seed program, what did Wisconsin and/or the Matteks do right in setting up and keeping the program running? John: Wisconsin has very competent and dedicated people running the Seed Potato Certification Program. We always meet with our customers every summer to ensure our seed is producing potato crops that meet high standards.

Jim: We have always supported the Seed Potato Certification Program in Wisconsin. We worked closely with the University of Wisconsin by sharing information that would make it stronger.

Do you remember any mistakes that you learned from along the way? Jim: Many, from planting to storage to shipping and harvest, we learned better ways to do them all. Warming and pre-cutting seed, more detailed storage equipment, watching pulp temperatures at harvest, etc., are just a few examples.

John: You make mistakes every year, but the key is to learn from them.

Is J.W. Mattek & Sons still farming 1,600 acres on a three-year rotation with oats and clover? And what varieties of seed potatoes do you raise? John: Yes. Varieties include Snowden, Atlantic, Lamoka, Mackinaw, Manistee, Lady Liberty and five Frito-Lay varieties.

Who are your main customers for the certified and foundation seed potatoes grown on the farm? Jim: Our customers are mainly in Michigan and Wisconsin, but we ship to Canada, Ohio, Indiana, Texas, Pennsylvania, New York



and Minnesota.

John: And overall, Frito-Lay remains our biggest customer.

You've maintained long-time customers and relationships. How has J.W. Mattek & Sons been able to keep those customers all these years? John: We strive to provide consistently good, quality seed, and we meet with our customers every year.

Jim: We have worked closely with our customers, giving them the seed potato varieties they need, and we ship quality seed to them.

What are you most proud of regarding the multi-generational foundation seed farm? Jim: I am most proud of how the farm has been passed down over the years, with every generation carrying on what was done before and improving upon it.

John is the oldest and the nuts and bolts of the operation. And now with the next generation, my son, Charlie, and nephews, Matt and Mitch, carry on the long family tradition and values.

John: I am proud of having my son, Matt, and nephews, Charlie and Mitch, joining the farm. I also want to mention my sister, Beth, and Chris Haedike, in our office, who make it a whole lot easier for us to farm.

What exactly is the difference between certified and foundation seed potatoes? And what are a couple of the key requirements for meeting certified or foundation status? John: Virus levels need to be much lower in foundation-class seed, whereas certified status allows higher virus rates.

Regardless of foundation or certified status, our storage buildings are pressure washed, cleaned, and disinfected 3-4 times a year, and of course machinery and implements are cleaned often during the growing season.

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"We went from digging by hand to today having two Lenco Harvesters, each digging 12 rows, GPS for planting, bulk seed shipments, pivots and swing-arm pivot irrigation, and sprayers that spray 44 rows at 10 miles per hour."

– John Mattek





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Jim: For foundation seed, you are allowed .50% total virus, and to classify as certified seed, it can have up to 5% total virus in the post-season test. Key requirements for seed potato production include having a very good spray program with aphid oil, and strict sanitation measures.



The Wisconsin Seed Potato Improvement Association (WSPIA) is a respected seed association across the country. Why do you think that is? Jim: The WSPIA is where it is today because it has always been at the forefront of the industry, including, most recently, a new greenhouse facility and taking a lead role in Direct Tuber Testing.

John: There are excellent people running the Certification Program. Brooke Babler and staff do an outstanding job, and others have in the past, too.

What are some of the milestones or major changes over the years in growing certified seed potatoes? John: For one, Brooke Babler has most recently initiated Direct Tuber Testing.

Above: A Frito-Lay variety of certified seed potatoes is windrowed on a beautiful fall day at J.W. Mattek & Sons in Deerbrook, Wisconsin.

Jim: Thinking back, the limited generation system was inspired, as was post-season testing and clean seed from our program. Equipment and technology have come a long way. For example, I picked potatoes by hand, and now we dig 12 rows at a time with one system.

Several of the Matteks have been involved in WPVGA and WSPIA boards over the years. Why is it important to be involved in the associations? Jim: I think it is good to be involved in the industry boards



A potato truck takes a Frito-Lay variety of certified seed potatoes from the field to storage. Mitch Mattek handles the storage operation and helps keep the 18 potato trucks running and on schedule between fields and facilities.







so that you get to know people from other parts of the industry and their problems and concerns.

