FARMING 2.0

*Introducing the **new generation** of Southwest Florida farmers*

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At Three Suns Ranch in Punta Gorda, cowboys round up a herd of grass-fed bison.

NICOLE KOZAK KNEW SHE WAS ON TO SOMETHING when she saw the reaction from local chefs. "When I meet with a chef and show them my cryovac chicken, they get so excited. I tell them it was just harvested that morning, and they are like kids at Christmas," she says with a smile.

What she's showing them is vacuum-packed meat that was raised without antibiotics, grass-fed, and raised and harvested humanely. "The meat is a beautiful pink," Kozak says. It's sort of entertaining to see the chefs' enthusiasm, she says, "But it's really reinforcing what we are doing."

Kozak, who runs Circle C Farm in Felda along with her husband, Manny Cruz, is one of a new generation of farmers in Lee and Collier counties who have seen changes in food trends and are building farms to meet those demands.

SMALL BUT PLENTIFUL

According to the 2012 U.S. Census of Agriculture, the number of farms nationwide has been on the decline since World War II. In Southwest Florida, though, the number of smaller farms is on the rise. "In Lee County, the trend is toward small farming initiatives," says Roy Beckford, Lee County Extension director. "People have been taking brown areas and turning them into green areas across Lee County and across the country for at least the last five years," he says. According to a recent report by his office, the median farm size in Collier County is 10 acres and in Lee it's 11 acres.

Part of Beckford's job is to help new farmers set up a business plan and get started. He notes that most of them are staying afloat despite the myriad challenges, including widespread competition and stringent regulations, not to mention the vagaries of Mother Nature. "Most [of the small farmers I work with] are making a small profit," says Beckford. "Maybe not an amazing profit—yet. But most are staying alive as long as they work with a business plan and work with the extension service, the USDA, and all the agencies that are here to help local farmers."

And Florida farmers have the advantage of vast resources. The extension service of the University of Florida serves all the counties in Florida and has the answers to questions about gardening, agriculture, pest control, and other related topics. Farmers can also access the University

Circle C Farm, Felda: (upper left) the chicken coops are moveable, which helps fertilize the fields; (upper right) cows are free-range and grass-fed; (lower left) goats are relatively new additions to the menagerie; (lower right) young meat chickens.

of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, which is a partnership among federal, state and county entities that is dedicated to developing knowledge about agriculture, among other topics. It has research, teaching and extension components.

Beckford goes on to describe another trend he has observed: "There's a big move toward local food. The trend toward local is even more significant than the current trend toward organic. You can get organic from anywhere, but you can only get local from one place."

THREE SUNS RANCH

One enterprise that is raising plenty of local food is Three Suns Ranch in Punta Gorda. Owners Keith and Cait Mann didn't start off as ranchers, but simply as people who wanted to eat healthier. They were becoming increasingly interested in the paleo diet, which stresses lean meat and fruits and vegetables, no dairy and very limited grains. Through this way of eating, the Manns began trying bison meat, which has less fat and cholesterol and more protein than beef.

Around the same time, the couple had the opportunity to start a business, and a cattle ranch in Punta Gorda became available. The Manns figured that other people must be interested in eating the way they ate—grass-fed protein from animals raised and harvested humanely and never given growth hormones or antibiotics. They bought the land in 2012 and set up a bison ranch there. And so Three Suns Ranch (a play on the fact that the Manns, who live in Sarasota, are the parents of three sons) was born.

Currently, Three Suns sells bison, beef and wild hog. Restaurants from Naples to Clearwater, including The Lodge in Fort Myers, buy the meats, which are packaged under the brand RealMeats. They are also sold at a retail shop at the ranch as well as online at threesunsranch.com. Ranch hands raise and harvest the animals on the nearly 6,000-acre ranch (except for the wild hogs, which are caught by local trappers) and package the meat, all under USDA inspection. "We have the USDA on site," says ranch manager David Dowdell. "They're here constantly testing and inspecting, so that we can sell to the restaurants."

