



LEAD WITH WE
SEASON 2: EPISODE 009
Matthew Wadiak, Cooks Venture

Simon Mainwaring:

From We First and Goal 17 Media, welcome to Lead With We. I'm Simon Mainwaring. And each week I talk with top business leaders and founders about the revolutionary mindsets and methods they use to build their bottom line and a bit of future for all of us by leading with we. Today, I'm joined by Matthew Wadiak, founder and CEO of Cooks Venture, which is a vertically integrated, regenerative agriculture company. We'll get into what that actually means in a minute, but just know that Matthew has a history of disrupting our food industry. He founded and served as the COO of Blue Apron, which was the first meal kit company ever to go public. Plus, he's a chef by training. So Matthew, thanks for joining us on Lead With We, and I'm excited to share insights from your journey.

Matthew Wadiak:

Simon, always great to connect. Thanks for having me here.

Simon Mainwaring:

So tell us about that journey for a second, that you were a chef, but then you've transitioned to take on the food industry. Give us some background on that.

Matthew Wadiak:

Absolutely. Being a chef has really been the catalyst for myself in terms of building a better food system and thinking about ingredients at their core. At a very young age, I started cooking when I was 15 years old in restaurants, and then paid my way through college and kitchens and culinary school, and then worked in some great restaurants out in California and overseas in France and Italy. And what we're taught to really appreciate as young cooks, at least when I was doing it was the value of the ingredients that you're putting into your food are what comes out of your dish, focusing on simplicity and sourcing the best ingredients possible.

So I guess the philosophy that I've taken on coming from my food world to starting Blue Apron, working with 250 farms at that company to starting a new kind of poultry company is that if there isn't something that's available to you that you want to cook for yourself or for your customers or just something really that you'd want to make for your friends and family, as a cook in the hunt for those ingredients, it's a responsibility to go out and try to procure them. And if they don't exist from a procurement standpoint, you have to work with farmers and partner with people who do to create them. And in the case of my current company, Cooks Venture, we learned that there wasn't a heritage chickens available in scale on our country that were raised at the husbandry levels that we wanted that had the variable efficiency of a company that can offer that to the public. So we're building that system step-by-step in these local circular economies, just like we've done with other areas of the food system that really need help.

Simon Mainwaring:

And so just stepping back a bit again, it's one thing to have a vocation where you care about food, it's another to say, hey, this is a purpose I'm going to take to scale and to bring that to life through Blue Apron and then through Cooks Venture, what was that impetus for you that allowed you to take it to the next level?

Matthew Wadiak:

Well, there's different things. When I started Blue Apron with my co-founders, the initial goal behind that company was, there was an opportunity where if you, it's hard to even remember back eight or nine years, and food things have evolved so quickly, but there was a time when people were watching the food network and consuming food media, the height of the celebrity chef in America, where people were just voraciously consuming that information about food. So more people were consuming food information than ever before, but less people were cooking than ever before. So there was obviously an opportunity to get people in the kitchen, a new generation of people who really wanted to learn how to cook.

And I think cooking really skipped a generation in terms of, we think about our grandparents as cooks, our parents somewhat as cooks, maybe not so much in America. And now this sort of like generation X, Y, Z are cooking again. And I think that's partially due to the accessibility of food through better retail platforms and digital platforms. And Blue Apron really solved that problem. So as somebody who had the goal of wanting to share our skill, which is food and cooking in the kitchen, that was an incredible opportunity.

And one more thing that I think is important to add to that is regarding food and cooking, as a real cook, a lot of times people talk, I see marketing about restaurant quality food. The goal of a restaurant chef is to make really great refined home quality food. So really the anthropology of food and cooking starts in communities. It starts in the home and that transcends into business. And that's really the service that we're trying to provide.

Simon Mainwaring:

The whole idea of regenerative agriculture or regenerative food system. What does that mean so we can all understand?

