

Wishnatzki's Legacy Grows With Help from Vistage

Gary Wishnatzki's grandfather probably wouldn't recognize the business he started in 1922 as a Russian immigrant selling produce from a pushcart in New York City. Chances are even greater that he wouldn't relate to the business Wishnatzki is growing with the fourth generation of his family.

Wish Farms is at the forefront of three major innovations in the produce industry: Marketing berries year-round, building a specific consumer brand for its berries, and developing robotic technologies to pick berries, as affordable labor becomes more scarce.

"It was a conscious effort to start growing our own berries and to become a year-round berry house," says Wishnatzki, who has been part of his family business since 1974 when strawberries were still a luxury item purchased primarily by affluent buyers in big cities. With partners across the U.S., South America and Canada, Wish Farms works with select retailers to provide strawberries, blueberries, blackberries and raspberries branded with the distinct Misty the Garden Pixie.

The solo operation his grandfather started has become the largest strawberry shipper based in Florida. The company represents more than 200 growers and

ships approximately 10 million flats of strawberries and 30 million pounds of blueberries annually. Its pushcart is evolving into a new headquarters in Plant City with 23,000 square feet of office space and a 138,000-square-foot warehouse that will include blueberry and strawberry processing, pre-cooling and cooler space.

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- Gary Wishnatzki,
Vistage Florida member

"It will be cooler than anything in Silicon Valley," he said. "We'll have a slide down from offices to the first floor, a rooftop conference room and event space, a treehouse connected to the second floor – and a few more surprises that even the employees don't know about yet."

On a more serious note, Wishnatzki is the co-founder of Harvest CROO Robotics, which will deploy "Berry 6" later this year to replace up to 30 strawberry pickers. "It was borne of what we view to be a necessity --- the availability of labor is shrinking, and it's only going to get worse."

And as Wishnatzki faces the challenges of growing a family business, he counts on his peers and Vistage chair to help him work through decisions about a constantly changing future.

"Gary was the first member of my Tampa Bay group in 2005 and he's been active ever since," said chair Art McNeil. "We were looking for growth-oriented companies that were value driven. Since joining Vistage, Wish Farms revenues have grown from \$40 million to over \$300 million."



In fact, Vistage has played such an important role in their growth that Wishnatzki enrolled an operating officer in a Key Group to share those teachings deeper within the company.

"Vistage has been really good for me," Wishnatzki said. "Sometimes their advice is surprising because they have opinions I really didn't expect to hear – but I usually follow it because it's well thought through."

For the future, Wishnatzki is looking at several new ventures but focusing on having fun and building on his family legacy. "My son and two sons-in-law work here – my daughter did until she took some time off to raise the fifth generation of Wish Farms."

About Vistage

Vistage offers professionally facilitated peer programs for Florida CEOs, Presidents and Business Owners of both larger organizations as well as emerging small businesses. Members meet monthly in small groups of 12-16 hand-selected members where they focus their collective brainpower on each other's opportunities and challenges, and hear expert speakers. Since 1957 Vistage has been dedicated to increasing the effectiveness and enhancing the lives of CEOs. There are 23,000+ members worldwide – with more than 800 in Florida.

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