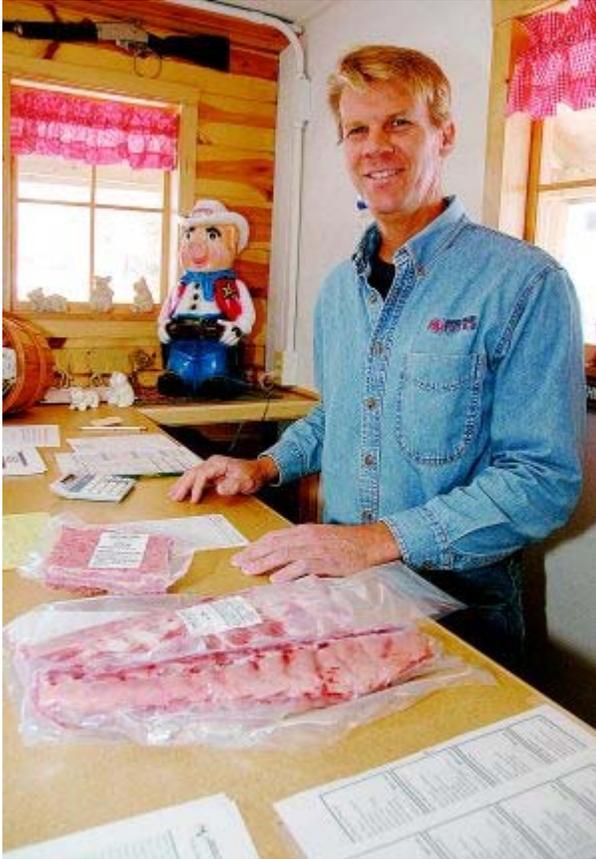


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Farm operations big business for Bellevue area

By: Jason Buzzell , Leader staff writer



Don Stoltenberg of Harvest Valley Foods has managed a thriving farm operation on the outskirts of Bellevue's city limits.

used to going to the market every day," Stoltenberg said. "They're used to going to the meat store to get their meat every day."

Raising pigs is truly a family-like effort. Stoltenberg's sister, Allie, does a "good job with the little pigs" while nearby neighbors Sandy Williamson helps out in the office part time, and Lisa Keller works in the small store on Saturday mornings. Add Jeanne and that's the staff, and it's allowed the Stoltenbergs to get up close and personal with their customers.

"We do have a lot of fun and meet a lot of people," Stoltenberg said. "And we like that. Kind of getting to know people you meet some real nice friends."

The extra work is worth it, he said. The store is open 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. on weekends. From May to October, they work weekends at Old Market farmers market selling fresh meat, eggs and other natural products.

"It's not really been an agonizing thing," Stoltenberg said, "Just get up at 4 o'clock in the morning, go down to the market for 26 straight weeks. You kind of have to like it."

The tougher part might be educating new customers on why they should choose this natural product over something they find in the store.

That's why the Stoltenbergs last week launched their Web site, www.harvestvalleyfoods.com.

Now people locally as well as globally will be able to buy products online and learn more about the meat and food they sell.

The Stoltenberg farm, which began in 1959 near 36th Street and Platteview Road, isn't very far away from Bellevue anymore. Paved roads, power and sewage lines have urbanized a once rural setting, but nestled on the southern skirts of town is a small farm with a weekend store that's growing into something more.

Yes, times have changed since George and Betty Stoltenberg started it all.

"I mean my hair's still wet, I just got done feeding the pigs," said Don Stoltenberg as he sat down in his office last Thursday morning.

Don is George and Betty's son. He's keeping the legacy alive - with a twist of course.

Don and his wife, Jeanne, started Harvest Valley Foods at the end of 2002. Prior to that, the Stoltenbergs were commercial pig farmers with close to 4,000 swine with business both inside and outside the United States.

It took some big changes, some financial risks, but today the operation is much different, which is a good thing, Stoltenberg said.

"I guess I've just always been a positive thinker," he said. "When we built the store there was some expense there, but we just looked forward and said, 'Hey this is going to work. It just has to.' "

When you buy something from this store, it's coming almost straight from the hands of the farmer who raised it.

The operation was cut down to 800 pigs, and the small store built near the farm. Word-of-mouth and farmers markets are the main way to sell products.

"The real great thing in our area because of the military presence is a lot of these families have been stationed in Germany and Italy and they are

"Kind of the reason for that is we have such a military presence here," Stoltenberg said. "They get transferred around and they're like, 'Oh we want to buy your stuff.' They e-mail us and it's a little bit cumbersome if you don't have a Web site, so now they can see what we're doing and place orders and get it shipped."

Plans are in the works for opening a tree nursery later this year, too. So far, the farm operation is going well, and the future has limitless potential for the niche business he and his wife are thoroughly enjoying.

"We just never looked back," Stoltenberg said. "We just did it, and we've just been really successful."

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