

[NEW THIS MONTH](#) | [RECENT ARTICLES](#) | [BIBLIOGRAPHY](#) | [MEDIA KIT](#) | [RECOMMEND THIS PAGE](#) | [SUBSCRIBE](#)

[Home](#) > [2005](#) > [November](#)

Originally published in *Business People-Vermont* in 2005.

SEARCH OUR SITE:

 SEARCH

## An Overnight Success

by *Liz Schick*

### THIS MONTH

[Stewart Construction](#)

[TelJet Longhaul](#)

[Aquarius Landscape Sprinklers](#)

[Gulliver's Doggie Daycare](#)

[Act 250](#)

[Under Construction](#)

[Extra Point](#)

[New Business](#)

[Mergers & Acquisitions](#)

[Faces & Places](#)

[Business Travel Guide](#)

[Featured Businesses](#)

### ARCHIVES

[This Month](#)

[Recent Articles](#)

[Travel Guide](#)

[Bibliography](#)

[Extra Point Index](#)

### SERVICES

[Reprints](#)

[Media Kit](#)

[Ad Rates](#)

[Send a Press Release](#)

Mark Curran (left) and Stephen Birge were named Small Business Persons of the Year in 2004 for their work building Black River Produce of North Springfield. Twenty-seven years ago, the self-confessed "ski



bums" opened a farm stand selling natural foods in Ludlow. Today, their company employs 160 people and grossed \$34 million in 2004.

Black River Produce doesn't sell jars of mayonnaise or napkins. "Everything we sell, whether it's fruit or vegetables or flowers or seafood, has a shelf life of one to three days," say co-founders Mark Curran and Stephen Birge. "We take care of things that are fresh."

Named Small-Business Persons of the Year by the Small Business Administration in 2004, and currently employing 160 people, Curran and Birge have come a long way in the 27 years since they opened a retail store in Ludlow.

"We were ski bums," Birge says with a laugh. "I moved up after graduating from Providence College and did all the ski bum kinds of work — mostly washing dishes. After two years at Boston College, Mark came up to ski and hasn't made it back to school yet. He was working as a carpenter when we met at Okemo. We knew we wanted to do something different, but we didn't know what."

"Mark's grandfather had his own business and it seemed like working for yourself was something we wanted to do," says Curran. At that time, in the late 1970s, tourism was going through a drastic change. Up to then, say the partners, people considered après-ski a hard wooden bench and a cup of hot chocolate.

Suddenly, a lot of young chefs were moving to Vermont because they couldn't afford their own restaurants in New York or Boston. At the same time, vacationers were beginning to demand a good dining experience, along

[Write a Contributed Column](#)

[Site Map](#)

[Recommend This Page](#)

[Subscribe to Business People Vermont](#)

[Contact Us](#)

Last updated:  
5/4/09

with Jacuzzis and condos and first-class resorts. The whole industry was going upscale.

“While I was washing dishes I was learning that fresh vegetables were all the rage because of this ‘nouvelle American cuisine,’” Birge explains. “So we thought, ‘Why not?’”

Black River Produce sells to restaurants, institutions, co-ops and independent grocery stores throughout Vermont, western New Hampshire, northwestern Massachusetts and a bit of New York. Cindy Farren is the accounting manager of a department with nine employees.



Their first venture was Black River Market, a farm stand that sold natural foods. Because they knew chefs were complaining about not being able to buy fresh produce, they figured that, as long as they were driving to Boston to buy fresh foods for their store, it made sense to sell to the restaurants, as well.

“It worked like a charm,” Curran recalls. “Once the chefs started talking amongst themselves, we began to get calls from Weston and Londonderry and Rutland, and it grew from there.” A year after opening, they moved into larger quarters in a former livery stable, where they began to concentrate on wholesale, changing the name to Black River Produce.

From the beginning, their philosophy was to buy as close to home as possible. “We’d rather sell Vermont produce than New Jersey produce, or New Jersey produce rather than Florida or California produce,” says Curran. Because they had friends who were farmers in Westminster, they began buying and selling fresh-picked corn and anything else the farmers were growing.

One of Black River Produce’s original customers was the Weston Priory. Brother Elias there remembers that the priory was one of the company’s first four clients.

“Their small store in Ludlow had a walk-in cooler. We would drive over the mountain to buy fresh produce to supplement our garden in the summer, and it became our only reliable source of fresh vegetables during the rest of the year. When Mark and Steve asked if we would be interested in buying in bulk from them, we immediately agreed. As we are a community of 13 and usually have 10 to 14 guests at every meal, we definitely had— and still have — a regular need for fresh produce.”

The Weston Priory has remained a customer with twice-weekly deliveries, Brother Elias says, because “Black River Produce offer us quality service and quality products. It’s to their credit that they have stayed in this area. They could have gone to Burlington and had a larger market base, but they are very rooted in the local community, and those are the kind of people with whom we prefer to do business. When we see them, we’re friends,” Brother Elias adds sincerely. “It’s not just a client/supplier relationship.”

After 10 years, the company again moved, to larger quarters in Proctorsville. Over the next 15 years, the company grew, adding fresh seafood in 1994, when former chef Steve Hekler joined the staff. At that time, Vermont restaurants were, at best, able to get twice-a-week seafood deliveries, says Curran. "Black River Produce was already delivering six days a week to most accounts so it was a natural addition."

This summer, again seeking space to grow, the company moved to North Springfield, where the partners had found the ideal facility. The Idlenot Dairy Plant was a 60,000-square-foot building with 11 loading docks and two receiving bays. It includes a 30,000-square-foot refrigerated addition the dairy built in 1989, only two years before it went bankrupt. "We essentially had a brand-new building that was pretty close to what we would have designed ourselves, if we had to," Curran gleefully relates.

