

Adversity Meets Ingenuity for Food Entrepreneur

EP 25: Farms, Food and You Podcast

Facing a major COVID-related setback, entrepreneur Will Kornegay launched a new business and a new way to help people who can't always afford nutritious food.

[Music]

Dee Shore (00:06):

Imagine gearing up to start production in a business you've poured your life savings into. COVID-19 hits, shutting down life as usual and bringing your plans to a halt, with no end in sight. That's food entrepreneur Will Kornegay's story. But thanks to some quick thinking and the support of others, it has a happy ending.

I'm Dee Shore of North Carolina State University's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, and in this episode of Farms, Food and You, Kornegay of Rocky Mount, North Carolina, talks about the ups and downs of food entrepreneurship, the way he turned bad timing with one business into a new venture and the rewards he reaps from helping those who can't always afford nutritious food.

[Music]

Dee Shore (1:03):

The story starts with the company Kornegay and his sister launched in 2019. Ripe Revival used NC State developed technology to turn fruits and vegetables leftover in farmer's fields into protein-rich gummies.

Will Kornegay (01:21):

Ripe Revival originally started as a company that was focused on working with US family farmers to take their excess fruits and vegetables and turn them into value-added consumer packaged good products. And our initial product and the formation of our company was rooted in taking those grapes and blueberries and sweet potatoes and extracting the goodness and creating a proprietary protein gummy out of those.

Dee Shore (01:48):

Kornegay and his sister, Laura Hearn, had more than making a living on their minds when they started the business.

Will Kornegay (01:55):

Our motivation was really rooted in several factors. One, my sister, Laura, and I had both worked in agriculture for the better part of a decade, actually for competing sweet potato farm operations. And we had been exposed to the difficulties that farmers face with food excess or food waste. And at the same time, we worked for operations that were rather large and had found creative solutions to that problem and saw the impact that it had on their efficiency and their profitability, and were really just floored by the troubles that exist with farm excess for the small farmer and the fact that one in eight consumers face food insecurity at some point. And so we made it a mission to start a company that

provided a solution for the small farmers and also addressed the issue of food insecurity at the same time.

Dee Shore (02:55):

Through Ripe Revival, Kornegay and Hearn, buy otherwise unmarketable fruits and vegetables from farmers to create their blueberry, grape, peach and cinnamon swirl flavored gummies. Ripe Water, which is made from watermelons, is the company's newest offering, and fruit smoothies are on their way soon.

For every bag or box Ripe Revival sells, Kornegay and Hearn donate fresh produce to families in need. The Kroger Foundation was impressed by their plans and it provided a grant that allowed them to buy equipment, to make their formulations at full scale. They sold their products in a few grocery stores and on their website, and they were ramping up and pursuing more markets when the pandemic hit.

Will Kornegay (03:45):

COVID-19 really had different plans for us. We had invested our life savings in this business, in a building, and a lot of time getting the facility to spec to be able to run production. And the week that we were supposed to launch our production, COVID-19 shut down the state. And that was a very humbling experience to have your life savings tied up in a business and not know what the future held.

It really just halted everything for us, and at that moment our plans, as we had laid them, were done, and we were told that it would be that way for a year from customers that we were counting on to make our business grow.

There was literally a few days where I thought that for lack of a better word, my life was over, that I had lost everything. I'd lost my life savings, everything I've worked for.

Dee Shore (04:35):

Kornegay saw that the pandemic created hardships for others as well, and he got an idea.

Will Kornegay (04:42):

Unfortunately, we weren't alone, and out of a necessity for survival we had to do something to pivot to keep our business alive. As we looked around and saw many other North Carolina restaurants and farmers and food producers in the same situation, wondering how they were going to move their products, how they were going to provide for their families and their employees, we decided to jump to action and do what we know best, and that's provide solutions in fresh produce.

Dee Shore (05:11):

Kornegay's solution was to use his facility as a place to pack boxes of produce, meats and other local food products then sell and deliver them to consumers who might not want to venture out during the pandemic or who were just looking for a convenient way to get food. He called the new company Ripe Revival Market.

Will Kornegay (05:34):

I built a website in three days, launched on April 4th, and within a few weeks we had several hundred members that we were delivering to from the Triangle all the way to Wilmington.

We were able to re-establish a lot of relationships that came from our careers and our network in working in fresh produce for almost 10 years. We sought out local North Carolina farmers and North Carolina produce companies who work with regional farmers to make sure that we can cover all different classes of commodities all year long.

We were able to go after relationships with meat producers and dairy producers, and really just North Carolina food businesses to provide solutions that they needed but also to fit a demand for consumers who were at home and fighting uncertainty and fears of what COVID-19 could do to them.

