

# Sowing Seeds, Reaping Profit

building a sustainable farm business from the ground up



**ELISABETH BZIKOT**

best baa farm and Ewenity Dairy Co-op

UK-born Elisabeth Bzikot is a pioneer among sheep dairy farmers in Ontario. As Chair of Ewenity Dairy Co-op, she markets sheep cheeses and yogurts at venues throughout the Golden Horseshoe and beyond.

## The Series

*Sowing Seeds, Reaping Profit is a series of seven case studies featuring innovative Ontario farmers with non-traditional backgrounds. It shares practical production tips, innovative marketing approaches and creative ways to successfully negotiate the myriad challenges that new farmers face in their start-up years and beyond.*

**Participants in the series include:**

**Elisabeth Bzikot** - Best Baa Farm and Ewenity Dairy Co-op

**Linda Crago** - Tree and Twig Heirloom Vegetable Farm

**Caitlin Hall** - Reroot Organic CSA

**Shin Kang** - Skyland Farms

**Linda Laepple** - Laepple Organic Farm

**Achim Mohssen-Beyk** - Reachview Farm and Quinte Organic Farmers Co-op

**Ute Zell** - Smiling Goat Farm

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**"T**he reason why we chose sheep is that they're nice animals. The other thing is that there's a good market in Ontario for lamb. And perhaps most importantly, I firmly believe that a lot of agriculture is in the pockets of large multinationals. They use their monopoly power to take advantage of farmers, with the result that the farmer doesn't get a just return on his investment.

"Sheep are not in that realm. No big business is interested in sheep. They will not let themselves be treated the way cattle so often are, because they will die. It's quite simple. So that was part of the reason why we originally chose sheep."

"The thing I'm most proud of in the last ten years is that the co-op is

managing to support six other farmers. They're getting a regular income from their milk. And I'm very pleased that we have been able to do it. It's very nice. It's nice to see people smile."

### The farm

Best Baa Farm is a 150-acre sheep farm in North Wellington County, ON. Elisabeth and Eric Bzikot founded the operation after moving to Ontario from Manitoba in 1998. The Bzikots maintain a herd of 150 British Milk Sheep, a dual-purpose breed that produces both milk and lamb. They cultivate small grains, hay, and haylage for feed.

Best Baa markets some of its lamb to retailers, including several restaurants and a Toronto butcher shop. However, most of the lamb is sold direct to the consumer, either at one of four Toronto farmers'

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markets or at the Best Baa Farm shop, which the Bzikots opened in Fergus, in 2005.

Elisabeth and Eric are also founding members of Ewenity Dairy Co-op. Ewenity purchases sheep's milk from six member-producers, including Best Baa Farm, and produces a range of products, from yogurt, to ice cream, to raw milk cheeses.

Best Baa Farm has recently acquired a 2000 sq. ft. cheese plant in Fergus, where Elisabeth and two helpers produce artisanal cheeses for sale under the Ewenity name. These products are distributed by the co-op, and sold at Best Baa's market stalls, as well as through health food stores and gourmet shops throughout Southwestern Ontario.

### **Starting out**

Elisabeth and Eric immigrated to Canada from southeast England in 1984, with the hope of creating a more prosperous future for themselves and their children. Eric was raised on a farm, and the couple had owned a farm together in England, which they sold in order to buy property in rural Manitoba. For a variety of reasons, however, Manitoba proved a poor fit for the Bzikots. After 14 years in the province, they decided to move to Ontario.

The Bzikots heard about a suitable property from their son-in-law, who discovered the place via an internet search. It had previously been used as a riding stable. But while the horse barn and arena were readily converted to use for the sheep, the property's former owners had neglected the land.

“When we took over the farm, the land was impoverished. It had

been rented out on an annual basis, so the tenants never had any incentive to take care of it. For the first three or four years, we had to buy food for the sheep. There wasn't enough to eat.”

The soil itself turned out to be quite good, if exploited, and the Bzikots were able to improve its fertility over time by applying manure. However, much of the land was too boggy to support alfalfa or to grow a decent cereal crop.

“We were told before we came that it was good land, but it needed draining. And it was quite true. When we had rain, the water would sit there into June and July. And the plants that grew there were bluish in colour, as opposed to being a rich green. If you traveled over them with any vehicle, they would just fold into the ground.”

Elisabeth and Eric ended up paying a contractor to drain most of their property. Excess water is now diverted through an underground system of perforated piping, which drains into a ditch at the property's lowest end. The procedure has vastly improved their yields. However, the operation cost them \$500/acre – a price that many small farmers would not have been able to pay.

### **Expanding into milk production**

Elisabeth chuckles at the idea of trying to produce sheep's milk in rural Manitoba, a region where people's palettes tend to be a bit conservative. The Bzikots didn't even think of milking until they came to Ontario.

“We had sheep for lamb – that was our original idea – and then afterwards we decided we would go over to milking, because there was a growing market for sheep

milk and sheep milk products. We looked into all the imported sheep milk cheeses, and there seemed to be an opportunity to produce similar things here. And something like yogurt, you couldn't import. So we thought we'd try out a few products like that.”

Shifting to milk production required a change in the genetics of the Bzikot herd. In 1998, the Bzikots imported 25 British Milk Sheep embryos from England, enough to form the nucleus of a small flock – the first of its kind in Canada. The following year, Eric and Elisabeth sold the wild boars that they had brought with them from Manitoba, and used the revenue to build a milking parlour. Ewenity Dairy Co-op was formed shortly after the Bzikots started milking, in 2001.

