

“Forest-Fed” Pork Earns A Market Premium

Brian Bowen and his family provide “forest-fed” pork products to families, farm markets and 6 restaurants from an operation they manage on a South Florida farm.

“We produce several types of sausage, bacon and fresh cuts from 300-lb. mature hogs,” Bowen says. “I started raising hogs in the woods when I realized there are thousands of feral pigs living on their own in nature, mostly in woodlands. I decided that if feral pigs can survive, domestic pigs should also be fine. Over 12 years, it has been very successful.”

Bowen says domestic pigs are more than capable of foraging for their own food, and the disturbance they produce in the forest floor actually encourages new plant growth. He believes the taste and texture of their meat from forest floor nutrients is exceptional. “Our pigs are rotated among several pastures in a 60-acre woods that’s mostly oak trees and pines,” Bowen says. “We move them every few weeks to allow

the pastures they’re in to recover. The pigs also receive free-choice non-gmo dry supplements. Their average rate of gain is 2.6 lbs. for every 1 lb. of dry feed. Pigs are raised to 300-lb. maturity in 5 to 5 1/2 months.

“I’ve compared our production rates to confinement housing and I think we have equal or better gain,” Bowen says. The farm they manage raises Berkshires, Hampshires, Durocs and Red Wattles. Bowen purchases weaned piglets from other producers. “We start them in an open pasture so they learn what an electric fence is,” Bowen says. “We move them into the woodland paddocks when they’re at 70 lbs.” Every 3 to 7 days pigs get moved to a new lot. Bowen says the animals forage and fertilize as they go, creating an uprooted soil structure that regenerates quickly and is ideal for new forest undergrowth. They forage for about 50 percent of their nutrition, which comes from roots, nuts, young plants and acorns. Bowen says “Pigs will eat just about anything,

including grubs, roots, downed branches, vines and invasive plants. They do a great job of managing the woods, but don’t hurt the trees.”

The farm has about 100 hogs that Bowen has divided into 4 groups. They harvest 5 to 8 mature hogs every 2 weeks, producing sausage, bacon, chops, roasts and back bacon. Bowen says the pigs produce great tasting pork products, and their growing cycle is good for the forest. In 12 years the organic matter content in the woods has improved dramatically and is now at 5 percent. Bowen recently planted 100 chestnut trees and 1,000 oak trees on open land and in swales. They groomed the terrain to create the swales to hold moisture for the growing trees.

The Bownens have 3 daughters that help with chores on Full Circle Farm, feeding cows and helping with a small herd of goats. “It’s a great lifestyle that grows healthy food now and provides a great environment for the generations ahead,” Bowen says.



“Forest-fed” hogs are rotated among several pastures in a 60-acre woods.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Full Circle Farm, 20997 174th St., Live Oak, Fla. 32060 (ph 386 776-2770; <https://fullcirclefoods.com>).

They Raise Winter Hardy Bee Colonies

Bee keepers Travis and Chiara Bolton specialize in creating bee colonies suited to cold weather climates.

“We sell starter colonies to non-migratory beekeepers,” Travis says. That means anyone from hobbyists to larger bee operations that overwinter their bees in Minnesota and other northern states.

The Minnesota bee breeders learned how to raise queens in Texas, but have been raising and selecting bees that are winter hardy in Minnesota. Keeping notes, careful observation and testing has improved the quality of their queens and overall colony health. Last winter, for example, they only had a 30 percent loss compared to many Minnesota beekeepers that lost more than half. They’re continually breeding for overwintered genetics from survival hives in order to lessen the percent loss.

Hygienic bees are another key factor to their breeding program. First they select colonies with desirable traits (honey production, temperament, wintering ability), then they test for hygienics.

Bolton explains that testing involves nitrogen and a 3-in. pvc pipe to kill a small portion of young bees in a sealed brood. Hives that clean out a high percentage (>95%) of the dead brood are hygienic, which promotes disease resistance.

After six years of raising bees and selecting quality genetics, the Boltons will begin selling starter colonies in the spring of 2016.

“We will be able to show that they are winter hardy bees,” Bolton says. “We want to be a resource for other beekeepers. The key thing is winter survival; there’s a real need for it in Minnesota.”

