



The *New* American Farmer

Greg and Lei Gunthorp

LaGrange, Indiana

Summary of Operation

- *1,000-1,200 pastured hogs*
- *Thousands of pastured chickens annually*
- *25 acres of feed corn on a total of 130 acres*

Problem Addressed

Keeping a small hog operation profitable. Greg Gunthorp has a degree in agriculture economics, but says he'd be broke and out of farming if he had listened to most of what he was taught.

"I would have borrowed money to put up buildings for raising hogs, and more for tractors and combines and storage silos and wagons for harvesting and keeping the corn to feed the hogs," he says. "And I would have gone belly up in 1998 when hogs were selling for eight cents a pound, which was about what my grandfather got for his during the Depression."

Background

Gunthorp was raised on a farm only a mile from where he now lives with his wife, Lei, and their three young children. Gunthorp owns 65 acres and uses about 65 acres of his parents' farm.

He runs the hogs on pasture ground that is too poor to crop. Gunthorp got organic certification for all of the farmland he uses, another step in a path toward the simplification and thrift Gunthorp has adopted in all of his farming practices.

"They're making farming so capital-intensive an average person can't do it anymore, or at least not the way they say it should be done," he says. "I get by with a tractor and a 3-wheeler now, and I'm still looking for ways to reduce my equipment and input costs. Going organic is a way to do that."

Gunthorp's pigs farrow in his fields, graze year round in intensive rotation through pastures sown in wheat, clover, rye and various grasses, and harvest their own corn when the time comes. He also allows them to root through the stalks after the harvest on his father's farm. During the deepest part of winter, Gunthorp adds hay and a corn-and-soybean feed to their diet.

Not only does Gunthorp vastly reduce the cost of hog production compared to farmers raising hogs intensively in confinement but he also adds value and employs special strategies to market his pork.

Focal Point of Operation — Marketing

Gunthorp is a vocal supporter of pasture-based systems for livestock, believing that the confinement hog industry wouldn't exist if fence chargers, rolls of black plastic pipe and four-wheelers were available in the 1950s.

“Every problem that buildings create could be cured by pasture. I know because I have a partially slatted building that sits empty because I can’t afford the death loss in it!” he says. Now, he says, tail-biting and respiratory problems are non-existent.

Gunthorp took his system one step further. After perfecting his rotational grazing system, he turned to marketing. Now, “I spend more time marketing than I do farming,” he says.

He has made meeting and getting to know the chefs at the best restaurants in Chicago a major focus of his work in the past few years, traveling more than 100 miles to the city at least once a week to talk with chefs right in their kitchens.

“More than anyone else, chefs appreciate how food is supposed to taste,” he says. “They know how much flavor has been lost when producers grow anything, animal or vegetable, for a certain look or a certain weight, or for its ability to be packed conveniently instead of for its best taste.”

He has little trouble getting orders once the chefs have tasted his product. “My problems come in getting them the kinds of cuts they want when they want them, or having enough suckling pigs to meet all the orders, but not in slow sales.”

He also sells his pork, and the pastured poultry he and his family raise and process, at a popular farmers market in Chicago almost every Saturday during the season. Gunthorp takes advantage of the crowds at the market to promote his burgeoning catering business, which has ranged from wedding receptions to company picnics to family barbecues.

The catering sideline began when a local company asked him to bring a hog to roast at their picnic. “When I saw how easy it

was, and how much money I could make from it, I started spreading the word that this was something else I was offering in addition to the best-tasting pigs around,” Gunthorp says. “If you had told me three years ago that I’d be direct marketing 100 percent of my hogs now I wouldn’t have believed it. But that’s just what I’m doing, and I’m making a living at it.”

The Gunthorps augment that living by raising chickens on pasture, too. They process the chickens on the farm because no USDA-approved meat plant in their area handles poultry.

“Good-tasting birds sell themselves,” Gunthorp said.

Economics and Profitability

Gunthorp figures it costs him an average 30 cents per pound to raise a hog to maturity. The lowest price he now gets for his pork is \$2 per pound, although he commands as much as \$7 per pound for suckling pigs — which weigh in at 25 pounds or less. Overall, Gunthorp’s prices average 10 times what hogs fetch on the commodities market. The top prices are in line with other specialty meat producers, he says.

