

AGRICULTURE

The goose that laid the golden egg

After 43 years, the Neubergeres seek a visionary for the continuity of Goosemobile

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FOR THE COURIER

PAINT ME A PICTURE

We idled down the old gravel road and turned north into the driveway of the legendary Goosemobile farm owned and operated by Tom and Ruth Neuberger. The farm lies east of Canistota, about two miles north and one-half mile west of the Lake Vermillion Recreation Area. As we rattled down the driveway I immediately noticed how clean and well-kept everything looked, the lawn freshly mowed, buildings in good repair. As soon as we stepped out to greet the Neubergeres, I immediately noticed something else; there was no odor. Of course the fresh scents of the country wafted by on lilac-laced breezes, but there was no manure smell. None of the nose crushing odoriferous fumes associated with confined animal farming operations (CAFOs) emanated from the poultry house. There was no concentrated, compounded heated funk escaping from the hog barns.

The chickens happily scratched around in the yard and grass, pecking and preening, eating and exercising. The hogs rooted and foraged in the wooded pasture, fully expressing at will their most foundational urges. A loyal farm dog made sure the raccoons and other predators stayed at bay. It only seems logical that modern, intelligent, educated, peaceful and healthy humans would want to eat food that comes from a place like this.

WHO IS GOOSEMOBILE?

Ruth and Tom were standing in the driveway, chatting with some prospective buyers. I was struck by how well they both have aged; it is amazing that they are still operating this labor-intensive operation at 85 years of age.

Both Ruth and Tom are graduates of SDSU and both taught for about 20 years in South Dakota, Iowa, North Dakota and Michigan. They purchased the family farm in 1972 when Tom's parents retired. They also operate Dakota Down, a line of down pillows and comforters.

Around 1980, Tom and Ruth were involved with the SD Goose Association as producers. Ruth recalls the high demand for geese in those days. She remembers that there were several regional processing plants and that some farmers would raise up to a thousand geese at a time to be taken

to the regional processing plants. From there, their geese were sent to Canada and to Germany. Eventually the German Market collapsed and subsequently the local (S.D.) market also failed.

The Association adapted by creating a local market. "We just ran around the state peddling them," Tom recalls as he gestured to a retired delivery truck, "Janklow was the governor at the time and he gave us a lot of good publicity for the self-help project." The Neubergeres bought the remaining trucks when the S.D. Goose Association disbanded, and behold, the Goosemobile was born. The enterprising Neubergeres began to receive requests from community residents for beef, lamb, pork, chicken and added these proteins to their growing portfolio, then incorporated in 1983.

Since the Neubergeres also own 160 acres of land suitable for crops, I asked Tom why they elected to choose this form of agriculture instead of growing row crop. "I could never afford to get into it, to buy the machinery; we've farmed 43 years and never raised a kernel of anything, the 160 acres have been sowed down to pasture."

As the farm to table movement began, and the demand for local, delicious, nutrient-dense foods evolved, the Neubergeres sought new markets for their growing business. Tom and Ruth elected to help found the Falls Park Market in Sioux Falls, which they have been attending since the late 70s.

OVERSIGHT

But how do the mechanics work in terms of transforming these healthy animals into healthy food that can be legally sold? If I wanted to raise poultry and get it to market, HOW would I do it? What about all the legalese? What about inspection, Federal Regulation, State Regulation, who do I call first? Oh, I give up. It's actually easier than you may think.

Tom explains, "The beef, pork and lamb are custom processed in the state inspected facilities, but we have our own poultry processing facility here. You have to have your own [poultry processing facility], because there aren't any custom poultry facilities around."

At the core of producer-based poultry processing is Public Law 90-492, The Producer Exemption from Daily Inspection, which allows individuals in South Dakota who raise their own poultry to process up to 20,000 birds per year with periodic inspections by the USDA. The meat can then be legally sold

to hotels, restaurants, supermarkets, individuals, institutions and distributors, but cannot be sold across state lines.

In a nutshell, someone who wants to process their poultry can work directly with their local USDA office to get the process started; there is no involvement from the South Dakota Animal Industry Board (SDAIB) whatsoever at the producer level.

