

Mooooooooooooove over tradition!

Today's farmers are breaking with tradition and finding success in new agricultural pursuits

By Diane Hageman

Families have been farming the land in Central Minnesota for more than 100 years, as is evident by the recognition received by the families who reach that century milestone.

Yet, there has been a significant decrease in the number of farms in Minnesota – a drop from 88,000 to 79,000 between 1991 and 2002, according to the United States and Minnesota Department of Agriculture's Annual Bulletin.

Running a farm requires a strong business sense. Business terms such as “niche” and “marketing” are becoming part of the agricultural lingo. Individuals and families who were either working on farms or raised on one are looking for new opportunities for their land and lifestyles.

Four Central Minnesota families have either found new agricultural niches or significantly re-tooled an idea that started out as a hobby for themselves or their older relatives.

It all started with a pumpkin patch

Bob and Judy Wilts, a couple from Big Lake, have reached a point in their lives where they wanted and needed a change in lifestyle. They had a 30-cow dairy herd and farmed 225 acres for 22 years. Their son and daughter, in their early 20s, were not interested in taking over the family farm. Located in a rapidly growing area just off Highway 10, Bob saw an opportunity. He and his family had had a pumpkin patch for 14 years, which drew many young families to his location. He figured he was in a great spot for a farmer's market.

In May 2002, he discontinued his dairy operation, built a building with an old time general store look and feel, and “Bob and Judy's Farm Market” was born. They have 27 acres of sweet corn, squash, tomatoes, cucumbers, green beans, peppers, and of course, pumpkins. The first year, despite road construction, “went relatively well and we actually made a little money,” Bob said. “But you can't get rich on any one thing; you've got to constantly be changing.” So 2003, they added a nursery with trees and shrubs.

Their clientele is mostly from a five to 10 mile radius around their farm. And with a new highway interchange and an anticipated additional 2,400 homes in new developments, Bob doesn't see it slowing down anytime soon. They were open seven days a week from May 1 to October 31 and averaged 25 cars per day. Bob was pleased that each customer's average purchase was twice as much as he had anticipated

A new twist on an old idea

Sometimes it just takes time and a new way of looking at things before an idea really takes off. LeBlanc's Rice Creek Hunting & Recreation in Little Falls bills itself as “one of the biggest and finest hunt clubs in the upper Midwest.” What started out in the early '60s as a one-room clubhouse run by the father and uncle of the current owners has turned into a 500-member club where 40,000 pheasants, mallard ducks, turkeys, and chukars (Indian partridge) are harvested each year.

Gregg LeBlanc and cousins, Elden, and Joseph took over ownership of Rice Creek in 1984. All three had been farming and decided it was time for a change. They had their work cut out for them – there were only four members, one small building and 1,700 acres of land. They have experienced steady growth each year and the business has been able to support the partners for the past 16 years. Currently, they have eight full-time employees (including the owners) and 45 part-time employees.

They draw mostly from the Brainerd, St. Cloud and northern metro areas but they have had people come from as far away as Texas, Florida and New York. Sixty to seventy percent of their business is corporate-related. The hunting season is from September through April. During the summer months, more than 400 members go to Rice Creek for the sporting clay shooting. They supplement these two main attractions with hayrides, sleigh rides, and snowmobile, cross country ski and four-wheeling trails.

“We've added on to the clubhouse three times. Now we have a regular restaurant that can seat 120 people and five bedrooms for up to 15 people,” Gregg explained. “In order to add to our market in the off-season, we host weddings, bachelor parties, anniversary parties, and business retreats. We are looking at a bed and breakfast for the summer months.”

Supporting a hobby

While the Wilts and the LeBlancs see continued growth with their businesses, Bev Roth, owner of Rocking R Farm in Foley, has decided a 30-stall boarding, training and instruction horse farm is just the right size. "I run my farm on a very personal basis. I really don't want to lose that by growing too big," she said. Yet Roth, who has been a life-long rider, considers a 30-stall and 74-acre operation "sizable" for this part of the state. She owns six of the horses, three of which she uses for lessons.

In 1994, she decided to quit her job at Fingerhut and pursue her part-time hobby on a full-time basis. Today Roth has three full-time employees and six part-timers. The monthly charge for boarding the horses is \$210. "You can't get rich doing this, but you can be comfortable," she said.

Roth, also in her 40s, has continually put money back into the business through upgrades and improvements. The farm has an indoor arena, two outdoor arenas, a stadium-jumping course, and a cross-country course. She has added on to her main building three times. There is now a heated lounge, kitchenette, shower facilities, video club, laundry, and loft for viewing the indoor arena. Her customers can store their possessions in a heated tack room with private lockers.

She has also hosted three schooling shows each year for the past six years with classes in dressage, hunter/jumper and cross-country. Her next project is to add turn-shelters. "The interest has really grown, particularly with adults," Roth said. We find that adult beginners are very comfortable coming here."

"Never owned a goat"

If you had told Brad Donnay seven years ago that he would be the proud owner of a 401-goat cheese dairy farm, he probably would have laughed out loud because, as he states, "I never owned a goat before in my life."

Brad, along with his brother, Kevin, and friend, David Lenzmeier, own Stickney Hill Dairy, just outside of Kimball. Kevin farms the land across the street, which was their original "home place" and Lenzmeier is a silent partner.

Both Donnay brothers attended the University of Wisconsin in River Falls and graduated with majors in food science and manufacturing. They were looking for opportunities and toured several dairy goat farms. In spring 1998, they milked their first goats – 40 of them. In 1999, their father retired and Kevin took over the 300-acre original farm, which is now certified organic.

Brad enjoys being his own boss and wanted to raise his two young children on a farm. He feels he's found a lucrative niche and wants to continue to grow. "Goat cheese is not financially viable for the big players like Kraft. The market just isn't big enough. And if they marketed heavily, they would drive up demand so high, the supply wouldn't be able to keep up."

All the goat milk is processed into cheese. They converted an old milk house to a cheese plant in 1999, doubled its size in 2000 and built on additions in 2001 and 2003. They produce an average of 4,000 pounds a week of cheese; their all-time high was 7,000 pounds in one week. Restaurants account for about 500 pounds a week and several Twin Cities upscale grocery chains sell the cheese. "Goat cheese appeals to upper middle class customers and is used in a variety of ways – recipes, on crackers, and in salad. It is very easily digested so it's good for some people who can't tolerate cow's milk."

Stickney ships the cheese to a distributor outside the state, some of it is packaged under their own logo and some of it is repackaged through a different brand. Currently Stickney doesn't have any competition in Minnesota but there are three large cheese operations in Wisconsin.

All their efforts seem to be paying off. In 2001 they had 87 goats and in 2004 they had 401. They doubled their sales between 2001 and 2002 and tripled that figure in 2003.

Not bad for a guy who had never owned a goat in his life.

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