His catering business, still a relatively new venture, already sells about one roasted pig each week. A 300- to 400-pound pig, “dressed out,” feeds 200 people at just \$5 a plate. He provides side dishes, too, and grosses about \$1,000 per event.

Gunthorp estimates whole-hog purchases account for one-third of his sales each year. Those involve the least amount of work, and thus the highest profit, so Gunthorp has focused his marketing efforts in that area. He encourages chefs, for example, to contract with him for a whole hog by pricing choice cuts so high it pays them to take the entire pig.

The other two-thirds of his sales are marketed in pieces, with the tenderloins, ribs and bacon easy to sell. Gunthorp uses a federally inspected processing plant that produces smoked hams, Italian sausage, Kielbasa and other specialty products from the rest of the hog. He reports little difficulty in direct marketing all of it.

Raising poultry on pasture has taken off even more. “I’ve got people practically tearing my door off the hinges to get more,” he says.

Gunthorp says the bottom line for him is that he is making enough money to keep his family healthy and happy. “We can get by just selling 1,000 pigs a year, and the smarter I can raise them and sell them, the better off we’ll be,” he says.

Environmental Benefits

Gunthorp’s hogs and chickens live in the open. They have access to shelter and feed during bad weather, but spend most of their time foraging. As a result — and in marked contrast to conventional practices of raising hundreds and even thousands of animals at a time in confinement — Gunthorp experiences few of the manure disposal, disease, aggression and feeding difficulties that go along with those conventional methods.

He doesn’t have to drain wastes into lagoons or have them hauled away; the hogs and chickens are their own manure spreaders. He also doesn’t need to inoculate his pigs against nearly as many diseases as contained animals are susceptible to. In fact, Gunthorp only gives shots to his breeding sows to protect them against common reproductive diseases.

Gunthorp also notes that he’s releasing a lot less engine exhaust into the atmosphere as a pastured pork producer, because he doesn’t use a combine to harvest grain, or trucks to haul the grain to storage, or huge fans and

gas dryers to remove moisture from the feed. His hogs just knock down the corn once he lets them in his fields, where they eat stalk and all.

“I also don’t have to worry about weeds and pests,” Gunthorp says. “I control the pigs’ susceptibility to worms by rotating them to different pastures regularly, and I don’t have to fertilize.”

Community and Quality of Life Benefits

Gunthorp says it means a lot to him that his wife does not feel pressed to work off the farm. His wife, a registered nurse, could make more money working off the farm, but he says they don’t need the extra income. “A farm is the best place to raise kids,” he says.

It would be different, Gunthorp says, if he’d gone deeply into debt to finance the conventional system of hog farming. In fact, they might already have been driven out of farming altogether.

“It’s just an easier way to go all around, as far as I can tell,” Gunthorp says. “A lot of my time is taken up now with marketing, or running the catering business, or working the farmers market, or meeting with chefs, but I really enjoy all that interaction. And I profit from it at the same time.”

Gunthorp participated on the USDA’s Small Farm Commission, serving as an adviser to former Agriculture Secretary Dan Glickman.

Transition Advice

“The biggest mistake a lot of farmers make is that they get locked into this idea that their product isn’t worth very much, and that anybody can do what they do,” Gunthorp insists. “And it just isn’t true.”

This negative attitude keeps farmers from benefiting from the nation’s generally strong



Chicago chefs are some of hog and chicken producer Greg Gunthorp’s best customers.

economy while they hang back and wait for the U.S. Department of Agriculture or politicians to improve the markets.

“That isn’t going to happen,” he says. “What farmers have to do is realize they have the ability to do things differently, to produce livestock and crops that are unique, with good flavor and value, and then let people know about it.”

The Future

Gunthorp believes his ability to increase his income is unlimited. He believes the value-added end of his efforts — the catering business in particular — can grow each year, and he intends to focus on marketing to companies, universities, schools and civic organizations all over northwest Indiana.

For more information:

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Editor’s note: Since this profile was researched in 2001, the Gunthorps greatly expanded their poultry operation. Every five weeks, they receive another 5,000 chicks, which they start in their converted hog barn. Once the birds get a good covering of feathers, Greg and Lei move the chicks outside. To finish the birds, the Gunthorps built a state-inspected poultry processing plant on site.

■ David Mudd