Matthew Wadiak:

Yeah, there's a lot of language around regenerative, which makes it seem overly complicated, but really when we're talking about regenerative agriculture, think about it like this, everybody's heard the word sustainability, right? So the way that I think about sustainability is sustaining the status quo. What regenerative agriculture is specifically trying to do is improve the quality of soil over time. So taking land that might've been sustained or depleted and through using animals and the right kind of crops, allowing more biodiversity to interact with the soil, building a better soil biome, building more organic matter and building healthier crops and food for people. So regenerative agriculture is just simply improving our farmland and improving the way that we can create crops and healthier food our communities.

Simon Mainwaring:

And I think our listeners fortunately hear more and more about obviously the climate emergency, and they also hear in lots of different ways about soil health and its ability to draw down carbon, but really when they're looking to someone like your company, like Cooks Venture, they're looking to just provide what they need on a daily basis. Can you connect the dots between the food they need that they want for their family and also how regenerative agriculture and farming really serves their future?

Matthew Wadiak:

Yeah, it's challenging because we do need to feed ourselves and we do need to, a lot of consumers suffer from label fatigue, where they go to the grocery store and they see 50 different claims, organic, free-range, ABF, this that, and the other. And it's hard to navigate that space. So it would be unrealistic to ask every single consumer to understand every single claim, but on a high level, I'd say try to buy whole foods. And by that, I mean, ingredients that are not processed. Try to buy ingredients that come from farms. If you know them, that's always much better. Try to buy foods that are grass-fed, grass-finished, pasture-raised. And if you can buy organic vegetables to support better systems, that's great. But regenerative agriculture for companies that do support that, those are companies that are really focused on partnering with farmers to improve that soil quality as opposed to just slapping a label on something. So when you see somebody who's advertising regenerative, it's a good opportunity to ask questions and create a learning for yourself and your family.

Simon Mainwaring:

Yeah, I think more and more consumers are not only conscious, they're conscious because they're better informed and they're taking the time to find out what food is better service to their family, but also to our futures. So, as you look to disrupt this category, it begs a question, which I think is really on a lot of people's minds is, at one hand, we want to serve the climate emergency and we want to enable and scale regenerative agriculture, at the same time, there's a very strong movement around vegan, vegetarian, flexitarian, and so on. So how does Cooks Venture fit in the middle? Because in a sense, we're still in a better sense farming poultry, and so on, but at the same time, we're serving the climate emergency. So help us think that through.

Matthew Wadiak:

Well, I mean, there's really a lot to unpack there. In general, there are two components. I think we do eat a lot of meat as a country and eating a little bit less meat and spending a little bit more on higher quality meat to ensure that farmers are getting paid better, that we're maintaining our soil in a healthy way with cattle, with chickens, with hogs, with seafood is all really important stuff. So I think the amount of consumption is important and the quality of ingredients that we want to perpetuate. And the way that I try to think about it is we talk a lot about in our company, when we have team meetings about social anthropology and how we're building this sort of like society that we'll look back on 20, 30 years from now and say, what are the decisions that we made and how does that impact where we are today?

And when we're thinking about our lives as people, a lot of our memories go back to what did I do with on the holidays, what did I do with my family, what did I do with my friends on these events? And a lot of times that centers around the kitchen table and in the kitchen, usually food related events. So by making good decisions around the table with our friends and family, we're able to cultivate the kind of world we want to live in, which can be a better flexitarian society. It can be a better meet society. And I think those

are all valid principles for getting animals out of keto-related systems and into more sustainable and scalable regenerative systems that are cost-effective to consumers.

The other point that I want to make about that is, if we want to get into kind of the weeds a little bit in terms of finance, when you talk about ESG companies and flexitarian solutions, these are companies that are hot on the market. We know that LPs have mandates now to invest in these kinds of blue chip companies that are ESG-related, and there's a massive shortage of them, just simply from a volume perspective on the market today, there's low inventory. And the numbers that ESG companies are trading at in public markets today between that and where the stock market is going, we're seeing liquidity opportunities for investors in ESG that didn't exist even a few years ago. And that's compelling because it drives VC dollars and angel dollars and PE dollars into an emerging economy where people are forced to care and mandates are dictating how that works, because now there's an option to exit profitably from those businesses and for founders to go and start businesses and use their imaginations to recreate something that they might not have had access to from a capital standpoint a few years ago.

