

Ethnic groups in the Cities find

Whole Farm Co-op products to their liking

As the population of America continues to include more and more ethnic groups, the changes which will come are not always easy to predict. Certainly there will be challenges with language and with different cultures and beliefs. There will also be opportunities for those who are ready to meet them.

Minnesota's growing Hmong and Hispanic populations may bring such an opportunity for the members of the Whole Farm Co-op. Located in Long Prairie, behind Ben Franklin, WFC is made up of small family farmers who practice sustainable agriculture.

Whole Farm Co-op sells most of its products to individuals, co-ops, and church congregations in the Cities. These orders usually look something like: two dozen eggs, three pounds of meat, a quart of maple syrup and 10 pounds of potatoes. These orders, which are filled by hand each week, can add up to \$15,000 worth of sales a month.



Last week, Ai Vang, a Hmong-American, described the growing need for hogs and goats to satisfy the Hmong, African and Hispanic appetites. At the meeting at WFC, Vang asked a number of the co-op's pork and goat producers if they could supply up to 100 goats and hogs a week for these ethnic markets.

Vang, who left Laos when he was a teenager, has lived in the United States for 22 years. He works as a translator for his local hospital and sheriff's department, north of the Twin Cities.

Vang is also a purchaser for two processing plants, one in Sioux Falls, S.D. and one in north St. Paul. One of the things that make these plants unique is that customers can slaughter and butcher their own animals.

Slaughtering and butchering animals is an important part of the Hmong culture. When the Hmong first moved to this country, they would perform these

rituals in their yards or homes. That tradition wasn't practical in this country and so processing plants have sprung up to fill the need.

An example of a common ritual involving butchering animals is a Hmong wedding celebration. At least one medium-sized pig and four chickens are slaughtered for meals and rituals at the groom's house, and two large pigs as well as two chickens for the bride's relatives. The bride's parents on their part have to kill a large pig to feed those who helped them during the wedding feast either with negotiations or other duties.

Vang said, because of rituals such as these, the two processing plants are currently butchering 30-60 hogs per day. Weekends are the busiest times because more people can come on those days.

According to Vang, the Hmong are looking for animals which are similar to the animals they raised in Laos. Many of the refugees who came to this country were farmers in their homeland. The Hmong want animals that have been raised without medications or hormones. They also desire animals that have been humanely treated and are healthy.

Animals for the Hmong had previously been purchased at sale barns and were not satisfactory. The Hmong were not happy with the quality of the meat or the condition of the animals. Vang began looking around for other sources of animals that would satisfy the Hmong consumers.

To help in his search for sustainably raised animals, Vang was shown a publication put out by the Minnesota Department of Agriculture. The publication features growers and processors who participate in the Minnesota Grown program.

The foundation of the Minnesota Grown program includes an annual grower license to use the trademarked Minnesota Grown logo. This license ensures that products or packaging bearing the logo were grown or raised in Minnesota. The Whole Farm Coop is listed as a Minnesota Grown member producing pork, beef, chicken, vegetables and many other items.

Vang told the producers that the Hmong most often want hogs which weigh between 75-100 pounds. Sometimes, for special rituals, they want hogs weighing 40 pounds, and other times they are in the market for hogs reaching market grower size, 240-260 pounds. The smaller hogs are more desirable because the Hmong often eat the pig right away and do not want anything to go to waste.

The goats are in demand by African and Hispanic consumers. Vang said the two processing facilities slaughter and butcher between 80-100 goats a day. Vang estimated that the population of Asian, African and Hispanic people in the Twin Cities area is 100,000.

Vang made the trip to Todd County in part to meet the farmers and also to see the farms where the animals are raised. He said he had recently visited a potential producer, but was unimpressed with the operation. He said the pigs were so crowded together and underfed, that they were fighting with and biting each other.

Vang visited WFC producer Ed Wettstein's farm, north of Long Prairie. Wettstein raises hogs to the market grower size. He has 25 sows who live in clean, airy pens, with their offspring.

The next stop was at Carol Miller's farm, west of Browerville. Miller raises Boer goats, which are specifically bred for meat production. Miller's farm was also an impressive display of well-cared for animals and cleanliness. Miller has 100 does, quite a few kids, and Nubian dairy goats.

Vang would like to have four main sources for the animals he buys. He would like to pick up the phone and tell the producers how many animals and what weights he needs for that week. He will provide transportation or reimburse producers who transport their animals.

Vang, WFC and the producers still need to hammer out the financial details. If a mutually satisfactory deal can be worked out, small family farmers in Todd County will benefit from the changing face of America.