“What got us started was an inquiry from a group in Manitoba. They were going to pay far more for our milk than what we could hope to get here. And so we got together for that reason.

“However, once we had done that, the people in Manitoba withdrew, and we had to think of something else. We could have given up. But Stephanie (a co-op member), who's always been interested in making cheese, suggested we make cheeses. So I became the Chair, and we got going.”

### **Marketing and distribution**

Under Elisabeth's leadership, Ewenity has developed a range of products, which the co-op markets strategically to specific consumer groups. Elisabeth identifies three markets for these products.

“We have found that there are more and more people with allergies of different kinds. Something like 95% of people who

**“I think that it’s unusual, distributing for yourself, but it probably is one of the reasons why we have been successful.”**

have problems with cow’s milk are fine with sheep’s milk. So we have those people.

“And then we have a group of people belonging to the health food market. They believe sheep milk is a healthier product, and they know that sheep are rarely handled in the way that dairy cows are. The yogurt is mainly for the health food people. We’ve also started selling pasteurized milk for the health food people as well as an unripened cream cheese.

“And then there is the foodie market. They would be into the high-class cheeses. The raw milk Eweda we make is a foodie cheese. It’s not something you’d sell in the health food market.”

Eric and Elisabeth’s son, Peter, distributes the co-op’s products to retailers in Guelph, Collingwood, Kitchener-Waterloo, the Niagara region and Toronto. Here, Ewenity’s milk, yogurt, and cheeses find shelf space at stores like The Big Carrot and Whole Foods. He and his fiancée also co-ordinate Best Baa’s market stalls.

“By distributing ourselves, we make sure that the product arrives in as good a condition as we can possibly make it. I think that it’s unusual – distributing for yourself, but it probably is one of the reasons why we have been successful. You’ll see other distributors who have a whole range of things, and yours is such a small proportion of the total, that it’s not looked after. And funnily enough, it won’t sell.

“When we do it ourselves, we know that the yogurt arrived there in mint condition, which you can’t necessarily guarantee if you go through someone. And then of course, by going to farmers’



The Bzikots market their products at farmers’ markets and at their farm store in Fergus. They also distribute Ewenity products to a wide network of retailers.

markets, you get the retail dollar.”

#### **Looking ahead**

“We’d always thought it would be nice to have a plant on our farm, and be able to pop over and do things. Just like Mapleton’s Dairy, you know? And then we went looking for a loan. And one of the FCC (Farm Credit Canada) gurus came out, and he asked me how much we were prepared to lose. I had not expected to hear that. And I said, ‘Oh, I wasn’t intending to lose anything.’ And he said, ‘No, but some do’.”

“His argument was that if you have a dairy plant on the farm, you will never be able to sell it. It’s good for you to be able to nip across the road and come back, but if you ever wish to sell the place, you’ll never get your money back because you’re not going to find someone

who wants to do what you’re doing. So that really made us think again.”

The Bzikots followed the FCC representative’s advice, and recently purchased an off-farm cheese plant of their own in Fergus, ON. They are looking forward to developing a new line of products, created using milk purchased from Ewenity, but marketed under the Best Baa label. They have recently purchased equipment to measure the solids in the milk, so that they may give incentives to co-op members who deliver the richest product.

#### **Lessons**

Best Baa Farm’s success did not come overnight, nor was it achieved without an off-farm salary. Elisabeth is quick to point out that her full-time teaching career helped to sustain the Bzikots’ operation through some

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of its toughest times. She advises new farmers to start small, and to hang on to their day jobs for as long as they're able.

"Start small, do a small experiment. Make your losses on little things because you're going to make mistakes at the beginning. You're going to overestimate or underestimate things, whatever you do. Your markets, your production, your costs: you're going to find yourself making mistakes"

"New farmers can make it as a profitable sideline, but to hope to make a career of it – very few will be able to do that. Maybe if you do it on a part-time basis, or your partner can farm while you do another job, but you have to put in a lot of hard work and you have to love the job."

For livestock farmers in particular, Elisabeth emphasizes the need to closely monitor not only the financial health of your operation, but also the well-being of your herd.

"There are two cases I can think of immediately where people went into sheep dairying and they didn't really enjoy it that much. I remember my husband, he went to visit one of them, and the man was cutting thistles while two young lads were milking the sheep. You don't do that.



For Elisabeth, healthy animals are the foundation of a successful livestock enterprise. She counsils new sheep farmers to make livestock care their first priority.

Cutting thistles is not an important job. Milking your sheep, seeing how they're doing, seeing how they look, you should do that.

"You put your jobs in order of priority. And I think you really need to keep your own eye on the important elements of your production system. Do it yourself or

work with someone; don't leave it to someone who doesn't know a lot, and can't be expected to. And above all, I think, you should really like what you're doing, or else you won't stay. You're not going to make money doing it. If you want a money-making enterprise, then don't choose a farm. Money can't be your source of satisfaction."

## What is FarmStart?

The objective of FarmStart is to **support and encourage a new generation of farmers** to develop locally based, ecologically sound and economically viable agricultural enterprises.

There are many challenges in agriculture today but there are also **many exciting opportunities**. By thinking about agriculture in new and innovative ways we can meet the challenges head on with a variety of solutions that promote a **a sustainable, healthy and regional food supply**.

Successful farms make important contributions to the health and vibrancy of both rural and urban communities. FarmStart encourages new farmers to engage in **entrepreneurial strategies that creatively turn challenges into opportunities**.

To learn more please visit [www.farmstart.ca](http://www.farmstart.ca) or call 519.836.7046



Ignatius Incubator Farm - Guelph, ON