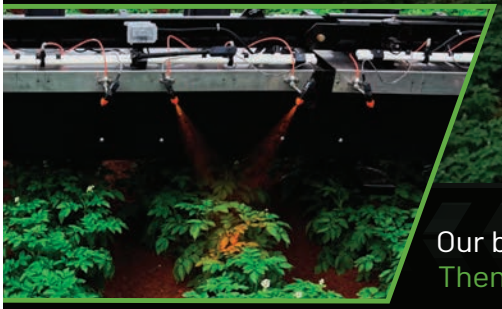
John: It is important to be on the WPVGA and WSPIA boards to keep informed of Industry issues and to give your input regarding them.

How has the growing season been for you this year? John: This has been a very good growing season. We irrigated every week for eight weeks because we didn't get rain.

Above: J.W. Mattek & Sons has four potato storage facilities with a total capacity of 628,000 cwt. (hundredweight) of potatoes. The operation can store potatoes until June of the year after harvest. A Frito-Lay variety of certified seed potatoes is shown being put into storage.

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Interview. . .

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Jim: It was a good planting season with adequate moisture through June, but then the faucet turned off and, like John says, it was dry for eight weeks, causing us to irrigate. It was hot with smoke from Canadian wildfires at times, but the potatoes turned out good.

Has it been a good career for you and your family, and why or why not? **Jim:** Yes, it has been a good career. We just like farming and the challenges it brings.

John: My wife and family support what I do and are always ready to help if, and when, needed.

Are regulations threatening the ag industry, or what are the major challenges today compared to years past? **John:** All regulations are getting tougher to abide by, particularly those regulating chemicals and other crop protection products, for example. And the names of the products and what you can use change every year. Matt takes care of that part of the operation, and I'm glad he handles the job.

Jim: Of course, we are losing some of our pesticides, and water is always an issue. Right now, it is almost impossible to put in a high capacity well, and environmentalists are keeping an eye on us.

What are some of the advancements that might make farming easier today than it was in the early years? **Jim:** Planters, electronic graders, GPS harvest equipment, irrigation monitors on your cell phone, and the



In this early photo, Jim Mattek Jr. hands Gene a hammer, while this issue's interviewees, Jim III (age 4 in the photo) and John (age 7), and their grandpa, James Sr. (right), look on. The Mattek family was getting the warehouse ready for potato harvest.

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list goes on and on.

I used to pick potatoes by hand for a neighbor at a rate of 10 cents per bag. I could pick 100 bags and make $10 a day, which was a lot of money for a boy 60 years ago!

John: We went from digging by hand to today having two Lenco Harvesters, each digging 12 rows, GPS for planting, bulk seed shipments, pivots and swing-arm pivot irrigation, and sprayers that spray 44 rows at 10 miles per hour.

What do you wish your neighbors or Wisconsin families knew about farmers in the area, and the Matteks in particular? John and Jim: We are farmers who work hard and do our best to produce the highest quality seed possible. We are very proud of our heritage and what we do.

What do you hope for the future of the Wisconsin certified seed potato industry? Jim and John: We hope that the Wisconsin certified seed potato industry continues to be the best and provide excellent, high-quality seed to the industry.

Above: Certified seed potatoes are harvested at the J.W. Mattek & Sons home farm.

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It takes big tractors to pull the Wilcox Eliminators—tillage machines doing a thorough job on a J.W. Mattek & Sons harvested potato field in two of the images, and an alfalfa field in the third photo.

What do you hope for the future of the farm? John: Hopefully, the next generation, Matt, Charlie and Mitch, and their children, will want to take over the farm someday.

Jim: My hope is that our farm will continue to produce the best seed possible for years to come.

Is there anything I've missed that you'd like to add? Jim: I would like to thank the potato industry and our customers and employees who keep us doing what we do best … growing seed!

John: Without our H2A workers and other employees, I don't believe we could be doing what we do today, which is growing quality seed.

Jim and John: We enjoy talking farming, hunting, life, and sharing laughter with our customers, sometimes over bowls of ice cream! In this world of technology, we feel this personal service sets us apart.

We want to thank our many customers who have trusted us with their seed needs, and we value their friendship over the years. We hope to continue providing quality seed and excellent service for years to come. BC'T

