

# Changes at Vesperman Farms Simply A-Maze-ing

By Ron Johnson  
Dairy Editor

Great-grandpa Vesperman might consider the changes to the family farm simply a-maze-ing.

"You do what?" he might ask. "You get town folks to pay to walk through a cornfield?"

Yep. In a nutshell, that's about it.

Kyle Vesperman, a senior at the UW-Platteville, is busily cultivating a different kind of crop than the corn, soybeans, hogs and beef his family has traditionally raised. It's called, "tourists."

The main tourist attraction on Vesperman Farms, a fifth-generation operation just south of Lancaster, is the annual corn maze. Now in its third year of operation, it should have drawn 4,000 to 5,000 cash-laden visitors once Kyle tallies up all the numbers.

An energetic entrepreneur, Kyle is finishing his degree in ornamental horticulture. Besides corn and soybeans, his parents, Bruce and Judy Vesperman, have experience growing sweet corn, pumpkins and other vegetables and selling them at farmers' markets.

Kyle is allergic to an assortment of dust and dander, but... "I wanted to farm," he says. "I like it out here and I wanted to stay on the farm. So I had to start finding some other way to work outside that's related to growing stuff."

He's been growing and marketing sweet corn and pumpkins for several years and came up with the idea of a corn maze after visiting the one commemorating Wisconsin's 150th anniversary of statehood in 1998. Kyle says his main goal in making his first maze, in 2003, was to simply "extend the pumpkin season and draw in more people."

But it's gone beyond that. His mazes draw people from nearby, but also from as far away as Chicago and Germany. It's gotten to the point where each maze brings in enough money to get "close" to matching what Vesperman Farms' corn and soybeans do, according to Kyle.

Making a corn maze can be both simple and complicated at the same time. A good plan is essential.

Kyle starts out by purchasing a maze plan designed just for him by a Briton named Adrian Fisher. The world-famous maze designer's credentials include seeing more than 500 of his mazes constructed in more than 25 countries on six continents and holding seven Guinness world records.

Kyle calls Fisher's mazes "incredibly complex," sometimes laden with circles. He professes a preference for mazes that make people literally choose which paths to take and that have dead ends. Fisher's fill the bill.

Fisher designs only 18 mazes for United States use each year, Kyle says. His is the only Fisher-designed maze in Wisconsin. "There's not another one in the world that's like mine," Kyle says.

So far Kyle has opted for a five-acre maze, though he says he would like to make one "a bit bigger" next year. But five acres still requires plenty of work.

After tilling the maze area - which always occupies the same spot in either a larger cornfield or next to a field of soybeans - the corn is planted. Seeds are planted in one direction and then perpendicular to the first direction. It's the same as the "check" method many farmers once used to make cultivating easier.

Come early June, when the young corn plants stand just six inches tall, Kyle and crew attack the real work of essentially carving a maze out of a block of cornstalks. Kyle stakes out the mazes four corners and squares up the field. Then, every 15 feet around the perimeter, he drives in stakes. These stakes serve as reference points for imaginary grid lines that match the lines on his maze plan.

That done, Kyle has an area 420 by 480 feet divided into 15-foot square "boxes." With one person reading the plan, one or two cohorts begin "hacking out" with hoes unwanted corn plants.

The would-be maze contains approximately 1,000 of these 15-foot square "boxes." Hoeing out the corn that has to be removed requires some 60 to 70 hours - more if the maze is

especially complicated.

When the hoeing is done and the corn has grown, the maze has paths five feet wide, and walls several rows thick, to keep maze meanderers from seeing through to other pathways.

Making the maze could be done easier and faster by using global positioning systems (GPS), but Kyle says the cost is \$4,000 to \$7,000. "It's cheaper for me and a few friends to do it," he affirms.

By mid-July the corn stands tall enough to keep people from peering over it, so the maze is ready for exploring then. But Kyle waits to open it the first week of August.

"When it's 95 degrees, no one wants to walk through a cornfield," he reasons. "I need the temperature to be 70 to 80 degrees. That's when you get the biggest crowds."

Most of his maze business occurs during September and October. Mid-October is especially busy, since the weather is usually warm or cool but not hot or downright cold. And, people are in a Halloween mood then, too, so they invariably purchase a Vesperman

pumpkin or two.

Each maze explorer is given a map, though some choose to not use it, preferring to master the maze all on their own. Visitors are also given long lengths of PVC with flags atop. That lets Kyle track their progress and determine whether anyone needs assistance.

This year's maze includes a 10-foot-high wooden bridge that affords a view of the corn, with the Grant County countryside unfolding beyond.

The theme this year? It's a Mississippi steamboat.

Each year, Kyle tries to tie his maze to an area attraction. This year it's the National River Museum, several miles west and south, across the Mississippi River in Dubuque, Iowa.

To go along with that, inside the maze are posts, each with a letter on it. Find each post and its letter, unscramble the letters and you could win a prize at the end of the maze season. This year the word has something to do with the Mississippi, and the prize is passes to the National River Museum.

Last year's maze featured

the design of a crop circle. The year before that it was a grinning jack-o'-lantern. "Everybody around here knows me for raising pumpkins," Kyle says.

Besides, the maze, Vesperman Farms offers wagon rides through the pumpkin patch. There's a miniature maze with a 500-foot-long path for younger children, and a rope maze, too.

Oh. We can't forget the popular farm animals - a Jacob's sheep, miniature horses, rabbits, chickens, a goat, llama and a potbelly pig.

"Outside of the corn and soybeans, everything else is all about attracting the tourists," Kyle notes.

He has plans for adding new things, as time and money allow. A bed-and-breakfast might fit in someday, as might a reception hall and music festival. But Kyle admits, "We've got a long ways to go before that ever happens."

Even if it does take several years for those attractions to be added, there's no denying that Vesperman Farms has changed a-maze-ingly since great-grandpa's day.



## Kyle Cultivates Corn, Tourism

This might look like an ordinary cornfield, but it's really Kyle Vesperman's enterprising way of tapping into rural tourism. The UW-Platteville senior, shown on a bridge that spans part of the field, is in his third year of making corn mazes on his family's farm near Lancaster. He's holding a map of the maze, which is laid out in the pattern of a Mississippi River paddle wheeler. When Kyle tallies up all the numbers, he expects some 4,000 to 5,000 people will have visited Vesperman Farms to purchase a pumpkin or meander the maze.