

Sowing Seeds, Reaping Profits

Growing a sustainable farm business



UTE ZELL

SMILING GOAT FARM

Having immigrated from Germany in the 1990s, Ute Zell has some important lessons to share on the subject of farming in a new country.

“I am an herbalist. And I wanted to grow what I tell people to eat. I wanted to do that in Germany originally, but the money was a problem. When you bought land over there, it was five times as much as over here. So I started a little farm here, a 20-acre hobby farm, with a few goats, a few chickens, and a few ducks. Then I met Tom, and he wanted to go bigger. So that’s why we bought this farm. And then we got even bigger and bought a second one.”

“Well, we are in a big change right now, because my partner and I separated. So I have to do it a little bit different now. I’m by myself, and that’s a little bit more difficult.”

The farm

Smiling Goat Farm is a 98-acre mixed organic farm in Freelon, ON, between Hamilton and Guelph. Ute Zell has been running the operation – previously with a partner, now as sole proprietor – since 1997. Ute raises wild boars, mixed poultry, and dairy goats. With the recent change in farm management, Ute has cut her herd of Nubian-Saanen goats in half, to 120 mature animals. The farm has historically shipped all of its milk to Hewitt’s Dairy, but Ute plans to start using the milk to make cheese, which she will sell direct from her new farm store.

“A lot of people will tell you it’s not worth it when you’re milking less than 100 goats. But I don’t only want to milk goats; I also want to

The Series

Sowing Seeds, Reaping Profits is a series of seven case studies featuring innovative farmers with non-traditional backgrounds. The series 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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“When you come to a different country... you really have to do a lot of research: what people buy, what they eat, how they eat, and when they eat as well... look around and talk to Canadians.

do cheese, I want to do birds as well, and I don't want to be specialized in only one thing.”

Smiling Goat Farm's wide range of products contributes to its financial viability. Each year, Ute raises 50 turkeys and 60 geese, which she sells from Thanksgiving to Christmas at her year-round stall at a Toronto farmers' market. The seasonal revenue from the sale of these birds helps to support the farm during the months when milk production is at its lowest. Ute also stocks her market stall with cuts of meat and sausages from her wild boars and goats, which she sells throughout the year. She also sells chickens, purchased wholesale from Fenwood Farm, an organic chicken producer in Ancaster, ON.

Starting out

Ute and her son, Matthias, emigrated from Germany in 1995 with the intention of starting a hobby farm in Ontario. As an herbalist with a successful practice in southern Germany, Ute had imagined that she would continue to practice herbal medicine in Canada. The farm would be a second source of income. However, her plans soon changed.

“Everybody tells me I was ahead of my time, because I didn't get anybody answering my advertisement for an herbalist. So I had to change something. I said, ‘Okay, we do the farming’.”

Ute's decision to get into farming on a larger scale was also influenced by her partner, whom she met shortly after moving to Ontario. Feeling that it would be

best to establish themselves in a niche market, the couple started an exotic poultry operation together.

New country, different tastes

“We started up with pheasants and guinea fowl. I went to the St. Lawrence Market and tried to sell my stuff there, and then I very quickly realized that pheasants and guinea fowl are not big sellers. I had customers who loved it. It was top quality. But you only have a small percentage of customers that say, ‘Oh! You have pheasants! Oh! You have guinea fowls!’ You know? There's not that many out there.”

“I tried to find other places to sell the birds, but it was very difficult. Then I started thinking to myself, ‘You don't eat guinea fowl and pheasant everyday yourself! So why would somebody else?’ I had a freezer full of birds, and I couldn't get rid of them.”

Even if they're not eaten everyday, guinea fowl are a regular part of many Germans' diets, and Ute had assumed that they would find a market in Canada too. She learned that cultural differences can impact farming decisions and retail sales..

“I'll tell you a secret of mine. The Germans think they know everything better, including myself – I throw myself into that pot, too. And that's the biggest mistake. When you come to a different country, and a different culture, you have to give yourself time to learn – to get to know the country, to get to know the ideas of the people here.

You really have to do a lot of research: what people buy, what they eat, how they eat, and when they eat as well. The most important thing is to look around and talk to Canadians.”

But talking to Canadians is sometimes easier said than done. Ute explains:

“Canadians are so polite. There's one downside to that, because they don't tell you the truth. And that's something I had to learn. When I had a girlfriend try my cheeses, she said, ‘Mmm, that's different’. I thought, ‘That's good!’ But in reality, it means, ‘Forget about it! You can't sell that!’ These things, you have to learn.”

