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Sunflower Oil Is Still Their Business

A central Minnesota family farm found a path to profitability with an unexpected crop—sunflowers. They’ve continued to grow since FARM SHOW featured them in Vol. 35, No. 2.

“Smude’s Sunflower Oil began out of adversity,” says Katelyn Smude, Marketing Manager. “Founders Tom and Jenni Smude began as crop farmers, dedicated to growing feed and bedding for their herd of beef cattle. But two straight years of crop devastation tested their finances and their faith.”

In 2009, the pair decided to take a gamble and plant sunflowers, an exceptionally drought-tolerant crop native to North America. The resulting sunflower seeds can be pressed to produce sunflower oil, and the byproduct, sunflower meal, is a protein-rich feed for cattle.

“Sunflowers are effective at growing deep roots to access extra supplies of moisture, especially in sandy loam soils,” says Smude. “The soil channels created by their deep root systems allow water to go deeper into the soil profile, which protects existing moisture by making it less vulnerable to evaporation loss.”

Similarly, sunflowers work well in rotation with corn, soybeans, wheat and other common Midwestern crops.

“Sunflowers and corn are especially harmonious, thanks to favorable relationships between the microorganisms and fungi at their roots. What one lacks, the other fills.”

The pair had planned to use the sunflower meal as feed for their herd of beef cattle and to sell the sunflower oil on the bulk market. However, three months in, the market tanked. With little sunflower oil on the retail market, they took another leap of faith and started Smude’s Sunflower Oil. In 2012, they began hand-processing small batches of sunflower oil to sell at local farmers markets.

“Our sunflower oil delivers exceptional performance, nutrition and purity in one simple ingredient,” says Smude. “It’s cholesterol-free, rich in heart-healthy unsaturated fats, and packed with more vitamin E than any other vegetable oil to support immunity and overall wellness.”

Today, the business operates out of a facility that runs 24 hrs. a day, 7 days a week, for 45 weeks each year, producing

approximately half a million gallons annually. They specialize in two types of sunflower oil: high-oleic sunflower oil for cooking and mid-oleic oil for industrial uses, such as pet food. Smude Oil is sold across the Midwest and into the East Coast, as well as online.

Nine varieties of infused sunflower oils are available, many developed in response to customer requests. Their microwave popcorn line is no exception. Launched in 2017, it features a chemical-free bag and just three ingredients: popcorn, salt, and Smude’s Sunflower Oil, which adds a rich, buttery flavor and is chock-full of heart-healthy fats.

“Our microwave popcorn delivers the flavor of old-fashioned stovetop popcorn, minus all the work and unhealthy downsides of butter,” Smude says. “It’s quickly found a very devoted following.”

The brand is in the process of launching a naturally refined sunflower oil into its lineup. This product, which lacks any distinctive flavor or odor, is processed without the more controversial chemical extraction and refining methods used in other vegetable oils.

“Naturally refined, cold-pressed sunflower oil offers the nutritional benefits and stability of sunflower oil while providing a more neutral taste, color and aroma suited for broader culinary and food manufacturing applications,” says Smude. “Many refined oils start with a solvent-extracted, lower-quality oil. In contrast, ours begins with premium cold-pressed oil and a natural refining process that uses only citric acid, water, heat and steam to remove variability in odor, taste and flavor.”

There’s no lye or harsh chemical extraction agents, and with a smoke point of 405 F, it performs exceptionally well for sautéing, baking and medium to high-heat cooking.

Over the next five years, the Smude brand aims to strategically expand its product line while continuing to grow distribution for both cold-pressed and naturally refined sunflower oils.

“We’ll strengthen our presence in retail, food service and manufacturing channels, building partnerships that align with our all-natural, clean-label mission,” Smude says.

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Female Welder Pursues Her Passion

By Lydia Noyes, Contributing Editor

Marla Stegall-Hotsenpiller of Moberly, Mo., owns Stegall Fabrication & Engineering, LLC, a welding business that serves the livestock industry.

