

A large flock of sheep is grazing in a field. In the background, there are several farm buildings with grey roofs. The sky is blue with some clouds. A person's arm in a green shirt is visible on the right side of the frame.

# *Re-inventing* The Family Farm

**Meet John Peterson, class of 2003.  
He combined technology and advertising with a  
sheer-genius sales strategy to revolutionize  
his family's 70-year-old farm.**



John Peterson '03 and his wife, Erica Peterson '04.

**J**ohn Peterson doesn't wear a tie to work. He doesn't talk incessantly about the "morning commute" or "rush hour traffic." He doesn't have a key fob or employee i.d. – doesn't have vacation days, either.

Yet at 31, Peterson is a lot like most other young professionals in business today.

He's a master at the art of multi-tasking. In between communicating with customers by phone and email, he's writing and designing advertising campaigns; calculating returns and revenues; and monitoring inventory.

He works hard to engage existing and prospective customers via Facebook; frequently updates the corporate website with fresh imagery and new information; and judiciously monitors the company's email inbox.

The difference between Peterson, class of 2003, and the millions of other 30-somethings in business today is, well, turkeys.

Lots of turkeys.

#### **'A Light Bulb Came On'**

Peterson is owner and general manager of Ferndale Market, an on-farm specialty store in Cannon Falls, Minn. The Market, which opened in 2008, sells the turkeys raised on the Peterson Turkey Farm, a 70-year-old, 140-acre, free-range turkey farm founded by Peterson's grandparents. The Market also carries other turkey products and additional locally grown items.

Named in honor of Peterson's grandparents, Fern and Dale Peterson, Ferndale Market is the result of what Peterson calls a "light bulb" idea.

In 2007, while working as an admission counselor for Augustana, he and his wife, Erica (class of 2004) became increasingly interested in the U.S. food system.

"We really wanted to find out more about where our food was coming from. We began doing a lot of reading about it and, suddenly, a light bulb came on," Peterson said. "We realized that we had a really unique opportunity to come back to our family farm and build upon the foundation my grandpa and dad had built."

After talking over the idea with his parents, Dick and Jane, Peterson set to work re-inventing the family farm he had grown up on. Ferndale Market officially launched in 2008.

"For the first 70 years of the farm, we only dealt in live turkeys. We, as growers, didn't have any connection with the end user – the people who were enjoying our product."

"The first step was to do things differently. Today we grow our turkeys free range, which means they're moved to fresh pastures each week. We went through the process of receiving USDA approval to use the "raised without antibiotics" and "naturally processed" claims, which means, essentially, it is what it says it is. No added water or salt – just 100 percent turkey which, shouldn't sound like a novel idea but, in reality, it's a huge point-of-difference for us."

"We work with a local processor in Marshall, Minn. We've created a brand for ourselves, with value-added qualities. We have an on-farm store where we sell our own turkey and

70 products from other farmers and food producers.”

Peterson also identified a wholesale market and now sells turkeys to colleges, schools, retailers, restaurants and businesses in Minnesota, South Dakota, Iowa and Wisconsin.

“My objective in 2008 was to find the people I needed to talk to about our family farm. One of the first places I went was Carleton College in Northfield, Minn., – it’s 15 minutes away from the farm.”

“I got to know the chef; then I met their food services provider, Bon Appetit, which serves four colleges in Minnesota. Soon, we began working with all of those schools. Through Bon Appetit, we also provide our turkey for a number of corporate headquarters, such as Target, Best Buy and Federated Insurance.”

Peterson says one of the reasons Ferndale is successful is because of the public’s growing interest in food origins.

“There’s been a real push in Minnesota to look for and find local and natural protein. There’s also a “Farm-to-School” movement happening in K-12 schools here to help kids understand where food comes from. We’ve worked with a number of public schools to be a part of their school lunch programs.”

#### ‘It Happened at the Same Time’

Peterson says the idea for Ferndale Market was a component of the plan to reinvent Peterson Turkey Farm.

“It really happened at the same time. It was all a part of the broad idea that we wanted to sell our products directly and be connected to the people who were ultimately using the product. We knew we couldn’t be viable retailers 12 months of the year selling only turkeys. In this area, there are a lot of other farmers doing some unique things, so we set out as a place to put all those products under one roof.”

In addition to Ferndale Market’s signature turkey products, the Market also sells other local meats, cheeses and other dairy products, and locally grown produce.

#### By the Numbers

Over the course of a year, Peterson Turkey Farm will grow nearly 200,000 turkeys. In comparison, the state of Minnesota grows 45 million turkeys each 12 months.

“In the scheme of things, we’re small. But, we’re also independent, which means we have the flexibility to do what we’re doing. We can grow our birds in a way that we believe is important.”

The location of the Farm and Market has also been key.

“We’re about 30 minutes away from the Twin Cities. Rochester is about 45 minutes away. We couldn’t do what we’re doing if we didn’t have access to those markets – and the two million people who live there – within an hour’s drive,” Peterson says. “I can tell you that Grandpa never imagined we’d be running a refrigerated truck up



John Peterson '03,  
in Ferndale Market.

“I can tell you grandpa never imagined.  
we’d be running a refrigerated truck up  
and down the highway.”

– John Peterson, Class of 2003

and down the highway.

The Farm and Market also benefit from Cannon Falls’ growing tourism industry.

“There’s really a lot going on in the Cannon Falls community. There’s a great winery here and popular bike trail that runs from Cannon Falls to the Mississippi River in Red Wing. There’s definitely a tourist draw.”

#### Training Ground

Peterson is quick to make the argument that his training in the liberal arts is what prepared him for where he is today.

“[At Augustana,] I learned to think critically, problem-solve, work with people to make decisions and deal with a lot of

different information at the same time.

As funny as it sounds, I really think that farming embodies all the skills the liberal arts instill in you. In agriculture, and in running a business, you can’t afford to be a specialist. You’ve got to be a generalist. You’ve got to be able to change and adapt. Those are skills that come from the liberal arts foundation.”

He also credits the values-based foundation Augustana provided.

“We know that the turkeys we grow are going to feed people. Knowing that helps frame the way we view our work. We’re doing more than just farming. We’re really caring for creation and helping to provide a healthy, nutritious meal at a fair price.”