

There's not too many greater places in the US to sit down to a juicy 100% grass-fed steak than Minneapolis, Minnesota. In a recent survey, Minneapolis was ranked the 6th most creative city in America (Austin Texas was 1st!), and creativity these days brings, among other things, a lot of natural, local, sustainable food to the table. Back in the 1960's Minneapolis also gave birth to the very first food coop in the US, a marketing concept which has now spawned over 30 bustling and spiffy modern versions in the Twin City area, every single one now thrilled to sell good local and sustainable meats. So, we could have hardly picked a more auspicious time to bring our delicious grass-fed meats to market. With over 3 million eaters in a metropolis of this size, it's not difficult at all to find our people. Here's a little background about how several of us are doing it.

Those of us at the Thousand Hills Cattle Company feel particularly lucky that we have gotten to know and now work alongside MIKE LORENTZ. Mike, along with his family, owns and operates Lorentz Meats out of Cannon Falls, and every bite of meat that we sell at THCC is processed from beginning to end at his state-of-the-art USDA meat plant. TODD CHURCHILL frequently states that it's quite possible that he'd have never made his mark in the rough world of the meat business had it not been for Mike's wisdom and generosity. In fact, it was Mike who, one fateful day, handed Todd a copy of Micheal Pollan's landmark article "Power Steer" from the New York Times Magazine Section (e-mail me if you want a free copy). Reading about the wild and unforgettable story that emerged from Mr. Pollan's little calf, Steer #532, as he went from a happy range birth into the nastiness of becoming an industrial meat food product turned out to be the galvanizing experience that inspired Todd's 2004 launch into the 100% grass-fed beef business.

Mike is a world-class direct marketing expert, he's been doing it since his family bought the original meat plant back in 1968. A man of many delicious and wickedly funny stories, Mike tells how easy it is for an amateur to lose his shirt trying to sell meat. He even teaches the highly recommended course Branding Your Beliefs. He tells about beef farmers thinking that they will make a bundle selling meat at their local farmer's market. He hates to sound cynical BUT, he cautions thusly: consider this path only if you have way too much time on your hands and are hoping to throw away every summer Saturday morning! He's exaggerating only slightly but there is reality within. He wants you to think about your main goal. While there can be advantages to being a market vendor, such as building a customer list who will buy halves and quarters from you in the future, spending 1/7 of your life with these morning shoppers who want to buy a pound of hamburger for dinner is, in essence, spending your day with folks who are not necessarily friends of your farm! You are solving THEIR problem, that of picking up a meal for dinner, but not necessarily solving YOUR problem. In addition, many farmers, even if willing to spend more time off-farm, just don't have the personality or patience to work this intensely with the public. It's just a fact of life that we all can't be Joel Salatin!

It was this story from Mike that catalyzed my decision last June to open the TRADITIONAL FOODS MINNESOTA Warehouse and Buying Club in south Minneapolis. I wanted to provide farmers with a place to sell "direct" but with far less expenditure of time. As a chapter leader for the Weston A. Price Foundation (see

[www.wapf.org](http://www.wapf.org)) for about a decade, I was used to spending much of my day hooking up city people seeking farm fresh food with those farmers who are willing to produce it but who don't know where the eaters are. As it turns out, this connection is quite often the missing link. We are currently expanding our marketing model, going from the rare "early-adopter" folks, those willing to drive 2 hours to purchase such things as raw organic milk or grass-fed meat direct from the farm, to the larger demographic, often called the "cultural creatives", who truly want these products, and who are willing to pay a premium for it, but are unwilling to take a huge chunk out of their day to work for it. If it can be purchased conveniently, and easily, they will do it. It is for these folks, and the for the farmers, that I built my warehouse. Incidentally, the CSA buying clubs are serving the same people, as a result, we also serve as a drop site for several local CSAs.

