

## Features

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## Move Forward

*Ellen C. Wells*



Holmquest Farms is located in the small town of Hudson, New York, no more than 150 miles from New York City and close enough to the metropolis to bring weekend and seasonal visitors to the area on a regular basis. The original farm was owned and operated by Evans Brewery, which grew hops on the property up until the early 1900s. Tom Holmes' grandfather purchased the land for a dairy farm and named his herd "Holmquest." Tom's father moved the farm from dairy cows to a vegetable growing operation in the late 1970s.

Soon after, in the early 1980s, hoop-style greenhouses were erected to grow vegetable transplants for the 450-acre farm, along with flowering plants and vegetables for retail sale. Currently, about half of the 450 acres is dedicated to field crops and half is in vegetable production for sale at the farm's on-site stand, as well as to local restaurants.

### **A Greenhouse Goes Up**

The Holmes' hoop houses were old, but adequate. Nevertheless, Tom and Terri decided the retail portion of the business needed upgrading for the convenience of their customers. "Nah, we didn't need [a new greenhouse]," Tom says. "We're trying to make [the shopping experience] more customer friendly," noting that they're making efforts to change with the times.

They connected with Jeff Warschauer of Nexus about three years ago to talk over the possibility of building a new glass greenhouse. "From a salesperson perspective, this was a tough one," says Jeff. "The Holmes' had no idea what to build and only had some older hoop houses." Jeff asked them to take a leap of faith when it came to finalizing the structure, as it's not only a large investment, but also a big change. Jeff admits to having concerns at the start of the Holmes project, but after visiting the family and the operation several times, he "got really excited." "Tom and Terri have 'farm' in their blood," Jeff says. "They wanted to take their business to the next level."



*The three-spanned Nexus glass greenhouse has vented roofs, large gables for signage and an expansive automatic sliding door—big improvements over the four hoop houses previously on this site.*

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### New Facility Details

- Three wide-span 42 ft. x 110 ft. Vail Atriums with one having a “bump-out” of 10 ft. for the mechanical room.
- Roofs are tempered glass with the bump-out being insulated metal.
- EDDG vents for inlet air lift up and down as opposed to swinging out.
- The roof vents are massive Atrium vents with about a 9-ft. chimney on each peak so the heat escapes quickly, negating need for noisy fans.
- Front three gables have great signage, glass and a huge Stanley Auto Slider.

With construction beginning in 2013, the Holmes’ moved four existing hoop houses to the rear of their production area and in its place constructed a 15,000 sq. ft. three-bayed glass structure with Atrium vented roofs (see sidebar). “We made the greenhouse shopper-friendly,” says Tom, “with wider aisles and carts so people don’t have to carry their purchases. The roofs open up so the heat goes out and there’s not the big fans making noise all the time. The environment is just nicer.”

Turns out this new greenhouse isn’t just good for the customer—it’s good for the grower, too. The Holmes’ also use this new space for growing plants both for customers and their own use on the farm. The end product has certainly changed. “We’ve always grown a quality product, but with the environment of the new glass greenhouse, as a grower, I have seen about a 30% increase in the quality of the plant because of the ventilation, the glass, the air movement,” says Tom. “I’ve been growing for so many years, and for me to see a difference, that’s a big thing.”

Along with the new greenhouse, Holmquest Farms also had a bit of a branding makeover, thanks to some of those skilled “city customers” who assisted with that portion of the project. The result was new logos, signage

and staff T-shirts. They've also set up a website and a Facebook page, which they update frequently with photos of what's new at the Farm—all with the help of their customers and friends.

"They didn't stop there," says Jeff. "We discussed interior displays with something of a soft look. They hired an architect who prepared a new bench layout with lots of curved lines." The Holmes' were able to prepare the benches themselves with a materials list and drawings provided by the architect.

### **Commitment to the Customer**

With the financial investment in the new structure, the Holmes family did an unthinkable thing: "We put up this brand-new facility and we kept all of our prices exactly the same as the year before," Tom says. "At first everyone saw this new facility and thought everything was going to be sky high, and when they came in they saw prices were exactly the same."

Holding prices steady is a prime example of Holmquest Farms' commitment to the customer. Retailing to the community since the early 1980s, they've developed a bit of a following with both locals and yearly out-of-towners.

"They're not just customers, we're on a first-name basis," says Tom. "Most of the people coming here we know personally. A lot of people, their parents or grandparents used to come here and they brought their kids, and now another generation has come in." The Holmes' recognize the value of building those community relationships. Whether its offering their customers the same high-producing vegetable varieties that they grow out in the field, or allowing the Boy Scouts to work for tips on Mother's Day Weekend, serving the customer long-term and for their best interest is what's behind the Holmes' every business move. "It's not like they just come in the door to buy a plant," says Tom. "We're there for the customer, not just to make sales. It keeps them coming back."

Providing fresh fruits and vegetables—and flowering plants, too—at reasonable prices is important to the Holmes family. "We sell at a rather inexpensive price because I don't want anything to go to waste, and secondly, because I think that everyone should be able to afford fresh vegetables," Tom says. "Everything nowadays is from overseas and you never know what you're getting ... If you think about it, it takes probably 10 days before it gets to the store, then the store holds it before they sell it, and then however long you keep it before you consume it. What do you think they put on that stuff?" Customers urge the Holmes' to bring their produce to the city for sale, but Tom responds with this: "I need to be here to make a quality product. I'd rather do quality and be here to do it and be able to sell it a little cheaper so people come to me."



## Setting the Table

In another example of moving forward in order not to be left behind, the Holmes' hit upon a genius concept: a table-to-farm dinner held in their new greenhouse. Twisting the concept of "farm to table" where fresh local produce is brought to a restaurant, Holmquest Farms brought the chef to the farm. In August, Hugh Horner, a friend and chef of the local Hudson restaurant Helsinki prepared a summer-themed dinner using food mostly grown and raised on the Holmquest Farms, including chickens raised on site. They sold 65 tickets for the event. In October, they held a fall-themed dinner complete with a farm-raised roasted pig. They limited dinner ticket sales to 100.

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*The menu for the "Eat the Farm" table-to-farm dinner held at Holmquest Farms in August used mostly ingredients grown and raised right on the farm.*

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"I saw that other people were doing this [holding dinners], and since we had this nice new building, I talked to the chef who is friends of ours and we came up with this," Tom says modestly. They created a video of the first table-to-farm dinner to post to the Farm's website in order to build interest in future dining events.

"This [project] is really what gets you up in the morning, raring to go," says Jeff. "They are truly a great garden center, farm and family rich in history. I love this place and the rebirth of a business that had sales increase through the roof. Nice to hear for a change." **GP**