

Pete Lockett exits his "pressure-pot" N.S. grocery startup a very happy man

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Pete Lockett says he heard the rumour for 10 years that Sobeys had bought his grocery business, Pete’s Fine Foods. “I used to hear it every week. Somebody would say, ‘Pete, I heard Sobeys bought you out.’”

Sobeys did eventually buy out Lockett — Nova Scotia’s celebrity grocer, and one of its best-known entrepreneurs. But he insists Nova Scotia-based Sobeys did not approach him until four months before the deal closed in November 2015. Sobeys paid an undisclosed amount for Pete’s Fine Foods, which at the time employed 450 people and consisted of two Pete’s Frootique grocery stores (in Bedford and Halifax) and a wholesale business.

Pete’s — as the stores are known in Nova Scotia — are like smaller versions of Whole Foods. The stores are known for their healthy image, exotic fruit, hard-to-find items and lively displays. Pete’s stores are not for value shoppers.

A third-party contact suggested Luckett talk to Sobeys about selling. The resulting negotiations included a hush-hush meeting in Halifax with Marc Poulin, then Sobeys's chief executive. "It had to be secret. Everybody knows me," Luckett says with a grin.

"It wasn't a tough negotiation. We came to an agreement on a price pretty quickly," Luckett adds. "It was an incredible moment in my life to do that deal."

Luckett is no longer in the day-to-day grocery business — an industry he was in for decades. He's now focused on his newest venture: Luckett Vineyards, an Annapolis Valley winery he started in 2010.

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It's a significant change. The fruit and vegetable trade, he says, is a "24-7 pressure-pot business." "It's (always) on your mind — that inventory is dying by the second," he says. Wine, meanwhile, is "getting better by the minute."

Luckett, 64, grew up in Nottingham, England and learned his signature sales techniques in that city's Victoria Market, from a greengrocer named Pat Briton. Luckett worked at Briton's fruit and vegetable stall as a teenager, and then, at 21, opened his own stand. "That proved to be a terrific success for me, even at that young age — competing with seasoned greengrocers and market traders. I was up against them but I managed to make a mark for myself."

Luckett is a gregarious and charismatic salesman. He welcomes strangers with the same enthusiasm most people reserve for their good friends. He's quick with a smile and calls everyone "mate." It was in the Victoria Market that he honed his casual and effective sales style. "It was called chatting up the customers," he says of the technique, while admitting that some of his original tactics and lines would no longer be considered politically correct.

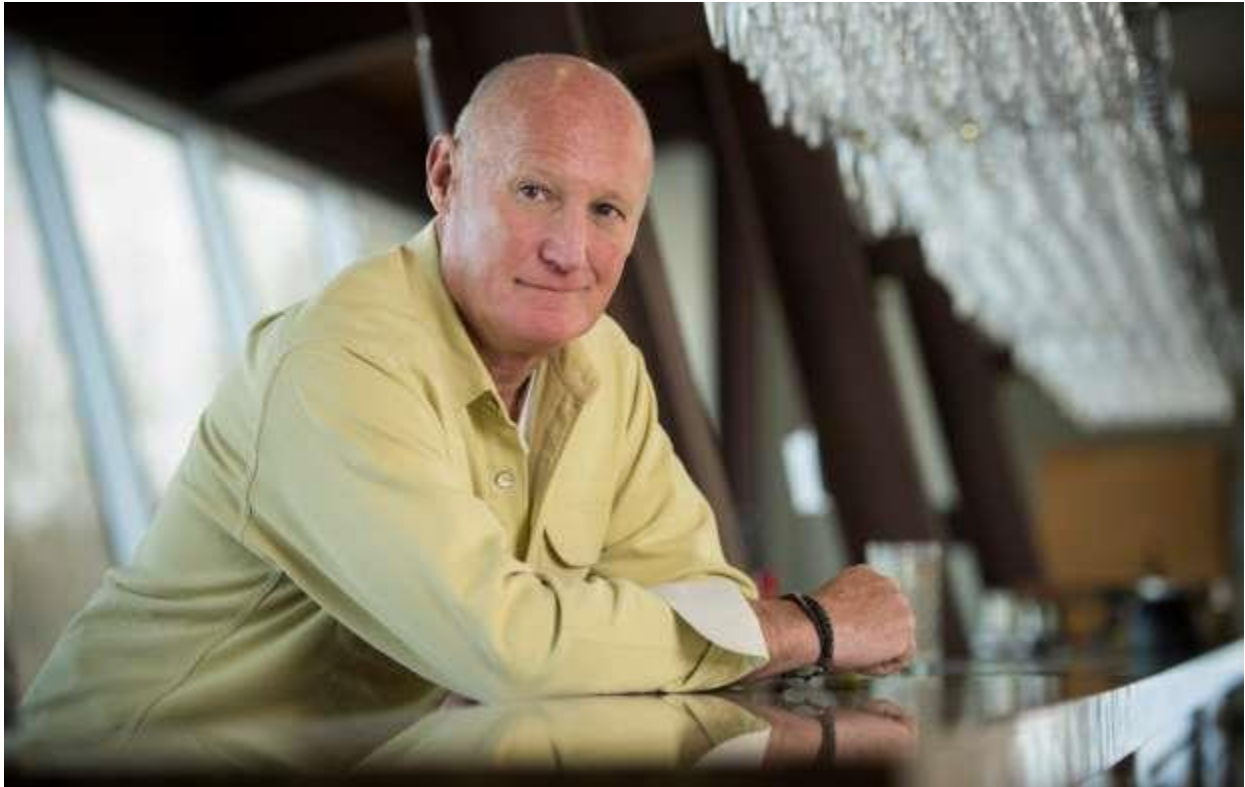
Luckett left England in 1979, at age 26. In Canada he found odd jobs: hammering For Sale signs into the ground, painting houses and working in a sawmill. He even claims to have sold illegal cockroach powder in Texas.

