



Sustainable Farmer

**March/April
2010**

ON THE COVER

Ben Gotschall of Lincoln cuts into a round of his farmstead cheese during the 2010 Healthy Farms Conference in February. Not only is Ben a talented cheesemaker, but he's also a member of the bluegrass band, Triggertown, which performed Friday night of the conference—and is working to release its first CD.

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Director's Note:

Very cool!

Fun!

Awesome

INTERESTING AND USEFUL

These were just a few of the comments overheard from the 2010 Rural Advantage/Healthy Farms Conference held February 5-6 at the Haymarket Holiday Inn in Lincoln. It was another successful joint convention between the Nebraska Sustainable Agriculture Society and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. A great time was had by all. Once again the weather made things interesting, and dicey! But we still had a good turnout.

The conference kicked off with Congressman Fortenberry giving a resounding vote of support for Nebraska's sustainable family farmers. An interesting connection he made was the relationship of food to health—and that is a hot topic right now. We had several great sessions on Friday by NSAS members including a very motivating session by Kevin Fulton of Litchfield on “Sustainable Agriculture as the Key to Rural Economic Development.” A packed house attended this session, as well as our tours on East Campus. Other sessions on Friday included Kevin and Charuth Loth of Lincoln, as well as one by Martin Kleinschmidt of Hartington and Dave Welsch of Milford—all producers and each a member of NSAS, and all quite popular! Also, we expanded the youth programming portion of the conference. The hands-on sessions proved so popular that some adults even attended! Maybe next year, we should do some of those sessions in the “adult” tracks.

Friday evening we were regaled with the sounds of Triggertown—a very dynamic and good bluegrass band. We even had some dancing. The auctions went well, as did the dinner. Be sure to check out the list of our food donors and contributors later in this newsletter issue and thank them for providing delicious, local, healthy, and sustainable foods for the entire conference!

Saturday was kicked off by some very enlightening sessions including one on hops production and another on incorporating cover crops into your operation. Well-known sustainable economist and author John Ikerd gave an enthralling capstone speech during lunch. He is a great resource and ally for sustainable agriculture, and a pretty cool guy! In the afternoon, there were more sessions including one by Paul Rohrbaugh from Pawnee County on “What to Do When the Kids Leave?”

Overall, it was a good conference, and we have even bigger plans for next year. Nothing is set in stone, but the dates will be similar. Suggestions for locations have come in from across the state, including Columbus, West Point, and Nebraska City. There will also be a Western Nebraska Sustainable Agriculture Conference in December later this year, so keep that on the calendar. Some new ideas we are working on include a resource table, and an hour or so in the afternoon when farmers can set up booths for free and sell their products or tell about their farms, and more! If you have any ideas or comments to help the NSAS Board and staff improve and expand the conference, please let us know by contacting us at healthyfarms@gmail.com or 402-525-7794!



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NSAS NEWS

Program Updates

Farm Beginnings Class

Coordinator | William Powers

Since 1998, Farm Beginnings has helped new farm families get established on the land. This hands-on program trains new and transitioning farmers in innovative, low-cost, and sustainable farming practices. Classroom topics include: values clarification, goal setting, whole farm decision-making, business planning, innovative marketing, and creative financing as well as social, environmental, and financial monitoring. Beyond the classroom, on-farm tours and one-on-one mentorships with experienced farmers give participants firsthand opportunities to learn about managed rotational grazing, deep-straw hog production, Community Supported Agriculture, and other examples of innovative stewardship farming.

NSAS has facilitated two Farm Beginnings classes in Nebraska. The first was in 2005, and the second in 2008. We are currently developing our web resources and mentoring network. Updates can be found on the NSAS website at www.healthyfarms.org.

We are also in the beginning stages of planning the third class, with the hope of being able to start this November or December. If you are interested in taking part in this program, contact us at farmbeginningsnebraska@gmail.com or 402-525-7794.

