



Love Thy Farmer: Seaside Grown

ONE MAN IS PUTTING HIS OWN SPIN ON HIS FAMILY’S LEGACY, AND HIS
RESULTS SHOULD DEFINITELY BE ON YOUR BRUNCH TABLE

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The word legacy carries a lot of weight. Unpack its multi-layered meaning, and you’ll find heavy concepts such as honor, tradition, heritage. That’s powerful stuff—sometimes so powerful that the word holds anything it’s attached to perpetually in place, pulling any innovative ideas back down to ground level.

Take a sip (or gulp) of the Bloody Mary mixes from Seaside Grown in Frogmore, South Carolina (on St. Helena Island), and you’ll taste that for this company, the opposite is true. Ross Taylor, the company’s founder and CEO, is filling his bottles with a hefty dose of the pride embodied in “legacy” right alongside fresh, hand-picked tomatoes grown by his family on Seaside Farm.

“I’ve created something brand-new, but it’s still rooted in my family’s history,” Ross said. “We are not good at many things, but when it comes to tomatoes, we know what we are talking about.” Ross’s family has vine-ripened their collective tomato-growing wisdom for 115 years, ever since his great-great grandfather Gus Sanders started farming a few thousand acres around 1900. Today, his extended family still coaxes crops from the same land. Growing tomatoes has now fed them for five generations.

But when Ross came back from college and graduate school, ready to join the family business, he saw things from a new perspective. He noticed how the farm’s single revenue stream was responsible for supporting an ever-expanding group. He also remembered the spot he’d always occupied thanks to his age. “I was always looked at as ‘little Ross,’” he said. “I decided I wanted to be a part of what we do, but also make my own splash.”

While working as a bartender in college, he’d had the idea of making a Bloody Mary mix using his family’s tomatoes, but he didn’t act on it then. When he was pondering his place on the farm, the concept came back to him. He enlisted the help of a buddy from his bartending days, and the pair transformed 1,000 pounds of Seaside Farm tomatoes into a bottled Bloody Mary mix. “We used the tomatoes fresh, and it really changed the flavor profile of the drink,” Ross said. “I loved it and felt I was onto something, but you never know.”

In October 2017, Ross put up for sale 400 cases of the mix at the family’s Frogmore general store called Macdonald MarketPlace. In two months, 300 cases were gone. That success pushed Ross to officially found Seaside Grown.

Mirroring the Farm’s tomato crops, the company is thriving, and Ross stresses he’s done more than create a popular product. “I’m putting my own spin on family tradition and making it more sustainable by bringing additional revenue,” he said. The company’s also making good use of product that was previously wasted. While 25 million pounds of Seaside Farm tomatoes are delivered to area stores and restaurants, a few million pounds are already too ripe at harvest and don’t have the necessary shelf life to go to market. “We take these tomatoes and basically stuff them in a bottle,” Ross said.

The result is a robust punch of pure tomato that comes courtesy of the Farm’s nutrient-rich land and Seaside Grown’s meticulous process. The fledgling beefsteak vines are started in a field on the edge of a tidal river. Warm, salty air ensures this area never frosts.



The Perfect Bloody Mary

Ingredients:

1.5 ounces of

Tito’s Handmade Vodka

4 ounces of

Seaside Grown Bloody Mary Mix.

Method:

Shake and serve over ice. Top with
your favorite accoutrement!

This is what is so unique about this mix,
you don’t need the additions,
it’s all in the bottle!
Just add vodka. Cheers!



Ross’s cousin Graham carefully keeps watch over every plant, hand-inspecting them. “Everything is personal here in what we do,” Ross said. “Graham knows what his plants need. If they need watering at 2 a.m., it’s done. He’s pretty persnickety about his crop.”

The mixes are made and bottled only at harvest time (in June), so only tomatoes at their peak are used. After being hand-picked, the tomatoes are hand-pureed and then hand-blended with the mix’s other ingredients. The only automated step from field to glass is the bottling line. Every bottle is affixed with a seal identifying the very day those tomatoes were picked, and from which field.

Connecting customers to its process in this way is another aspect of Seaside Grown’s model that Ross says sets it apart. “We’re bringing people here to the farm, to the exact spot the tomatoes they’re tasting came from,” Ross said. “No one else is tracing their product like this because no one else is putting their hands in the soil, hand-harvesting the fruit, and then hand-making a product in the volume that we are.”

The family’s connection to its land, to the tomatoes it produces, is honored in the product names, such as Gus’ Spicy Mix. The family is also pitching in labor. Last year, for Seaside Grown’s first “official” season, multiple members gathered to help Ross hand-bottle since he hadn’t yet installed the automated line. “Even my 88-year-old grandmother and her 90-year-old sister helped,” he said.

Having the support of his extended clan means a lot to Ross. “Being here, doing this with my family, means everything to me; it’s my entire heart,” he said. “This company is my way to create some value and stay connected to this land and my kin.” And he believes those who’ve gone before him would be pleased. “While I’m not a farmer, I’m following in Gus’ footsteps, and in my grandfather’s footsteps, continuing the family story in a way that may not have ever occurred to them,” he said. “I think they’d be proud.” □