

Friday, August 24, 2007

Small Business Snapshot

Holy cow - Hobby farm now marketing lean beef product



Photo by Ron Bath

[View Larger](#)

Jon Bednarski bought 50 acres of Oldham County farmland six years ago because he wanted to try his hand at raising beef cattle.

He thought it would be a good hobby, a diversion from his main line of business as a La Grange distributor for Northeastern Log Homes Inc. and its subsidiary, Classic Post & Beam.

But as he began reading up on the subject, he discovered a viable business opportunity in the beef market.

Consumers are becoming more health conscious and more informed about the foods they eat, he said. So it makes sense that consumers want healthier, more natural alternatives to the beef products found in most major grocery chains.

Getting started

Bednarski believed he could tap into that market, and in 2003, he and longtime business partner Dan Weintraub formed Sherwood Acres Beef.

The partners purchased a small herd of cattle -- a breed known as Belted Galloways, which produce low-fat and low-cholesterol meat. The free-ranging steers are 90 percent grass-fed and are steroid- and hormone-free, Bednarski said.

The first of the Sherwood Acres herd was processed last fall at Boones Abattoir Inc., a USDA-inspected facility in Bardstown, Ky.

With product in hand, Bednarski and Weintraub hit up local farmers markets, specialty grocers and restaurants.

The company also became active in Kentucky Proud, a Kentucky Department of Agriculture initiative that supports food products grown, raised or produced in the state.

And with the help of matching funds from the Kentucky Cattlemen's Association, Sherwood Acres launched a Web site, printed brochures, ran print advertisements and purchased custom freezers that it placed in retail outlets.

Seeing strong demand

Their efforts are starting to pay off. Now, Sherwood Acres Beef products can be found in Amazing Grace health food store in the Highlands, at the downtown Market on Market grocery and on the menu at the upscale 610 Magnolia. Louie's Fish House & Restaurant in La Grange has made the Bely Burger a staple on its menu, and consumers can go online to place orders as well.

The partners declined to disclose revenue, but they said that by July, the company had exceeded its revenue projections for all of 2007.

With the growth, the challenge now is staying ahead of demand with only 20 head of cattle in the herd.

To keep up with orders, Sherwood Acres needs to process an average of two cows per month, and it takes 18 to 24 months for the cows to reach that processing point, Bednarski said. So Sherwood Acres buys cattle from other producers when needed, as long as the steers meet the company's guidelines in terms of the breed and how the cattle were raised.

Sherwood Acres' goal is to expand its herd to about 50 or 60 cows by 2008.

"The demand is great, and we're having fun with it," Bednarski said. |