Simon Mainwaring:

It's a really important point you're making, which is the market forces are headed in the right direction, the ESG expectation has woken up. Institutional investors as well as retail investors now saying, hey, show us the metrics behind the difference you're making in the world. And actually, the Biden administration just recently announced this new mandate that it's going to be mandatory ESG reporting rather than voluntary, because it simply wasn't meeting the climate goals efficiently or quickly enough. And so it's great to hear that the market forces are rewarding founders and companies that are headed in this direction. So one more piece of the puzzle here is, there is obviously that appetite literally for meat in all its forms and the fact that you can do it through regenerative agriculture and more responsibly is a plus, but how does that then go about improving the soil? How does that actually address these pressing climate issues? Just help us understand how you go that farming in a way that's different so that you can feel better about not only what you're buying, but what you're enabling in terms of our future.

Matthew Wadiak:

Sure. So, in terms of animal agriculture, there are really two kind of major categories of animal agriculture that folks should understand. Number one, you have ruminants. Ruminants are cattle. So cattle that we eat for beef. And in a ruminant system, cattle eat grass, celluloid material, and they ferment that in what's called the rumen, a compartment in their stomach. And cattle have the unique ability to eat grass and digest that into simple carbohydrates, which then builds muscle and bone and organs and creates healthy animals. So grass-fed, grass-finished beef is so important because it takes those animals off of feedlots and eating harvested grains. Whenever you have harvested grains, you're talking about input requirements to soil and in traditional systems, conventional systems, that includes petrochemicals for fertilizer, things like dicamba and glyphosate for herbicides, and then a lot of energy use on the farm harvesting those crops.

The other kind of animals that we need are monogastric animals, pigs and chickens primarily in the United States. And in monogastric systems, a lot of folks, when you say pasture-raised chicken or pasture-raised pork, immediately assume that because cattle can eat grass, chickens can eat grass and digest that and calorically into building their bodies. It's not the case. You have to feed these animals, but

they also are much better at feed conversion than cattle. So they only have to eat a little bit of grain to put on a larger body mass. Our chickens having to be a little bit slower growing. So they eat more grain than maybe a fast growing Cornish cross chicken, but we want to make sure because they're doing that, that we're focusing on purchasing grain that comes from really great regenerative systems, meaning that we select our birds for the criteria to be able to digest some things like winter wheat as a cover crop, as opposed to just corn and soy, to think about how we can create higher digestibility through selecting heritage lines, keep oats to eat sunflower.

So now we can build organic systems, regenerative systems on land that the chickens are digesting. And that improves the quality of the soil. So if we're harvesting crops from crop land that we're making sure that we're building biodiversity, it's sequestering carbon while we're doing it. And that's a really important consideration.

The other part is that the land that the chickens go out on, if you have, one of our chicken barns that has four or five or six acres of land on it, the impact to the actual soil of the farm land where they're eating their feed from is about 40 times that. So for every 40 acres of chicken land that we have, where we have our pasture-raised chickens, we have for every 10 acres, 400 acres of land out there that's being affected in terms of cropland. So that's why it's so important to get these regenerative systems right and it's so important to support alternative breeds and systems that can digest that kind of feed.

Simon Mainwaring:

So, as I understand it, you're doing better service to the customer who's buying it. It's a more responsible way of raising poultry as you say, and it serves climate more effectively, but let's talk about your business model, because I sit there and like anyone, I go, well, if this is so self-evident, why isn't it happened before? And then at the same time, I think, well, there's large companies out there that effectively have monopolies over this industry. So talk about some of the barriers to entry as you want to launch a company like this, you want to serve our future, you want to be more responsible, but then you run smack up against this massive established sort of legacy industry. What was that like? And what were some of the obstacles?