In 1982, following a failed farm and yogurt venture in New Brunswick, Luckett was down to his last \$300. He set up a stall in the Saint John market and returned to using the sales techniques and tricks he learned in England.

"I remember it like yesterday, my first day," he recalls, seated in his winery office. Within a few weeks he was producing daily sales of between \$800 and \$1,000, making change for customers out of his money belt. He felt like the Lone Ranger: "I couldn't stop for a break. I had go for a pee in the morning and pee at night. I couldn't leave the stall."

Following a decade in Saint John, Luckett moved to Nova Scotia and set up a Pete's Frootique store in Bedford. "I expected to hit the ground running, but it did not happen." The store

struggled for a year and a half, but eventually took root. He opened a second store in downtown Halifax and the Pete's name flourished.



Luckett became one of Nova Scotia's most recognizable entrepreneurs, appearing often on TV. In the 1990s, he was the most prominent voice in the fight against Nova Scotia's ban on Sunday shopping. Luckett defied the ban by dividing his stores into many small entities under one roof. Individually, the smaller operations were allowed to open on Sunday. Others copied the tactic and the Sunday shopping ban was eventually dropped. He considers it a highlight of his career.

"For many years we ruled the roost of Sunday shopping in Nova Scotia," he says with obvious pride.

There have, however, been some missteps. A third Pete's store, in rural Wolfville, near Luckett's home, failed and was closed before the sale to Sobeys.

"We misread the market and for three years we never were able to achieve the sales we needed to make money in that store," he says. "That was a tough pill to swallow — to say goodbye and close it up, especially in my hometown... I had to bow my head and get out of there."

Luckett has lived in the Annapolis Valley for nearly 20 years now and purchased his Valley vineyard in 2000. He grew fruits and vegetables but eventually ripped up the crops in favour of grapes. The winery now puts out 108,000 bottles a year in 20 varieties. With additional acreage, he hopes to hit 360,000 bottles annually.

For Lockett, products are interchangeable, but the sales techniques remain constant.

“Whether it’s drugs, sex, rock ’n’ roll, roofing materials — the same rules apply: the engagement of the customer,” he says. “(We’re in) the feeling-good business. Give the customer what they want. Listen to them. The basic rules I learned from Pat Briton I still apply ... and he was just a little old Nottingham greengrocer.”

At Lockett’s vineyard, there’s an old British phone booth among the vines. Visitors are invited to make free long-distance calls to anyplace in North America. (The winery’s best-seller is Phone Box Red.)

“I always try to make a business a fun place to be, never losing sight of who is paying the bills. When the customers come in that door, we call it show time. We put on a show every day for our customers.”

Source: Financial Post, written by Quentin Casey, photos by S ndor Fizil

<http://business.financialpost.com/entrepreneur/0213-biz-qc-lockett>