

Title: Soy to the World

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Soy to the World

A Hardwick company takes on tofu

by [Kevin J. Kelley](#) (02/21/07).

The field-and-mountains logo has been designed. The recyclable plastic bottles have been ordered. The stainless-steel machines — some imported from China, others purchased secondhand from local food firms — stand ready in the new Hardwick factory.

All that remains is for Todd Pinkham and Andrew Meyer to actually start producing and selling their company's organic soy milk and tofu. Following a long and risk-rich prelude, the Northeast Kingdom entrepreneurs are about to discover whether there's a profitable market for alternatives to the state's signature dairy products.

Pinkham, 37, established [Vermont Soy](#) 11 years ago as a kitchen-sink tempeh-making venture. "One winter day," Pinkham recalls, "my wife and I were looking through catalogues and saw an ad for tempeh culture. That seemed like an interesting possibility."

The inspiration for building a business on fermented soybean cakes came from Organic Cow of Vermont. Founded in 1990 and later absorbed by the Dean Foods conglomerate, the Tunbridge milk company proved there was money to be made in switching from conventional to organic dairy farming. It started a statewide trend. Pinkham, a Johnson State College graduate, had worked on a Johnson farm that was one of Organic Cow's early suppliers. "I saw from Organic Cow that it was possible to find a market for something a lot of people said wouldn't be viable," Pinkham explains.

He and his wife, Meg Treadwell, started small, culturing five pounds of tempeh a week for sale at Hardwick's Buffalo Mountain food co-op. This initial incarnation of Vermont Soy eventually grew to supply about 30 restaurants and food services around the state.

Freshness and local sourcing were the selling points that enabled Pinkham's product to compete with Lightlife Tempeh, a market leader based in Massachusetts. Pinkham and Meyer plan to play the same artisanal angles as Vermont Soy tries to shoulder its way onto shelves now stocked with Silk brand soy milk, which is also owned by Dean Foods.

"It will taste better than anything you've ever had," declares Meyer, who compares mass-marketed soymilk to Kraft American cheese and his own product to the cheeses hand-crafted at Jasper Hill Farm, just up the road in Greensboro. The 36-year-old Hardwick dairy farmer served for seven years as agriculture policy expert to Senator James Jeffords. "Everything depends on your philosophy and the tools you use," he adds.

"Vermont Soy doesn't need to be the biggest producer in the land; it just needs to be the best."

To that end, Meyer and Pinkham have been getting valuable advice from a local tofu expert. The latter studied manufacturing and marketing techniques for two years with Chinese-born Mingruo Guo, a professor of nutrition and food science at the University of Vermont. The instruction was paid for by a U.S. Department of Agriculture grant designed to help Vermont farmers and food companies develop soy-based products.

The ag education couldn't have come at a better time. Pinkham knew there was a local demand for soymilk and tofu; by the late 1990s, many of Pinkham's tempeh customers were asking for them.



TODD PINKHAM

PHOTO: [ANDY DUBACK](#)

But getting the recipes right proved trickier than he had supposed. "Tempeh is a low-tech startup," he notes. "It's difficult to learn about making soymilk because not many people in this country have knowledge of it. It's not like living in Japan, where you can basically pick your teacher."

Still, by 2001, Vermont Soy had progressed to a point where Pinkham was considering buying factory space from Green Mountain Coffee Roasters in Waterbury. Then came September 11, which left many a business plan in ruins. "That was a major step backwards for us," Pinkham says. "We had a new baby, a half-built house in Morrisville and a company that had just hit a huge obstacle." He now has three boys — ages 6, 3 and 7 months.

Vermont Soy had also been defending itself against accusations that it was contributing to the demise of dairy farming. "We kept hearing complaints that soy milk was a threat to cow milk," Pinkham says.

Having worked on farms most of his life, the Massachusetts native viewed this hostility as both ironic and ill-informed. "Soy actually fits in nicely with Vermont agriculture," Pinkham says. "A lot of farms could benefit from using soy beans in crop rotation, and a lot of farmers might make money from growing soy beans." In addition to serving as the raw material for tofu and tempeh, soy crops can serve as a fuel source, Pinkham notes.

Although it's closely identified with dairy farming, the Vermont Agency of Agriculture sees potential rather than peril in soy products. "They've been incredibly supportive of what we're doing," Pinkham says. And farmers themselves have also shown interest in soy crops. About 100 turned out last fall for a meeting in Hardwick on soybean cultivation, says Meyer.

With demand burgeoning, there appears to be plenty of opportunity for soy cultivators. Only about half-a-dozen Vermont farmers currently grow soybeans for human consumption, Meyer estimates. Among them is Ken van Hazinga of Shoreham, Vermont Soy's primary supplier. In keeping with its localvore orientation, the company buys all its soybeans from Vermont farmers, even though abundant quantities are available at competitive prices from growers in Québec and New York.

It's all part of what the company describes as the Whole Bean Way. "We're all about completing the cycle," Meyer explains. "Our mission is to be sustainable and local all the way from the farm to the store."

Meyer himself may eventually sell soy to the company he co-owns. He says he's thinking of sowing soy this spring on a few acres of his family's dairy farm. He focuses on the figures while Pinkham fiddles with the formulas.

"The growth factor for all soy products is just enormous," Meyer observes. "For one thing, a big segment of the American population is lactose-intolerant, so they're buying something other than cow milk."

Indeed, soy-foods sales in the United States ballooned from \$300 million in 1992 to nearly \$4 billion in 2004, according to the Soyfoods Association of North America, a Washington, D.C.-based trade group.

Tofu and soymilk makers also pitch their cholesterol-free products to the swelling ranks of health-conscious foodies. Soy comestibles are also routinely fortified with vitamins — a practice Meyer and Pinkham plan to follow as part of their efforts to enhance Vermont Soy's appeal to customers of food co-ops and health-food stores.

Taste may be the only drawback. To many palettes, plain tofu and soymilk scores low on the yumminess scale. Hence the flavoring: Once the company gets rolling, Vermont Soy will begin offering organic chocolate and vanilla soymilk.

With the first gallons of soymilk scheduled to pour forth from Vermont Soy's 3000-square-foot plant in the next two weeks, these are days of excitement and anxiety for the company's principals. With his three sons to support, Pinkham knows "we can't afford to make any mistakes." But he expresses confidence that Vermont Soy is poised for success.

*Bon Appétit* magazine also offers reason for optimism. It ranked artisanal tofu No. 6 among the Hot 10 Top Trends for 2007. The grooviest fare, according to the taste-making publication? Grits.

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