
SNAPSHOT SERIES: TRANSITIONING TO VALUE ADDED ENTERPRISES

SWEET BRIAR FARMS – EUGENE, OR

All Natural, Humanely Raised Pork

 WALLACE CENTER
WINROCK INTERNATIONAL

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The Wallace Center supports entrepreneurs and communities as they build a new, 21st century food system that is healthier for people, the environment, and the economy. The Center builds and strengthens links in the emerging chain of businesses and civic efforts focused on making good food – healthy, green, fair, affordable food – an everyday reality in every community. Winrock International is a nonprofit organization that works with people in the United States and around the world to increase economic opportunity, sustain natural resources, and protect the environment, implementing projects in more than 65 countries across the globe.


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The Snapshot Series examines how traditionally direct marketing farmers are using value added enterprises to supplement and expand their agri-businesses, reaching new markets and consumers through the development of new products. This effort was funded in partnership with the Risk Management Agency as part of a multi-year initiative to develop and distribute risk mitigation resources for the direct marketing community.

More information on the series can be found online at www.wallacecenter.org.

AT A GLANCE: SWEET BRIAR FARMS

Keith Cooper and Petrene Moreland are co-owners of Sweet Briar Farms, a 40 acre hog farm in western Oregon. Priding themselves on all natural, humanely raised pork, Sweet Briar Farms offers a variety of pork cuts, smoked meats, sausages and bacon, as well as a successful line of rubs, spices and sauces. With a seasonal staff of up to 25, and the help of Keith's children, Sweet Briar Farms sells at over a dozen farmers markets, online, and on farm, and in the face of increasing demand, is poised to become the biggest provider of naturally raised pork in the Willamette Valley.

BACKGROUND

Keith Cooper is owner, operator and manager of Sweet Briar Farms, a 40 acre hog farm in western Oregon. Originally from Eugene and raised on a sheep and cattle ranch in eastern Colorado, Keith was first introduced to the idea of raising pigs when his daughters were involved with 4H growing up. first introduced to raising pigs in 1978 by daughters Michelle and Darci, who were involved in their local 4-H club. After he returned to Oregon in the late 1960s, he worked as a journeyman electrician, but was looking for a way to keep his ties to agriculture. Keith learned about pig raising through trial and error and with help from other farmers, and has been raising pigs ever since.

Petrene Moreland is co-owner, executive director and business manager for Sweet Briar Farms. Though she hadn't worked in farming before, Petrene quickly rolled up her sleeves and began to work on the business management side of Sweet Briar Farms, learning a lot about marketing and business on the job. Keith's son Ben works for Sweet Briar Farms as its financial advisor, and also helps out with building barns and expanding the business. Keith's daughter Michelle, who lives in Portland, helps out during the summers and daughter Darci helps with the books from Las Vegas.

Located 20 minutes from downtown Eugene, Oregon and 2 hours from Portland, Oregon, Sweet Briar Farms is in a rural area surrounded by several other family farms that raise mostly cattle, sheep, chickens and grow hay. Sweet Briar Farms' location has been a boon, located not only near several towns and cities, but also near several farmers markets. They've also benefited from western Oregon residents' increasingly sophisticated food tastes and growing interest in where and how their foods are sourced.

VALUE-ADDING

From the beginning, Keith has focused on raising his pigs humanely and naturally, with plenty of room to roam on open pasture and without the use of antibiotics or chemicals. Besides being known for the quality of his pigs and the passion with which they're raised, Keith is also known for the crossbreeds he's created. Sweet Briar Farms currently has four breeds, including heritage breeds such as Duroc, along with several crossbreeds, such as York-Hampshire

sows. Durocs, which have reddish brown coats, are very mild-mannered and known for their growth rate, ruggedness, feed efficiency, and the quality of their meat. Yorkshires, with pink coats, are known to make great mothers, but are known to be feisty and rambunctious. Berkshires, with their black and white coats, are a newly acquired breed which have a sweeter flavor. Rounding out the breeds carried by Sweet Briar Farms are the black and white Hampshires.