Ute and her partner responded to this experience by getting out of the exotic poultry business, and into dairy goats – a promising new industry with a growing market. They bought a larger property so that they could produce hay for their new herd. Ute sold a townhouse that she owned in Cambridge, and used the proceeds to build two large barns and a 32-goat milking parlour. They made a fresh start.

Marketing strategy

Ute and her partner turned their operation around in part by broadening their production and marketing strategies. While selling to a dairy limits the returns that a farmer can receive on their milk, Hewitt's has provided a reliable market for one of Smiling Goat Farm's most important products. With income from the milk more or less guaranteed, Ute has been

Selling at the market enables Ute to educate customers about her products, and to provide recipes and cooking advice.

able to experiment in other areas, including with the wild boars, turkeys, and geese.

After trying out a series of farmers' markets closer to home, Ute now sells all of these products at the Dufferin Grove farmers' market in Toronto. Selling at the weekly market makes for a long day. Ute's van is equipped with a cooling unit, which she plugs in the night before, and packs with sausages and fresh cuts of meat. On market mornings, she milks her goats, rushes through her chores, and then packs the frozen products into coolers, which she loads into her van. The market runs from 2:30 to 7:00, but vendors must add an hour on either side for set up and tear down. Given her long commute, Ute is rarely home on Thursdays before 10pm.

However, having sold at Dufferin Grove market since 2001, Ute knows that it's well worth the effort. Her Toronto customers are curious enough to try her unusual products and affluent enough to afford them. Over the years, people who were originally drawn to Ute's stall by her delicious samples have become long-term customers and friends.

"The people who are buying at the market, they are different from people who buy their food at the grocery store. These people want to talk to the farmer. They want to hear what we do and how we do it. They come to the market, meet friends and family, talk to us, and laugh with us too."

Selling at the Dufferin Grove market enables Ute to educate customers about her products, and to provide



While Ute currently sells her goat milk to a local goat dairy, she has plans to produce goat cheese for sale at her farm.

recipes and cooking advice. It also gives her a means of doing market research by discussing new ideas with her customers or testing new products with them. Even after twelve years in Canada, Ute is well aware that her expectations and tastes remain different from those of her Canadian clients. She therefore sees the opportunity to talk with her customers and respond to their needs as her best marketing strategy.

Looking ahead

Ute's split from her partner followed partly from a difference in their visions for the operation.

"We had just bought a second farm, but we've sold it now – Friday is the closing date. We bought it because Tom wanted to grow grain for the

goats and so on. But it almost broke us. Because of double taxes, double hydro, driving back and forth... Actually, it would have if we weren't selling it now.

"So in the end, I can go back to my idea: doing it small. I don't want to make millions, just to make a decent living out of it, to be able to send my son to school, and to have fun with it. That's what I want."

Now that she is on her own, Ute is retooling her production and marketing strategies so that the business can work better for her. She has dropped the plan to produce grain, and is moving into haylage instead. A key factor in this decision is the heavy equipment used in grain production, which Ute cannot easily operate or maintain.

Ute advises new Canadian farmers to start small, and to take the time to do market research before investing in a new enterprise.

“Tom believed in used equipment, and I don’t. I will sell the stuff that’s not working for me. I mean, he was tall and had a lot of muscle power; I don’t. So I have to go the easy way, which costs a little bit more money, of course – more than a little bit. But you have to find a balance between money and making it easy for yourself.”

Ute is also considering selling off most of her wild boar herd, as the animals are too large for a single person to handle.

On the marketing side, she has cut her milk production to a more manageable level, but plans to make up the financial losses by getting into value added products: producing goat cheese for farm gate sale. This time, however, she knows to start small, to maintain her market in Toronto, and to do a lot of research before making any major investments.

Lessons

Farmers who are new to Canada and are looking to market their products to Canadians would do well to take note of Ute’s



Ute’s wild boar chops are a staple at the Dufferin Grove farmers market. where she has developed a lucrative niche market for her specialty meats.

experience. Ute advises new Canadian farmers to start small, and to take the time to do extensive market research before investing in any new enterprise. She also highlights the complex rules and regulations that affect farm businesses in Canada. New

farmers should make sure that they understand the rules that pertain to their business, as these can be very different from those enforced in other countries.

“What works in your home country does not necessarily work here!”

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 or call 519.836.7046



The Ignatius Incubator Farm - Guelph, ON