



Tom (right) and Jesse (left) Milesnik

SOMERSET GRAIN & FEED

Tom Milesnik is adjusting his Bernardsville business to changing times, while also preserving our area's agricultural history.

BY ALICE ROCHE CODY
PHOTOS BY LAUREN KEARNS

In October 2021, Tom Milesnick marked his 40th year at Somerset Grain & Feed in Bernardsville, and a recent tour of his facility illuminated his dual roles as owner: adjusting his business to changing times, while also preserving our area's agricultural history of the grand farming estates that once flourished throughout the Somerset Hills. Stepping into his store - which sells everything from pet supplies to lawn fertilizer to locally sourced hay - feels like visiting a museum, with Tom serving as the careful curator.

"We've been here 76 years - the third oldest business in Bernardsville, next to M.J. Neill and the movie theater," said

Tom, a 64-year-old Gladstone resident. "Back in the day, it was like a gas station or convenience store, where you fed the horses that plowed your fields. It was important to the Somerset Hills area and provided feed for all the estates, local farmers, the little people and the big people. It had to be in the center of town so the grain station was close to the railroad."

While reminiscing, Tom sits atop 50-pound bags of specially blended birdseed stacked at the front of his shop. "How has it changed? We had guys waiting in their trucks at 5:30 am, smoking cigarettes before we put the lights on. They'd come to get their supplies before the sun came up, waiting for us to put the



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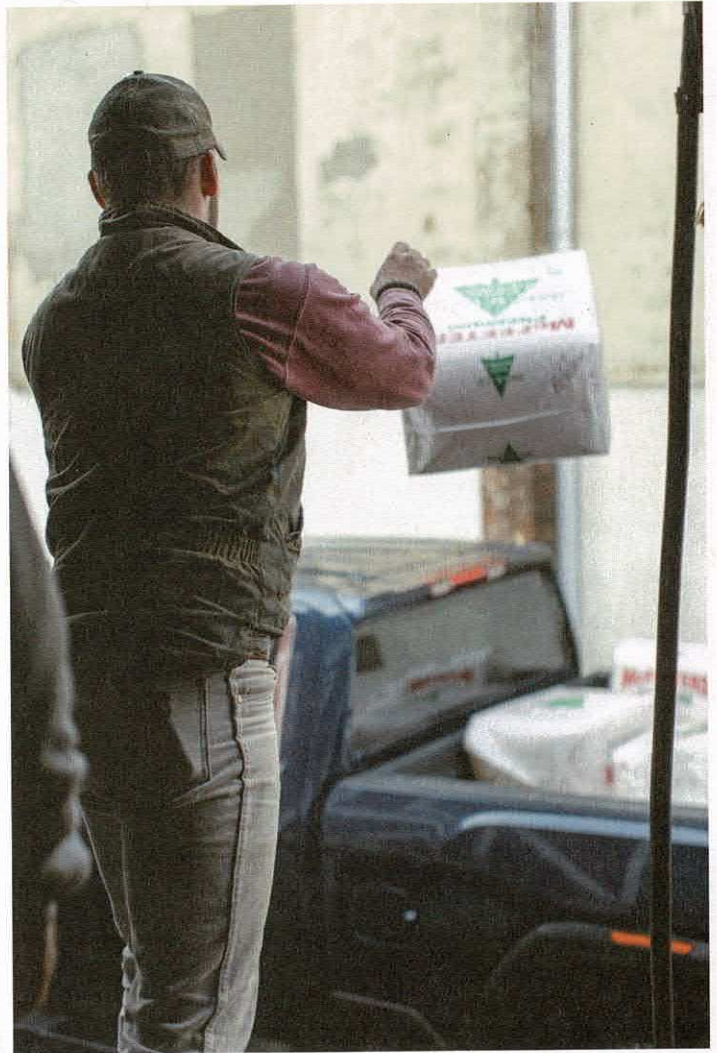


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key in the door. Our old boss, Pete, would put on a pot of coffee and shoot the breeze."

Just then, Tom greets a customer carrying a chain saw to be dropped off. "We have a sharpening service," he explains. "An old-timer, Hugh, does it for us. When he hangs it up, I don't know who'll replace him."

Chances are, this icon of a store will surely adapt and survive, if history is any indication. While it may no longer be a pre-dawn bustling hub, it remains relevant by offering premier products and consultations. Take the grass seed, it's from a nearby family-owned business, a deliberate mix that sprouts verdant green lawns rivaling fields in Ireland. And customers report that they cannot fill their bird feeders fast enough with the specially blended birdseed that attracts cardinals, robins and finches.

The farm delivery service is also key.