Matthew Wadiak:

Yeah, well, you hit the nail on the head. So the kind of like elephant in the room that we were just talking about was digestibility to feed. And the reason why that's a problem for the industry and for big business is that the genetics industry that services the entire poultry industry, I mean, every single company from your small farmers market farm, all the way up to Tyson is controlled by two businesses. And everybody's heard of Monsanto and Bayer crop sciences and those huge agribusinesses. The multi-billion dollar businesses that you haven't heard of are Aviagen and Cobb. So Aviagen is the globally dominant poultry breeding company, genetics company, and Cobb is owned by Tyson, the other one. And between those two companies in the United States, they comprise 99.9% of the genetics market for chicken. So that's your small local farmer, that's your big company like Sanderson or Pilgrim's Pride, publicly traded companies. And when you think you're buying that farmer's market chicken, a lot of times you're buying a genetic product that was sold to a hatchery that then buys that bird.

The issue with that specifically, besides the lack of biodiversity that is from those companies is that those businesses have become very good at utilizing US commodity crops, corn and soy predominantly, and selecting for 50, 70, a 100 generations of an animal that performs very well from a feed efficiency standpoint, eating those crops that require these input substitutions like herbicides and ammonium nitrate fertilizer, but even when you were a giant chicken company like call it Sanderson or Pilgrim's Pride, one of the really big ones, you're reliant on the genetics of another ag business company that's providing you those birds. So the performance and the financial success of view is reliant on crop subsidies, which is why we have crops subsidies in our country, and it's reliant on the feed conversion that those companies can provide genetically for you as a customer of those chicks.

Simon Mainwaring:

What you're doing is so important, because as everyone listening can understand, we can have any number of small social enterprises doing things in a more responsible way, but if we don't retool these foundational, fundamental global industries, nothing's really going to change at scale. So help us drop down now to your business model. When you look at the well-established and very protected systems, how do you build out a business model that's actually going to take that on? Can you give us a sense of Cooks Venture, what it looks like?

Matthew Wadiak:

So we're the only independent breeder operators in the United States. And what our business model really does is it does the R&D, it does the research to create these novel strains of heritage chickens. And because there's such a demand for more transparency, because there's such a consumer demand on e-commerce and in retailers now for slower growing healthier chickens, we're able to create a small premium on what we sell, still not inaccessible to a normal consumer. That small premium instead of a 79 cent chicken, and if we can get \$2 a pound for chicken or a 1.85 a pound for chicken, from us on a business standpoint, we can invest a lot more into the research and we can invest a lot more into building quality grains, making sure people are making living wages, making sure we're focusing on biodiversity and still make a healthy margin in our business. So we monetized our company through retail sales, B2B sales, and also direct-to-consumer sales.

And I'd say the other important financial part of the business is, we're not so focused on having one revenue channel like retail or food service when food service existed, in the COVID days, it's much less these days, hopefully, we're coming back there. But we also focus on omni-channel systems like direct-to-consumer and selling to other companies that do direct-to-consumer, because as we've seen, especially in the volatility of the market recently, you have no retailers that are selling a lot one week and not a lot the next week, food service, which is really high week and low next week.

So if we can balance that out with some of the experience that we've had, for example, at Blue Apron, which was just acquiring customers, you have basically a CPA to LTV model, if we can apply some of our knowledge and use levers to say, okay, we're going to create X number of spend efficiently in our econ channels and substitute the rest of our birds on a weekly basis through retailers and manage margin accordingly, that creates a really a much healthier margin management and top line revenue system for us to just look at growth in our company.

Simon Mainwaring:

Obviously, we saw what happened in the auto industry when Tesla went in there in the first place and everyone pushed back because they were insistent on doing things the way that they'd always been done. Did you experience pushback? Did you find that roadblocks were being put in your way or was it, it's fair game and there's capitalism in its pure sense, fortune goes to the brave?

Matthew Wadiak:

Innovation is all about pushback. Innovation is about seeing something that somebody else isn't doing and taking that opportunity. And throughout that process, you're going to work. We can't do everything alone. We have vendors where we're buying equipment from. We have packaging, we have folks who we sell to. And we have to explain what we do on a daily basis, just like every entrepreneur does since the beginning of time. So I think you just get used to folks saying, oh, we can't do it like that, or we have to do it like this. And working through those problems is just part of the responsibility of any entrepreneur.