The demand for bison meat is growing, according to Dowdell. Also: "People want a clean product," he says. "And we are one of only a few places in the country that can say we raise them, harvest them, and sell them. We know that animal's history, start to finish. People are getting more and more enlightened as to what's in their food."

The first few years at the ranch were not all smooth sailing, Dowdell says. One of the biggest problems they ran into in setting up shop is that, because bison are not native to Florida, the animals didn't all thrive immediately at Three Suns. For one thing—ironic for an operation inspired by a high-protein diet—the animals were not getting enough protein. The prairie grass they were used to in Wyoming or South Dakota, where many of them came from, is about 20 percent protein, while the Florida Bahia grass at the ranch is about 8 percent protein. "So they had to eat twice as much," says Dowdell, meaning it took longer for them to

Three Suns Ranch, Punta Gorda: (this page) C.J. and Cutter Nelson, ages 12 and 7, are the sons of cowboy Adam Nelson; (facing page) in May, Congress passed the National Bison Legacy Act, which deems the animal our national mammal.

reach maturity. Three Suns supplements the grass with a product made from orange peel and orange pulp, but never feed the bison grain, a practice that makes for higher quality meat, according to Dowdell.

Another stumbling block was that there were no local veterinarians who knew how to take care of the non-native animals. The only de-worming medicine they could get their hands on, for example, was for cattle, not bison. The Three Suns staffers ended up consulting with the vet who cares for media mogul Ted Turner's bison in Montana, which is the largest herd in the country, according to Dowdell. When they got the care of the animals under control, the bison required about an extra year to grow to maturity, and even then, didn't reach the size they might have in Wyoming or South Dakota. "Everything is smaller in Florida—the native deer, the bears. Consequently, the bison are, too," says Dowdell, who came to Punta Gorda to run the ranch when he retired as a commercial fisherman in New England. (He is the uncle of owner Cait Mann.) The operations are similar, he claims. "You just have to deal with what Mother Nature throws at you."

Operations are clicking along smoothly now. Though Dowdell declined to give specific financials, he says that the ranch is breaking even. Of the 1,500 head of bison on the ranch (they have the largest herd in the state), they harvested about 150 to 175 last year and expect to harvest around 300 this year.

Dowdell says that he and the Manns have plans for Three Suns to get significantly larger and to increase the volume of what they do now—selling directly to consumers and to restaurants and clubs. They have plans to build a more significant cutting and wrapping plant for the meat, and to take the business national. They'll surely need to expand their staff of 12, which include five cowboys, who had grown up on the land and stayed on when the ranch was converted from cattle.

"Every year gets better and better," says Dowdell, as they learn the business and what works best. "When you buy meat at the supermarket, you really don't know where that meat came from. And people want to know where their food is coming from. I don't see that trend reversing," he says.

Buckingham Farms in Fort Myers was one of the first local farms to derive revenue from agritourism, in which customers are invited to the farm. Buckingham opened a restaurant, a market (above), and now an events space.

BUCKINGHAM FARMS

Buckingham Farms in Fort Myers was a pioneer among the local small farms when things began to change in the early 2010s. Large, industrial farms were getting ever larger, and restrictions placed on small farms were making it increasingly difficult for them to earn a living, says T.J. Cannamela, one of the owners. When Buckingham started out, it had cattle and some vegetables, but was just breaking even. "One bad infestation or freeze, and you're done," says Cannamela. He knew he had to make a change and develop other revenue streams for the 75-acre property.

Luckily, Cannamela says, Florida Commissioner of Agriculture Adam Putnam was on the same page. He and local legislators passed a bill that would make it easier for farmers to expand their businesses by inviting customers onto their land. This was the beginning of agritourism in Florida, which is defined as any enterprise that brings visitors to a farm or ranch. Buckingham was an early adopter.

"We know people could buy a tomato at the grocery store while they're getting toothpaste, so we had to give them a reason to come out here," says Cannamela. Buckingham Farms decided to extend its line into what they were already good at: food. He and his co-owners picked up some kitchen equipment at a reasonable price and added a kitchen. "We started with Friday night dinners," he says. "We posted a menu on the Internet and people could order through the week then pick it up Fridays from 5 to 6 p.m. All the food came from the farm and was cooked well. People loved it. We were doing about 65 to 85 dinners on an average Friday. We actually started it in 2012 just before the agritourism bill passed in 2013—we took a chance."

