

Farmer Ben's: Raising, growing Grandpa's way

by Brent Cole

Inspired by traditional farming and family, Farmer Ben's, located in Lynden, takes the simpler, natural approach: do things the way Grandpa's generation did. Operate the farm as a unit, with each family member helping out in their own way. Use animals to the fullest extent. Keep it healthy. The end result is a farm that is trying to be "a beacon on the hill," according to Farmer Ben Elenbaas, and one that demonstrates operating in old-fashioned ways can benefit the greater good.

The seeds for this family farm were sown in the 90s when owners Ben and Jessica (then dating in high school) rented land from Jessica's

grandfather. The two grew, bailed and sold the hay, even getting a joint bank account for their earnings. "We used that to start our farming endeavor and we never stopped," Ben stated.

In 2001, the couple purchased seven acres on Nolte Road, and three years later they began renting a 46-acre plot which they later purchased and is now home for the family. They also rent 40 additional acres between two other parcels; one from Ben's great aunt, as well as land that has been in the Elenbaas family since 1901, when ancestors came over from the Netherlands.

Farmer Ben's is home to cows, pigs, chickens and ducks throughout the year, and an expanding vegetable selection during the sum-

mer months. The animals are raised and the vegetables are grown using "common sense" practices, utilizing what the plants, animals and ground provide naturally, Ben said.

Ben began his career in the eighth grade, getting a job at a local dairy farm where he worked almost every day for eight years – through high school, college (Ben is one credit short of a degree from Huxley College of the Environment), and playing football. After he was hired at his current job at the BP oil refinery, Ben continued working at the dairy farm, all while he and Jessica built up Farmer Ben's.

While their farm name is Farmer Ben's, Ben is quick to point out that he thought it should be called Farmer Jessica's, "but she thought Farmer Ben's was a cute name." Jessica plays as much of a role in the farm as he does, Ben said.

"She can do everything I can do aside from the heavy lifting. Sometimes she'll even bail hay. She can do everything. I pay the bills, she runs the store – it's a pretty good balance. There's no way I could do it without her," he added, "It's always been us together."

The sense of family farming obviously includes their children: sons Hunter and Christopher, ages eight and seven, and daughter Remington, age five, all contribute in different ways.

"Hunter's the oldest, he's just starting to get big enough and strong enough – he can feed the pigs on his own," Ben said. Christopher has over 30 ducks and sells their eggs. Remington is there for "moral support."

"Our children are the sixth generation of Elenbaas to farm on Van Dyk Road. If you don't



Ben and Jessica Elenbaas, with their children Christopher, Remington, and Hunter. The family raises cows, pigs and poultry, and are expanding their vegetable selection. **COURTESY PHOTOS**



think a kid can farm, come hang out with us for a while," Ben said. In addition to other responsibilities, the children help with irrigation pipes, feeding the chickens and collect the eggs, and during the summer months they help in the pasture moving fences and even pushing the cows. "They're not afraid of anything," he said, adding, "It's a lifestyle we wanted for our kids."

On the farm, the kids are learning traditional farming techniques with a modern. "Doing it the way Grandpa did, but incorporating modern technology like a round bailer and bailer that wraps the bails in plastic," Ben said. He added, "We recycle all the plastic

with Northwest Recycling"

As part of the "doing it the way Grandpa did" creed, Farmer Ben's does not use commercial fertilizer, pesticides or growth hormones, preferring to practice farming traditions handed down over the years including rotational grazing.

While working at the dairy farm, Ben learned the importance of feed quality, a key point in the Farmer Ben plan. "It's all about feed quality," he emphasized, adding it's better to use good feed as the end result will be stronger and healthier cows. He allows cows to have access between the barn and outside all year long, allowing them to grow, thus maximizing their potential.

"I can raise beef fast enough

that I can harvest it when the meat is still tender. It's growing at a good rate without hormones – fattening on the good quality forage even throughout the winter." He added, "Cows are designed to efficiently convert grass,

greenhouse, we'd like to get some sweet corn and beans in the pig pasture to use that nitrogen," Ben said.

The farm is also part of a farmers co-op that formed in 2011 called North Cascades Meats, a group of 12 family

stores – to make it available for the masses," Ben said.

The old-fashioned approach is at the core of Farmer Ben's, and something the family hopes will help get good food into the hands of local people at a reasonable price. Doing

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so that's what we do. We feed them high quality grass. Their stomachs aren't put together to process corn, so we don't feed them corn. Grass fed beef is healthier."

When it is butchering time, Farmer Ben's uses all parts of the pig, cow and chicken. They sell back fat (used to make lard), harvest the organs (usually healthy as a result of the way the animal was raised) and even the bones, he said.

"Those animals – we have a healthy respect for their life – so if we're not going to use the whole animal, then we've dishonored them. They lived their life so we can continue ours. When stuff gets wasted you might as well spit on that pig as it's going out."

Farmer Ben's sells products at their on-site store, open Fridays and Saturdays. The store brings in a mix of different people for various reasons. Customers appreciate the farm's standards (no use of growth hormones, pesticides, etc.), and like local products. "We see all of Whatcom County," Ben said with a laugh.

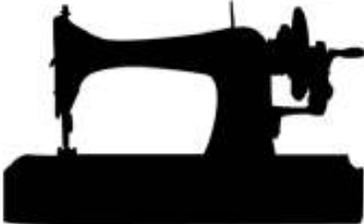
While beef, pork and chicken is the focus of Farmer Ben's, they started growing vegetables last year and will be selling more this season including corn and beans. "We put in a greenhouse last year – tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers among other things. We plan on doing some stuff on the

farms from Whatcom and Skagit counties. "It's a group of like minded farmers that are trying to do our best to promote what we're doing and help other farmers get into the marketplace. One farm like me can't get into the grocery store, but 10 farms with standards, consistency, high quality products can get into

things the way grandpa did.

For more information about Farmer Ben's, visit myfarmerben.com. The farm is located at 1461 Van Dyk Road in Lynden and can be reached at (360) 354-8812. The farm store is open Fridays and Saturdays, and offers beef, pork and chicken products.

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