Simon Mainwaring:

Yeah, I think so. I mean, the old mindset and the new mindset is just going to keep butting up against each other until enough people see the light. And you talked about the different partners, packaging, suppliers, equipment, when you're building a brand, a purposeful brand, are you very conscious in the choices of those partners? How do you make sure that you don't expose yourself to criticism through a partnership? So how did you go about building that coalition?

Matthew Wadiak:

Well, you have to walk on eggshells when you're building a partnership. And one of the things that I've learned after some more years in working in business and being an entrepreneur is that, although it's really important to operate quickly, patience is important. And just like you might explain things to an investor or in a sales channel, we want to work with your partners in such a way that we've always taken the philosophy that partners don't service us, we service them. And when you take on that approach and that mentality, generally, you can get folks who maybe are innovative themselves, but haven't been given the conduit to express themselves in the way that they want to and opportunity to be creative and partner with you as a company and as a team.

Simon Mainwaring:

I think it's a really powerful point because as a B2B supplier, that's one of your revenue streams, a lot of the retailers out there are looking for a story from their suppliers. They want to have something to say at point of sale. So if you really commit to serving your partners, as you say, and they're serving you, then you can all work together to, from a brand point of view, share a narrative that's going to resonate with consumers and that in turn will drive business growth. So I think that's critical. And also one thing that you've mentioned that I think is critical is that if you are going to provide a viable alternative to the way things have always been done, for example, industrial farming and poultry, you need to be vertically integrated in the sense that you need to control the entire supply chain, otherwise, the integrity of what you're doing breaks down at some point. So can you help us understand what does it mean to be vertically integrated?

Matthew Wadiak:

Well, it means a lot. So one of the assets that we acquired when we purchased this company was an 800 acre property with 57 poultry houses, built out in the foothills of the Ozarks and a hatchery that's associated with it. So to maintain these pedigree lines that we own, which date back some of them to the 17th century, we have to have special housing to accommodate that and have those kinds of facilities in America, independent facilities. I think we have the only one that still exists. This farm started operations in the 1930s and was actually operational through World War II, feeding soldiers overseas. And it was founded by a guy named Lloyd Peterson. I'm actually partners with his grandson. And we've created an incredible amount of construction and progress and innovation on this farm over the course of the 10 years that I've been engaging with the company and in the last three years since I've owned it.

And having a program where you're focused on genetics breeding requires people at a PhD level and a team of people at that level to go out and do selection on a daily basis to bring birds into our hatchery and manage genetic lines in a hatchery and keep them segregated and keep the IP associated with that segregated in private and to have people who really know what they're doing in the field too on our breeder operation, where we have the birds that were laying to create our broiler lines. And most companies are able to get fairly easily because they can just buy these birds. And then they have to have a processing plant and some farmers, but when you're vertically integrated, you're really doing it for generations before anybody else in the industry is.

And then additionally, we have in-house nutritionists who are PhD, nutrition level folks, and we're constantly monitoring in feed trials, can we select for the criteria for better digestibility to oats? Can we do that for sunflower? What do the controls look like for those birds? And can we do that in a system where the birds are living their natural life, where they're also going out to pasture? Traditionally, that was always done in small pen trial type arrangements, where you weigh a bird and you put it back in, it's a little isolated container. And we don't want to do that. We want the bird to grow in the same way that it will grow when we're growing it as a broiler, which is in the outdoors.

So those are really challenging things to overcome and to think about and innovate on. And then, of course, that's just the beginning of it. And then you have to manage the processing plant. Then you have to manage the packaging. Then you have to manage the fulfillment and the customer relations. So it's really a lot to take on, but the value proposition, it's so great that there's an incredible amount of opportunity. When you're talking about market size for poultry, it's the most eaten food in America, one of the most eaten foods globally. And the demand for more transparency and slower growing foods and animals that are healthier for people is the largest emerging category in the food space. So that's kind of the light at the end of the tunnel is that we have to do all of this work, we have to innovate, we have to overwhelm ourselves to some degree to make progress, but we're servicing this community of existing demand.