It paid off. The popularity of Friday night dinners led to the farm's expansion to a full-fledged restaurant. They hired an executive chef and began serving more meals, namely an extremely popular Saturday morning breakfast in season, and Tuesday–Saturday lunch. "All the vegetables are from the farm, the eggs are from our chickens," he says. "People can see their food being grown."

Another recent addition is a rustic, outdoor events space that is popular for weddings and fundraisers. ("We're booked through next spring," Cannamela says.) They hire friendly staff and cultivate loyal customers. They strive to meet the needs of those customers while staying true to their mission of selling local food, nearly all of it from seed, and none of it genetically modified. And it's working. The farm won a 2015 Chrysalis Award for Sustainability from Lee County Visitor and Convention Bureau. Revenue is up to a little over a million dollars, says Cannamela, a 43 percent increase over the year before.

CIRCLE C FARM

Like Buckingham, Circle C Farms in Felda has also paid close attention to the market and set about filling a business need, while staying true to philosophical farming principles. Kozak and Cruz bought their 130 acres in Felda in 2012. They've since added 6.5 acres in Bonita Springs. In Felda are cattle, lambs, goats, sheep and meat chickens, while the Bonita location has about 1,200 free-range laying hens. They sell their goods to local restaurants and clubs (the aforementioned gleeful chefs) as well as at their small farm store in Bonita Springs. "Everything is pasture grass fed and raised," says Kozak, whose mother-in-law works the farm store seven days a week. "I joke that the only thing not free range on our farm is my mother-in-law," she says.

Circle C has begun to expand its line. "We started selling poultry and eggs"—they have their own poultry processing plant on the grounds in Felda—"and everyone said, 'the chickens are great. What else do you have?' So we started with beef and lamb. Then pork." Kozak says they plan to install a USDA-inspected abbatoir and butcher shop in the next few months, and expand the Bonita Springs farm store this summer. Kozak says that the farm has not been in business long enough to have annual revenue figures, but reports that demand for their products have increased steadily, to the point where they have hired seven fulltime staffers on the farm.

Aside from raising and harvesting humanely, an important principle at Circle C is to repopulate heritage breeds, which are livestock breeds that existed before industrial agriculture took hold. "I have one chef who will only serve our heritage large breed black [pig], which has a unique flavor and is very lean. In 2005 there were only 500 of them left. That's increased to about 3,000 now. Breeding them and offering them for consumption allows the demand to increase so they have a better chance of continuing the line."

Like the bison ranchers at Three Suns, Kozak and her husband are constantly learning how best to care for all their animals. "The learning curve is quick because it has to be. But in Florida, with UF [University of Florida], we have some amazing resources—research, databases, experts. You can call the extension office and ask about a feed you want to try and they will walk you through it. And once you're comfortable with certain species, you can transfer the knowledge pretty easily. And thank goodness for Google," she laughs. "If I don't know something and I'm standing in the field, I can so a quick search and start to figure it out."

THE NEW GENERATION

This is the new generation of farmers—smart, resourceful and nimble in the marketplace. They know they have to be, to stay afloat. They're taking advantage of food trends—people wanting to eat a cleaner product that's locally grown—to support their businesses. And they're constantly looking for new opportunities, never staying stagnant.

Another change that local farmers keep an eye on are immigrant groups moving into the area. People coming to the area from Latin America or the Caribbean create a market for the niche foods they like to eat. Beckford has watched this in action. "Amaranth is a grain that is popular with people from Trinidad and Jamaica. I've seen farmers in Lee County start to grow amaranth. They have maybe 2 acres, all amaranth. They drive it over to Broward County to a farmer's market and—because a lot of people from Trinidad and Jamaica live in Broward County— every blade of it is sold in 15 minutes. Farmers are understanding their clientele better and better, and meeting their needs."

"There are some really cool trends beginning to happen in Lee County," Beckford says. "I'm proud to be part of them."