“Healthy Farms, Healthy Kids” Project

Coordinator | William Powers

In an aging farming population, it is vital to expose our youth to the trials and tribulations, as well as the joys and jubiliations of farming in a sustainable manner that benefits both themselves and their communities. This NSAS project, funded through a SARE Youth Educator Grant, has three phases:

1. **Youth Scholarship Essay Contest (YSEC)**—youth from across the state wrote essays about what sustainable agriculture meant to them. Awards were given to each participant, which included a certificate and a scholarship to the 2009 Healthy Farms Conference.
2. **Farm tours**—a group of children from the Lincoln area will tour farms near Lincoln and Raymond, doing a pasture walk, learning how to make butter, and seeing “life on the farm.”
3. **Farmers market tour**—this group of children will later tour an area farmers market.

Phase 2 and 3 will allow participating youth to follow food products from the farm to the market to the consumer. To learn more, contact us at healthyfarms@gmail.com or 402-525-7794.

Beginning Farmer Support Groups

Coordinator | Crystal Powers

At the 2010 Healthy Farms Conference, you may have noticed a few more young farmers than have been present in the past. We did, and out of that, we have formed a small support group in the Lincoln area for beginning farmers and young farmers. What we have done so far is meet for coffee on Saturday mornings, either in Ceresco or at the farm of William and Crystal Powers outside of Ceresco. Conversations have encompassed farm management, food and health, and even some politics and sports.

The basic idea is to create local groups of people interested in getting started or going back to farming who are seeking support and assistance in doing so. These support groups will be designed to be a springboard of ideas from a community of like-minded people interested in sustainable Nebraska agriculture.

This project is still in the beginning stages, and any ideas for expanding are welcome! Contact us at healthyfarms@gmail.com or 402-525-7794.

Events

EGGSTRAVAGANZA on April 25

Plan to be in Lincoln on Sunday, April 25, for Slow Food Nebraska's Eggstravaganza! Celebrate the kickoff of the growing season with local farmers and producers at the annual Eggstravaganza from 11 a.m.-2:30 p.m. at Chez Hey in downtown Lincoln. There is a cost, with available family rates. RSVP to slowfoodnebraska@gmail.com. For more information, visit www.facebook.com/slowfoodnebraska.

2011 Healthy Farms Conference

Read NSAS executive director William Powers' “Director’s Note” on page 2 for a summary of the 2010 Healthy Farms/Rural Advantage conference. We are at the very beginning stages of discussing dates and locations for the 2011 conference. Share your ideas by e-mailing us at healthyfarms@gmail.com or calling 402-525-7794.

Get Involved

- **Newsletter Articles** - Write an article about your perspective on sustainable agriculture, or how you practice sustainable ag on your farm. Contact rita.brhel@gmail.com or 402-841-8734.
- **Farm Tours** - Interested producers can promote their event for free, and recruit NSAS staff and Board members to help. Contact healthyfarms@gmail.com or 402-525-7794.

Stay Connected

- **Facebook:** www.facebook.com/NebraskaSustainableAgricultureSociety.
- **Twitter:** <http://twitter.com/nestustainableag>.
- **Weekly Events E-newsletter** - Subscribe by sending your contact information to healthyfarms@gmail.com or 402-525-7794.
- **Listserv** - Connect with NSAS members by joining for only \$45 a year. **3** Learn more at www.healthyfarms.org.