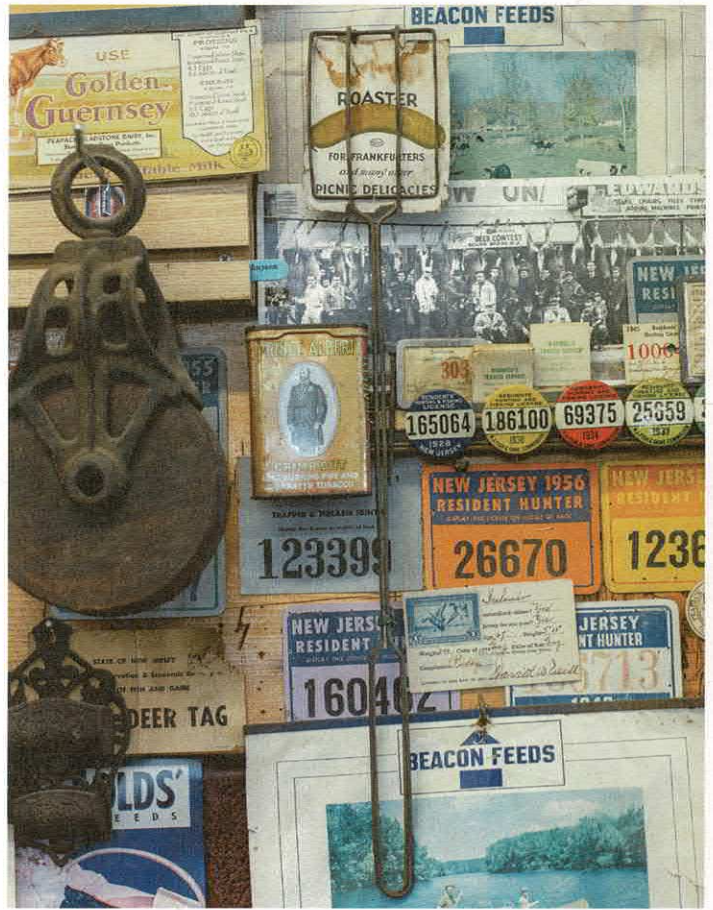
"We pride ourselves on our same-day or next-day delivery, which separates us from the pack," said Tom. "It's an honor to serve our community." His delivery staff, which includes his son, Jesse, and two part-timers, Kyle and Steve, make continu-

ous runs dropping off livestock feed, hay and bedding to neighboring farms as far away as Pittstown. The bulk of his business supports horses, with cattle coming in a close second.

As Tom heads toward the front counter, he's like a practiced docent sharing local lore and pointing out artifacts that decorate the walls. A history buff, he's comfortable dabbling in the past.

He explains that the current storefront, built in 1947, used to be the original feed store's grass parking lot. Black-and-white photos document the builders' progress as a crane lifts the ceiling's steel beam. Tom's former employer, Pete Mastrobattista, bought the business in 1945 and incorporated it as Somerset Grain & Feed. Before that, it was known as White & Sons, and before that, Barker & Higgins. It just so happens that Tom has relics from both businesses, a wooden pen he grabbed at a VNA sale from the former and an old thermometer hanging behind the counter for the latter.

Next, he points to an antique hot dog wire roaster fastened to the wall. "I had a woman customer, about 80 years old, and she started tearing up," said Tom. "I said, 'Are you okay?' And she says, 'I used to sit with my father who made hot dog's with that.' It triggered a memory." Another customer asked his grandson if he knew what the strange wire contraption with a wooden



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When they're here, they're family.

handle was used for. A rug beater, of course, for cleaning dusty carpets. Memorabilia from bygone Bernardsville stores, such as Fox's Hardware and Griffin & Howe, a hunting and firearms store, join the mix. High above loom large antique grain and feed signs, unearthed from beneath floorboards in the storage room, stuffed with hay to serve as makeshift insulation.

Moving past his back office, Tom points out a Kennedy and Johnson Leadership for the 60s campaign poster. Destined for the dumpster, it was hidden behind a picture that belonged to the late Dr. Julius Mastro, a Drew poli-sci professor and part-store owner. "That was a good rescue," he said. "Kids like to sell stuff on eBay, but if it comes to me, I'll save it."

Next comes the old weight room, where a vintage balance scale sits on a table. "We used to have all bins of seeds, barley, oat cracked into 5 and 10 pounds," he said. "It was like going to candy store."

Back then, railcars delivered the feed, and an old track extension connecting the store to the train station can still be spotted outside. "My boss, Pete, would spot cars at night and open the doors to the mill," said Tom. "He'd drop a plank down, shovel grain out, put it in a cart and wheel it in to be sent to the grain tower. It was run up the conveyors, ground and bagged into 100-pound bags. They made chicken and horse feed from corn, oats and wheat. Guys tough as nails, 120 pounds smoking

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cigarettes, lugged the 100-pound bags. Now it comes packaged into 50-pound bags. I caught a glimpse, the tail end of all that.”

