

Nate Freitag – Free Day Popcorn

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

Sarasota, Florida. Here in a gourmet food shop is a video showing the planting of popcorn in a field half a continent away. This results from the outreach by an innovative young Kansas family that is producing popcorn and shipping it around the nation and beyond. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Nate and Stacey Freitag are the founders of Free Day Popcorn Company in Belleville, Kansas. Nate grew up on the family farm northwest of Belleville near the Nebraska line. He went to college in Pennsylvania where he met his wife Stacey. They married and started a family. Nate taught high school and Stacey worked in marketing. In 2013, they moved to the midwest and settled in Belleville. Nate is now an online instructor with Insight School of Kansas and helps his dad on the farm.

"Dad's grown popcorn for over 20 years for various processors," Nate said. When he and Stacey tried popping the popcorn themselves, they realized it was delicious. "As someone who grew up on microwave popcorn, I thought this fresh popcorn was amazing," Stacey said.

In 2015, they launched their own company to market this popcorn directly. They called it Free Day Popcorn Company. This comes from the roots of the family name. Nate's ancestors came from Germany five generations ago and homesteaded here. The family name is now pronounced Freitag, which comes from the German Frei-tag meaning free day. Free Day Popcorn was born.

Today, Free Day Popcorn has two parts to the business. One is retailing gift containers and unpoped ears through its online store or in local grocery stores, and the second is selling wholesale in bulk to independent movie theatres, gourmet popcorn shops, schools, and others. For direct purchases, customers can buy yellow or white corn in mason jars, clamp jars, bags or more. A big seller is popcorn on the ear.

"People can stick the whole ear in the microwave and let it pop," Stacey said. "It's fun to watch. That's how a lot of people first hear about us," she said. Of course, buyers can get popcorn kernels and pop them in the microwave or on the stovetop also. Bulk products are shipped in 35 or 50 pound bags.

"We're really proud of selling a high quality product," Nate said. Free Day Popcorn emphasizes freshness. Some commercial vendors may store popcorn for 18 months before selling. The Freitags try to sell only popcorn from the current season.

"Fresher popcorn tastes better," Nate said. "Because we are not blending with previous years, it pops more consistently and there's less waste," he said.

This business also provides a personal connection with the grower. "People seem to care more these days about where their food comes from," Nate said.

Nate has done Facebook Live sessions where he interacts with people while demonstrating how corn is planted or harvested. "There are people who don't even know that corn grows on an ear," Stacey said.

Nate recalls loading a pallet of popcorn in wintry conditions in January. Three days later, they got a picture of it being unloaded in Florida amid palm trees and sunshine! That same Florida customer was so interested in a video of Nate planting corn

that she ran the video on a continuous loop inside her store. “Nate’s teaching background comes in handy so he’s really good at explaining what’s going on,” Stacey said.

This is a multigenerational family effort. “We couldn’t do this without my dad and his knowledge and support,” Nate said. Nate and Stacey also have three young girls. The popcorn is grown on the family farm near Byron, Nebraska, north of the rural town of Republic, Kansas, population 116 people. Now, that’s rural.

Free Day Popcorn has sold online from coast to coast and border to border, to 48 of the fifty states and four foreign countries as far away as Spain. Wow. For more information, see www.freedaypopcorn.com.

It’s time to leave Sarasota, Florida where we found a video of Nate planting popcorn. We salute Nate and Stacey Freitag for making a difference with entrepreneurship in agriculture. I’m glad to see this business pop up.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.