



2nd Act

TOM FREI WENT FROM ENGINEERING ROCKETS TO THRIVING AS A LAVENDER FARMER AND WEDDING PLANNER.

THE SWEET SMELL OF Success

There are a lot of stereotypes about wedding characters: demanding bride, evil mother-in-law, over-the-top wedding planner. That last one is usually depicted as a woman with bouffant hair, hauling a pricey rental chandelier. Tom Frei does not fit that silly old trope. He's the owner of a private event space and lavender farm, Woodinville Lavender, in Redmond, Washington. Prior to this second act career, he was busy putting Mars landers into space as a rocket scientist.

Frei spent 26 years in the aerospace industry. "Everything I did was to get things into space or keep things in space," he explains. "GPS satellites, weather satellites. The Cassini spacecraft that went to Saturn, I got to work on that. I worked on multiple of the Mars landers with the air bag lander—we did the propulsion for that."

BY KATHRYN DRURY WAGNER



PHOTOGRAPHY BY CAROL HOOK



Yet, he began calculating another kind of launch. “I had this feeling I wanted my own business and something totally different. I kept thinking, ‘What’s my passion? What do I love?’ I grew up on a farm, so plants and agriculture felt good,” says Frei, who spent his youth on a 1,500-acre grain farm in northern Idaho. He and his wife were familiar with some of the lavender farms on Washington State’s Olympic Peninsula and had fallen in love with the fragrant plant. “It’s easy to grow and low maintenance, naturally organic, and you can make hundreds of products out of it. That was the vision: to buy a piece of property, build a lavender farm, and make an agribusiness out of it,” he says.

Their three-and-a-half-acre farm was a success, with a gift shop selling products like lavender ice cream and tourists plonking down in Adirondack chairs to enjoy the purple fields reminiscent of Provence. As the business grew, people started to say things like “Oh, we’d love to have a dinner here or a wedding here,” so Tom and his wife Brenda, who is a labor and delivery nurse at a nearby hospital, expanded into after-hours private events.

Despite the relaxing scent of the lavender, running the agritourism portion of the farm started to feel anything but serene. “We would have the tour buses coming in, hundreds of people, and it wasn’t peaceful and calm,” says Frei. “It was overrun. The light came on that the events were a better fit for us.” Four years ago they switched to private events only, which is mainly weddings, and found their perfect niche.

Next year is already booked, and 2022 is starting to fill up.

“Some people would think, ‘Weddings, that is a nightmare!’” says Frei, “but we only do small weddings. With coronavirus, they’re coming up with different names now like micro-weddings. That’s all we do to begin with, intimate weddings of 80 people or less.” At the time of our interview, due to state restrictions on gatherings, Frei was hosting ceremonies with up to 30 people outdoors, and he was also having success with elopement packages. “I’m getting tons of calls from couples who can’t have their huge dream wedding and still want to get married. We work with them and help them get married.”

Frei sees parallels between being a rocket program manager and engineering couples’ big days. “You develop a relationship, take them all the way through. You get to know them and be a small part of a really big, important milestone.”

For anyone else contemplating a career switch, Frei says, “Don’t be afraid to do it. Think hard about what you love to do. I’ve seen people who retire and stop being engaged, and I’ve seen other people who were late in their career and were super engaged and loved what they were doing and were just going to do it until the day they died. I thought that model was way better. I hope that I’m out there cutting lavender and hanging it and drying it and running weddings until I’m really old. We’re still preparing and saving for retirement, but I want to do this forever. I think that’s a way better model than retire and fade away.”

For more information, visit woodinvillelavender.com