You deserve a big
**THANK
YOU!**

2010 HEALTHY FARMS CONFERENCE
FOOD SPONSORS & CONTRIBUTORS:

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Kvam Family Farm at West Point

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Shadowbrook Farm at Lincoln

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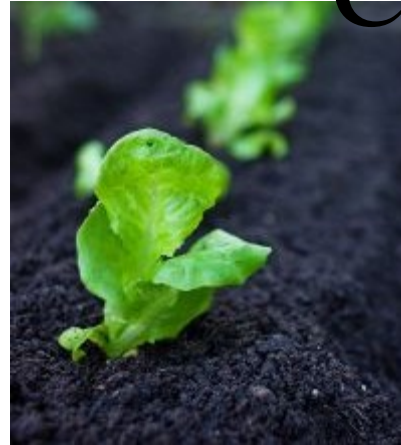
Back Alley Bakery at Hastings

Larry McIntyre

American Lean Beef at Wolbach

Slow... Comfort Food

By Barbara Dunn



To some, "comfort food" is a favorite food served during childhood, hard times, joyful times, or a food that invokes a

feeling of peace and well-being. For me, comfort food is Slow Food.

In his book *Omnivore's Dilemma*, Michael Pollan writes about the Slow Food Movement, which began in Italy in 1989. Slow Food, as he writes, "reminds us of our connection to farmers and farms and to the plants and animals we depend on."

Comfort food, for me, is knowing the turkey I cooked for the following recipe was raised by Laura and Andy at Chisholm Family Farm, that the eggs in my homemade noodles were raised by Ruth and Everett at Common Good Farm, that the quark cheese that thickened my gravy was produced by Krista and Doug at Branched Oak Farm, and that the potatoes and greens were grown by Charuth and Kevin at ShadowBrook Farm. All are small family businesses within a few miles of Lincoln.

I feel a connection to these farmers, their plants and animals, and their farming practices. It is comforting to know the food I eat and serve my family and friends is either grown in our own garden or produced by local growers I know and who care about the quality of their products.

Here is one of my favorite Slow comfort foods:

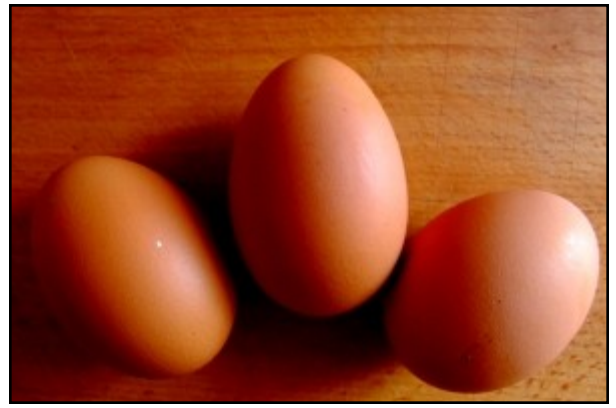
Creamed Turkey on Mashed Potatoes

Place the following in a kettle of drippings from a baked turkey & simmer slowly:

- 2-3 cups chopped turkey
- 1 1/2 cup chopped carrots
- 1/2 cup chopped onions
- 3 Tbsp chopped celery tops
- 1 Tbsp chopped fresh dill weed
- 2 Tbsp chopped cilantro
- 2 tsp chicken flavoring
- Salt and pepper to taste
- Homemade noodles: 4 eggs, 1 tsp salt, and 2+ cups flour mixed into a stiff dough, rolled out on a cutting board with flour to prevent sticking, cut into noodle-size strips with pizza cutter, and let stand an hour until partially dry.

Add water to the kettle, put noodles and flour in the stock, and simmer to form thick gravy. Thicken with quark cheese, if necessary, to form the gravy. Just before serving, add 1 cup fresh frozen peas. Serve over mashed potatoes with a green salad as a side.

Now, that's Slow AND comforting!



Marketing 101

By Rita Brhel

There is a certain appeal of valued-added agriculture that even the most conventionally minded farmers cannot ignore: the ability to command prices, and potentially profit. Whether a producer sells his corn to the local elevator or through a niche market, the common denominator is bringing home a paycheck.

Commodity farmers see a 1% to 2% return when they sell their product. Depending on how many of the processing and marketing steps a value-added producer, he can see as much as a 70% increase in profitability over a conventional producer—not to mention, the value of even having the freedom to seek out this type of profit.

