
Sharing SBLA Success Stories

Bulyea Lenders Co-operative

Leaning Maple Meats

Bernie and Cheryl Kirstein, Owners

Bernie and Cheryl Kirstein live on a farm, but don't rely on it for their income. In 1999, the couple successfully switched from dairy farming to opening a health inspected, meat processing plant. They custom-slaughter, cut and wrap wild game and livestock for farmers and hunters.

The Kirsteins had raised chickens and pigs for friends, relatives and themselves since 1975, but didn't start using their butchering skills professionally until they had to make a life-altering decision. "My two brothers and I bought Kirstein Farms from our dad in 1978, but by 1996, the buildings and equipment we had were getting old," Bernie said. "That meant we had to either expand for about \$1 million or get out. We decided to pursue our own interests." The Kirstein brothers sold their dairy quota and 70 cows in the spring of 1999.



Bernie and Cheryl had to find another way to earn a living. "Cheryl and I have lived here since 1975," he said. "We didn't want to leave. We love our yard." The idea of working in Regina and commuting every day didn't appeal to the Kirsteins, so, after talking about it, the couple renovated a shop in their farmyard and opened Leaning

Maple Meats in the fall of 1999. "We phoned Saskatchewan Health and said, 'We want to do this.' They came out for three hours and went through everything with us, and were really good about it."

The couple also gives high praise to the Bulyea Lending Co-operative. "They gave us money when the banking institutions wouldn't," said Bernie.

In addition to custom-slaughtering, cutting and wrapping, the Kirsteins raise about 600 chickens and up to 100 pigs every summer. The couple used to let the chickens run wherever they liked, until they lost 350 to coyotes and foxes. Now, they run in a fenced, one-acre pen. The pigs have a three-acre pen with shady willow trees and a cool dugout. "They're as close to free range as you can get," Bernie said. "They're free of antibiotics and growth hormones, and they're butchered right here." The Kirsteins sell most of their pigs and chickens to regular customers, and sell the remaining cuts of meat from their shop. Although many of their customers are local, they have customers from all areas of the province. Since the Kirsteins rarely advertise, most of their customers hear about them by word-of-mouth.

“We got a lot of our customers from raising chickens, and we started getting the careful hunters because they were told they’d get their own meat,” Cheryl said. Rather than spending a lot of time raising cattle, the two prefer to buy the bovines from local farmers and sell the meat in their shop. “A lot of city people question growth hormones, so we can’t just buy beef from anybody,” said Bernie.

The Kirsteins say BSE hasn’t hurt their business, because farmers are finding inventive ways to use their cattle, such as giving beef for wedding presents and Christmas gifts.

The Kirsteins make a variety of meat products. On Feb. 26, 2005, at the Saskatchewan Meat Producers Association’s annual convention, Leaning Maple Meats took first place for its smoked back bacon and third prize for its boneless tumbled ham. “We entered five of the 18 categories,” said Cheryl. “We were surprised we won because we didn’t know what they expected.”

Both award-winning products were cured in a vacuum tumbler that Bernie made. He said it would have cost \$7,000 to buy a new one, compared to \$2,000 for the one he made. Bernie has also designed two ceiling hoists for moving sides of meat, stationary shelves for their freezer, and wheeled carts for moving cuts and wrapped meat. His newest invention is a hoist that dumps heavy tubs of meat into the grinder.

Butchering is a competitive business, so the Kirsteins provide services that others don’t offer and keep their cost low. “We do what the customer wants, and we go by the policy, ‘the customer is always right,’” said Cheryl.

At present, the Kirsteins employ two full-time people, plus themselves and up to nine part-time people at various times during the year. “Our biggest problem is finding skilled labourers,” Bernie said. “We have to compete with the oil rigs and Alberta.”

The other problem with the business is that people drop by to pick up their meat between 7:20 a.m. and 10:20 p.m., even on weekends. “We literally have to run away if we want a day off,” Cheryl said. “No forwarding address and no one has our cell phone number, either.” On the other hand, the couple enjoys working at home, being the boss, choosing when they want to work and doing everything together.

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Story and photographs by: Stephanie Guethert
Freelance writer