The warehouse itself is a 7500 square foot rectangular building with 4 loading docks and 18' tall ceilings. Basically we wanted to create a big box full of food with a large parking lot. Essentially, a four season farmer's market. The bulk of our staff consist of volunteers and work-share members. Everything we do is by word-of-mouth. While we are not "open to the public" anyone can join with a lifetime membership for \$75. The membership comes with full privileges and the signed contract requires them to state that they are not from the government (with no intent to infiltrate us), and explains the responsibilities they have to us and that we have to them. Our membership form may be viewed on our website.

Since our launch in September of 2008 we have over 1200 members and a truly steady flow of loyal customers each day. We need to grow inventory with the size of the membership as we don't want to have a huge building full of food with no customers any more than we'd want a flock of customers with nothing to buy. We currently have about 50 vendors, and there are three basic categories, first of all and foremost are the farmers who bring us such locally-produced farm items such as beef, pork, lamb, goat, eggs, fresh milk, cheese, yogurt, honey, vegetables and much more. Our arrangement allows for the farmer to drop off product, then get right back to the farm, several have their own key to the warehouse. For this, we take a commission ranging from 15-30%.

Secondly we consider ourselves as an incubator for what we call micro-producers. These people make such things as jams, jellies, sauerkraut, kim chi, hand-made soaps, cookies, bread, kombucha and crispy nuts. We help them grow their business to the point where they may someday be big enough to get on the shelves at food coops and supermarkets. Otherwise, it's difficult for them to get past this awkward growth stage.

Lastly, we provide some important food items that are not local, nor are they necessarily hand-made, but they are items that round out the diet of people seeking a healthy lifestyle. They are such things as seasalts (we have about 15 salty options), the very best in cod liver oils, extra virgin coconut oil and coconut products.

A pre-winter launch of any new business up here in the near Arctic can be considered pretty unsavvy business thinking but we didn't let pure rationality stand in our way. We saw the local hunger for this, we quickly developed a business plan then jumped into

the water. Being under-capitalized forces us to be money-smart. Then there is, of course, “the economy”. On this last issue, we do feel secure in the fact that people will always need to eat and, interestingly, we find that two surprise factors have helped us. One, people are cooking more! In bad times people eat out less and cook more, plus, having the best ham in the world, or even delicious juicy cheeseburgers with a glass of good red wine is a “guilty pleasure”, a relatively cheap way to add joy to bleak times! People can serve a delicious meal of our farm-fresh food for as little as seventy-five cents per person. This helps us. Additionally, many people are losing their health insurance (I can’t decide if it’s a good or bad thing) but it does seem to have the interesting side effect of making people care more about staying healthy! Spend more money on good food, and send less to the doctors and the insurance industry buzzards! What a concept, we love it.

So now, with the first wisps of Spring melting our piles of snow, with farmers already nursing their baby tomato plants and knowing that there are tiny sprigs of pasture grass ready to burst into life, we feel extremely hopeful! We have been offering mostly comfort foods for the winter, good meat and good root vegetables. Sort of colorless, not too exciting, but actually quite perfect for us Nordic types, after all, you can almost see Lake Wobegone from the warehouse! But, before long, we want to see those farm trucks backing up to the dock, filled to the brim with bright lettuce, juicy red tomatoes, fat watermelons and freshly-picked berries. Spring is a good thing when you live in the snow country, especially if you sell fresh local food! Come visit us! See pictures and learn more as the story unfolds. Check us out at [www.traditionalfoodsmn.com](http://www.traditionalfoodsmn.com).

William G. Winter, DVM is a free-lance journalist, teacher and consultant. He is primarily interested in awakening the world to the human health benefits as well as the environmental bonus that comes from raising grass-fed livestock using sustainable practices and the magic of holistic herd health. He is also the herd health consultant for producers of livestock for Thousand Hills Cattle Company and lives in Minnesota where the grass grows green and lush, and all the producers children eat right and are therefore above average. Contact him with your concerns, grand concepts, and rave compliments at [holistic@visi.com](mailto:holistic@visi.com) or [www.willwinter.com](http://www.willwinter.com).