

Change in growing measures help family farms find a niche with local stores and distributors

Scott Wentz

West Central Tribune - 08/31/2007

FALCON HEIGHTS — A group of farmers and chefs were talking food at the Minnesota State Fair, but deep-fried snacks were not the topic of conversation.

Instead, the discussion focused on how some family farms around the state have changed their growing methods and are increasingly marketing to local stores and restaurants rather than to larger distributors. Jim VanDerPol's family adopted so-called sustainable livestock and dairy farming methods in 1999. They sell pork on their Kerkhoven farm and in nearby Montevideo, and to restaurants in Granite Falls, the Twin Cities and Duluth.

"Our goal is to market the pork as locally as possible," said VanDerPol, who also uses an area meat processor and buys feed and veterinary services in west-central Minnesota.

"Those are the kinds of things that we really need to focus on to make a decent life in the rural area," he said.

The VanDerPols' 300-acre operation, Pastures A' Plenty, was one of several featured during a recent State Fair event sponsored by the Minnesota Farmers Union and Midwest Food Alliance. The alliance has recognized 34 Minnesota farms that practice sustainable farming, which considers land conservation, humane animal treatment and fair employment practices.

Farmers acknowledge the retail price for meat and produce grown with sustainable methods often is higher, but argue that is outweighed by the health and environmental benefits.

"People like the way it tastes," VanDerPol said of pork from pasture-fed hogs, noting some consumers also like that the food on their plate comes from their community. "There are quite a few people in our customer base that like to feel that they're doing something."

Dan Coughlin made the switch about four years ago. The Lonsdale farmer began feeding his cattle herd primarily grasses, allowing him to eliminate hormones and antibiotics from the diet because the food source is better.

Coughlin, who sells his beef to Cannon Falls-based Thousand Hills Cattle Co., said he believes consumers' interest in food grown with sustainable farming methods will continue to increase. And for now, he said, there is value in being part of a niche market.

"It's good for us right now that everybody's not in it," Coughlin said.

"It's not fading away," agreed Richard Handeen, who raises grass-fed cattle on his Montevideo farm and sells to area residents as well as to Minneapolis eateries.

Handeen said raising cattle on a grass diet is more nutritious for the animals and better for the environment, such as by reducing soil erosion.

Some farmers have found loyal customers in Minnesota restaurant kitchens.

Chef Scott Graden said he turns to more than a dozen area farmers and producers for ingredients used at his New Scenic Cafe, north of Duluth. That includes fish from nearby Lake Superior, berries from northern Minnesota and herbs grown in the region.

Besides contributing to the local economy, restaurateurs say they value their relationships with area growers.

“We know where we’re from,” Graden said of the food on his menu.

He added: “If I can get fish from the guy that smells like fish, that’s pretty cool.”

<http://www.wctrib.com/>