

Conversation with Tom Muska

'Mother Nature is the silent partner at the corporate meetings'

By Ted Glanzer
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If you told East Windsor resident Tom Muska in 1984 that he'd be a full-time apple farmer, he would have done more than just look at you sideways.

Indeed, Muska, 71, was helping run a successful oil company, and had previously worked as a computer programmer.

Fast forward 30 years later, and Muska and his family are running the successful Applebrook Farm, which grows dozens of different kinds of apples, including 12 or 13 heirloom apples, and presses its own non-pasteurized cider. And while the cider served as the farm's first break-through product, it's the apples that people now come from far-flung places to buy. Social media and email have leveled the playing field, as the farm can send out 500 to 600 electronic newsletters for free or post daily updates on Facebook that people can view immediately.

It hasn't always been smooth sailing for the farm, which closed for the season on Nov. 26, or for Muska, a cancer survivor, who has seen some challenging times.

But as Muska said when he sat down to talk about his journey, "I've met a real slice of humanity. I've met a lot of wonderful people who are no longer my customers, they're my friends."

Q: How long have you owned Applebrook Farm?

A: The land was purchased by my father years ago, in the late '60s, early '70s. It's about an 11-acre farm. At one time it was larger. When we started the farm, for about 15 years we started wholesaling cider and 15 to 20 varieties of apples. It took us about 11 years to get the recognition we needed. Our first official year (farming full time) was 1985.

For eight years (starting in 1982) we sold a cider that was made by the Botti family.

We'd bring a truckload of apples down there and they'd make a batch of cider for us and charge a fee. We had a retail margin on that and would sell it here. In 1990 we had our own cider mill. The 25th harvest was this year and in only two we couldn't make cider (due to freezing). A pivotal year for us was 1996 — Steve Grant from the Courant did a fabulous story on us on our Grandpa Tony's Cider.

My wife is very charismatic and very intelligent and a great marketer — probably the reason why we are as successful as we are. It's a catchy label. And this may be the best cider you've ever had.

Q: What separates your cider from all others?

A: I heard Dr. Frank Emerson from Purdue University. He did a five-year study

on making cider, using different combinations of apples and keeping elaborate chemical statistics like sugar/acid ratios, all that kind of stuff.

He came up with a bottom-line result of the different kinds of apples you need and what percentages. You'd have to be a chemist to understand it. I'm not. I'm an economics major and a math minor. I heard him speak at a state pommological meeting in Connecticut, where they have speakers from all over the country come in and speak about various things: new chemicals, new apple varieties, new techniques. All kinds of stuff. The year we put in the cider mill, I really paid attention. What caught my attention is we had maybe 20 varieties of apples, many of which he used in the blend. So I said, 'What the heck, we'll try it.' Bottom line is, people loved it. The week Steve Grant did the story on us was around Columbus Day, and in that one week we were just overrun, like that movie "Field of Dreams" when all those cars kept coming up to the baseball field. But two weeks later, the E.coli scare hit. Starting in 1997, my sales dropped off on unpasteurized cider.

After the Courant article, we got into the black. For a long time, cider drove the business. The last half dozen years, it's been down 20 percent. Cider got us on the map and the apples are keeping us there.

The result of the E.coli problem is I had the FDA here and they watched me make cider for a week. Then they watched me make cider another week. They haven't been back since. They were impressed with the operation. How clean it was. The way it's bottled and refrigerated. The floors ... it looks like the dentist office. It really is a clean mill.

Q: There's a lot more going on than you think?

