



ORGANIC GRANOLA & OATS



Producer OF THE *Month*



BRATTLEBORO FOOD CO-OP

Producer ^{OF} THE *Month*

by Jon Megas-Russell



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Peter and Virginia Vogel founded Back Roads Granola with the goal of creating the best granola you have ever tasted. They have been entrepreneurs in one form or another for much of their lives, and in many ways their success story starts with Virginia and Peter's skills: Virginia's business savvy and sales and marketing experience, combined with her commitment to impeccable customer service, has led their strategy, branding, and sales approach; she and her team build relationships with every one of their current buyers, and are quick to respond on every level to satisfy their customer base. Peter's experience in the carpentry and construction business has enabled him to design and build a customized production line of great efficiency that produces batch after batch of top-quality granola, which get packed fresh and swiftly shipped out the door to their many customers. The recipe for their granola business is one that has created a perfect balance of high quality, certified organic, gluten free ingredients with a fair price point for the finished

product. In just nine years, with an excellent core group of family and staff working around them, Back Roads has succeeded in becoming a nationally and internationally distributed granola brand with a wide variety of offerings.

Virginia and Peter met at the University of Oklahoma, moved to Vermont in the 1970s, and have lived in Halifax, VT ever since. They built their own home and raised their two daughters (now grown) there. They have raised cats, dogs, chickens, pigs and llamas over the years, and when they're not at work, Virginia and Peter spend most of their free time together on the farm, cooking great meals, though they travel they can. Their first business was Vermont Timber Homes, a timber frame business, and their first food business was Vermont Gold, which produced a line of maple syrup, maple candy, and maple sauces and salad dressings. After their kids grew up and left for college, Virginia and Peter renovated their home to open Spirit Hill Farm Bed & Breakfast. They spent four years offering a lovely, unique place for folks to stay at their "back roads" Vermont getaway. Guests raved

about the granola served at breakfast and often asked if they could purchase it to bring home. The rest, as they say, is history.

In 2011, Virginia and Peter renovated an existing 16' x 24' space at their home for a commercial kitchen capable of producing 1,000 pounds of granola per week. Many co-ops in our region began selling Back Roads Granola—your Brattleboro Food Co-op being the first to sell the original, in bulk. Growth came quickly, along with a high level of customer satisfaction and increased demand from retailers all over the East Coast. By 2012, Back Roads was selling both bulk and packaged granolas and had expanded their flavor offerings.

In 2013, Back Roads outgrew their home commercial kitchen and made the decision to move production to the Cotton Mill in Brattleboro (where they previously produced Vermont Gold maple products). At the same time, their daughter Coral returned home to join the family



business with a degree in marketing and ten years of work experience. From 2014-2017 additional bakers were hired and new equipment purchased to enable increased production. In 2016, they transitioned to a completely gluten free brand and started adding Paleo products to the line (they now produce nine varieties). The next year, Peter and Virginia's other daughter, Liv, joined the company as head of sales in the Northeast/North Atlantic region. In 2018, their rapid growth rate was intentionally slowed to allow for installation of additional state-of-the-art production equipment to be installed. Additional training for an ever-increasing production team with an emphasis on efficiency and safety became a priority.

Virginia and Peter are very serious about producing their granola

with the highest quality organic ingredients available and shipping it fresh out of the oven (a huge point of differentiation versus other granolas). Back Roads granolas are certified organic, non-GMO Project Verified, kosher and gluten free. They contain no salt, soy or canola oil. And as of mid-2018, their products don't contain any cane sugar—only maple syrup and honey are used to lightly sweeten and enhance flavor, and coconut sugar sweetens the chocolate they use.

Sourcing organic, non-GMO Project Verified ingredients for granola takes Peter on local as well as international journeys to meet Back Roads' strict standards. Purchasing ingredients involves sourcing from Vermont, Canada, Mexico, Spain, Bulgaria, Brazil, and more. Peter likes to say that Back Roads is a "glocal" company, meaning ingredients are



sourced locally and globally, with a priority on purchasing directly from producers wherever they're from. Locally, Back Roads annually purchases thousands of pounds of certified organic maple syrup from Norse Farm, a 4th generation northern Vermont family farm with 18,000 taps. Back Roads also purchases large quantities of organic chai from locally-owned Chai Wallah, whose facility is right next door to Back Roads in the Cotton Mill in Brattleboro. Internationally, Back Roads is purchasing ingredients such as almonds and sunflower seeds directly from farms in Bulgaria and Spain. Purchasing all international ingredients directly from producers is a goal they are working towards.

Back Roads' production has grown exponentially over the years. Like other granola bakers, the process they use to make their granola is unique and, therefore, the equipment is customized for their needs. Peter's background in building and construction has allowed him to create new and intriguing ways to



increase from 1,000 pounds of granola per week to over 2,500 pounds per day. The work starts early each morning with a team of bakers tumbling wet and dry ingredients in four cement mixers with food-grade liners. Tumbling allows each element, such as cashews, almonds, coconuts chips, etc., to remain intact. Once it is sufficiently tumbled/mixed, it is transferred to the 'depositor', which applies a thin, even layer of the granola mixture onto each baking tray. Over 400 trays, holding 6 pounds of granola each, are baked each day, five days a week. Once baking is completed, the granola is cooled and dried fruit is added, at which point the bakers shift their attention to packaging the mouthwatering mixture. It's never packaged until it is completely cooled, which assures that every bag or box is perfectly crunchy. They then proceed to mixing dry ingredients together for the next day's production.

Back Roads granolas are currently sold in 1,000 locations across the country and in every state except Nebraska. They are very proud of being recognized as a national premium brand. They continue to invest heavily in improving processes and adding to existing production equipment to make the job of granola making easier and safer for



all involved. Employees currently include twenty local people, and that number continues to rise. Most recently, Back Roads hired an HR director whose job it is to support all employees, prioritize work-life balance, and develop alternative benefits and wellness programs. The future goal is to offer employees comprehensive healthcare with the continued growth of their business.

So what does the future hold for this flourishing business? They have many accounts and much opportunity for increasing their customer and distribution pipeline. They will continue to invest in equipment to increase and improve production and will develop new efficiencies across the board. Continued healthy growth will bring increased opportunities to offer more jobs in our community, and Back Roads is committed to increased wage opportunities combined with increased employee benefits. They will continue to pursue relationships



and direct purchasing opportunities with their growers/producers. And, you can expect to see their brand expand in related categories.

**Stop by the Co-op
on Wednesday April 10
& Wednesday April 24,
from 11am-1pm to
meet the team from
Back Roads Granola
and taste their delicious
organic granolas!** 