Petrene says that they created their value added products—various pork cuts, smoked meats, sausages and bacon—through trial and error. Sweet Briar Farms produces four kinds of bacon and eight kinds of sausages, along with ham, lard, and a range of ribs, steaks, and roasts. They also carry nitrate free hams and produce special products by request, such as hazelnut fed pork. In 2004, Keith introduced a variety of rubs, spices and sauces. It seemed like a good complement to Sweet Briar Farms' meat products and Keith learned how to make them from other spice mixers and a lot of trial and error. Their line of rubs includes Barbeque, Caribbean Jerk, Country Style, and Hot Italian, among others. The sauces are named after local rivers and lakes, such as Willamette River Mud, which is molasses and tomato based, Spencer Creek Mud, which is mustard based, and Fern Ridge Water, which is vinegar based.

THE FIRST YEAR

In 2000, Sweet Briar Farms' first year of operation, Keith started with 24 pigs. He bought a labeler, a cooler, and bread van, which he converted into a mobile meat storage unit, and sold retail pork cuts from the van at the Lane County Farmers Market. Keith contacted licensing agencies to understand the rules and regulations for selling from his van; the process of obtaining the various licenses and approvals took about two or three months. Although Keith had invested thousands of dollars into the purchase and conversion of his van, he only made about \$80 his first day. This left him with a surplus, and he made the decision expand to another farmers market in Portland, Oregon.

GROWTH AND RECOGNITION

Since it began, Sweet Briar Farms has grown in size and reach, beginning to take off in 2006. Petrene recalls that 2007 was the first year the farm came out ahead and Keith did not have to work as an electrician to pay the bills. Not only has there been an expansion in staff size and herd size, but they've also increased the number of outlets carrying Sweet Briar Farms' products. The farm also has plans to build additional facilities. With 140-180 pigs and one and a half barns, they plan to add an additional barn that will accommodate another 150 pigs.

When Sweet Briar Farms has gaps in its breeding schedule and has a shortage of meat, it also buys pigs from neighboring farms to sell. Petrene emphasizes that they only purchase from "farms that meet and exceed Sweet Briar Farms' requirements raising Duroc, Yorkshire, Hampshire, and Berkshires," and that this supports the few local pig farms that exist. In fact, some of these pigs are originally from Sweet Briar Farms, having previously been given or sold to neighboring farms and then bought back.

Although Keith and Petrene manage the farm, they hire 20 to 25 seasonal workers each year, with 15 to 18 workers during the summer alone. In the summer months, Sweet Briar Farms sells its products at 11 farmers markets; in the winter, the number of farmers markets where Sweet Briar Farms can sell goes down to five. Throughout the year, the farm sells to 25 to 30 restaurants, at numerous festivals, on their own website and the Local Harvest website, and on the farm. They also sell whole dressed pigs for luau-style cookouts for special events.

Sweet Briar Farms has also grown in acceptance and name recognition. When the farm first began, Keith's neighbors were opposed to having a hog farm in their neighborhood because of concerns over possible odors and pollution. At one point, Keith's mailbox was vandalized because of local opposition to

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his hog farm. Petrene says that today, everyone in the neighborhood wants to buy pork from Sweet Briar Farms. In 2006, Sweet Briar Farms made a brief television appearance when its leaf lard was used by Martha Stewart on her program for a lard rendering demonstration for piecrust.

Increasingly, Sweet Briar Farms' pork products are sought after by well-known chefs, delis and restaurants. After first being introduced to the Portland, Oregon restaurant scene via a European-style market known as Pasta Works, Sweet Briar Farms' products can now be found on the menus of some of the top restaurants in the Portland area, including the Blue Hour, the Country Cat, Bridgeport Brew Pub, Castagna and Wildwood, among others. In magazines such as *Gourmet* and *Eugene*, Sweet Briar Farms has received numerous mentions from chefs complimenting the farm on the quality of its pork and how pleased they are about serving local, healthy and naturally raised pork. In 2008, Sweet Briar Farms participated in an Outstanding in the Field dinner hosted by chef Jim Denevan, which introduced over 300 people to their products.