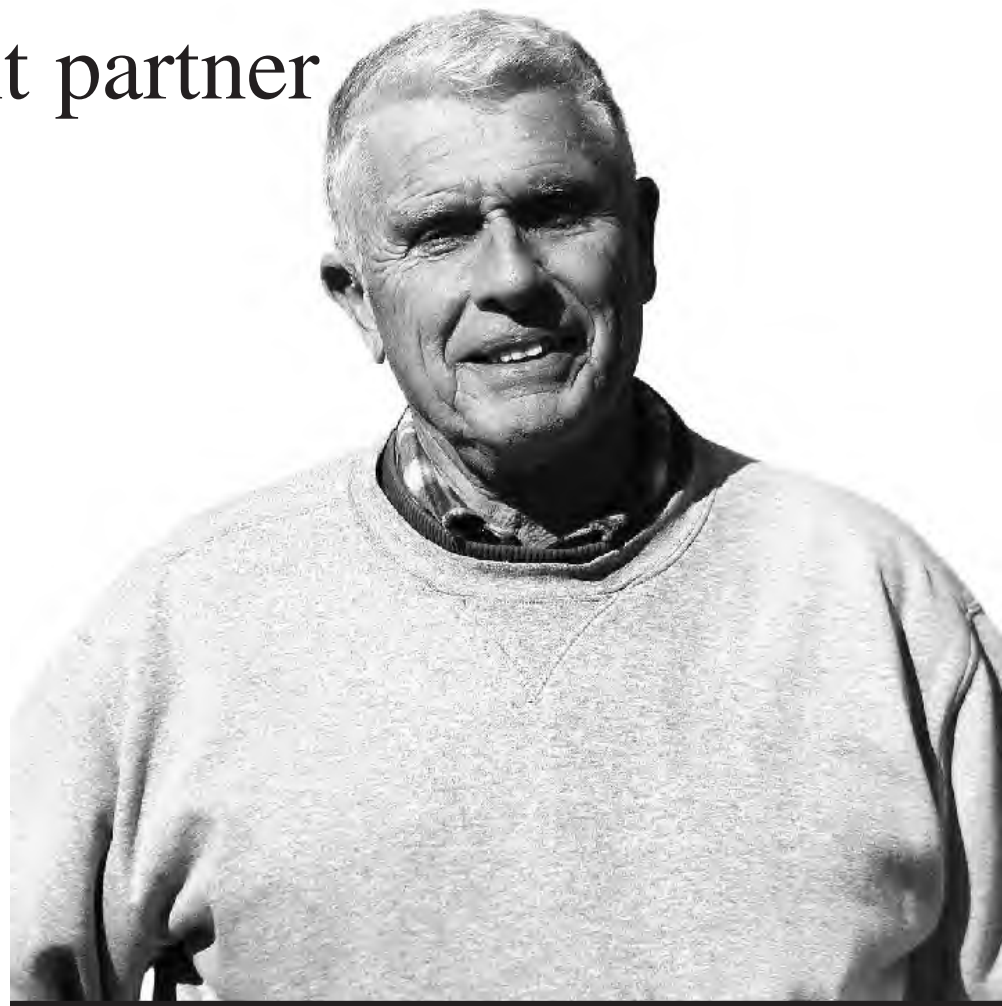
A: More than you can imagine. I've picked the brains (of the large apple growers) and I've listened to people from Cornell and UMass. I'm constantly learning. I never thought it would take so much knowledge to raise something as simple as an apple.

Q: Did you aspire to be an apple farmer?

A: I had no idea what happened to me, why I did this. I started planting some trees in the late 1970s. My dad had this acreage. He just purchased the land. It was all overgrown farm. It was a dairy farm, part of it was a tobacco farm. ... I went to Boston College to study economics.

Q: What did you aspire to do?

A: My first job was with the second-generation large mainframe computers. I was a programmer at UTC, Pratt & Whitney division. And I moved up from



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there. An assistant analyst, project leader, a manager. I took a job at Aetna for five years. Then I went into my father's business, Hall and Muska Oil Company, which was one of the biggest local oil companies around. I left that six years later, I cashed my stock in the company and sold it to the employees, who kept it going; I put my kids through college and started the farm. If you told me a month before I was going to do that, if you told me two weeks before that I was going to do that, I would have said, "You're crazy." I didn't know anything about it. We did have a part-time farm from the late '70s until I left Hall and Muska Oil in 1984.

Q: So you were sort of building up to becoming a full-time farmer?

