

Fourth-generation farmers chart ambitious course

Fresh Valley Farms has a waiting list for their monthly meat boxes

SPALLUMCHEEN—With a focus on regenerative agriculture, diversity and adaptability are paramount to success at Fresh Valley Farms.

“For us that’s key, because it ties into our marketing system. To have multiple species makes the whole marketing machine that we built more useful and more appealing,” explains Steve Meggait, who operates the Spallumcheen farm and its complementary CSA box program with his partner Annelise Grube-Cavers.

The farm totals 310 acres, including a parcel purchased by Meggait’s great-grandfather in 1922 and a separate piece about a kilometre away bought by his parents, and some leased land. Meggait took over seven years ago, becoming the fourth generation to farm his family’s land.

Meggait and Grube-Cavers raise beef, pork and chicken plus hay and grain using natural systems. They use no chemicals and pasture-raise all the animals using rotational strip grazing. The cattle eat grass and alfalfa grown on the farm.

They’ve applied for organic certification through the North Okanagan Organic Association and are now waiting for an inspection.

“The ecological aspect of what we do is a huge part of our marketing. We’re trying to transition to more organic, pasture-raised, grass-finished beef,” says Meggait. “The whole concept is regenerative agriculture where you take land that’s been sort of abused for the last 100 years and you try to manage cattle in a way that mimics natural systems to bring back the grasslands or just to have a balance between really productive land and really thriving, natural systems.”

He uses electric fencing purchased through the Environmental Farm Plan to strip graze the cattle and is working to integrate other species that can come in behind the cows to further cultivate the ground and add important nutrients.

He said reducing over-grazing allows the grass to grow back quicker, thus producing more.

“It looks like you’re leaving feed on the ground but you’re actually leaving your solar collectors on the ground,” he explained.

The farm is currently raising 23 red and black Angus cows, 10 sows, 600 broiler chickens and 600 chicks. They added a flock of 150 turkey chicks this year. In addition, they finish 50 to 100 hogs and 2,000 chickens annually.

Meggait wants to increase his cattle herd and introduce older breeds that are better suited to finishing on grass instead of grain.

Unable to move his mainly Berkshire-cross pigs too much in two years, this year Meggait opted to plant two acres in annual forage crops for the pigs to eat in a strip-grazing system. The crops include daikon radish, kales, Italian rye grass and oats.

“It’s a big step forward with the pigs this year in that we’re actually utilizing some of the nutrients and they get to eat that forage,” he notes. “It’s not good soil management from a holistic perspective, but it’s at least good utilization of nutrients.”

The farm supports a CSA program offering monthly meat boxes to about 110 customers who pick up their orders in Kelowna, Vernon or at the farm. Online orders outside the program add another 20% to the customer base.

Grube-Cavers says the program has a waiting list. There’s room to grow. She expects to offer another pick-up day in Kelowna in September and open the program up to another 30 customers.

With many consumers looking to leaner cuts of meat, the highly marbled cuts are a niche product. But the farm has no trouble finding customers who value the flavour, nutrition and animal welfare offered by Fresh Valley Farms.

“We have some people who ask for skin-on roast so they can make cracklings. So these are not people who are zero-fat yogurt eaters,” says Grube-Cavers. “When you’re selling meat of this quality, the flavour has to hit the bullseye.”

An on-farm abattoir for the chickens means customers can choose from whole birds or pieces of chicken,



Annelise Grube-Cavers, with Finley, 10 months, and Steve Meggait, with three-year-old Etta, operate Fresh Valley Farms in Spallumcheen.

something not often offered by farms.

Grube-Cavers says many of their customers have farming backgrounds so they do not balk at the prices, either. Most pork cuts average \$8 a pound while beef costs from \$10 to \$27 a pound, depending on the cut.

“At this point we don’t really have those conversations because the people who are purchasing from us, our business really embodies the values they care about,” she says.

Those values include reducing their fossil fuel footprint by always using the smallest vehicle possible: the electric bike, electric car, micro-truck or three-ton cab-over with a small diesel engine.

The couple, who have a three-year-old and 10-month-old, also hosted From Dirt to Mouth on July 21, a paid “nose-to-tail” meal at the farm featuring their meat prepared by two chefs with local ingredients.

The farm has grown steadily in seven years and Meggait expects it will continue to develop over the next decade.

“We plan to put all of the actual crop land on both farms into this strip-grazing method eventually, and lease about 40 to 80 acres so I can make my hay. So the long term plan is to grow quite a bit,” he says. “I’d like to be doing about \$500,000 in sales and we’re halfway there. That’s where I see the production of this farm being taken fully advantage of.”

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TRACTORS

| | |
|--|--------|
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| JD 5200 ROPS, LOADER, 4WD, 6,100 HRS | 24,900 |
| KUBOTA BX 2660 2950 HRS, LOCATED IN CHEMANIUS (U15729) | 8,400 |
| NH 54D 4WD, CAB, LDR, 40 HRS, LIKE NEW, SOME WARRANTY (U31396) | 49,500 |
| NH 54D CAB, LOADER, 4WD, 450 HRS (U31931) | 37,900 |
| NH BOOMER 33 ROPS, LOADER, 4WD, IND TIRES (U32032) | 25,900 |
| NH T4.75 5200 HRS, CAB, LOADER, 4WD (U31956) | 39,900 |
| NH T5050 CAB, 1,100 HRS, 12X12 T - 540/1000 PTO | 39,500 |
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| NH TN75 ROPS, TRACTOR & LOADER, 4,500 HRS (U32078) | 25,000 |

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|---|--------|
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| LIKE NEW RITWAY LAND ROLLER (CNS721) | 11,900 |
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