Dee Shore (06:29):

Ripe Revival Market offers a produce box and a grocery box that includes produce and other North Carolina made food, such as meat and dairy products. For every box sold, the company donates two meals. The company also offers a community supported produce box filled with 10 to 12 pounds of imperfect produce, and for every one of the Community Supported Boxes purchased, a similar box is provided for free to a family in need of fresh fruits and vegetables.

Will Kornegay (07:05):

We like to say we want to drive unity through community, and this year has been a great example of how true that is. We believe that when you invest in the community, they will invest back in you and that we're all in this life together.

We've been just floored by the overwhelming support this year. We wouldn't be here today, if we didn't have Ripe Revival Market, we're glad and proud to be now an established business with a great customer base, to be able to continue doing that and doing that well.

Dee Shore (07:31):

Kornegay says that finding a way to meet consumer demand has been key.

Will Kornegay (07:36):

I think, for us, this year has been a blessing in certain ways because COVID-19 has actually driven demand that has helped us to grow our business. We took a very genuine and authentic approach to providing a solution, and that is why the demand has been stronger for us than it may be for others that have done similar things.

Dee Shore (07:58):

What else has contributed to success?

Will Kornegay (08:01):

Luck. I think there's a lot of luck in how things have transpired for us. I think that we're lucky to have had the experience that we've had, to have the mentors that we've had. We've had great mentors who have prepared us for a lot of the things that we've faced. We've been part of organizations that have been great, that have really prepared us to be able to face adversity and do so well.

Dee Shore (08:24):

And don't forget the perseverance, even when all seemed to be lost.

Will Kornegay (08:29):

I guess, my determination and a little bit of hardheadedness wouldn't accept that, and so I'm proud that we've been able to pivot and overcome something that has ended many businesses and something that surely should have ended our business. I know that it was nothing that I've done on my own, alone, but I'm very proud that we have found a way to bring people together and overcome something that has been very disastrous.

Dee Shore (08:58):

What has Kornegay learned from his experience that he'd like to share with others hoping to start a food business?

Will Kornegay (09:05):

I think the best advice that I can offer in a simple sentence to someone who wants to start a food business is to make sure that there is a product market fit and that they have a product that solves a need that they are ready to work endlessly to take that product to market, to always take consumer feedback to heart and to make sure that they listen to their customers, to be able to adapt and to be able to make changes or pivots within their business that will allow them to solve that need and grow.

Dee Shore (09:50):

When Kornegay thinks back on his experience launching Ripe Revival Market, he's proud to have helped provide a market for farmers and food producers and help meet a need for people who lack fresh, nutritious food.

Will Kornegay (10:06):

I think a moment aside from just our business surviving that I'm extremely proud of and I think what really motivates and drives us to keep pushing more than ever, is the amount of families that we've been able to distribute fresh food to. In the past year, we've utilized and distributed almost 4 million pounds of fresh produce that have been distributed to families in North Carolina. And let me be clear, that is not all through our donation program, but it's come through our building in Rocky Mount that we have put our hands on and somehow packed in a box to the USDA Farm-to-Families program or through a partnership with the Food Bank of Central and Eastern North Carolina.

We have played a vital role in feeding a lot of families and to see the tears of joy and to hear the feedback that these families have provided on how much we've been able to be a part of a big group of people who are making an impact is really exciting and humbling, and it's really what drives us. We hope that people will buy into our mission of reviving produce and people for purpose, in supporting us so that we can continue doing that together.

[MUSIC]

Dee Shore (11:26):

Thanks for listening today and we hope you'll join us again for the next episode of Farms, Food and You. To learn more about the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences and our podcast, visit go.ncsu.edu/farms. While you're there, share your thoughts. We'd love to get your ideas and to hear what topics you'd like for us to explore in the future.

[MUSIC]

About Our Guest

Will Kornegay was born, raised and lives in Rocky Mount, where farming of produce and other commodities is key to the economy. He says he always wanted to work in agriculture, but he took a detour after graduation from NC State University with a degree in business. He worked as an energy trader for two years before taking a job with Ham Produce Co. in Snow Hill, when he got firsthand exposure to running sales and operations for a large food company with a farm, a produce packing operation, a commercial puree line and a dehydration plant. With his sister, Laura Hearn, he started Ripe Revival in 2019 and then Ripe Revival Market in 2020.

Resources

Learn more about Kornegay's companies at riperivival.com and riperivivalmarket.com. To find out more about how Ripe Revival turned NC State University discoveries into protein-rich snacks made from excess fruits and vegetables grown by U.S. farmers visit our story [“Coming Up: Healthier Foods, Less Food Loss.”](#)