A: We cleared the land and planted some dogwood trees and some apple trees beginning in 1975. Eventually the whole 50 acres was cleared, but it took a lot of time. I ordered 50 trees, four or five different varieties — McIntosh and Cortlands and Macoun and Delicious, everything people are familiar with, and Northern Spy, which is an old heirloom apple. I ordered 50 and they sent me 300 trees. I said, "I've got 250 extra trees. I don't know what to do with them." They said, "Keep them." So we planted the 300 trees in 1975 ... A month later, I said, "What do I do?" It was insane. I just started taking care of them nights and mornings before I went to work ... By 1984, we had 800 or 900 trees.

In 1982, The Scantic Congregational Church had a fall fair. We went over there

with all our stuff. We had doughnuts, apples, blueberries. We took in like \$2,000. I thought to myself, "Can you make a living at this?" I had no idea how long it would take to make a living at this. It sort of planted the seed and a couple years later I left (Muska Oil).

Q: When did you become a full-time farmer?

A: I guess I became a full-time farmer in 1985. I had a midlife crisis, I don't know. Around 2004, I began tearing up the old orchard, I took out about 900 trees and I began planting some of the new hot varieties like Honeycrisp. In the late '90s, I did some grafting with the heirloom apples ... the apples you can't get anywhere. Baldwins and Winesaps. Gravenstein.

We have 12 or 13 varieties of heirloom apples as well. They don't all come at once. We pick apples for about 75 to 80 days, starting in late August right through the middle of November. We have about 35 varieties. What's carrying us now is our apple sales are increasing at a tremendous rate.

Q: What separates an heirloom from other apples?

A: It's just very old. 200, 300, 400 years old. I have one apple, Summer Rambo, which goes back to France in the 1500s. I have no idea why I planted that.

Q: What do they taste like?

A: They're excellent apples, though the

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best tasting heirloom apples I have are the Northern Spies. One of the challenges of heirloom apples is they tend to bear every other year. That's why people don't grow them anymore. Bottom line is they have a unique taste. We have another heirloom called the Roxbury Russet, which was planted by the pilgrims in the 1620s. It's amazing the people who want this apple. It's green and looks like a pear. I have another apple called Golden Russet, which I grafted because it's a terrific cider apple.

Q: Have you experienced any setbacks with the farm?

A: I went into substitute teaching for six years because in 2001 and 2002 we lost our crops back to back because of freezes.

Q: Did you think about selling?

A: I never thought so much about selling, but quitting. I don't know how to express this from my heart. I'm a Christian, every farmer has got

to somehow be faith-based. Because it's a dice roll. Mother Nature is the silent partner at the corporate meetings. She can put it to you or she can be very forgiving. We've had five freezes in 28 years, and they were pretty disastrous when you lose all your income. In 2001, we lost everything. We had a beautiful bloom, it was 90 degrees on the 4th of May. On the 7th of May, it was 23 degrees. The blossoms were burnt, scalded, gone. I was in the middle of substitute teaching then, though in the six years that I substituted, I wound up teaching full-time for three years. The schools thought I had some good teaching skills. In 2001 and 2002, I considered going back to school and being a math teacher, maybe (the apple picking) part-time.

Q: Did you like teaching?

A: I enjoyed teaching. It is quite a challenge today. It's a little different than when I went to school.

Q: What was different?

A: The discipline. Putting up with a lot of garbage from kids

and parents. When I went to school, the teacher was always right, the principal was always right. Anytime I was involved with the scolding of a child, I would end up with a meeting with the principal and a (meeting) with the parents. The frontline teachers don't get support any more.

Q: Did you grow up in this area?

A: I did. I went to Suffield Academy, played a lot of sports in high school. Growing up here was beautiful.

Q: What's your wife's name?

A: Sharon. We've been married 47 years. Awful good-looking still. I'm a lucky man. ... My wife has been so supportive, it scares me. If someone said, I'll give you \$1 million for these 30 acres, I'd take it and say it's your turn, and I'd go travel the world. She's been unbelievable. My kids, too. It brings tears to my eyes. We've had some tough years. But we've had some wonderful pieces of heaven that have fallen out of the sky.