

PAM KNIGHTS

Fostering Connections

INTERVIEW BY ELLEN ECKER OGDEN

It was September 1998 when I took a seat at the table with Pam Knights. We were in a garden, along with 40 other guests, while Lyndon Virkler, a chef instructor at New England Culinary Institute, harvested vegetables and presented a cooking class.

The sun was setting, and there was a golden glow filtering between the ferny asparagus and succulent fall raspberries. We seemed relaxed, but the planning leading up to this moment had been monumental.

This was my first taste of working with Pam, founder of Pam Knights Communications, a full-service branding and marketing company based in Northfield, Vermont. Despite her quiet demeanor, she has the focus and determination of an athlete and a dedication to her work that is detail-oriented and indefatigable. Plus, she has a soft spot for farmers.

"Farmers are very hardworking and committed. Without them, we wouldn't be eating as well as we do," she says. "So it is in my best interest to help them succeed!"

While most of her success has been behind the scenes, she is a visionary, having co-founded the Vermont Fresh Network (VFN) while serving as director of public relations and special events at New England Culinary Institute. She is also a frequent workshop leader at conferences where she provides the guidance that small businesses need for developing marketing plans and tools.

She sees endless possibilities for building strong connections between farmers and consumers and especially enjoys working with local inns and restaurants to grow those connections.

This interview offers a peek into her life, her work and what keeps her so passionate about Vermont food.

Edible Green Mountains: What influenced you most when you were getting started in your career?

Pam Knights: I graduated from UVM, as a pioneer in the environmental studies program. While there, I started the first women's alpine ski team (with co-captain Susie MacNeil) and the first women's XC ski team. I was also among the first to bring my horse to the equine program. From these experiences I learned that if you want to do something and it isn't already in place, then why not create it yourself!

EGM: How did you get started?

PK: When my son Jean-Luc Matecat was 3, my first husband, a French chef, and I both started working at New England Culinary Institute (NECI). I was there for 13 years as director of PR and special events, and developed the non-professional continuing education for adults and children, culinary weekend and guest chef programs. From there, I went on to the Vermont Land Trust, where I managed communications and events. This gave me the opportunity to work with the stewards of Vermont's working landscape and helped me to understand the importance of land conservation and the work of farmers and foresters around the state, before branching out on my own.

EGM: Who are your customers and what are some of your favorite projects?

PK: I'm passionate about family farms, as well as country inns, restaurants and agritourism. By choice I work mostly within the culinary and hospitality industries, but also with artisans and other small businesses.

My first client was King Arthur Flour, developing their cooking school. I've worked with Cedar Circle Farm & Education Center for more than a decade to develop harvest festivals and handle PR and advertising. I also enjoy working with longtime client Green Mountain Hooked Rugs, being a hooker myself! And there are, of course, many others too numerous to mention.

EGM: How would you describe your work?

PK: I'm a branding and marketing strategist, consultant and project manager. My strength is in helping businesses put the pieces together in a cohesive way and to define their niche within their industry. Together we develop a strategic marketing plan both short and long term, develop their brand and their print, digital and social marketing tools—with the goal of empowering them to successfully grow their businesses. I also work as a consultant for farm viability and small business development programs throughout New England.

EGM: Where do you see VT food initiatives heading in the next decade?

PK: Towards education, to encourage more Vermonters to buy locally. With more farmers vying for the same food dollar it's increasingly important to stand out. It's not enough anymore to be a farmer member of the VFN or for a chef to use locally grown foods. We all need to work to attract more families to the local table and build more community partnerships that support buying locally—while paying farmers and chefs a decent wage.

EGM: What words of advice do you have for new food start-ups?

PK: Start with a good business and strategic marketing plan. Determine what makes you unique, what you do well and people need, and communicate it in a creative, engaging way that makes customers feel good about buying your products and services. 🌿

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