

## Small Cattle Operation Does Its Own Processing

Kim and Steve Wells sell their beef direct to the consumer and control the meat every step of the way. They even purchased their own processing facility. They did it the hard way, without the backing of a banker.

"We had to sell about half of our 80-cow herd and some land to buy the facility," says Kim. "We needed to do something. Several processors had gone out of business and the others were pushing out quarters of beef for large operators. There was no access for smaller operators like us."

Concerned about the grain market in the late 1900's and early 2000's, Kim and Steve researched options. With pastures that had been organic for decades, they decided to start selling beef direct to consumers. It just required a little fine tuning of their operation to produce a high-quality product that would appeal to consumers.

"Our banker laughed at us when I told him what we were going to do, but the rewards have been unlimited," says Kim. "By 2003, we had switched most of our row crop land over to pasture. We were the largest 100 percent grass fed, organic beef producer in the state."

They break their cattle herd into groups, each with its own herd bull and about 6 acres of grazing per animal. Farm ponds

were developed to provide the water. Silt carried into the ponds provides water soluble minerals. Other inputs, aside from reseeding pastures with grass and legume seeds, are minimal.

"We supply them with free choice salt and diatomaceous earth, which provides some trace minerals, but also controls worms," says Kim. "The diatomaceous earth moves through with the manure and controls fly larvae as they hatch. We also use it in a dust bag to powder their heads. We haven't seen a vet in 8 years, and our meat is phenomenal."

Bulls stay with the herds year-round. As a result, calves are produced year-round and provide a constantly refreshed meat supply. Young bulls are processed into steaks, roasts and ground beef, while heifers rebuild the cattle herd.

Kim had driven by Barnard Processing for years as she took the family's beef to a Kansas City farmers market. The idea of doing their own processing was something they had been considering for at least 15 years.

Kim and Steve needed dependable processing. They had already transitioned from selling 800 to 1,000 lbs. of beef every Saturday to a store front of their own. When it opened in December of 2016, her farmers market customers followed.

"It went great until COVID hit and the city did street work that made it difficult to reach us," she says. "By May we had to close."

By the time they closed the store, they had already made the move to buy and renovate the processing facility. "It sat empty for 2 years before we were able to buy it," says Kim. "USDA inspection wasn't easy to get, but the inspectors were great to work with, very helpful and patient."

They opened the processing operation in August of 2020. "We started out doing one animal every other day," says Kim. "Now we are up to 3 beef and a couple hogs a day."

In addition to herself and Steve, 2 of their children also work at Barnard Processing, as do several former employees of the facility.

"We run it ourselves, thanks to some experienced butchers who came in to give us lessons," says Kim. "The need for a facility like this was big before COVID. It's even bigger now."

As fast as one challenge is met, the Wells family takes on another one. While the Barnard plant was just getting going, they partnered with friends to open Wells Locally Sourced Meats, a new store in Kansas City, Kan., this past December. Wells supplies the beef and pork, while partners Deborah Borel and her daughter Claire Walker run



Ribeye, T-bone, and other steaks at Wells Locally Sourced Meats.

the shop. Borel and Walker also supply fresh produce, canned goods, and culinary items from their 6-acre farm, as well as store-made ice cream, deli items and lunch specials.

The Wells family is already looking ahead to new challenges. Plans are underway to open a store front at the Barnard plant.

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## New App Matches Farmers With Custom Operators

When Molly Woodruff needs help on her farm, she goes to the Farmmee app and looks for local providers. Farmmee lists people who provide services farmers need. Released this past May, listings are still growing. Woodruff, CEO of Farmmee, and her partners, Becky McCrea and Cindy Rockwell, are confident it will grow quickly.

"Our goal is a thousand farmers and providers by the end of the year and at least 5,000, perhaps as many as 10,000 by next May," says Woodruff. "In the first month, we had users sign up from 15 to 20 states, stretching from Minnesota to Texas and New York to Nevada. We were surprised to sign up more providers than farmers."

