



MOLLIE FICOCELLO, ANNIE GORDER, GRACE LUNSKI
 Sproule Farms/3 Farm Daughters
 Grand Forks, North Dakota

FAILURE ISN'T FATAL

There is a truism often spoken around Sproule Farms. Failure is not fatal.

“Our parents inspire us,” Mollie (Sproule) Ficoello says. “They have taught us that mentality, that ‘failure isn’t fatal.’ Don’t be scared to go out and try something new,” she says. “If it doesn’t work out, it is not the end of the world.”

Sproule sisters Mollie, Annie Gorder and Grace Lunski, all married with college degrees ranging from marketing, finance, business and law, nine kids total aged infant to 9, seized on that advice from their parents, Paul and Susie Sproule.

They formed a pasta company they named 3 Farm Daughters. Headquartered with their parents’ 15,000-acre, first-generation farm at Grand Forks, North Dakota, the sisters entered the consumer food world, a place where failure is not all that rare.

FARM TO CONSUMER

“Prior to 3 Farm Daughters, we were a traditional farm,” Mollie says. “We grew crops. We dropped them off at the elevator, fulfilled our contracts. And, we wiped our hands clean of the supply chain. We never took it to a retail or direct-to-consumer model.

“When we started 3 Farm Daughters, we had to figure out what that next step looked like,” she continues. “And, the next four steps after that. This is a grain growing on our farm. These are the attributes of our farm. How do you bring that to a consumer?”

In four years, Mollie, Annie and Grace have taken significant steps forward. Today, pastas like cavatappi (a family favorite), elbow, penne and rotini cuts, and a new high-fiber spaghetti are sold in 1,400 retail outlets. Whole Foods, Central Market, Albertsons, Fresh Thyme Market and Meijer are customers. As a private company, 3 Farm Daughters does not release its financial data.

3 Farm Daughters pasta is available nationally through Amazon and by way of the 3 Farm Daughters website (3farmdaughters.com)

3 Farm Daughters launched an orzo pasta in collaboration with Molly Yeh, the cookbook author, restaurateur and blogger who is the host of the Food Network cooking show “Girl Meets Farm.” Orzo is a pasta sprinkle added to soups, salads and casseroles.

WHO IS MY FARMER?

“We started 3 Farm Daughters because at the time, we were all either starting or growing our families, and food and nutrition was becoming on the forefront of our minds,” Mollie says. “We wanted to create a product that we felt good about eating ourselves and feeding to our families. Coming together to make the product and the brand was natural and already part of our daily discussions. Being that we were growing these ‘better-for-you’ varieties on our farm and being familiar with their properties, we thought, ‘What better way to have a clean, more nutritious option than straight from the source itself—the farm?’”

Grace agrees. “Our whole goal has been bridging that gap from farmer to consumer,” she says. “People want to know ‘Who is my farmer?’ We decided to lift the veil [and show] what a family farm looks like.” She adds, jokingly, “We’re making farming cool.”



PHOTO COURTESY OF 3 FARM DAUGHTERS



3 Farm Daughters bridges the gap between farmers and consumers who want to know. “Who is my farmer?”

3 Farm Daughters pasta includes two ingredients, wheat flour and durum semolina flour. Made with a specialty wheat variety that is naturally high in resistant starch, the pasta products are better nutritionally for the consumer, all while staying “clean label,” meaning without any additives or enrichments.

“People are sensitized to what they are putting into their bodies, so they want those ingredient labels to be short,” Annie explains.

The first couple of years, Sproule Farms grew only small test plots of this wheat. The sisters produced test batches of pasta for the family and moved forward on the pasta the family approved. They began selling some different pasta cuts on the 3 Farm Daughters website in late 2020 and, shortly thereafter, on the shelves of 39 local stores. It was all-hands-on-deck—sisters, mom and dad, cousins, team members—to make those early-morning deliveries.

“We got scrappy and made it work,” Mollie says.

SPAM OR REAL

It was in 2021, only one year later, that the sisters received an email from Whole Foods asking for a meeting. They thought at first the email was probably spam. But, they replied and found the high-end grocery chain—which tends to feature “better-for-you” food sources—had already done marketing research on 3 Farm Daughters pasta and was highly interested in putting it on its shelves. By July 2022, 3 Farm Daughters pasta could be found in 68 Whole Foods stores.

“Whole Foods was big pinch-me moment,” Annie says. “We had taken [a lot of] little baby steps, and all of a sudden ... ‘We’re making pasta.’”

It’s been a marketing and logistical whirlwind, one that has evolved into a partnership with customers ▶

Meet the 3 Farm Daughters (top). From left, Grace Lunski, Annie Gorder and Mollie Ficocello. As they began to raise their children, diet and food became important to them. Their clean-label pasta products—two ingredients only—are produced for people who are sensitized to what they are eating. 3 Farm Daughters pastas are now sold in 1,400 retail outlets, including Whole Foods.





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who invested in the sisters' story. "We ask them what [pasta] shape they want to see next. That's the reason we are launching spaghetti. The voice is so loud, that we are coming out with spaghetti this year," Grace says.

"Consumers really buy with their core values, what's important to them," Mollie adds. "Healthy, clean-label, delicious. It's almost like farm to table. But, it's grain. You really don't see the grain. [But the pasta] connects consumers to grain farming."

RULES OF THE TRADE

Mollie, Annie and Grace did not set out to create a consumer-packaged goods company. But, here they are. And, retail food has tried-and-true rules.

One buyer took Grace down an aisle to show her how the original 3 Farm Daughters bags of pasta presented themselves on the shelf. The bags—bags not

3 Farm Daughters' Annie, Grace and Mollie, with their father, Paul Sproule, of Sproule Farms, and their cousin, Michael Sproule, who provides overall day-to-day management of the farm

boxes—were too large for the space, and as bags, they tended to fall over.

"See how the bag falls over. [Customers] can't see your logo on the shelf," the buyer said to Grace. "We were new to the industry and had a lot to learn about putting products on grocery shelves," she says.

3 Farm Daughters rebranded and changed the packaging just prior to launch at Whole Foods, selling pasta in a box and not bags—and to dimensions more accommodating to shelf space, having a stronger brand appearance and bringing more life to their branding with color and design.

3 Farm Daughters is building out a retail business based on the agricultural principles they learned on the farm. Innovation is the center of the farm and their pasta company. Their goal is to continually roll out new products, branching even outside of the pasta aisle.

GRIT, DETERMINATION AND MENTORS

"Our parents show resilience, grit and determination," Grace says. "It is the keys to their success. We've learned, don't take the highs too high and the lows too low. We need to take the hits when they come and still know why we are doing what we are doing. We focus on bringing products from the farm full circle to the consumer."

Mentors have been important to the success of 3 Farm Daughters. "Time is the most valuable thing you can give someone," Annie says. "We've had Zoom calls with a million questions. Sometimes, they were very simple questions. But, the feedback and guidance we got from those individuals are instrumental to our business."

Annie says the sisters have learned one big lesson along the way: "We have to be nimble and be understanding to whatever happens. There is only so much we can do, and the rest is in God's hands."

"We look back," Mollie says, "[and] obviously there has been a want among consumers for products with origins linking directly back to the farm. We want to keep it to our core values, to bring better nutrition to consumers from the farm and elevate their understanding of what the farm is, what grain looks like and understand the steps it takes to bring a product from the farm to the grocery shelves."

It's a straightforward consumer proposition, Annie explains. "Growing up in an ag community, we walked through wheat fields, and we know what a combine looks like. However, our consumers may have never done that, so this is our way to share that with them and bring them along on the agricultural journey." ///