Each day, 25 trucks are loaded at the facility, plus three tractor-trailer trucks that go to Boston and Hartford and down the Connecticut River valley to pick up produce, seafood and flowers. They also buy a lot of Vermont cheese up and down the state, an operation run by Theresa Parker.

There is a full organic department to supply co-ops and whole foods retailers, which is kept in a separate part of the warehouse and is the domain of Dennis Melvin. Melvin, who has been with the company for 25 years, also takes care of many larger accounts and works with the organic farmers.

Buyer Dan Tricarico concentrates on specialties like baby vegetables or yellow pear tomatoes, and the flower department continues to bloom under the direction of Bruce McEnaney. All of this is kept running smoothly by Cindy Farren, the company's office manager for the last 15 years.

The numbers back up Birge and Curran's comments about the company's growth, which has paced itself steadily, earning at least 10 percent a year for the last 10 years. In 2004, it grossed \$35 million while serving 1,500 active accounts. "On a good day," Curran says, "we process more than 1,000 orders." To many customers they deliver six days a week; to some, only three or four.

The company distributes throughout Vermont, western New Hampshire, a bit of New York and, most recently, in northwestern Massachusetts. The partners call their company "the FedEx of fresh food."

"Since our delivery trucks are out there picking up product from the farms every day, we also haul whatever the farmer wants us to take," says Curran. "We pick it up from them one day and it comes back here where it is consolidated into the tractor-trailers that go to Hartford or Boston, or to their customers the next day. We always wanted to connect the farmer with our customers, and believe that, if they can't be our customers, then we can connect them with their market."

This is a 24/7 business. Curran comes into the office in the morning, when he does most of the produce buying while the crew receives merchandise from all over the country. The evening crew loads the trucks for the next morning's delivery from about 6 p.m. to 6 a.m. Birge comes in during the afternoon, puts together the loads as they arrive and does most of the

pricing.

“In the beginning,” Curran says, “we didn’t have time to have personal lives. We would get up at 1 a.m. and drive to Boston, come back and re-divvy up the truck and deliver it the same day, until 9 o’clock at night. We were young and could do that and still have time to ski. Now we still work long hours and, somewhere in the process, we managed to get married.”

Birge and his wife, Nancy, have four children, all in college. Erin and Bonnie attend Keene State; Hannah goes to college in Wilmington, N.C.; and Craig is at the University of Massachusetts.

When Steve Hekler (second from right), a former chef, joined the staff in 1994, Black River Produce added fresh seafood to its growing list of products. Today, about 40,000 pounds of fish is delivered



fresh every weekday. The company cuts and then freezes it or delivers it to waiting customers. With Hekler in seafood sales are, from left, Brad Barker, Jean Turco and Terri Laskevich.

As Curran stumbles over his wife, Margie’s, name, he laughs. “Gee, I better get this right for the article or I’m in big trouble.” They have four sons. Two of them are in college on opposite sides of the country — Miles in Santa Barbara, Calif., and Oliver in Fairfield, Conn. James and Spencer attend Green Mountain High School. Birge agrees with Curran’s comment that, “These eight kids explain why we are still working so hard.”

The partners saw the SBA award as a great opportunity to finally take the time to formally set the marketing direction for the company, enlisting the aid of many of their longtime employees and bringing in Pat Howell of Howell/M Martin Marketing and Advertising of Brattleboro.

Out of that exercise, among other plans for the future, grew “the fresh connection” tag line to their logo and a Web site that includes such headlines as, “Lettuce serve you,” which continues the irreverence that has been their hallmark since their used VW bus bore the slogan, “Give Peas a Chance.”

Considering the size of the company they run, Birge and Curran remain fairly loose about formalizing their own positions. Curran maintains that he is Honorary Exalted Dragon of the Rutabagas, and Birge is Grand Wizard of the Cherry Tomatoes. “The titles go with our mission,” Birge says, “to be the best purveyor of fresh stuff out there.” •

*Originally published in November 2005 Business People-Vermont*

---

**For a permalink directly to this article, paste the code below into a page on your Web site:**

---

```
<a href="http://www.vermontguides.com/2005/11-nov/blackriver.html"><i>Business People-Vermont: Black River Produce</i></a>
```

***Business People-Vermont,***  
your monthly business  
magazine since 1984

***Business  
Travel Guide,***  
your guide to Vermont's  
people, places and things:  
a how-to manual on local  
color, business, politics,  
scenery, events

**FEATURES**

[Business Travel Guide](#)

[Featured Businesses](#)

**ARTICLES**

[This Month](#)

[Recent Articles](#)

[New Business](#)

[Mergers &Acquisitions](#)

**NAVIGATION**

[Home](#)

[Site Map](#)

**ARCHIVES**

[Bibliography](#)

[Extra Point Index](#)

**ADVERTISE**

[Media Kit](#)

[Ad Rates](#)

[Reprints](#)

**COMMUNICATE**

[Press Releases](#)

mail to:

editorial (at)  
vermontguides.com

[Staff / Contact Us](#)

mail to:

customer.service (at)  
vermontguides.com

[Write a Contributed Column](#)

[Recommend This Page](#)

[Subscribe to Business People-  
Vermont](#)

**SEARCH OUR SITE:**



Business People-Vermont/  
Mill Publishing Inc.  
P.O. Box 953  
Williston, VT 05495-0953

**1-802-862-4109**  
**fax 1-802-862-9322**

© 1996-2009 Mill Publishing  
Inc. [All rights reserved.](#)