“Especially with the push for local foods, there is the opportunity for producers to take charge of marketing their products,” said Ginger Myers, an University of Maryland marketing specialist. While there are some producers who have no desire to do more than to sell their livestock and grain through the local sale barn and grain elevator,

others want to be more involved. “The producer can take the process into his hands: ‘Now, this is my product, this is where I sell it, this is how I do it,’” Myers added.

But producers can’t judge value-added agriculture by profit potential alone—it takes definite mettle, and often quite a learning curve, to make it happen.

“The first question you have to ask yourself is, should you be getting into this enterprise?” Myers said. “It’s not automatic success.”

What Is ‘Value-Added’ Anyway? The term “value-added” has been around for many years and literally means taking a basic agricultural product, such as beef, and adding value through a unique characteristic: grass-fed beef. Value-added products are niche, meaning they don’t necessarily appeal to the mainstream consumer; and they’re branded, helping consumers connect emotionally to the farm from which the product came.

“We often think of value-added agriculture as helping producers retain

more of their profit—processing, through enhancing, the packaging, or even the way we market something,” Myers said. But, looking from a different perspective, she wants producers to take home this definition of value-added agriculture: that the value is determined not by the product’s characteristics but by consumer demand. “It’s a consumer-driven process,” she said.

Understand The Risks: Producers interested in value-added agriculture know the profit potential of going niche, but they may underestimate the risks. Don’t read too much into the sales pitch for value-added agriculture: may increase farm viability; may increase farm visibility; may expand the market season; may open new markets.

“You will notice the ‘may’ in all these situations,” Myers said.

There are considerably more risks in value-added enterprises than in selling products by bulk through the commodity market, she continued: “You may also be looking at more operating costs, you may have more risk of your

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The ‘value’ in value-added is determined not by the product but by consumer demand.
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Guidelines for success

- **Realize that the backbone of successful marketing is a high quality product** – “Producers need to command a premium price for their products, and to get a premium price, they need to have the highest quality in the product category,” Myers said.
- **Start small** – “Determine how much high quality product you can process and deliver on a consistent basis. Then match your placement to that volume,” she said.
- **Remember that success in value-added agriculture is not guaranteed** – “You need to do your own research on potential sales,” she said.
- **Be honest with how much the enterprise will cost, in money and in time** – “Often, I will not see enough labor put in a business plan, or someone will overlook the fact that they need more training to do what they want to do,” Myers said.
- **Remember that price and convenience do matter** – “Be aware that we match price and availability to where our customers are,” she said.
- **Understand that seasonality can be a significant handicap** – “Will a product net enough profit in those few months to justify it being value-added?” Myers asked.
- **Be sure to have the resources to meet the competition** – “The competition will come from various sources,” she said: not just direct competitors such as fellow green bean growers but also other vegetable gardeners as well. “Remember that it takes three to five years to see profitability with a value-added product. How are you going to position your product to stand out?”
- **Only be as different as can be afforded** – “I love all the different kinds of handmade soaps, but if you put four different kinds of berries in your soaps so that you can be different, be sure that you can afford to continue doing that,” Myers said. “There are other ways you can make your product stand out.”
- **Write a marketing plan as part of the business plan** – “I call a marketing plan an early warning plan,” she said. “Sometimes you can identify early problems and how to address them, things like how many jars to buy or who’s responsible for all the permits you’ll need.”

product spoiling before it gets into the hands of the consumer, you may need additional permits, and more.”

Know Your Product: The key to success is for producers to do their market research *before* jumping into a value-added venture—by talking to other producers, seeking out potential markets, and learning about their potential customer.

“If you’ve been successful with your family, friends, and fools buying, that isn’t the same as really identifying what type of person would buy it,” Myers said.

“The most important part of what I’m talking about is that you really need to understand what you’re producing,” she said. The commodity product would be turkey, but the value-added product has a much longer description: heirloom, free-range turkey ideal for the natural-minded family’s Thanksgiving dinner.