Simon Mainwaring:

You have this purposeful intent, you built out this whole sort of ecosystemic solution in terms of vertical integration and going to market with it, tell me what is the reception been like? What are your sales teams say? How do they convince retailers, customers to pay a premium on the basis of the integrity of

the product you're making? Because no amount of good intention will win the day. You've got to actually go out there and make the sales. So how do you go to market?

Matthew Wadiak:

Yeah, I mean, there's different kinds of customers. There's customers that are extremely eco-conscious and environmentally conscious, and there are customers who will buy a bird simply because we're environmentally more focused. There are people who understand that there's a breeding program with these mono breeds in America and globally, and they want to buy alternative genetics. They want to support a heritage line program, but at the end of the day, it really boils down to one main thing.

And I actually learned this from Bill Nye many years ago, people will buy something for all of the bells and whistles one time, but they'll buy it again because it tastes good. And the key differential is that our chicken simply tastes better. And the feedback that we hear time and time and time and time again is this tastes like the chicken that I had when I was a child, this tastes like the chicken I had that my grandmother grew on her farm when I was a kid. And we hear that over and over and over. And you can see the difference in the meat, you can taste the difference in the flavor of a better grown bird that has slower growing genetics.

And at the end of the day, if we want to feed ourselves better food, retailers understand that. And when you get in store and you start building some velocity in stores and it's increasing week over week over week, because customers keep coming back and become loyal to your brand, because you have something that's genuinely different versus just a different wrapper on a package, then you really have somebody for life. And that's how we've been able to grow as a company.

The other thing that's really been important for our business in terms of growth is you're always up against industry leaders who think they know everything about their industry. That's true in every industry, anybody who's ever been in sales knows that. The thing that's really helped us is we've built an incredible following in e-commerce and share of voice. And if we can use those dollars to acquire customers and we're putting those CPAs to good use, if you're also in the B2B sales world as well, it's free advertising for B2B.

So folks who maybe we've met with two years ago who said, no, no, no, I have a relationship with another company, I don't even want to taste your chicken, today, now they might've seen a 1000, 2000 ads on Facebook and Instagram and their chefs and their customers are coming to them and saying, we want Cooks Venture chicken. In our company now, we want to distribute them in Florida and Atlanta, somewhere on the West Coast in Las Vegas. And that's because our share of voice online has become very powerful. I think it's important for any new business that's thinking about commercial opportunity, you have to have that online share of voice if you really want to grow in those channels.

Simon Mainwaring:

And how did you build that share of voice? Was it a function of the product? Because as you say, it's so critical, and all the episodes of Lead With We, we constantly hear the purpose is no substitute for a great product, you can't compete unless you're delivering a product that is as good or outperforms your

competitors, but is it the product that is driven that sort of word of mouth and the loyalty to the brand, or have you actually been cultivating that through content and thought leadership and marketing?

Matthew Wadiak:

Yeah. So it's primarily marketing-driven. I think if you look at segmentation in customer acquisition, you have like your normal channels, influencer marketing, affiliate marketing, referrals, and then you have paid marketing, obviously, paid search, and then Facebook, Insta ads and social ads. The most effective marketing out there is generally paid search and social campaigns and being able to create brand focused oriented ads that get people to engage with your ads is the most effective way to do that. If you have somebody who's, if you put an ad out there and A/B test that and you look at your conversion rates and your click-through rates and your acquisition rates and you have really a winner and you're able to engage an audience and get nine or 10,000 comments on an ad, you know that you have a captive audience and you're onto an idea.

And we don't claim to know it all, but the one great thing about when you're building a brand that besides acquiring customers or being able to monetize that through digital transactions, you really get that sensory feedback of what customers are thinking in real time, and that can change how you address other consumer markets and other channels.

