

A Gift That Keeps on Giving

Father's Day Gift Becomes Sherwood Acres

by Amy Bramblette

For Father's Day, most men receive a tie, shirt or hand-painted plaque with #1 Dad scrawled on it. But for Jon Bednarski, a Father's Day gift turned into a business. In 2003, he was given three Belted Galloway cows that would lead to Sherwood Acres, a farm that currently has 30 head of cattle.

Bednarski works for a Vermont based company, Northeastern Log Homes and moved here to Oldham County, where he met his wife, Sylvia. "We bought 50 acres on Ballard School Road to take my daughter's horses out there," he said.

Then came the Father's Day cows that changed his plans. "I got to pick them out. We went to a farm in southern Indiana," Bednarski explained. "At that point, I was interested in my son doing some showing. I had done some of that with dairy cattle. But kids today like to do other stuff."

When he realized his son wouldn't be showing the cows, Bednarski decided to go another direction. "With beef, at some point, they go on somebody's plate, and you have to recognize that," said Bednarski. "At that time, with my marketing experience, I knew the next step would be to look at selling beef."

Dan Weintraub also works for Northeastern Log Homes and knew Bednarski. The two had formed The Sherwood Corporation in 1991 for land development and preservation. They diversified in 2003 and started Sherwood Acres to concentrate on the beef production. Bednarski handles the farming and Weintraub works on sales and marketing.

"From conception to actually hauling the animals to the processor- that's Jon," said Weintraub. "I go to the processor, pick it up and finalize the sales process."

Since starting with three, Sherwood Farms now has 30 head of the Belted Galloways, or "Belties", as breeders call them. What most people notice first about the Belties is their appearance. They are indeed "belted," with a white strip surrounded on both sides by black, red or dun color. The cattle originated in the Galloway District of Scotland, a rugged, hilly area along the coast. This heritage makes for solid, sturdy cattle, which can survive in harsh conditions. It also makes for some very good beef.

"The appearance alone has value, but it's not the primary value," said Weintraub. "The primary value is it's tender, it's flavorful, it's juicy, it's a good quality beef, and it's extremely lean."

But just having great meat didn't mean instant success for Sherwood Farms. "Typically when you sell cattle at the sale barn or the stockyards, they pay a premium for black hide- Angus, Simmental, whatever. Anything that is different from that they don't pay a premium for. In fact, they discount them," Bednarski said.

To be competitive, Bednarski and Weintraub decided to direct market their meat. To succeed, they have capitalized on what makes their product different. First, unlike beef bought in mass retailers, Sherwood Acres' cattle are raised with rotational grazing and finished up on a corn and soybean supplement. Most beef bought in supermarkets is raised in a feedlot with hundreds of other cattle where high volume production is the norm.. "They may have 10,000 cows in there," Bednarski said. "Their goal is to feed them until they get to 1,100 pounds and then they're sold."

Another difference is Bednarski and Weintraub raise their cattle without chemicals- no hormones, steroids or antibiotics. With many consumers questioning the safety of the meat they eat, this is a big selling point. "The big push today is natural food, no hormones, no steroids, no antibiotics," said Bednarski.

"And local is as important, if not more important, it seems, to people than natural," added Weintraub. Consumers really like the fact that meat is raised locally and they can feel good about where it comes from.

All of the meat sold by Sherwood Farms comes vacuum-sealed and frozen. It's USDA approved and has the Kentucky Proud label, signifying it's a Kentucky-produced product. The company sells meat only by the cut; not whole. They offer Sample Packs, where the customer can get several cuts and ground beef.

In heading up the marketing, Weintraub has found different ways to reach consumers. There is a web site, www.SherwoodAcresBeef.com, where customers can place orders. Local orders can be delivered or picked up, or shipped to the Midwest and Central Atlantic states. The company also sells at two local farmer's markets, one in Louisville and the other in LaGrange, which has built sales.

"The farmer's markets also help to build a customer base." Weintraub noted. "Take a seasonal market like the one in LaGrange. I am delivering two orders today that originated from that." Sherwood Acres is available at two retail outlets in Louisville- Amazing Grace Whole Foods and Nutrition and Paul's Fruit Markets. Some Louisville area restaurants are also customers of Sherwood Farms. Their meat is served in 610 Magnolia and The Patron. For these customers, the packaging is a little different.

"Even though freezing the product doesn't, as far as were concerned, have an effect on the quality, higher-end restaurants are interested in fresh product." Bednarski said. "They will take vacuum-sealed product, only fresh."

While happy with how far they have come, Bednarski and Weintraub are always looking to grow and improve. Whether it's studying trends on cuts of meats, attending agricultural marketing conferences or investing in more land, they are planning ahead. They have purchased 100 acres in Henry County, Kentucky, and are looking into possibly buying more cows. "I don't see us getting bigger than 50 head of cows," Bednarski said.

As far as advice for other hobby farmers hoping to get into a business, Bednarski recommends several things. A good mentor can help avoid pitfalls. Help from the government and other groups, such as breeder's organizations can also be crucial. By doing homework, Bednarski found several programs through the government that would match on fencing, watering systems and other items his farm needed. He also used his Oldham County Extension office for information and learning opportunities. "There is just so much stuff available out there," Bednarski said. "You just have to go and look for it."

Of course, sometimes receiving just the right gift can also do wonders.