NUTS AND BOLTS OF HARVESTING

We walked past a group of clucking and cooing eight-week-old chickens that are docketed for harvest in the morning. "We get 250 chicks every two weeks all summer long," explains Tom as we stroll towards his USDA FSIS inspected poultry slaughter facility, a retired 53' reefer trailer. "In a typical harvest day, we will harvest about 125 birds." Tom isn't even required to notify USDA when a harvest will occur. He noted that they drop by unannounced periodically to conduct an inspection.

Tom recalls how he came up with the idea to put the facility in a reefer trailer, "I saw a reefer at my neighbor's place, he was using them for pig nurseries. I thought they would make a great slaughter facility and I wouldn't have to build a building, plus it could be moved!"

Doing the math on the trailer, it only cost him about \$6.22/foot for a secure enclosed area to build out the facility. Inside of the trailer, stainless steel gadgetry gleamed as we inspected the line up. First the kill cones, then a scalding tank with a digitized display, a plucker drum with its alien black feather-grabbing fingers and lastly the rig is crowned with a rotating linkage of evisceration shackles on a conveyor chain. Tom bought most of his equipment used, and did a lot of the plumbing and electrical work himself.

The facility struck me as being an efficient, no-nonsense, compact, relatively inexpensive, clean and reliable setup; likely able to accommodate a much higher volume of harvest than the 250 birds-per-week in current production.

From the slaughter room, Tom transports the butchered chickens to an area where he keeps his specialized packing equipment for



"Ruth and Tom Neuberger stand in front of their Canistota home explaining the history of Goosemobile. After 43 years of operation, they are seeking continuity for their farm-to-table business." PHOTO BY NATHANIEL PREHEIM

chicken and chicken cuts. After they are packed and the air removed from the packaging, the meat is flash frozen and ready for marketing.

DIRECT MARKETING

Next we fly toward the Goosemobile, roosting in its very own barn. The Goosemobile unit serves several purposes. It is a mobile sales floor, a meat storage facility and the iconic marketing machine that has helped to earn Goosemobile their considerable regional notoriety.

We step inside and are greeted with an array of lowly humming deep freezers lining the perimeter of the large enclosed trailer, easy to read signage directing us to where we might find our delicious frozen treasures, and a display for the Dakota Down products. It's easy to see how seductive this format of grocery shopping can be; so far detached from the buzzing florescent lights, screaming kids and institutional-cleaner scented ambiance of some supermarkets.

TALKING TURKEY

But is there actually any money in this? Tom crunches the numbers, "Our average farmer market generates \$1500 per day. We also supply several health food stores out in Rapid City and Sioux Falls. We also sell through the Dakota Rural Action online CSA." Last year our total income was \$102,000.00.

The other element that makes this business so alluring is the freedom

of lifestyle. "For most of our neighbors who farm, their wives are all forced to work off-the-farm jobs to help support the operation. Ruth has never had to work off the farm. Ruth hasn't been involved with the production and processing. As the Director of Marketing, she notes that \$102,000 of meat was sold last year, package by package. We're not going to get rich, but we have no debt and want for nothing."

However, there is a silver lining; the operation has a lot of room to grow, and a solid foundation to build on. The production capacity of the slaughter facility can be increased by up to 600 birds per week, maybe more.

Currently there is not a walk-in freezer on the property. With the integration of increased cold storage area, more pastured animals could be raised, harvested and

stored to be sold during cold months when there is no grazing.

Chicken tractors could be moved across the pasture in summer to accompany the management-intensive beef-grazing operation. Social media and web marketing and sales channels have yet to be tapped. The opportunity is ripe for a tech savvy, entrepreneurial visionary with sound business skills.

"For \$139,000 you can do what we are doing," says Tom, "It would include all our production equipment, slaughter house, packing equipment, our book of business, the Goosemobile, our production practices." The purchase price would not include the land or the farm but the Neubergeres are open to someone moving onto their farm, renting the buildings and just continuing the operation as it is now. Tom and Ruth are also open to training the new owners.

I suspect it won't be long before a forward-looking individual, couple or group will seize this golden opportunity, before it flies away.

This is part of a monthly feature called Rural Alternatives being facilitated by Rural Revival, a local non-profit organization established to support local agriculture and its role in sustaining rural communities. The author, Nathaniel Preheim, is a member of the group and local bison producer. Learn more at ruralrevival.org.