

Vitaly Brukhaman
Transitioning Into Organic Processing and Farming
Naturally Fermented Vegetable Processing
East Brunswick, New Jersey¹



Photo: Vitaly Brukham with naturally fermented gingerale.

Vitaly Brukhaman embodies the spirit of a true entrepreneur - full of energy, ideas, and enthusiasm for his start-up organic processing business called Bubbly Jen's Farm or BJF (named after his daughter). Brukhaman's goal is to create a branded line of naturally fermented, locally produced, organic foods and specialty beverages targeted at ethnic consumer markets. His passion for organic food stems from surviving Thyroid cancer and "realizing that food is our best medicine; organic farmers are our true primary care givers." Brukhaman's desire to master natural fermentation originates from the recipes he enjoyed as a child growing up in Moldova, studying Russian, and traveling and working in Ukraine and Belarus. His affinity for all things "local" comes from the New Jersey countryside where he lives in a farmhouse built more than 100 years ago.

Getting Started. Brukhaman left his information technology job in 2012 to grow and market organic fruits and vegetables on his two-acre farmstead. His goal was to process his crops into naturally fermented products. Since 2012, however, his ideas have evolved as has his knowledge of organic production. In 2013 Brukhaman graduated from a beginning farmer program sponsored by the National Organic Farming Association. In 2014 he participated in several on-line courses through the Organic Processing Institute and met with two dozen or so restaurant chefs, retail grocers, processors, farmers, and potential consumers to network and to learn as much as he could.

Decision to Transition. Brukhaman anticipated that the transition to organic would be a fairly easy one since the two acres of land he purchased in 2012 had not been farmed for over 10 years. He planted his first crop of radishes, garlic, and mustard greens in 2013. When meeting with a certifier in 2014 however, Brukhaman was told that he'd violated several organic rules – namely the planting of conventional garlic and the use of Epsom salts as a fertilizer supplement prior to testing the soil. Consequently, his land no longer qualifies for immediate certification; he will have to transition the land for three years before becoming certified. "At this point, I decided that I might be better off purchasing organic crops from other farmers to process while transitioning my own land," Brukhaman says. That's when his processing business moved to the front burner.

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Transition Strategies. Brukhman will continue to hone his processing skills and recipes by renting kitchen space at a certified commercial kitchen during the winter of 2014-2015. During this time he plans to complete the Food Safety Manager Program (required for food handling). Brukhman will purchase needed inputs and distribute the final processed products for taste-testing and sampling to friends, neighbors, and potential retail buyers. By spring of 2015, he hopes to have secured commercial kitchen space and organic handlers certification. If all goes well, he will begin processing recipe-tested naturally fermented, certified organic sauerkraut, pickles, and tomatoes by fall 2015. His modest sales goals include marketing 2,200 pints of product direct-to-consumers at farmers markets and fairs as well as independent specialty retail stores that cater to Russian and Japanese communities.

Transition Challenges. Most beginning farmers and food processors alike find navigating the organic regulations and required food safety training a bit daunting. Brukhman, however, enjoys learning new skills. It's the recordkeeping, necessary for certification, that he finds most challenging. He is working with experienced growers and consulting with certifiers to better understand what's needed for certification. Brukhman is also in the process of developing a business plan to map his business' start-up and growth strategies, communicate to strategic partners, and help determine if the business can support the financial goals of both owner and future investors.

Most Satisfying. "I enjoy the feeling of certainty – that by offering tasty organic naturally fermented products I am doing something good and meaningful." When asked to explain a bit more, Brukhman said "I am having a direct positive affect on the well-being of my family, myself, and others. I rarely had that feeling while being a corporate IT consultant."

Words of Advice. As someone who has spent the past two years educating himself about organic farming practices, processing, and marketing, it's no surprise that Brukhman advises other farmers to do the same: "I recommend exploring one's own interests and resources, coming up with at least a general direction [or strategy] and then going full throttle with an individual learning program." Brukhman recommends a mix of learning platforms including online knowledge-building classes, hands-on experiments, and in-person classes with other farmers. "Taking a class allows you to interact with fellow members of the audience – you can meet very knowledgeable people and, who knows, maybe even a future business partner!"