



MARTIN SIDOR FARMS INC.

By Lynn Zawacki

"If life gives you lemons, make lemonade." The familiar phrase describing how to turn a misfortune into something positive is familiar to all of us. In the case of Mattituck potato farmer Martin Sidor, he did just that.

When the profits in wholesale potato farming began to dry up a few years ago, he and his wife, Carol, decided to follow a different path: take those spuds, bet the family farm and expand into the retail potato chip business.

Today, Martin Sidor Farms produces and sells kettle-cooked, golden crispy, and all-natural North Fork Potato Chips. The big "S" logo on each package is the same

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one used on the 50lb. bags of round, white potatoes the farm sells to wholesalers. The Sidors sought advice from the Long Island Farm Bureau in Calverton and Cornell Cooperative Extension of Suffolk County in Riverhead. They bought chip-making equipment in 2003 and began selling their chips a year later.

The Sidors faced what more and more Long Island farmers were experiencing: the end of a way of life. According to Joseph M. Gergela, executive director of the Long Island Farm Bureau, during potato farming's heyday in the 1940s and 1950s, Nassau and Suffolk counties were home to 70,000 acres of potato farms. As residential development encroached on the agricultural landscape, that acreage declined. Competition from the world market, where land, energy and labor are cheaper, contributed. Today, only about

3,000 of those acres remain.

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It's really necessary to survive in farming in a place like Long Island," explains Gergela. "The Farm Bureau advocates for the agricultural industry, so we're very proud that Marty was able to do what he's done. It's a very positive thing and helps keep his farm from being developed."

Because of its innovative achievement in reinventing itself into a successful business enterprise during challenging economic times and its contribution to the Long Island region, Martin Sidor Farms has won designation as Long Island magazine's 2006 MVP in agriculture.

The Sidors farm on 150 acres. They own 75 acres and lease the other 75 from neighboring landowners. Martin is president of Martin Sidor Farms, while Carol serves as secretary/treasurer. The Sidors' two daughters and son also are involved in the business.

"It's a family farm and mom-and-pop operation. It's by no stretch corporate America. It's as grassroots as one could get," says Martin Sidor, 55, a third-generation farmer. His grandfather emigrated from Poland in the early 1900s, and in 1908 purchased the house where the Sidor family still lives today.

Martin is in charge of the day-to-day man-

agement of the farm, while Carol operates the 2,000-square-foot chip plant in Cutchogue. They share marketing duties. "In the beginning, no one knew us from Adam. We'd get in the car with samples to wineries and farm stands to get the chips out there," notes Sidor.

Today, that market includes growing numbers of stores such as King Kullen, Waldbaum's and Whole Foods Market locations and high-end food shops in Manhattan. North Fork Potato Chips are sold at East End fairs, festivals and events, including the Hampton Classic Horse Show in Bridgehampton. Sales are climbing. About a year and a half ago the Sidors began to sell online to generate more business.

It takes about 100 pounds of Andover, Norwis and late Marcy Long Island potatoes to create 25 pounds of chips. "We do chipping according to sales," says Sidor. "We produce 150 cases per day when needed."

And the recipe? "We decided to stay strictly with sunflower oil and salt. That's it. Sunflower oil is more expensive but makes the chips golden brown," says Sidor. "Kettle cooking makes it thicker, crunchier, with more potato flavor. We started sweet potato chips last year, introduced barbecue flavor this year and we're planning a new flavor."

Sidor admits that although there was a degree of risk in starting the potato chip business, he regards the decision as "inline diversification. Instead of trying to raise beets or cabbage, I thought I would stay with potatoes and take one extra step. It's value added."

Says Sidor, "This is so different for me. It's like water and oil. It's not about me. It's about a family striving to continue potato farming on Long Island in the 21st century."