
ELK FARMER JOHN RIETKERK

RAISING ANIMALS THAT ARE DEER TO HIS HEART

BY LEA ZELTSERMAN
PHOTOGRAPHY BY CAROLE TOPALIAN

Working full-time for Bell Canada while running a small family farm might sound like the perfect opener for another article about the difficulties faced by sustainably minded farmers in Canada. Not so for John Rietkerk – office worker by day, elk farmer by night.

“This is a success story,” he tells me, and quite emphatically, at that. I get the feeling he wishes people would stop assuming he could be the poster boy for struggling small farmers.

We’re standing at his Second Wind Elk stall at the St. Lawrence Saturday Farmers’ Market in Toronto. A steady flow of customers comes through, most leaving with a small bundle destined for their dinner tables. John is relaxed and confident about his product, happy to answer questions and give suggestions. A customer, told that the cut of meat he’s contemplating serves four, scoffs that he could easily eat half of it by himself. “Well, you have to eat it with something else [on the side],” John slyly replies.

Even when he’s being serious, explaining the operations of his farm or why he feels so strongly about the significance of his day job, John always looks like he’s smiling out at you underneath it all.

“I like to tell people that, until we moved in 1967, my dad was able to raise his family on a 100-acre dairy farm with a bit of off-farm work, but very little. Today, I’m on a 100-acre farm and I could raise a family on my hundred acres; I wouldn’t have to have the day job. It’s pretty cool in this day and age. We do it because we choose to, we don’t have to. And I’m really proud of that. It’s very unusual to be able to do that off a 100-acre farm. But I think it’s because of the type of animal [we raise],” he explains.

That animal is his herd of elk. John has been an elk man since late 1995, when he and his wife, Judy, took on ten bred cows (as female elk are known) from neighbours with an elk farm of their own. It took five years to build up the herd before they had enough animals to start selling meat. There are now about a hundred animals on the farm. While



they built up the herd, John stayed on at his job at Bell in Guelph, where he’s a property manager. The Rockwood farm is a small operation, but it suits both John and his elk, which he describes as great animals to raise.

Unlike many other animals, elk don’t require a high level of maintenance, especially since they’re raised for their meat; often-standard farm chores like milking are not required. The animals stay outdoors at pasture throughout the year, which means that John doesn’t have to deal with spreading manure or handling waste. In the summer, he checks up on the herd regularly, and in the winter, provides them with bales of hay every few days. To keep the herds happy and to ensure that no dominant group emerges to compete for food, he keeps the herds in separate groups, such as bulls, calves, and pregnant cows, spread out across ten fields.

Judy and their three sons, including a set of twins, have been involved from the start, especially with the bigger activities that punctuate an otherwise steady routine, such as vaccinations and weaning the calves. Both of the twins got married last summer, so Judy now plays a larger role in the farm. On the whole, though, John has been able to fit the farming into his evening and weekend schedules – or perhaps it’s the day job that he’s managed to fit into his farming life. Either way, for John, success is not measured by the number of jobs you juggle.

The farm work starts after he gets home from his job, usually around 5:30. John feeds his animals, has dinner with the family, and moves on to paperwork or marketing. “It’s a win-win for me. I can have a farm and I can be a farmer in the evenings and weekends and vacations,” he says. He pauses, before continuing, “The wife says it’s all the time, because I love it.” It sounds almost idyllic, but perhaps it’s just his love and passion for the work that make it sound so easy. He’s proud of what he’s achieved, of raising his family and putting his sons through college, and he’s careful to point out that his choices are just that –

choices. “I enjoy raising the elk, I enjoy farming, so therefore I need to sell meat to do that. I often tell people here [at the market] that I do this so I can have elk.”

John also attributes his success to the growing demand for elk meat in a market where people are increasingly looking for a dinner that’s natural and humanely raised. That elk falls outside the tried and true triumvirate of chicken, pork and beef adds to the attraction.

Even in the current economic climate, sales have continued to rise. John feels that it may even be helping sales, as people think more carefully about where they’re going to spend their money, which often translates into a search for something naturally and humanely raised. He says that elk is “cheaper than a meal out” and “goes well with a bottle of wine,” qualities that don’t hurt, either. John is rarely questioned on his prices, and when it does come up, he’s happy to explain that elk cannot be processed for meat until they’re three years old. That’s three years of caring for, feeding and pasturing. Compare that to a conventionally raised cow that can reach one thousand slaughter-ready pounds in as little as a year.

Running a small farm raising animals that aren’t a mainstream product does mean that John initially invested a lot of time on paperwork and marketing. But after nine years of selling meat, the need to promote his product has dropped considerably. With his weekly stall at the market, and steady business from several local butchers (he’s the elk supplier for The Healthy Butcher, White House Meats and The Butchers in Toronto, and Organic Garage in Oakville), John is able to focus less on marketing and more on general business maintenance and responding to product requests.

A bit of business savvy never hurts, either. Over the years, John has also begun selling meat from other local farmers at his stall, giving customers choices like duck, bison and boar. All are naturally raised by farmers who follow similar practices to Second Wind Elk. He laughs that he’s now the game-meat vendor at the Saturday market. John also



makes good use of his elk. Along one table is a display of leather goods, including gloves and hats. The products are handmade by a woman who uses the leather from Second Wind elk, along with moose and bison hides. John buys the products wholesale and sells them at his stall. Nestled among the leather goods are a few antlers. They’re not just for hunting-lodge ambiance. The bone marrow inside the antlers is valued for its medicinal properties against arthritis and for boosting the immune system. The antlers were John’s first business, selling them overseas to Asian markets before he started selling the meat. Now, he sells mostly locally, either whole to Toronto’s Asian community, or ground into capsules for those who prefer a little more mystery to their medication.

So just how much elk does he eat himself, I ask? About twice a week, he says. It’s the family’s only source of red meat. As for his favourite recipe, he doesn’t give away any secrets except to say that it’s a pot roast. “I love it. My wife, Judy, will do it in the slow cooker. My favourite recipe involves mushroom soup and onion soup mix. Put it all in the crock pot; it’s easy, and in five, six hours, it’s perfect.” □

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