

On-Farm Restaurant Feels Like Home

The service can't get more downhome or friendly than at the Tutti Fruitti Kitchen & Market Farm in rural Sauk Centre, Minn. The restaurant is so popular that town folks drive out of town two miles for lunch. A farmer working in the fields doesn't have to change clothes before eating there because it's a restaurant on a farm, says owner Marlene Gwost. In addition to great home cooking, there's a chance she will play a little concertina music during the meal.

The Gwosts grow produce, which is sold on the farm or served in the on-farm restaurant or through its catering services. In the spring, customers come for U-Pick strawberries and asparagus. In the fall they return for the pumpkin patch and corn maze.

It started in 1984 when Gwost and her husband, Kevin, who both had town jobs, purchased 30 acres. They sold extra vegetables from their garden from their front yard.

"Every year we kept adding items and it got more popular and bigger," Gwost says. Eventually they built a 2,108-sq. ft.

building for washing, storage and selling, and two of the couple's daughters ran the business. To bring in year-round income, the Gwosts decided to build a bakery, then added soup and sandwiches.

"That lasted for a week. The following week we started serving regular lunches. We could see it would work," says Gwost, who quit her town job in 2012 to help in the on-farm, 115-seat restaurant.

Located about 2 1/2 miles off a major interstate highway, the restaurant attracts customers from both nearby towns as well as travelers passing through.

"The number one thing we are known for is our caramel rolls and our homemade pies," Gwost says. Besides all-day breakfasts, diners appreciate the restaurant's daily buffets with different entrees from barbecue ribs, to roast beef to old-fashioned baked chicken. For people who like to eat at home, the Gwosts sell unbaked frozen beef and chicken potpies.

One of the Gwosts' daughters is in charge of the gardens, which provide the fresh vegetables, strawberries, raspberries and



Kevin and Marlene Gwost operate this popular 115-seat restaurant on their Minnesota farm. The produce they grow is sold on the farm or served in the restaurant.

apples found at the buffet and on the menu. Three high tunnels extend their growing season. The restaurant was able to serve fresh tomatoes into January this year. Other vegetables are frozen for year-round use.

A flock of 150 chickens provides eggs for the restaurant. In the beginning the Gwosts raised beef but couldn't keep up with the demand, and now they purchase meat.

A son is the main chef and another daughter is a waitress.

"It's nice to have three of our kids involved,

and it's going to be their future," Gwost says. Because of the restaurant the farm provides a way to make a living for four families, plus other people hired to work at the on-farm businesses.

The secret to success is simple, Gwost says. "We make them feel at home."

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Poultry Farmer Specializes In Fly Fishing Feathers

"Breeding chickens for the feathers is definitely not a get-rich-quick business, so you better love the business or it isn't going to succeed in the long run," says Dr. Tom Whiting, founder and owner of Whiting Farms, Delta, Colo.

Whiting Farms raises 80,000 chickens of 10 major genetic lines on two western Colorado ranches for the sole purpose of supplying feathers for the fly fishing industry. "We are a poultry genetics and production company that specializes in fly-tying feathers," says Dr. Whiting. The company's mission is "To produce the highest quality, value and selection of feathers for the fly tiers of the world."

Whiting markets 80 different products "for the discriminating fly tier". Each of the company's genetic lines of chickens is bred for a specific tying purpose related to catching freshwater and saltwater fish. Whiting Farms' products are sold in 36 countries, including more than 600 fly shops in the U.S.

Whiting Farms' feather products are referred to in the fishing industry as "genetic dry fly hackle". Hackle feathers are sold as "pelts," "capes" and "saddles," that are harvested from different parts of the chicken's body.

Dry fly hackle, when wrapped around a

fishing hook, splay out into a dense hackle "collar." When the fly is cast onto the water, the surface tension of the water causes the fly to stand atop the water, imitating an insect—thus the term "dry fly." Dry fly hackle feathers from the head and neck of a rooster are referred to as the "cape." Feathers from the breast and back area are called the "saddle," or "saddle hackle."

Whiting says all roosters produce hackle, but "it's only through painstaking, long-term genetic selection for a host of dry-fly characteristics" that Whiting Farms is able to produce high-demand hackle.

It takes about a year for Whiting Farms to grow a mature rooster from a baby chick. "Because chickens are small in size and reproduce rapidly, we're able to radically alter how they grow their feathers in a relatively brief period of time," says Dr. Whiting. "It's amazing, through selection, how much a rooster's feathers can change over time."

Processing feathers is a large part of the Whiting Farms operation. Every feather pelt is washed and carefully dried to ensure the hobby fly tier has a clean product. This is important, since a fly tier's tying habits may include licking fingers or placing feathers in the mouth to moisten them prior to tying, the company says.



Whiting Farms in Colorado raises 80,000 chickens for the sole purpose of supplying feathers for the fly fishing industry.

Feathers are washed, dyed and cured and then go to a grading room for individual rating of quality and grade. Grading criteria include quill length and suppleness, barb count and stiffness, lack of webby material, stem condition, consistent coloration and size range.

For the fly tier, the higher the hackle grade purchased, the more flies that can be tied from a cape or saddle. Using the company's grading system, a platinum-grade saddle

that costs \$150 will produce 2,500+ dry flies, or 6¢/fly; a gold-grade saddle that costs \$120 will produce 1,500+ flies, or 8¢/fly; a silver-grade saddle that costs \$90 will produce 900+ flies, or 10¢/fly; and a bronze-grade saddle that costs \$60 will produce 600+ flies, or 10¢/fly.

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Ag Tourism Boot Camp Helps Boost Farm Income

Hugh McPherson learned how to manage an ag tourism operation the hard way, and now he is teaching the lessons he learned to others. The founder of Maize Quest, a company that designs custom corn mazes and other on-farm attractions (Vol. 29, No. 3; Vol. 33, No. 5) recently started an ag tourism management boot camp.

"If you offer a corn maze or other ag tourism events on your farm, you can find yourself managing anywhere from 10 to 50 employees," explains McPherson.

He notes that once you start hiring and putting people on the payroll, managing them can get out of hand. "One of our students had 300 seasonal employees,"

recalls McPherson. "We help create systems to effectively manage employees. Our classes combine what we have learned in our own operation as well as what we've learned from our Maize Quest clients."

McPherson has a lot to draw on. His own farm has evolved over the years from a corn maze to the Maize Quest Corn Maze and Fun Park. It grew from a simple corn maze in 1997 to straw bale, fence, rope and other types of mazes. The park also includes gemstone mining, dinosaurs, party rooms, geocaching, life-size board games, a pedal cart track, and even a Wild West train built on a tractor. McPherson offers nearly 50 attractions in all. Each year the business recruits up to 30

part-time employees.

As McPherson's on-farm business grew, so did his off-farm clients, other maze or ag tourism business owners. His Maize Quest Maze Catalog offers a variety of products and services individually or in packages for a monthly fee.

He now has clients in nearly 30 states, as well as the province of Ontario.

"We offer the boot camp online twice a year for 8 weeks each," he says. "About half our corn maze clients take the boot camp. Some students run on-farm markets or berry picking."

McPherson says the 8 modules include weekly homework, as well as an hour-long

virtual class each week. It is priced at \$997 with a coupon for a \$300 discount for signing up prior to the beginning of a class.

"If you have 5 employees, I am confident the class will pay for itself in the first month," says McPherson. "You can spend a lot of money on advertising and the experience, but if people show up and aren't taken care of or properly welcomed, you can get a real bad reputation."

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