

Teen Finds Niche Market With Acorn-Fed Pigs

By Dee Goerge, Contributing Editor

If you dine at Proof, a Mediterranean restaurant in Des Moines, you may find pork chops with a Spanish-style flavor on the menu.

"My pigs are fed acorns once or twice a day," says Emily Harold, 17, owner/producer of Natural Oak Pork. "Even when it's cooking you can smell the difference. There's flavor in the fat, and when you eat acorn-fed bacon it's very rich and buttery."

Harold's father told her about acorn-fed pork when she was looking for a niche market to earn money to support her hobby of showing pigs and goats.

She chose the heritage breed of Berkshires as they are very feed-efficient, have good marbling, and thrive on acorns. She buys gelded male pigs that are about 50 lbs. in September after show season and raises just a few at a time based on orders. This past winter she raised seven Berkshires to about 300 lbs. The pigs live inside a building with access to the outdoors.

Harold buys all the feed including non-medicated ground feed with corn/soybeans and vitamins and minerals that is always available to the pigs. A couple of sources provide the acorns, which have been boiled, dried and bagged.

"I feed them whole, caps and all. The pigs spit the shells on the ground, and we use them for compost," Harold says.

Most of the pigs are sold in halves or wholes for a premium price (\$900/whole). Harold takes them to the locker to have them butchered, then delivers the meat to customers up to 3 hrs. away. When there is extra meat she sells \$100 packages with a variety of cuts. To market she calls or emails potential clients and has gotten business through word-of-mouth from her repeat customers.

Harold hopes that after attending college for agricultural communications, she can raise hogs as a sideline. For now, her brother, Kyle, who has helped her, will be a freshman



Acorn-fed Berkshire pigs produce bacon with a very rich and buttery flavor, says Emily Harold, owner/producer of Natural Oak Pork.

this fall and will continue the business.

"Natural Oak Pork is a great way for me to learn valuable skills, manage money and be responsible for its success," Harold says.

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Sunflower Oil Grown, Pressed And Bottled On Kansas Farm

Living in Kansas, the Sunflower State, adding value to sunflowers by pressing the oil seems like a natural thing to do, says Dennis Wright. He is the third generation that has grown sunflowers on the Wright farm near Bird City, Kan.

"Cold pressing unrefined oil is not very prevalent in our country right now. Most oil is refined in the U.S., so we felt there might be a good market for it," Wright explains. "What makes us unique is that we do it all, from planting the seed in the ground to putting the cap on the bottle."

Wright and his father, Don, raise high oleic sunflowers that have 82 percent acid levels in the oil, which are high in mono unsaturated fats and low in poly unsaturated fats, and have vitamin E and antioxidants. Sunflower oil is comparable to olive oil in nutrition and price.

In 2016, the Wrights put up a 30 by 40-ft. building with a room for pressing and a room for bottling next to an old government bin on the farm that can hold about 5,000 bushels of sunflower seeds that are fed to the building by a 4-in. auger.

The Wrights set it up to be efficient and automatic using parts they had on hand. Don, a retired electrician, used a microswitch from a pivot irrigation sprinkler to automate

the process. After the seeds are pressed, the oil cycles through a filter several times. The press is placed high enough that the meal falls into a commodity bag that can be moved with a pallet jack and loaded into a truck when sold to a farmer for feed. Don built the labeler so that it operates by pushing on a foot pedal that runs an inexpensive drill that spins a lawn mower belt to rotate a bottle while wrapping on the label.

Learning to operate the German equipment effectively took some trial and error, but marketing is the biggest challenge.

"We stop at stores wherever we go and let them smell it. It smells like sunflowers," Wright says. Between that, attending craft fairs, being part of tours, and word of mouth, they have Wright Farms Sunflower Oil in an assortment of grocery stores and specialty shops, as well as selling it direct to customers.

"My biggest surprise is the varied uses people come up for it," Wright says. In addition to everyday cooking, it works well in Asian dishes, for smoking meat, and for skin care products such as diaper rash cream.

"We set the price (\$6 for a 16-oz. bottle) so customers can easily justify giving it a try," Wright says. "We make it in small batches so it's as fresh as oil can be."



Dennis Wright adds value to sunflowers by pressing the oil and bottling it. In 2016 he and his father put up a building with rooms for pressing (left) and bottling (right). Home-built labeler (above) operates by pushing on a foot pedal.



The family does all the work themselves and have the capacity to grow the business in the future. In addition to 16-oz. bottles, they sell the oil in 8-oz. and 32-oz. bottles with plans to sell gallons in the near future.

The Wrights welcome dealer inquiries and are also open to tour requests.

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Simple Ground Mount Solar Panel Racking Kit

If you've looked at solar energy in the last few years but rejected it because of complicated hookups and mounting requirements, this new adjustable, ground mount racking kit might be the answer.

The kit, developed by Dave Sand of Avon, Minn., is designed to install self-contained multiple pods of solar panels set up in series. It includes a galvanized steel A-frame stand that bolts together to support the panels, and rectangular rock-filled bases made from expanded steel mesh. Each stand is anchored by 2 bases, which measure 2 ft. wide, 8 ft. long, and 1 ft. high.

"The kit includes everything you need except for the solar panels and electrical wiring, including micro inverters. The customer supplies the rocks," says Sand. He sells the kit only to installers, who mount 10, 12, or 14 panels on each stand.

Sand says the kit provides an inexpensive

way to anchor the frame that supports panels. "With a standard ground mount, several poles are placed in the ground and a racking system is installed on top to hold the panels. You first dig several holes that are a few feet deep, then set the poles in and fill them with concrete. The structure creates the foundation for holding the panels.

"My kit is much more customer friendly because there's no need to dig holes."

The stand comes with a hand-cranked ratchet that's used to adjust the panel angle seasonally, which is a big advantage, says Sand. "With a standard ground mount the panels are fixed, meaning the tilt angle and direction are permanent. There's no adjustability, which isn't ideal for areas that get a lot of snow. Electric-operated solar racking systems are available, but their motorized systems are designed to tilt the panels both daily and seasonally which adds

to the cost. Also, there are more components to go wrong.

"My system is mechanically adjusted. The panels can be adjusted anywhere from a 60 to 10-degree angle, depending on the angle of the sun. Tilting the panels at a 60-degree angle during winter allows snow to slide off much faster."

Sand, an electrician by trade, has a big solar panel setup on his small acreage. "I set up my solar panel system in 2009, and neighbors later asked me to help them with their solar projects. That's when I got the idea to build a kit."

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Solar panel racking kit provides an inexpensive way to anchor A-frame steel stands that support panels set up in series. Each stand is anchored by a rectangular rock-filled base made from expanded steel mesh.