A concrete ramp leads into the original store. “If this room could talk,” said Tom, shaking his head.

Today it’s stuffed with rows upon rows of packaged feed for dogs, cattle, horses, chicken, goats, sheep and more. Old-school burlap bags cover the walls, and original wood plank floorboards line the entrance. Above, Tom points out a spec of pale green paint left behind.

“When we knocked the old ceiling down, a treasure trove of invoices came down, some as old as 1903, along with a mummified cat, a thermometer and all kinds of artifacts,” said Tom. “There were elaborate orders from the Dryden and Robling estates, with 40 bags cow feed, 30 bags chicken feed. It gave a window into the big estates.”

On the wall that faces the railroad tracks, bricks now cover a glass window. “The bookkeeper used to stand here and open the window and stick his head out to see where the railcars were,” said Tom. “There was a wood burning stove nearby to keep warm.”

A sparrow swoops down and flies out an open doorway on the opposite wall. Overhead, near the back, some charred ceiling beams remain. The store lost its three-story grain tower - the tallest town building at the time - when it burned down in 1968.



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Tom (right) and Jesse (left) Milesnik behind the counter at Somerset Grain and Feed



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“The fire was so bad, they let it burn for three days,” said Tom. “They couldn’t put the hay and grain out.”

The phone rings. It’s Jean at the front counter, telling Tom there’s a customer pick-up. “Send ‘em down,” he said. Then he hauls 50-pound dogfood bags to the open doorway. Below, a woman parks her car.

“Everybody have a good time at the ball?” Tom asked.

“Wonderful,” she replies, smiling as she loads the bags into her hatchback.

“The rest of your order is on its way, we’ll call when it gets here,” he said before she drives away.

These days, it’s hard for small retail stores to compete with companies like Amazon that drop dogfood onto customers’ front porches. But Tom guarantees his pet food is freshest because it moves so quickly. And his face-to-face customer interactions are priceless.

“We know the first names of 70% of our people,” Tom said. “I wish we had a bigger staff so there’d be less running around. Then I could sit and talk to people, but I don’t have that luxury.” For now, it’s Tom and his son, Jesse, as full-timers with Kyle and Steve making deliveries parttime.

Above all, Tom’s commitment is to the animals. “Even if we’re closed, I don’t want to hear a horse is hungry,” he said. “Me and my son, we go out for different deliveries after-hours.

You can't go to Shop Rite. A bag of carrots is not going to cut it for a horse."

Over the years, he has made deliveries despite floods, tornadoes and blizzards. Once, it was snowing so hard when his truck broke down that he spilt open a bag of birdseed to watch the birds until help arrived.

As if on cue, another sparrow flies out the open door.

Tom's dedication to animals started young. He grew up in Middlesex and was responsible for taking care of his dogs as well as feeding the quail and pheasants his family raised. "Our domestic animals depended on me," he said. "It's not like deer or birds that can fend for themselves. Domestic animals relies on you, like a pet. It keeps me doing what I do."

During summer months, starting at age 12, he spent summers on a Pennsylvania farm. "We drove pickup trucks and tractors," he said. "Set its hooks in me. I was done. The tone, the speed, pure enjoyment. Riding horses. I'd go out there when school ended and come back a week before to get a haircut so I'd be ready for school."

The freedom of the outdoors is what attracted Tom to Somerset Grain & Feed when he first visited in 1981. At the time, he worked a government job in Hillsboro but felt penned-in by punching a time card and working at a site surrounded by barbed wire. Instantly, he was hooked.

"I was like, 'You're going to pay me to do this?'" he said. "It was a unique blend. I love animals, love farming, and love the outdoors. It's a combination of all three. It's total freedom. I get in the truck and go buy hay." He purchased the store from Jim McCue in 2004.

Yet Tom knows this life isn't for everyone. His son Justin works at an IT firm in Hoboken, while Jesse returned after attending the University of Wyoming. "It's a great privilege to work alongside my son," he said. "Not many dads get to say they hang out with their son all day long. It's a special relationship, the crown jewel of all of this."

He calls Jesse his Rock of Gibraltar. "He kept us going," said Tom. "God has blessed us really well. We always keep going. Seventy years ago, there were bumps in road, and they kept going. That's why we're here. All you can do is try. There's honor in what we do. Ain't a lot do what we do. We're proud of our niche."

Somerset Grain and Feed is located at 74 Mine Brook Road, in Bernardsville, NJ. Please call 908.766.0204 or visit somersetgrainandfeed.com.



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