MARKETING

Sweet Briar Farms relies mostly on word-of-mouth and public events such as farmers markets and festivals for advertising, though they've recently started putting ads in local magazines such as *Edible Portland*. They also make the rounds to four to eight festivals per year.

As a firm believer in sustainability and staying local, Sweet Briar Farms also supports many other local farms and businesses. Keith is the President of the Board of Directors for the Lane County Farmers Market, often trains other farmers on various aspects of the hog business, and frequently buys their pigs. Petrene speaks at various local events to teach others about marketing and running a business. Many of these local events are sponsored by Think Local Umpqua, an organization that seeks to encourage people “to Think Local First when selecting goods and services.” Sweet Briar Farms also makes donations of its products to support local charities and their fundraising efforts.

Although Sweet Briar Farms takes its pigs to a USDA slaughterhouse—a requirement to sell to the public—their products can't be sold at grocery stores because they don't use a USDA packaging plant. “We like our butchers and packaging plant, because they allow us to get our products cut and packaged just the way we want them,” explains Petrene. Because the USDA requires that products be processed at USDA-certified facilities all along the line—from slaughter to packaging—in order to be sold by a third party, Sweet Briar Farms only sells directly to the public, via farmers markets, their website, and on farm.

CUSTOMERS

The majority of Sweet Briar Farms' customers comes from the 11 farmers markets they participate in. Second to farmers markets, restaurant accounts provide the most revenue, followed by sales from the Local Harvest and Sweet Briar Farms websites. Petrene says that the farmers markets are an excellent venue because they attract a wide range of people from a variety of social and economic backgrounds, who not only buy farm products, but look forward to seeing the people behind Sweet Briar Farms each weekend.

ADVICE

Sweet Briar Farms' key pieces of advice are to minimize expenses, take things slowly, and to treat what you do with care. This is particularly important to them when it comes to raising animals: “Humane treatment is critical because it all comes back to roost.” They also try to remember to take things one day at a time in operating their business, and to remember that it's a long-term investment that requires mental and emotional investment. Petrene also notes the importance of working with the community to build a business, a principle she lives out with Keith in helping out and exchanging advice and support with neighboring farmers—whether it's the egg lady around the corner whose eggs they sell or the mushroom guy with whom they split delivery costs.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE AND MEASURING SUCCESS

In order to keep up with growth, Sweet Briar Farms hopes to build two barns and a walk-in cooler and freezer in the future. They're working with the University of Oregon and Lane Community College to convert methane into electricity that will heat and light the barns. With the additional barns—which will make a total of four—and a projected growth of over 450 additional pigs, Petrene sees the potential for Sweet Briar Farms to become the biggest naturally raised pork provider in the Willamette Valley over the next five to seven years. Sweet Briar Farms also hopes to open its own meat store in the coming year, mainly to be able to maintain control over the quality of their product. Besides expanding the acreage used for their pig farm, Keith and Petrene are looking at the possibility of diversifying the use of their land. For example, they're considering allowing another farmer use part of their land for cultivating blueberries, and dividing the profits.

Both in their mid-fifties, Petrene and Keith are starting to mentor employees as apprentices to take over management and farming at Sweet Briar Farms. Eventually, they hope to build a farmhouse to allow workers to live at the farm.

According to Petrene, success is “being able to do what you like doing, do it well, and make a reasonable income.” She believes they've reached that point, but adds that “what makes us hit the mark is the fact that our animals are happy, healthy and treated with passion and respect . . . we can honestly say that you are eating fresh, healthy meat.”

LESSONS LEARNED

- Make every effort to raise your animals and to operate your farm sustainably.
- Invest in your community to build your business—get involved with neighbors, other farmers and local organizations to exchange information, resources and support.
- Diversify the outlets in which you sell: consider festivals, farmers markets, restaurants, online, on farm and stores.
- Maintain control over the quality of your product by selling directly rather than through third-party retail stores.
- Be mindful of the future of the business by mentoring employees who can take over management.

RESOURCES

Think Local Umpqua:
thinklocalumpqua.blogspot.com

Local Harvest:
localharvest.org

Willamette Farm and Food Coalition (Locally Grown):
lanefood.org

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