Simon Mainwaring:

That's really powerful what you're saying, digital and social marketing is not only important in terms of driving sales, but really it's a real-time feedback loop on what is important to your customer, how their tastes, their expectations, their mindset is changing. And so it is important to invest in that. And help us understand through all the sort of A/B testing and all the different advertising that you've done and the success you've had in building that sort of mind share, there are a couple of pointers you'd give us in terms of how you talk about a purposeful brand.

Matthew Wadiak:

Yeah. I mean, a couple things. You should always allocate a certain percentage of your brand marketing for just brand-driven content that you feel like, I feel like as a creative team and as a founder is valuable in the message you're trying to convey. AB marketing is essential, but you should always have spaghetti on the wall and test things that you think anecdotally might be good. I'd say the other thing that's important is, you really have to look at the numbers and follow the numbers, but don't get pigeonholed into running the same kind of campaign over and over and over. It's important to always have 20 or 30 campaigns that are in pretesting preflight mode and looking at what's the next generation of the ad, what's the next hit, what's the next thing that in terms of your brand story that you're trying to communicate to your customers that you can create high engagement on and good KPIs.

When I think about brand marketing, the analogy I always try to give is, if we have a two-by-four and a nail and you're trying to pound the nail in with a hammer, every single time you touch a customer with part of your brand ideology, pasture-raised heirloom better than mainstream chicken, these birds go outside, it's healthier for you and your family, you're supporting better farmer economies, et cetera. By tapping that nail down every time you touch one of those points, that's your brand story, you're able to get that nail into the wood, but if you give the wrong story, like discount, flash sale today, buy cheap chicken and stock up your freezer, what did you just do? You bang the nail sideways. And that consumer,

you're going to either have to slowly tap them back, which takes a lot of work and a lot of money or maybe that nail so far bent over, you never get back. So those touch points are really critical in being not only data-driven like so many entrepreneurs are, but also strategic in the data you're trying to represent.

Simon Mainwaring:

I couldn't agree more. Understandably, a lot of young companies rush to market, they want to get an MVP out there, they want to get some product traction, but there are many who make the smart choice to think, let's build a brand out of the gate. Let's get our strategy in place. Let's define our purpose and the messaging that falls out of that. So, as you say, you can keep hitting that nail and bringing the same bell over and over again in different ways so that you do resonate in people's minds, they know the difference, because otherwise, everybody's attention is so fractured across so many channels in real time that it's almost impossible to build that mindshare that you guys have done. And so tell us about your ambitions in the poultry industry, which as you say is just the largest and most exciting marketplace opportunity in the category, but then, are you looking beyond poultry to other categories? Tell us about the plans for Cooks Venture.

Matthew Wadiak:

Well, a couple of things there. We think there are multiple opportunities in the poultry industry besides our retail and DTC channels. Additionally, ultimately, we're a genetics company and the sale of genetics globally, where slow growing chickens and healthier chickens are in demand is important. Additionally, we have sublines that we're working on at our company that are focused on things like digestibility to local grains in different geographies like Asia, South America, Europe, et cetera, where they have more wheat-driven crops. So selling a chicken, for example, part and parcel with a local food system where they might be growing something like Kernza or lupin as a protein substitute to the soy in different geographies. So building digestibility to those things and selling a grain system with a bird is novel and has not been done, but is a great IP genetic and nutritional product that isn't in the future of our business.

And then, additionally, we really want to be from a DTC standpoint a one-stop shop for a vertically integrated companies that people can trust. So we have partners that we work with in the beef category, we're launching lamb very soon with partners from the Savory Institute hub farms that are near us, that we're actually running with our chickens as a really cool combination system. We're planting fruit and nut trees on all of our properties where the chickens graze amongst the forest. In agroforestry, silvopasture systems in scale. We're actually planting in the next couple of weeks 20,000 hybridized European American hazelnut trees that the chickens will be out in. So we're expanding into categories that make sense naturally, but our goal is to be a multi-billion dollar company, but prove that these systems that can be tested and are tried and true in smaller operations can have variable efficiency in scale and be marketed in a way that is modern and conducive to better farmer systems, better transparency and consumer demand.

