

BRAND
POINTS Plus



COVID-19
RESOURCES



Brooks Farms pivots from family entertainment to grocery ...and more.

Ask anyone in Mount Albert, Ont. about Brooks Farms and you'll hear how this thriving family farm plus family entertainment mecca has been a community fixture for well over a century. What began as a traditional farm with livestock, field crops and grains, and later added (pick your own) strawberries and raspberries, maple syrup tapping and duck races, in recent years transformed into a mega-event-based operation featuring the Barnyard Playland. Brooks Farms added two commercial kitchens to keep up with the demand from seasonal visitors.

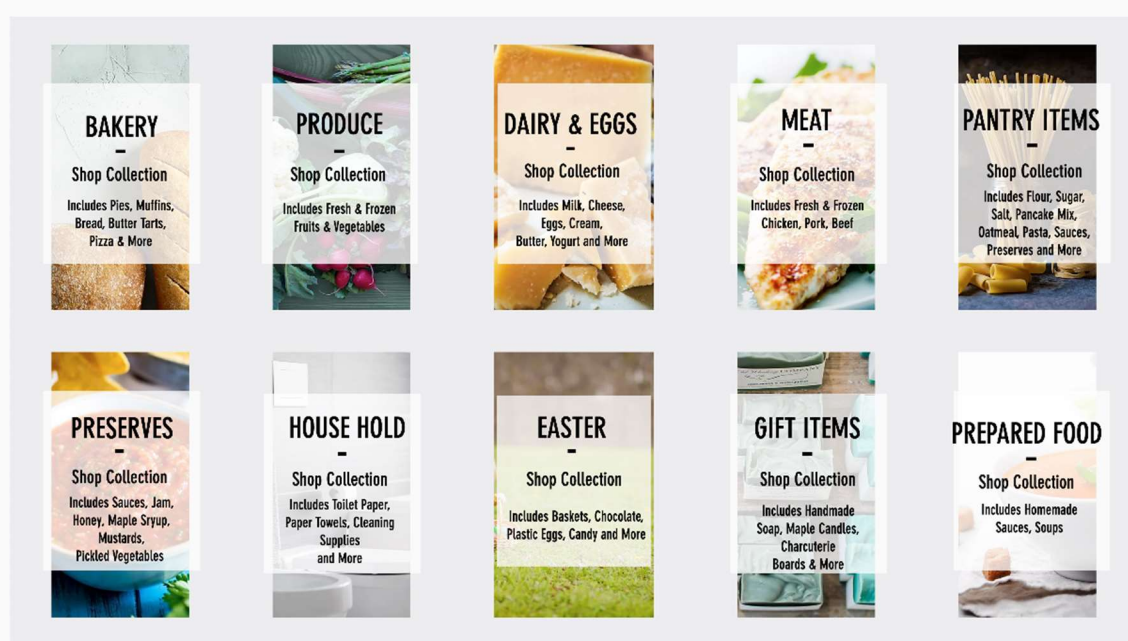
Brands Points PLUS spoke with General Manager Craig Douglas to talk about how Brooks Farms is weathering COVID-19 and has pivoted to become a grocery-first operation.

What was business like for you before the coronavirus hit?

When all of this came on, we knew that much of our operation was done. There were no tours of the maple forest, the whole educational program closed, there were no pictures for weddings.... On a typical day, the gate would have opened up at 8 in the morning. It's pretty quiet in the early spring, but Easter is the busiest long weekend for us. Both commercial kitchens are pumping, there's a big Easter egg hunt, and the market has pies, maple muffins, breads, and all sorts of other fresh products. It would have been insanity; it's crazy, but it's great. Those good weekends can set you up for the year.

What steps did you take when you saw the handwriting on the wall?

My background is in grocery, so I decided to turn what had been a glorified bakery (with pies, maple muffins, and so on) into a grocery. I wanted to bring in a whole variety of new stuff, but I knew we had to make some changes. We had to pivot to new suppliers, such as getting a second egg supplier to guarantee our order. We got a text from a woman whose mother has 60,000 chickens. She now brings us eggs. Yeast is another thing. I bought a case in a few weeks ago and it was gone in a day and half. I brought in three cases, and it was gone. Our Flanagan's rep said, "Really?" He couldn't believe it, but now we're selling all your everyday grocery basics, and people are buying massive amounts of everything from flour, sugar and salt to lemon juice, ketchup, pasta, canned beans and soups, not to mention fresh produce like broccoli and lettuce. We got the word out that we're here to help. Eighty percent of the products we're bringing in, Brooks Farms has never carried before.



How has your online presence changed?

In pivoting to grocery, we decided we needed a new website just for that part of our business, so we launched www.madebyafarmer.com, which I am hoping makes things easier for both our customers and staff.

What staffing changes have you made?

We couldn't bring back the seasonal staff, so we have four staff now. One guy who only worked weekends is now full time, but we couldn't bring back 36 employees. Also, typically we have six guys coming up from Mexico to help, and we don't know if they can be fast tracked for permits.

How big a challenge has this been for Brooks Farms?

It's been a huge change. In the beginning the owners were cautious. They were close to locking it up and locking it down, but I said, give me a chance. Give me the time to see if I can turn this into a proper grocery market. It's only curbside, which has hampered us in one way, but we also do delivery in the Mount Albert area.

Initially, I was being very cautious about spending money on the grocery. I started very slowly with five or six produce items, but people were calling us, calling us, calling us.

The phone was ringing off the hook, so that's when we knew we had to ramp up. Here are some of the things we did:

RAMPED UP SOCIAL MEDIA

We put stuff out on Facebook and Instagram, and we pushed it that way in the communities where we have a huge following.

CREATED NEW SIGNAGE

We have a big road sign at the corner of the farm, we had a bunch of signs made for the parking lot, and we made signs for the pillars for parking for curbside pickup.

ENGAGED WITH LOCAL MEDIA

A York Region radio station is doing free advertising. They did one for us, and that's helped. I'm still trying to figure out how to reach the people we can help.

DEVELOPED A SPECIAL GROCERY-ONLY WEBSITE

The biggest change has been the new website. Literally the day we went live with www.madebyafarmer.com, it just clicked in. On Easter Saturday we had to turn it off because there were just too many orders.

Are you planning to expand this new part of your business?

One thing I'm looking to launch is what I call a meat package share program, so we can put together, for instance, a breakfast package or a lunch package or a dinner package instead of just selling groceries. It's only in the planning stage, but we'll launch this.

How do you measure success?

It's hard to say how our sales are being affected because normally the Easter weekend is so massive. My whole mandate (before) was to open more days and more hours. But we're trying to recoup by switching to the online ordering. Success to me is: are we able to cover our costs, are we able to keep people employed, will we be able to bring staff back? We've already asked a few employees and they are on board. When this ends, we'll definitely continue with the grocery.

Craig Douglas of Brooks Farms' top tips for weathering the COVID-19 storm:

- **Don't get deterred by having a slow day or even a slow week.**
- **Listen to the people to hear what they're really looking for. Depending on your community, everyone is looking for something different.**
- **Give it a shot. Realistically, the length of time you're willing to try depends on the individual. When we changed things over, we weren't sure we could see the light at the end of the tunnel. Now I'm glad we took the risk. Really, it only took a week to see that this was going to work.**

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