“My parents moved to Missouri in 1983 and started a lawnmower sales and service business called A-1 Agri Sales & Service,” says Stegall-Hotsenpiller. “My father quickly realized lawnmower sales alone wouldn’t support our family through the winter months, so that fall he built the 2-in. cattle feeder that we still manufacture today.”

Other equipment quickly joined the roster, including cattle chutes, panels, tubs and a portable cattle corral. By the late 1990s, the business had phased out mower sales and focused entirely on manufacturing.

“I was first introduced to welding around three years old when my dad repaired equipment for our farm and neighboring farmers,” Stegall-Hotsenpiller says. “I was fascinated by the cool blue light reflecting off the bright white shop walls.”

Because welding light is dangerous to unprotected eyes, Stegall-Hotsenpiller’s mom lined the band of a welding helmet with towels to make it fit properly.

“I began arc welding (stick welding) at five,” Stegall-Hotsenpiller says. “A natural,” my father always said. He jokes it’s due to women having steady hands and the ability to pay attention to details.”

The family business received its first MIG welders in 1983, and Stegall-Hotsenpiller wanted to start right away.

“My dad resisted. He said I needed to butt-weld two pieces of 14-ga. sheet metal together and seam it using a 7/32-in. 7018 rod without burning through. That took me until 13.”

Stegall-Hotsenpiller’s first paid welding job came during high school, working on seat brackets for the Moberly Speedway. She saw it as a hobby, not a career, but she continued helping the family business while attending accounting school.

“At the time, my father didn’t have a written material list for cutting the portable cattle corral components. When I asked how I was supposed to help without knowing what to cut, he told me he had built several dozen from memory. We worked together to create a formal list, and I kept asking questions. After one too many, my dad suggested I go to engineering school.”

She did just that, changing her major to mechanical engineering and graduating as one of three women in her class.

“My first independent design was a tilt table for calves. It allows calves to be safely turned onto their side for procedures like ear tagging and castration.”

Today, these tilt tables are primarily manufactured for sheep and goats and used for hoof trimming, vaccinations, ultrasounding, ear tagging, and other routine management tasks.

“Our goal is to improve safety, reduce animal stress, and increase overall efficiency,” Stegall-Hotsenpiller says.

“We build both manual and hydraulic models. The big challenge is keeping the frame perfectly square through fabrication.



Most Stegall Fabrication & Engineering equipment is custom-designed to meet individual customer needs, setting the company apart from manufacturers that produce only standard “cookie-cutter” products.

If the main frame is even slightly out of square, the tilt mechanism won’t function properly.”

Today, most Stegall Fabrication & Engineering equipment is custom-designed to meet individual customer needs, setting the company apart from manufacturers that produce only standard “cookie-cutter” products. Stegall-Hotsenpiller has worked on several large-scale projects, including sheep pens at the Missouri State Fair and the pens at the St. Louis Lambert International Airport Livestock Export Center.

“We manufacture a complete line of small-animal equipment, cattle equipment, horse stalls, feeders for multiple species, and specialized equipment for elk and buffalo.”

Other unique projects include constructing enclosures for lions and tigers and installing portable elk corrals in Alaska, complete with chutes and cube systems.

“Whether the project is large or small, I take pride in every piece that leaves our shop. I’m continuing my father’s legacy while building one of my own.”

Still, Stegall-Hotsenpiller is acutely aware of the challenges of working in a male-dominated field.

“Women are capable of doing anything men can do, even when we have to work twice as hard to prove it.”

She suggests that women stand their ground and fight for their goals.

“There’ll be hurdles. It may take time to earn respect, but anything worth doing comes with challenges.”

She’s quick to agree that the rewards of running a welding business make the challenges worth it.

“I’m proud of every product we build,” Stegall-Hotsenpiller says. “My goal has always been to manufacture quality equipment at a reasonable price. And to this day, I still find welding therapeutic. I don’t have to think about it—I just weld.”

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