

Elm River Farms Has Got Your Goat

By Randy Olson

Most Americans are not aware that 70 percent of the red meat consumed worldwide is actually goat meat. That lack of knowledge is due mainly because the United States and Canada have not been known as consistent goat meat eaters. The U.S. is more of a beef and pork society. Health conscious people are becoming more interested in the fact that goat meat is lower in cholesterol than chicken, yet higher in protein than beef.

Mark and Tanya Wells operate Elm River Farms, just west of Mt. Erie. They are one of a growing number of farms in southern Illinois that are filling an expanding demand for goat meat. "I used to raise feeder pigs," said Mark, "but the low market prices and cost of production got me to start looking at other possibilities." The Wells began to study and research the goat industry for a while and ultimately decided to jump into it about four years ago. "We bought our first buck from Dave Thomas, added a few does and slowly increased our herd," said Mark. "Today, we have about 140 does and nearly 200 total goats on our farm."

Elm River Farms consists of 132 acres. Many of the structures that were previously used to raise hogs and cattle have been converted to raise meat goats, known as "boers." Mark and Tanya have not ventured into the dairy goat side of the business or the pygmy production either. "That's a whole different specialty," said Tanya, "we just concentrate on raising goats for meat." They raise both full-blooded and percentage varieties of goats.

The Wells are able to market their product at various venues where buyers appreciate the quality of their goats. Most of their herds are sold in Kentucky. They are members of a cooperative group of 58 other goat farmers in Illinois and Indiana, known as the Midwest Goat Producers. They share production experiences, success stories, and solve problems through networking together. "It has been an ongoing education process for us," said Mark.



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The influx of more ethnic groups in America has created a greater demand for goat meat in the U.S. It is common menu fare in many European countries, Asia, South America, New Zealand and Africa. Health concerns have also raised the demand. U.S. farmers are currently only producing 30-35 percent of the goat meat demand across the nation. The rest of the need is filled through importation from overseas.

Elm River Farms receives their electricity from Wayne-White Counties Electric Cooperative. "We've been on Wayne-White lines for 31 years," said Mark, "the service has always been dependable for us; we appreciate what the cooperative employees do each day."

One of the benefits of raising goats is the shorter reproductive cycle. "It's just a five-month process from breed to kid," said Tanya. "If everything goes just right, a doe can produce three kids in a two-year period, and many times they have twins (sets), which is an added bonus." According to Mark, there are also a lot of stereotypes associated with goats. "Many people have this image of goats sitting on a rock pile and eating tin

cans," said Mark. "They are actually a real social animal with a lot of character, which makes them enjoyable to raise."

While the goats on Elm River Farms can often be seen grazing on field vegetation, Mark has put his Ag production degree to work with his own recipe mix of custom blended feed for the animals, which they also put out in the feeders everyday. They usually keep four or five bucks on the farm, which can each provide stud service for eight to 10 years. Does are generally able to provide consistent kid production for seven to eight years. Their prize buck, Danny, is the son of a clone from a well-known buck named Eggsfile. Many buyers seek offspring that are derived from Danny. While the Wells routinely take their goats to market, they are also happy to sell individually to local buyers or other goat farmers.

So remember, when somebody jokingly tells Mark and Tanya Wells "hey, you really got my goat," they literally mean it. For more information about Elm River Farms or raising goats, call (618) 854-2711 or visit the regional goat farmers Web site at www.Midwest-GoatProducers.org.



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