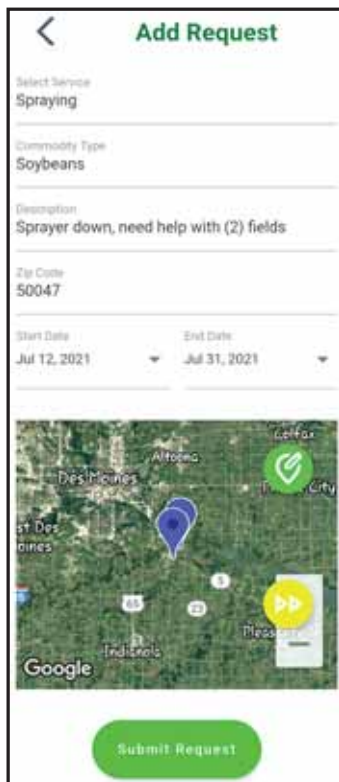
Farmers can download the app free in either Android or iOS versions. Anyone (including farmers) can list one or more services they offer for a monthly fee starting at \$19.99. Rates for services are negotiated between provider and user.

"Most of our initial service providers have been farmers wanting to better utilize equipment and skills through custom work," says Woodruff. "With the cost of modern equipment, they want to maximize their return."

The rapid growth and widespread use of the app was another surprise to the three Farmmee partners, who all live in Iowa. Initially, they focused on marketing the app to farmers in their home state, with plans to slowly branch out. But interest in the app took off as soon as the word got out.

"We had a lot of farmers looking for drivers with a commercial driver license (CDL)," says Woodruff. "We started calling colleges in the farmer's area that offered CDL training to reach out to new trainees. We also reached out to CDL holders we knew to ask about referrals."

Filling gaps, like the CDL situation, is all part of customer service for the Farmmee developers. "We have put together a team



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to respond to user needs," says Woodruff.

"We want Farmmee to be useful for anyone who needs a farm hand, whether for fencing, driving, or combining," says Woodruff.

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## Variety Boosts Value Of Farm-Based Creamery

Hard times were hitting in 2017 as milk prices were dropping for Gary and Amy Blase, Ethan, So. Dak. Their son, Chad, who'd recently returned home to help with the family farm was determined not to let the family farm fail.

They turned to Laura Klock, who's an experienced entrepreneur. She gave inspiration to the Blase family by helping them realize Amy's lifelong dream of owning their own creamery and making their own products. "I wanted to help make this a reality," Klock says.

In 2018, the family purchased the Valley Side Farm Cheese business about an hour away in Crooks, So. Dak. Blase and Klock received a customer list, equipment, and all of its inventory. They learned to make cheese at the facility with the help of the creamery's former owner. Meanwhile a renovation was taking place at the farm. Using space in the old dairy barn, they created a cheese aging room and set up a cheese-making room. Within a year, they had their first batch of Farm Life Creamery cheese curds, using fresh, full-fat grade A milk from Blase's parents 100-cow Holstein herd.

Says Klock, "We're like the Baskin-Robbins of flavored cheese curds. We've come up with 45 flavors of curds so far." Among those are the original (unflavored curds) and others like Kickin' Maple Honey and Jamaican Jerk. Farm Life Creamery also has rare, small-batch artisan cheddar flavors like Bloody Mary, Coffee, and Chocolate. Others include the more conventional flavors like Dill, Caraway and Original. Other cheeses they've mastered are colby, gruyere and mozzarella. Cheeses are sold in single packages, as a cheese tray assortment or multiples in a gift box.

Their products are sold right on the farm where retail space was added to the original milking parlor. They're also marketed to grocery and convenience stores and butcher shops along with area restaurants, hospitals and school food services.

The early months of 2020, just before



Farm Life Creamery makes 45 different flavors of cheese curds.

the pandemic, saw excellent sales. With a vision of expanding their capabilities to bottling milk, they applied for a USDA Value Added Producer Grant. That fall the \$50,000 grant came through. It allowed them to add space and equipment on the farm to bottle their own grade A whole white and chocolate milk. They were also able to market and ship their products to more stores and expand delivery options through online orders.

Today the Creamery is recovering well from pandemic lows. In the summer of 2021, they hosted a grand opening complete with a full line of products in their retail store. The event featured the debut of their own ice cream as well as a new playground and a mini golf course. They continue to add value to the property and offer farm tours that are fun for the whole family.

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