

Profitable Small Farm Built From Scratch

Jeff Hall and Cindy Hale are proof that inexperienced people can build a small farm from scratch that's profitable enough to support a family.

They got their start when they bought 40 acres near Duluth, Minn., intending to produce food for family and friends. More than 20 years into their venture, operating Clover Valley Farms is the full-time occupation for both Hall and Hale.

They produce specialty meats and several types of artisan vinegar, salts, mustards, and jams. Other products include shrubs and a blend of fruit, sugar and vinegar syrups used to make sparkling sodas and cocktails. They also raise rabbits and sheep for specialty products.

Over the years, their business has evolved as they monitor and assess what works and what doesn't. They built a greenhouse that's irrigated with greywater from their house to produce herbs, flowers, vegetables and greens. They also planted

fruit trees and berries, then diversified into chickens. Eventually, their flock grew to 500, and then came ducks, turkeys and pigs.

In recent years, they changed their focus. "Livestock is very labor-intensive. We decided to simplify our processes, reduce waste, and focus more on our fruits."

Hale drew on her background in science and obtained a grant to study the feasibility of turning their fruit crops into value-added vinegar. They began using elderberries, juneberries and Aronia, all fragile fruits that wilt quickly after picking, to produce wine. Live acetobacteria were added for a secondary fermentation that produced fruity and healthy live-cultured vinegar. Homegrown rhubarb, apples, pears, currants and wild cherries are blended to produce Rhubarb Wine vinegar. Made in small batches, the herb-infused varieties add layers of flavor to the original crisp rhubarb. Hale says the honey-sweetened version is both sweet and tart. "We're part of a very small group of culinary and artisanal

vinegar producers in the country," Hale says.

Their farm has more than 20 varieties of apples, two varieties of cherries, three types of plums, and nearly 10 species of small bush fruits. They're also propagating pear varieties from historic trees.

Clover Valley's livestock operation has pivoted from poultry and pigs to meat rabbits and sheep. Hall says these species are less work and more sustainable because rabbits reproduce on their own, are small and easy to care for, and their housing can be picked up and moved instead of cleaning out manure required with other livestock. Sheep graze their fields, provide excellent weed and pest management in their fruit orchards and supply high-quality meat, wool and hides.

Products made on the Clover Valley Farm are sold at local farmer's markets, area co-ops, and a few retail stores in Minnesota and Wisconsin. Hall also produces beautiful wooden bowls, and the couple offers workshops and classes on sustainable



Jeff Hall (shown) and Cindy Hale produce a variety of infused vinegar and other products on their sustainable farm near Duluth, Minn. Hall also makes unique wooden items they sell at farmer's markets and on their website.

farming at Clover Valley.

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"Self-Serve" Saves Small-Town Grocery

Not many towns with a population of 600 people, like Evansville, Minn., can claim a grocery store, much less one that is high-tech and self-serve. Customers who have paid the \$75 annual membership can access the Main Street Market 24 hrs. a day. They use a phone app to open the door, scan their items, and pay. No phone? No problem. Members without a phone can use a key fob to get in.

"Evansville lost its grocery in 2017, and we wanted to bring one back. However, sustaining a store with traditional hours wasn't going to work," says Alex Ostenson. "Even with regular hours, a lot of people in the area commute to work and don't get home until evening."

Ostenson, a diesel mechanic, and his wife Caileen looked for an alternative. What they came up with was a self-serve membership store. They put it in place, and locals stepped up to join.

For those who prefer personal service, the market is open Tuesdays and Thursdays (9-5) and Saturdays (9-4). While only 900 sq. ft., the market offers everything from

snacks and sodas to name-brand grocery items, frozen pizza, meat and dairy, including Millerville butter (Vol. 42, No. 6).

"We've been open about a year and a half, and it's going well," says Ostenson.

It's going so well that the Ostensons are in the process of expanding the concept to a neighboring town that was in danger of losing its only grocery. The Hoffman Market is 3,500 sq. ft. and is not yet self-serve.

"When we announced we were taking over the store, some people were concerned we would only be open 3 days a week like in Evansville, while others said they were ready to buy a membership," says Ostenson. "We assured them we're going to keep regular hours and later expand to self-serve."

They've had to work out details with state regulators, as they did with the Main Street Market. "Getting state approvals for such a new concept was our biggest challenge in Evansville," recalls Ostenson.

"When the state gets on board, it'll be really good for a lot of communities," he says. "We've already heard from others in Minnesota."



Alex Ostenson and his wife Caileen and family in front of their self-serve market.

The interest is not just in Minnesota. The Ostensons were invited to speak about their concept at a national grocer's conference in Kansas this past summer.

"I've had meetings with people in Arkansas and Vermont and had emails from California and Canadian provinces, as well as Washington and Nevada," says Ostenson. "I'm doing some consulting with folks that want to do something similar, and we're investigating setting up a franchise model. People like the idea, but most don't have the

time or resources to set it up themselves."

Thanks to a \$30,000 stipend from a regional foundation, Ostenson is working full-time on the concept. That includes fine-tuning it and working out inefficiencies. They have a Facebook page and are planning to set up a website. Adding grocery delivery to their list of services is also being considered.

While they carry some local items like honey, they hope to do more with local producers. This past summer they received several unexpected donations to their produce shelves.

"One day a farmer came in with watermelons he had grown," says Ostenson. "They're too expensive to get from our distributor, but he said we could have them free. We had others come in with tomatoes. They all said they had more than they needed and wanted to share."

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David Beekman sells his chickens through Market Wagon, an online marketplace.

Preteen Profits From Chicken Business

David Beekman may only be 12, but he already has his own successful farm business.

David comes by his love of farming honestly, as both of his parents were involved with 4-H and FFA from an early age. Their operation, Hickory's Legacy

Farms, is named for David's grandparent's property, Hickory Grove Farms.

"When I was seven, my parents wanted me to have a project of my own so that I could learn responsibility and make some money, but I wasn't old enough for 4-H yet," says David. A poultry business was a

natural choice.

"I like chickens, and they're small and pretty easy to care for. At first, I just raised some for us to eat and sell a few to friends and family, but then my mom found out about Market Wagon, and I decided to sell through there."

Market Wagon is an online farmers market and food delivery service. Farmers and vendors can list what they have available, set their prices, and update the inventory weekly. Customers have a week to put in orders through the site, and the Beekman family and other sellers get an email with the final orders by Wednesday. That allows them to bring everything to the hub on Thursday morning, at which point Market Wagon delivers it directly to people's homes.

While Market Wagon has hubs all over the Midwest, Southeast, and Mid-Atlantic, David sells in the Northeast Ohio hub. "For now, I mostly sell chicken on Market Wagon, but also sell sweet corn, ornamental corn, and mini pumpkins," says David.

Selling might be the easy part of this farming venture, as David puts in most of the hard work of raising the birds himself. He raises approximately 300 birds a year and is continually experimenting with new products to sell.

As with any self-run business, David's farming venture has benefits and drawbacks.

"I like when we go pick up the baby chicks because they're really cute. I like knowing people like what I raise, and I like the money, too, but I'm mostly just saving that. I don't like the 'business' stuff so much - sitting with my mom and figuring out all the costs and how much I have to charge, but I have to do that to make money."

For other kids interested in starting their own agriculture venture, David offers this advice:

"First, make sure it's OK with your parents because they have to help, like if you can't drive or need help with the computer, and because they have to let you have space for your animals and pay for things until you can pay them back when you sell your stuff."

"It's a lot of work, and you must ensure the animals are taken care of every day because they rely on you. So, you can't decide part way through that you don't want to do it anymore."

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