
Cory's Country Lamb

*Tom and Mary Cory, Proprietors
Elkhart, Iowa*

Operation

Lamb producers Tom and Mary Cory of Elkhart, Iowa, are capitalizing on ethnic populations living in the Des Moines metro area. The Cory farm is located about 20 miles northeast of downtown Des Moines. The metro population is approximately 350,000. Of that, some 10,000 people are from Bosnia. The downtown Des Moines Farmers' Market is working great for the Cory's in reaching interested customers.



The Bosnians prefer purchasing live lambs that weigh between 75 and 85 pounds, smaller than a traditional 130-pound finished lamb. This client base tends to select lambs directly at the Cory farm. Tom, with the help from a fellow teacher, made a farm sign in Bosnian that spells out terms of sale and price. Once a lamb is selected and purchased, it is butchered at a designated area on the farm.

Most of the lamb originates from the 200-ewe flock. Additional lambs are purchased from a local producer. Mary is the primary manager of the farming operation, which began in 1991. Tom teaches agriculture for the Des Moines Public Schools. They are the parents of Spencer, Gavin and Luke.

The Cory's direct market the lamb meat from sheep that they raise. They have gone from direct marketing five lambs in 1996 to just over 400 lambs in 2001. It is difficult for consumers to find locally grown lamb in the stores. The Cory's sell at the farmers' market, occasionally to restaurants and also have ethnic groups that buy from them, as mentioned above. They have explored the marketing of other products from sheep leather and wool.

Motivation

The Cory's both have a passion for raising sheep. They also want to be involved in value added agriculture. This seemed like a natural way. When they started, not many people offered lamb meat for direct sale.

Business Development

The Cory's started small and determined what they needed to meet legal requirements in regards to marketing meat. Then they obtained an operating note from a local bank. They did not take a business planning class until after our fourth year of direct marketing.



Market Access

The farmers gave away recipes and nutritional information. The Cory's estimate they have given away thousands of samples. They have not had a lot of direct, local competition. However, there is a bigger market out there that they feel they have not tapped.

Critical Steps

The Cory's were able to work with their processor to maintain a quality and consistent product. They tried to think of several ways to add value to their sheep operation, such as jerky, summer sausage, leather products and wool products.

Barriers to Success

The Cory's feel they should have taken the business planning class before obtaining an operating loan.

Unexpected Problems

According to the Cory's, they tried to expand into the leather and wool products area too quickly. They also tried to add other items such as chickens, eggs, garden produce and they hired labor. It did not all cash flow. They had not anticipated what it would take to manage all of those enterprises.

Success or Failure

It has succeeded in that there is a definite demand for their lamb meat. Their future plans include maintaining a quality product and expanding as financially resources and time resources allow.

Industry/Market Changes

It is still difficult for consumers to purchase lamb locally. The Cory's are continuing to work to fill that void. Consumers can purchase lamb meat from them by the package, half a lamb or a whole lamb. People like to know where their food comes from.



Lessons Learned

It is important to grow slowly. The couple would recommend the next level business planning course be taken early on in the business development.

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