Here are three questions for producers to consider as they determine what is their real product:

1. **What are the unique features of your product or service?**
2. **What benefits do these unique features offer consumers?**
3. **What type of person (personality, values, economic status, etc.) would buy your product, and for how much?**

It’s vital for value-added producers to match their product’s traits with their customers needs, because the real product is not the artisan cheese they spent so much time making but rather the satisfied consumer. While commodity farmers will receive payment for what they produce, as long as they can deliver it to a sale barn or elevator, the value-added producer is not guaranteed to sell what she’s spent so much time on. The end result of a producer’s hard work is, therefore, is the actual product sale.

“Value-added agriculture is not about marketing what you can produce, but producing what you can market,” Myers said.

For example, “I talked to a woman with Araucana chickens. She wasn’t selling the eggs or the chickens, but the egg with the yolk blown out of it – \$15 each to crafters,” Myers said.

The Product Determines the Marketing Strategy: Because success in value-added agriculture depends so much on the consumer sale, marketing is a major part of the venture from the beginning. From the time when a producer first considers going niche, he should be determining his USP, or unique selling proposition—in other words, what about the product is so much better than that of the competition?

What didn’t work?

There are three main reasons why value-added producers fail, even when they have a solid marketing plan:

1. **The product does not match the consumer** – Producers need to guard against products not niche enough, or too niche. Hot sauce may be too broad of a product class, in that there are so many other competitors that the new product gets lost. Hot sauce baby food may be too narrow of a focus, in that there are too few consumers. “You need to step back from the product, and ask yourself—or if you’re unable to, have someone else ask—what need or want does this product satisfy in the consumer?” Myers said. “Just because you can make it doesn’t mean you can sell it.”
2. **The value-added enterprise is being treated as a commodity enterprise** – Producers need to realize that value-added enterprises are businesses that require farmers to do everything from raise the product to processing it to selling it. Skipping any of these stages, perhaps because of lack of skills or motivation, jeopardizes the venture. The exception is when a value-added product is sold to a wholesaler, which is a viable option for many producers. “If you want a cut-flower business but don’t want to deal with the orders, invoices, and deliveries, it’s better for you to produce flowers and sell them to someone else to do all that,” Myers said. “You have to ask yourself, do you want the day-to-day tasks that take to get the product out the door?”
3. **There are distribution problems** – Points of distribution where breakdown is common is: not supplying enough product at initial delivery, not being consistent in supply or not keeping consistent delivery schedules, and an inability to break into the competition for shelf space. “I worked with a man who produced this amazing salsa. He made it by himself in a commercial kitchen, but he just could not meet the growth in demand. Oftentimes, you will lose your contracts doing that,” Myers said.

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“Value-added agriculture is not about marketing what you can produce, but producing what you can market.”
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“You have to consider everything, from business cards and a website down to who answers the phone when somebody calls,” Myers said.

The elements that merge to create the USP is known as the four Ps:

- **Product** – What unique features and benefits does the product have?
- **Price** – How much will this product cost? Does the price match the quality but still keep it accessible to the intended customer? Will the price enable the enterprise to turn a profit? It’s important that the product be different enough from the same class of items in the mass market to command a high price. It’s also important not to price a product too low, as consumers are conditioned to associate low prices with low quality. “There needs to be created a perception: Nice things aren’t cheap, and cheap things aren’t nice. We buy with our eyes and what we perceive to have value,” Myers said. “I think pricing is an area we often neglect: We come in too low.”
- **Promotion** – How will this product be advertised? Some options are: business cards, websites, brochures, print and radio ads, flyers, conference exhibits, blogs, and e-newsletters.
- **Place** – Where will this product be sold? Some direct-market options are: on-farm stores, roadside stands, e-commerce websites, mail-order catalogs, special grocery stores, farmers markets, craft shows, festivals, eBay, and Home Shopping Network. Other options include selling products to a wholesaler, but remember that this option will cost 10% to 15% of the potential profit.