Simon Mainwaring:

There are those like you that have taken on these big industries, Elon Musk with auto industry or Adam Lowry at Ripple, whose has taken on the dairy category and impossible foods apparently is now getting into dairy, you're taking on the poultry industry. In one sense, I think while that's really hot at the outset, but when you've got a big industry that is a massive needed disruption, there's nothing but upside on

the other side. So tell us what's that experience been like? And what counsel or advice would you give for those entrepreneurs listening that want to take on these big, big kind of legacy categories?

Matthew Wadiak:

I think you really have to say, regardless of what happens, regardless of who says no on the market or whatever problems we have with a particular situation, whether it's like scientific or manufacturing or sales or distribution, you have to be ready to overcome problems. And I think every entrepreneur needs to be ready for those same things, but I think when you're looking at a macro industry like building the first e-commerce food company in two decades or redefining what poultry looks like in America, you should be ready to face steep challenges. But again, to your point, the reward for being willing to do that is enormous.

And the other thing that I think is important to talk about is what's the moat? How do we define our companies in terms of building unique identities that are not easily replicable by other businesses. And by being involved in something like genetics, for example, it takes over, we're dealing with the biology of animals, takes 26 weeks from a baby chick to become a hen to lay an egg. And you have to do that through five generations times four or five generations of those five generations, which is about 10 years to create a genetic line. The amount of money that you have to overcome to invest in that is just many tens of millions, if not hundreds of millions of dollars. So you're able to dig this really, really, really deep moat and commit to doing something different. I think having that security and knowing that, hey, at the end of the day, we're sitting on the backbone of something very, very, very powerful here. We know that people want it, now how do we solve all the other problems in between and overcome the daily obstacles?

Simon Mainwaring:

Sure. And for those of us that worry about the future as we should, but as entrepreneurs, we want to take it on, what is your vision for the future of farming and food?

Matthew Wadiak:

Well, one thing is for certain, there are a lot of people going about these problems in different ways, but we can't keep doing what we're doing. That's the main thing. And that isn't just farming and food. That's policy. That's how we pay farmers. That's how consumers, if consumers can think about one thing when they go to the grocery store, I would implore them to think, the person who created this tray of meat or this vegetable or this bag of beans or whatever it is, that the people who put it in the package make a living wage, number one, that's very important that we pay our food workers in our country a living wage. Number two, did this food that I'm going to consume hurt future generations in terms of food production? Are we depleting from our soil to the point that we can't recover from that in the future?

So if you can start to ask yourself those couple of questions, not just as an entrepreneur or people trying to monetize this business, but as a consumer, I think it really starts to move money into the categories where we need it to create regenerative systems where none of this happens without investment. And that's what drives the investment is people asking those questions.

Simon Mainwaring:

Great. And for those that want to enable the shift that you've made possible, where can they buy your chicken today?

Matthew Wadiak:

Well, you can buy our chicken all over the country in the New York region and at Boston and Baltimore and DC at FreshDirect, you can buy it on our website, cooksventure.com. It's up and down the West Coast from New Seasons, New Leaf, down in LA to Jimbo's and Erewhon Market. In Chicago, Eataly and Eataly nationally, by the way. So we're all over the place. We're in several 1000 retailers throughout the country. If you can't find a near local store, just pop online and grab.

Simon Mainwaring:

Fantastic. Matthew, thank you so much for your time and also for the leadership of you and your team to really re-engineer the industry for our future. Really appreciate it.

Matthew Wadiak:

Thank you so much for what you do, Simon.

Simon Mainwaring:

Thanks for joining us for another episode of Lead With We. Our show is produced by Goal 17 Media, and you can find more information about Cooks Venture in the show notes for this episode. Make sure you subscribe to Lead with We on Apple, Google, or Spotify, and do share it with your friends and colleagues so they too can build purposeful and profitable businesses. You can also watch our episodes on YouTube at We First TV. And if you'd like to learn more about purposeful branding, check out wefirstbranding.com, where we have lots of free resources and case studies. I'll see you on the next episode. And until then, let's all Lead With We.