



Pineland Farms in New Gloucester is home to a number of agricultural, business, sporting and recreational activities.

In the middle of a movement

Pineland Farms a big name in Maine for local, value-added food

BY JULIA BAYLY
BDN STAFF

For almost a century, the cluster of brick buildings in New Gloucester housed the state's institution for developmentally disabled people — originally called the Maine School for the Feeble-Minded — before it fell on hard times in the 1970s and finally shut its doors in 1996.

Today, the buildings, grounds and gardens are home to Pineland Farms and are at the center of the state's locally produced and value-added food movement with operations stretching from southern Maine to the St. John Valley.

"When it was a mental hospital, it had two large farms on either side of it," Craig Denekas, president of the Libra Foundation, said.

In 2000, Libra — the private philanthropic foundation created by the late Elizabeth Noyce in 1989 — purchased the original 1,600-acre property from the state to build what is now a 5,000-acre working farm, diverse business campus and educational and recreational venue.

"Libra was really sort of the originator of Pineland," Denekas said. "When we acquired the buildings, we also got those two farms — Hill Farm and Valley Farm."

Back when it was a state hospital, some residents tended to the animals to produce eggs, milk and cheese and grew vegetables, Denekas said.

"We got it in 2000 and then commenced a very large-scale rehabilitation project," he said. "We renovated every building top to bottom with the idea the farms themselves could be home for a Maine product base with cheese, potatoes and beef."

The thinking at the time, according to Denekas, was that Maine could benefit by combining its high-quality food with a



Visitors get up close and personal with some of Pineland Farms's 130 Holstein dairy cows recently in New Gloucester.

branded image, much like what has already been done in the state with Stonewall Kitchen or in Vermont with Ben & Jerry's.

"We know we can grow a quality potato in Aroostook County as well as Idaho, if not better," he said. "But Idaho has really succeeded in marketing their brands."

With an eye toward "value added," Denekas said Pineland Farms decided to avoid the bagged whole potato markets and instead develop prepackaged diced and mashed potatoes at its processing facility in Mars Hill.

"We'll run between 60 million and 70 million pounds of potatoes through that plant this year," he said. "That plant supports 180 well-paying jobs with good benefits."

The packaged potatoes are sold to Applebee's, Walt Disney World, Cracker Barrel, Bob Evans, Golden Corral and Hannaford grocery stores, according to Denekas.

"Sales are so good, we are having a hard time keeping up," he said. "We doubled the capacity of the plant, and we may have to double it again."

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DEB NEUMAN
BACK TO BUSINESS

3 reasons to break up with a customer

It was late at night when they checked in, a husband and wife who had booked two weeks at my inn in Bar Harbor back when I was an innkeeper. I knew within five minutes of their arrival this was not going to go well.

They demanded service that I was not able to provide — valet, restaurant, bar, pool. My property did not offer those amenities.

I knew there would be no way they would enjoy their stay with me and we would all be miserable. I decided it to sit them down for the "talk."

I kindly suggested they would be better off staying with someone else and offered to find them a room at a more resort-like property. They

agreed. I made the breakup as easy as possible by returning their room deposit and making all of the arrangements for them. It was the best decision for all of us.

The downside of this breakup was that I found myself with a vacancy at the height of the season. I also worried that they would be unhappy with me and share negative comments about my business.

Fortunately, those worries were unwarranted. I rented their vacant room quickly and later learned that this couple contacted the Bar Harbor Chamber of Commerce to praise me for providing them with exceptional customer service. They had a fabulous visit to Bar Harbor and planned to return.

Breaking up with a customer is hard to do but it's often for the best when you realize that the relationship is not going to work out well. Too often we try to be everything to everyone out of fear of losing a customer or negative feedback. But there are times when a breakup is the best way to go.

The No. 1 reason to break up with a customer is that you're not able to meet their expectations. When this occurs, it's best to have the "talk" with the customer: Clearly explain what you can and can't offer and suggest solutions and referrals to other businesses that can better meet their needs.

A second good reason for breaking up with a customer is that they demand so much of your time that it's having a negative impact on your business. Consider the return on investment and if this relationship is harming your ability to conduct your business and your relationship with other customers. If a customer is causing stress and creating havoc, let them go.

The third reason to break up with a customer is that they treat you or your staff poorly. I always have been fiercely protective of my employees. They deserve to be respected. It's time to break up with a customer if they are consistently rude or belittling to the people that are most important to your business.

Breaking up is hard to do. Similar to our personal relationships, it starts with knowing yourself and your business, what you can and can't offer, what you want out of the relationship and what is in the best interest of the customer, your staff and yourself.

The bottom line for me in this situation was that I wanted this couple to have a wonderful Maine vacation so they would return and tell others to visit. I knew I wasn't the right person to provide them with the vacation they were looking for, so I sent them off to someone who could.

As is true with many breakups, it was difficult at first, but in the end it all worked out for the best and we all lived happily ever after.

Read Deb Neuman's blog at backto-business.bangordailynews.com.

Ignoring debt collectors could leave you defenseless

BY RUSS VAN ARSDALE
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR NORTHEAST CONTACT

A consumer from southern Maine was summonsed to court by a creditor seeking to collect a debt. The consumer failed to show up; he lost the case in what was termed an uncontested, default judgment.

By not going to court, the consumer lost his chance to present evidence that might have

swayed the judge. The consumer could have demonstrated his precarious financial position and possibly been able to pay off his debt on more favorable terms.

People who deal with consumers in debt say that such stories are not uncommon. Because



they're afraid or don't know the law, people can make debt repayment more difficult than it needs to be.

Help is available in the latest in a series of booklets from Maine's Bureau of Consumer Credit Protection. It's titled "Downeaster Common Sense Guide: Debt Collection."

If you are in debt, you owe it to yourself (pun intended) to read the guide.

A cardinal rule if you are in debt is to keep lines of communication open. That advice comes from the guide and from one of its authors, David Leach. Leach also is principal examiner at the Bureau of Consumer Credit Protection.

"Legitimate, licensed debt collectors have a job to do," Leach said. "Our experience is the majority of times the collector will work constructively with their debtor client if that consumer will work with them in good faith, offering a plausible repayment plan."

It's when debtors fail to return phone calls, answer letters or otherwise become unresponsive that things can get nasty. Collectors tend to dig in when that happens, turning up heat on the debtors and using legal remedies

at their disposal.

Ignoring a court date could result in a judge's order that a debtor's wages be garnished, granting the creditor a chunk of the debtor's pay until the debt is settled. The guide advises always filing a written answer to a complaint with the court.

The guide covers legal protections that debtors have under Maine law, including a statute of limitations. It says the statute of limitations is usually six years from the time a debtor last made regular payments.

Debts older than the statute-limit age are often called time-barred debts. The debtor is not off the hook for the amount of the debt; collectors can still try to get a debtor to pay at least a portion of the amount due, but they may

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