“Value-added is all about ‘marketing on the mind,’” Myers said. “It’s all about consumer-driven sales and how to market so that the consumer will buy it.”



Hartington Woman Devotes Life to Sustainable Ag Movement

By Rita Brhel

Ask Linda Kleinschmit about her greatest accomplishments and she won’t list any of the projects for which this champion of sustainable agriculture is so well known.

“I am most proud of my five children and the fact that they have all grown to be really nice people who are a responsible part of society,” said Kleinschmit, who has farmed alongside her husband, Martin, for more than 40 years in the Hartington-Fordyce area. “That is, by far, the best thing I have ever done.”

Surrounded by photos of her children, their spouses and her grandchildren in a farmhouse that doesn’t at all reflect the busyness of this planting season, it is clear that this woman—who has been a major influence in improving both the state and national image of sustainable agriculture—sees her work as only a small part of her life.

Kleinschmit has been a longtime voice for the sustainable farmer. It is evident by her extensive volunteer involvement in organizations and efforts aligned with this interest that she deeply believes in this issue.

In the past, Kleinschmit has served on the Administrative Council, Farmer-Rancher and Diversity committees, and as National Conference Planning Committee chairperson for the USDA North Central Region Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program; as District Director for the Nebraska Farmers Union; as an Instructor for the Nebraska Farm Beginnings program; and on the Advisory Board for the National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture. And these are just the projects she would admit.

“I was really fortunate to do these kinds of things and to be able to meet people from all over the country in an area that I’m passionate about,” Kleinschmit said.

“Through these activities, I was able to bring the world to the farm when I couldn’t leave the farm to see the world.”

Her interest in sustainable agriculture began nearly 38 years ago when her and her husband began converting their 370-acre mainly dairy farm into a certified organic, grass-fed beef and alfalfa operation.

“We wanted to change our practice to become more sustainable with less chemical inputs, partly because we didn’t see where we were increasing our yield or lowering our bottom line all that much by purchasing more chemicals,” Kleinschmit said.

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 12 >>>>>)

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Another less-talked about reason for the conversion was that one of her sons became ill.

“We tried to figure out what would cause a three-year-old to get cancer,” Kleinschmit said. “The only thing we could figure out was the chemicals.”

At that time, sustainable agriculture was a new, almost foreign, idea in agriculture; there weren’t many resources to turn for information or assistance. Kleinschmit felt lucky to have access to one of those few places, the Center for Rural Affairs, now based at Lyons.

“We started using sustainable practices designed to reduce our expenses while maintaining our bottom line,” she said, “such as using wind to reduce our energy costs, combining trips to town to save on fuel, experimenting with seeds to find which ones grew better without the need for chemicals, and composting. Anything to cut our costs.”

12 It is from these on-farm trials that

Kleinschmit and her husband found a way to make sustainable agriculture work for them.

“We weren’t rich by any means, but we also didn’t have the debt that some conventional farmers have,” she said. “And our kids always had shoes and there was always food on the table.”

Kleinschmit’s experiences with sustainable agriculture were so positive that she felt herself called to spread the word, to promote the farming practices that improved her family life so much.

“I love doing what I’m doing, and I love living where I’m living,” she said.

While she admits her volunteerism for the sake of the Sustainable Ag Movement takes a lot of time and energy, Kleinschmit said the work makes

her happy because it’s about something larger than herself.

“I can’t stop just because I got children and grandchildren,” she said. “I can’t live in a world that’s so segmented and divided, and I certainly can’t live in a world where people aren’t raising food responsibly and taking care of the land.” It’s apparent that this—being active and involved in a variety of activities related to sustainable agriculture—is right where Kleinschmit is meant to be.

“I never knew I was going to live on a farm or be a farmer,” said the Valentine native who met her husband during summer break from college during one particularly fateful evening at a bar in Yankton, South Dakota. “And I just feel so fortunate.”

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