



IN MANY WAYS, THE LIST OF FARM EQUIPMENT AT **THE HOME GROWN FARM** IS MUCH WHAT YOU WOULD EXPECT: SHOVELS, GLOVES, HOSES, A TRACTOR. BUT THE ONE PIECE OF EQUIPMENT THAT TOBY TULL USES MOST ON THE FAMILY FARM IS A BIT LESS TYPICAL: A COMPUTER.

Toby graduated from Baylor in 2007 with a degree in Information Systems. After working on campus for a year and a half in Campus Living and Learning, he moved to Dallas to take a job as the director of IT and e-learning for a media company. But after several years, he realized his life was missing something. After a year of travel, Toby moved back to the Waco area, where his family had begun taking his mother's hobby to a new level.





Pam Tull, who works in Baylor's Office of Sponsored Programs, had begun a small hobby farm near China Spring, Texas. Along with her son, Brandon, who graduated from Baylor in 2001, they began a program of Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA), selling shares in the farm to members of the community who, in return, receive produce when crops are harvested.

When Toby returned from his trip, the brothers began to brainstorm about ways to improve the typical CSA system to be able to reach more people in the community.

"We wanted to bring it to a new level," said Toby.

"We knew that what we were doing on the farm was the right thing, and we wanted to be able to expand."

"We knew there was a niche," said Brandon. "We are very passionate about food. Mostly, if it doesn't come from us or our partner farms, I don't want to eat it. We all believed that other people should have access to that kind of food."

THE BROTHERS WENT TO WORK, BOTH DELVING IN TO THEIR AREAS OF EXPERTISE.

"I chose to focus on distribution and customer experience," said Toby. "I felt like I was uniquely qualified to do it because of my IT experience. I knew that convenience was going to be key. We live in a world of consumers who are used to being able to get what they need 24/7, and it can be difficult for a farm to bend to those demands. **I knew TECHNOLOGY would be the way create a bridge to that customer experience.**"



Brandon's focus was on the food.

"There was no way we were going to compromise on the integrity of our product," he said. **"My job is to produce the BEST QUALITY, most natural, best tasting food for our customers."**

The two spent countless hours going back and forth with ideas.

"Brandon is a farmer, a very tech-savvy farmer," Toby said. "Because he has a background in the business world, it did make things easier to figure out new systems."

In January, they launched their new model and, as of then, their customer operation is entirely online.

People who have purchased shares of the CSA are credited with a certain amount (depending on how much of a share and what season the farm is in) at the beginning of each week. They can then go online and choose what they would like to purchase. Everything they order will be available for them to pick up the following week (or delivered to them for a small fee).

"Typically, CSAs off-load all of the produce that they can't sell anywhere else to their members," said Toby. "Our model gives our CSA members first choice."

What they don't sell to their shareholders then goes to a farm stand or farmer's market, or is repurposed in some way.

"If you've paid to grow it and taken the time and care to grow it, you don't want it to go to waste," said Brandon.

"We do everything we can to minimize waste. If it doesn't go directly to the customer, it's converted to something else: treats, jam, chicken feed, even dog treats."

Another change from traditional CSA models to the way The Home Grown Farm operates is to offer members the option to roll their money over to the next week, or even the next season.

"If you don't want or don't like what's offered one week, or if you are going out of town, you can use it the following week. And if you have money left at the end of the season, you can use that towards your next season's share," said Toby.

Their model also allows members to purchase items other than raw produce with their share.

Their sister, Melanie Tull, who recently graduated from Baylor with her Masters of Social Work, makes baked goods for the farm using chemical- and pesticide-free, all-natural ingredients. Among the treats members might be offered in any given week are cinnamon rolls, breads and honey from their farm, and croutons from one of their partners. Another partner allows them to offer goat's milk soap.

Some of these endeavors have created the need for The Home Grown Farm to partner with other farmers. But the brothers wanted to make sure none of the integrity of their products was compromised. So they created their own set of standards and award only certain farms with "home grown certification."

"It's impossible for one farmer to grow all things well," said Toby. "So we find other farms and certify them to our standards. We get a bigger variety, and we can support other farms with our technology."



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THE BROTHERS DEMAND STANDARDS HIGHER THAN TO BE CERTIFIED AS ORGANIC, AND INSPECT THE FARMS ONCE A MONTH.

“Right now we have very few certified partners,” said Brandon. “We have high standards in our growing practices and personal integrity, and we demand the same from everyone we work with. That means we’re very picky about who we do business with. But if we can’t run a business without honesty and integrity, then we don’t want a business.”

Because their standards are high, sometimes their costs can be higher than typical supermarket prices. And while the brothers believe that the improved taste and quality of their food makes it difficult to compare, they also know that they need to communicate this to their customers.

“We use a lot of social media to connect us with the consumers,” said Toby. “Facebook has kept us in business. We don’t have a million dollar advertising budget, so social media is the way we get our product out in front of people.”

In addition to a Facebook page, the farm also has a Twitter account and a website that includes a blog.

“The website, but the blog especially, connects people to our vision,” said Toby. “People share our ups and downs. They see why sometimes they aren’t getting a certain food or why our costs are a bit higher. We’re fighting a culture of Wal-Mart, where you can get whatever you want whenever you want, no matter the season. We’re leveraging technology to educate people.”

This past January, for example, when a freeze destroyed their fields, the brothers took video and posted it to their website. They have also explained things like their choice to use recyclable cartons (rather than Styrofoam) for their eggs, means the cost increases by 50 to 75 cents per carton, but helps sustainability and minimizes their footprint.

“People like that we’re sharing this part of the process,” said Brandon. “They get the same vision we have and they’ll not only support it, but be passionate about it.”



THE HOME GROWN FARM’S

success with technology is also having an impact on other area farms.

“We implement new technologies to make our CSA experience more convenient but also to make every day transactions more convenient. At the Waco Downtown Farmers Market, we were the first to implement Square [a credit card reading device that connects with mobile devices allowing sellers to accept payments nearly anywhere, for a fee],” said Toby. “Other vendors thought they were too expensive. However, it was obvious that making the transaction easier for the consumer increased sales. Six months later, many other vendors are using them.”

The brothers know that they are not only leading the farming community in using new technology, but in increasing efficiency at the same time.

“Farmers are typically more introverted,” said Brandon. “There was one day that I was out in the field thinking, ‘There’s not one thing I’m looking at that would tell me I’m not in 1850 right now.’ And then I walked back inside, and Toby was at the computer with three monitors going and was on his phone.”

And that’s the kind of partnership that’s making it all come together at The Home Grown Farm.

“Brandon works 96-plus hours every week, and technology allows him to connect in short bursts and still get his job done,” said Toby. “And I’m glad I can do my part in my way. I never realized the real value of my business school education until this venture. In my corporate jobs, I leveraged my education, but until this I didn’t realize the holistic value of my Hankamer education. My ability to connect accounting to technology to marketing to all of it is because of what I learned in the business program at Baylor.”

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