Prices have not been finalized, but Bolton



Bee keepers Travis and Chiara Bolton specialize in creating bee colonies suited to cold weather climates.

says they’ll be somewhat higher than other suppliers because of their genetic selection process. They will sell queens and starter colonies throughout the season. The Boltons also make their own hives with their unique design. Their double nuc boxes contain two

hives in one unit with four frames over four frames.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Bolton Bees, 1631 Dayton Ave., St. Paul, Minn. 55104 (ph 651 728-1530; boltonbees@gmail.com).

Chocolate Chickens Sell Like Hotcakes

Andrea Martin sells “free-range chocolate chickens” on her website, primarily to draw attention to her consulting business and the novels she writes. Martin advises poultry beginners on how to get started raising backyard chickens.

Martin also runs a chicken rescue for unwanted birds. She notes that too often people start keeping chickens without knowing much about them.

“I once had a call from a rooster owner who wondered when their rooster would start laying eggs,” laughs Martin.

Peoples’ problems with roosters encouraged Martin to develop a section on her website specifically for “Raising Roosters.”

One problem, she notes, with her Free Range Chocolates is an inability to ship during the summer. However, the rest of the year she makes custom batches of chocolate birds in white, dark and milk chocolate. Nuts, dried fruit, cereal crisps or unsweetened coconut can be added. Candies come in different forms, including roosters, nesting hens and chicken poo. They sell for \$3 apiece.

“I would encourage others to consider making and selling chocolates in animal or plant forms that reflect your interests or products you are selling,” says Martin. “There are so many chocolate molds out



Andrea Martin sells chocolate-shaped chickens on her website to draw attention to her consulting business.

there, from vegetables to bugs and more. Mine are popular at functions and would be great at farmers’ markets and such.”

Martin gets custom molds at Anna Clark Cookie Cutters (www.annclarkcookiecutters.com).

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Andrea Martin (ph 978 303-7577; www.howtodothings101.com).

Heritage Apples Making A Comeback

Heritage apples are on the way back thanks to the Seed Savers Exchange (SSE). Although SSE and its members have been swapping and sharing seeds for 40 years, this is the first year SSE has sold apple trees using grafts from select trees. Eventually grafts will be available from around 1,000 trees in the SSE Heritage Orchard.

“We shipped 294 trees that were grafted for sale this year and took orders for 1,376 custom-grafted trees that will be shipped by March 2016,” says Dan Bussey, orchard manager. “Together, they represent 45 varieties shipped to hundreds of SSE members and others in 46 states.”

SSE is a 700-member organization that preserves and promotes heritage vegetables, fruits, flowers, herbs and grains, a heritage cattle breed and now apples. Each winter members receive a new listing of varieties available from other members and the SSE farm. This past year SSE offered scion wood for grafting from 117 varieties in the annual member Seed Exchange.

“As trees mature, we will be able to offer more,” says Bussey.

SSE members offered another 522 varieties, with 185 offered by one member, Nick Botner of Yoncalla, Ore. (see FARM SHOW’S Vol. 35, No. 2). Botner is internationally renowned for the largest collection of apple varieties in the world.

Unlike scion wood, which is ordered prior to grafting by the recipient, custom grafted trees must be ordered a year in advance. Bussey plans to offer approximately 20 varieties for 2017 versus the 40 varieties offered for 2016. The 2016 SSE catalog will carry pre-grafted trees produced from 6 old varieties in the SSE.

Bussey hopes the 1,000 varieties now in the orchard or its nursery is just the start as SSE finds new “old” varieties to add. He is all too aware of how quickly old varieties are disappearing.

He tells of hearing about a regional favorite called Yahnke that was thought to have died out. Bussey found a tree in northeast Iowa and took scion wood with the owner’s permission. When he returned a year later, the tree and others in the old orchard had been torn out.

“We are always looking for old varieties, especially if they originated in the upper Midwest,” says Bussey. “Let us know if you have an old tree. We would love to hear about it. We may take scion wood from it or know someone who would.”

Memberships in SSE start at \$30, but anyone can order the 2016 catalog.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Seed Savers Exchange, 3094 North Winn Rd., Decorah, Iowa 52101 (ph 563 382-5990; www.seedsavers.org).