

Value-added Agricultural Success Story



Ritter Farms

This story is one of a special series of value-added agricultural enterprise successes in Tennessee. The entrepreneurs featured have worked with specialists at the Center for Profitable Agriculture in different ways to achieve various levels of start-up, sustainable and long-term enterprise success. I hope their stories will be interesting, informative and inspiring.

Rob Holland, Director, Center for Profitable Agriculture



Jack and Nancy Ritter bring fresh produce directly out of the field to sell in their market.

Jack and Nancy Ritter have been farming together in Grainger County for nearly 40 years, although he traces his family's ties to agriculture several generations back.

Former schoolteachers, the Ritters have built a unique agritourism business that is centered on their big red barn, which faces busy state highway 11W. At first it was used to pack their Grainger County tomatoes to sell to wholesale markets.

"People driving by would see our barn and stop and ask if they could buy from us," recalls Nancy. "We decided if they wanted to buy our tomatoes, we could grow other things like green beans, cabbage, cucumbers, squash and onions, so we bought a scale and cash register and opened for business."

Their most successful item, of course, was the fresh-from-the-garden tomato that seemed to thrive in the limestone-laced soil. "Grainger County tomatoes are unique," says Jack. "We grow them for the taste, which people like." Whether it is the soil, the variety or the vine-ripened process, Grainger County tomatoes are now recognized internationally.

Jack credits retired UT Extension agent Charles Cavin with making the local tomato a household name. "Charlie's been the biggest promoter of Grainger County tomatoes we've ever had. Wherever Charlie traveled, he would tell people about them."

"Our tomatoes have even been sold at Harrods in London," Jack says proudly.

As the business took off, the Ritters looked for other ways to enhance their operation. "We weren't busy in the winter, so we decided to open a kitchen where we could use any overabundance of fruit and vegetables so they wouldn't go to waste," Nancy says.



Tomatoes grown in Grainger County, like these at Ritter Farms, have developed a favorable reputation with many consumers.



The big red barn is a symbol for bringing people back to the farm, which also features a restaurant open year-round.

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The couple consulted with Bill Morris, Extension food processing specialist, for advice about processing, labeling and marketing their own line of jams, jellies, tomato juice, spaghetti sauce, chili, salsa, catsup, pickles, relishes and apple butter. "We took a class at UT and got certified to produce and sell our value-added products," says Nancy. "The assistance we received from Dr. Morris has been invaluable."

In 2006 the Ritters received a cost-share grant from the Tennessee Agricultural Enhancement Grant program that enabled them to convert an old shed attached to the barn into a kitchen and, more recently, a small restaurant, where old-fashioned home-cooked meals are served. "I've always been interested in cooking," says Jack. "Opening the restaurant was a way to use our Grainger County products, which are fresh, not canned, like you get in most restaurants."

Ritter Farms also offers a variety of agritourism opportunities throughout the year, including *Strawberry Weekend* in May, *Bluegrass on the Farm* in July and the annual *Harvest Celebration* in October. Civil War reenactments of the Battle of Bean Station have also taken place on their farm. Sunday is the only day they are closed year-round.

But consumers do not have to actually go there to get a "taste" of what Ritter Farms is all about. Son Russ hosts a radio show, broadcast live six days a week from a small studio inside the big red barn. Bluegrass and old-time gospel music are staples in their "Back to the Farm Hour" play list, which airs on four radio stations and two cable TV channels.

At Jack's urging, Nancy learned how to develop a Web site. "I consulted a computer instructor at the high school where I used to teach about how to use the software and got a Web-hosting service," says Nancy, who created the design and updates it regularly.

Now that the Ritters have achieved every business goal they ever had and more, the idea of retirement has been "floated" to their three sons. Stanley is already a partner with his dad in the business, and Russ, the youngest, works there full-time as well. Oldest son John works in the medical field.

"We couldn't ask for a better business," says Jack. "We love what we do. We're proud to be a part of this community. As my grandpa told me years ago, 'Farming is a worthwhile endeavor.'"

The mission of the Center for Profitable Agriculture is to help farm families improve income by identifying new ways to add value to food and fiber products through processing, packaging and marketing. We focus on three areas:

- Working with families and entrepreneurs to analyze value-added agricultural enterprises;
- Implementing market development studies to determine the viability of new products;
- Conducting educational programs for Tennessee farmers and agricultural leaders.

Visit the UT Extension Web site at
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