

# Hertsel Berkshire Farm

words by Mallorie Boggs

A few weeks ago I was sent an article about a Berkshire pig farmer in Indiana who was offering quality protein to his community during this time when it can be difficult to find in the store. When I connected with the farmer in the article he responded with, "Mallorie if I know anything at all it is that Jesus paid my debt, George Strait is the 2nd greatest American of all time, and I love Berkshire hogs. I would love to talk with you about what we are doing."

Mike Hertsel knows the exact day that he began his career as a pig farmer. In looking through his Facebook profile for pictures that capture the passion that Mike has for the breed, I found a wedding photo of him and his bride, Sarah.... and his first Berkshire board, Otis. This photo was posted on October 31, 2019, and captioned "18 years ago today I became a pig farmer...". This simple post only solidifies the transparency in love, hard work, and faith that Mike has in his position of co-owner of Hertsel Berkshire Farm.

## **Tell me about your operation, family, etc.**

I did not have the luxury of growing up on a farm or even living in the country. I have always joked that I grew up on a 600 acre 1/64 scale farrow to finish carpet farm in my mom and dad's attic. I do however believe that I inherited a love of agriculture and farming through my mother's side of the family. My grandparents were farmers and I am sure that's where the passion comes from. My wife Sarah and I started dating our sophomore year of high school. I knew that she was a keeper because she would go with me to work every day after school and help me milk cows. Today we raise Berkshire pigs and kids on the same small farm that I rented when I was in high school. The Lord has blessed us with 4 children. Elizabeth 11, George 9, Caroline 6, and Nick 3. I work for ADM as a sales consultant, and Sarah is a hair stylist a couple of days a week. We love being able to share our love of farming with our children. We believe strongly in the values that can be learned every day by being stewards of God's creation.

## **How long have you been raising pigs? How did you get started?**

I started raising hogs my senior year of high school in 2001. I had saved some money from my after school job at a dairy farm and was eager to invest it in my own livestock operation. I have always loved hogs, in fact,

I was rewarded the 2nd year of Kindergarten after I drew pigs breeding on the cover of my mother's day cookbook. Grandpa had told me that when pigs ride each other they were makin' bacon, so I thought that was pretty appropriate for a cookbook. My teacher told my mom that another year of Kindergarten might help me mature a little and maybe I would think about something other than pigs and cows. It was not effective. Every day I would dream of someday having my own farm.

As soon as I was able to drive and had a little money saved I rented a barn from a retired hog farmer named Amos Sheets. He was very gracious and really encouraged me in so many ways. I started with two bred gilts in the fall of 2001. I purchased one from Gene Wakeland of Rose Wood Farms in Argos Indiana. He was in his 80's at the time and had been raising Berkshire hogs for decades. I bought the other from Tom Sarber of Nappanee. In the fall of 2002, I went to Michigan State University to study dairy herd management. Sarah was in cosmetology school but she would stop every day on her way home and feed and take care of the pigs for me. We bought our first farm after we got married in 2004. 2 years ago we had an opportunity to buy Amos's farmstead where we had started raising hogs in high school. For Sarah and me that was a dream come true.

## **Why did you choose to do Berkshires?**

Before I bought my first sows, my FFA advisor encouraged me to do a research paper on the different breeds. He encouraged me to find something that would be an added value product. At that time the Berkshire breed had a program called Berkshire Gold. I was fascinated with the idea of selling directly to the customer instead of through a middle man. After buying a couple I fell in love with their personality and temperament. Over the years we have tried a few other breeds but our Berkshires have always been our focus. We have been exclusively Berkshire for the last 10 years.

## **How many sows do you currently have?**

We currently have 10 sows. I would describe our operation as being 75% meat production and 25% show pig focused. Our meat business grows every year and we are expanding that as our customer base grows. Our goal is to be at 30 sows in the next 5 years.



Photo courtesy of Hertsel Berkshire Farm



Photo courtesy of Hertsel Berkshire Farm



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**Where do you supply your pigs to?**

We currently are only selling pigs direct to local families. They have the option to buy wholes or halves. We recently added 3 different smaller packaged options ranging in price from \$39 to \$99 for people who want to buy smaller quantities. We have talked with a couple of local restaurants that are interested in buying parts of the hog. Our goal is to build enough demand for our trim through our direct customers. Once we have this market a little better established we will be in a much better position to supply the needs of these restaurants. We have also recently inquired about being a part of an online farmers market. These are definitely markets that we believe have the opportunity and would like to be a part of.

**How did you begin selling Berkshire pork? What are the various ways that you market it?**

We have always sold a few hogs directly to customers as they would inquire about it. I remember 4 years ago being really disgusted because I had sold a small load of fat hogs for about \$0.30 a pound. I remember eating lunch that day and thinking why in the world am I selling Berkshire hogs for \$0.30 pound, that has got to be the dumbest business strategy I've ever heard of. From that moment on I made a commitment to never sell another hog to the conventional hog market. That was the day we became a business rather than a hobby. I raised our prices to a place that gave us a comfortable profit margin based on our input costs. At first, I felt sort of guilty for charging people over the conventional hog market. But then we started getting

cards from our customers thanking us for selling them such a great product at a reasonable price. It was a lot of work initially to build the customer base but now we are struggling to produce enough to keep up with our customers' demands. Our marketing was originally just by reaching out to people we knew and through word of mouth. We really started gaining positive traction when we started utilizing Facebook.

**I'm a huge fan of your social media posts. How do you plan for them? What advice do you have for others trying to sell products on social media?**

I was a little reluctant to do the whole social media thing initially because I am not at all tech-savvy. I went to a breakout session at the Indiana State young farmers convention through Farm Bureau that was all about growing a retail farm business through social media. We decided to try Facebook. It was a hit right away. People are curious about what we do. They want to know the farmer that raised their food. I believe that the biggest part of our marketing is telling a story. Facebook gives us a platform for that, and it doesn't cost us anything. We do a variety of videos and posts. Some of them are me being goofy impersonating Chris Farley, some of them are educational explaining how we raise our hogs and why we do some of the things we do. And sometimes they are targeted to generate sales by letting people know what we have available at that time. Needless to say, people seem to enjoy the content and there is no question it has helped us sell pork. We have found that the funny ones seem

to attract the biggest audience but sell the least. The ones in the barn with the pigs generate the most conversation, and the ones intended to sell pork do exactly that. I wish I could tell you we have a scientific strategy in regards to when we post them but it really just depends on what we have going on and what I feel helps best tell our story at the time.

**I love the variety of products that you offer. How did you come up with the different bundles? What is your most popular?**

We worked really hard on selling wholes and halves for 3 years. That is the easiest for us to do because we are just selling the customer a live hog. We deliver it to the processor and then we're done. However, we kept hearing I wish we had a freezer because we would love to try it. So this February we had 7 pigs made into a variety of cuts that we knew were popular based on feedback from previous customers. Once we had the meat I started thinking about what types of boxes and price points would best work for our customers. We have a \$39 breakfast box that is basically bacon and sausage. A \$49 grillers box that is pork burgers, pork chops, and ham steaks. We also offer a \$99 Berkshire Bundle that consists of about 26 pounds of various cuts. I thought when we did them initially that the breakfast box would be the most popular because it was the cheapest option. I was dead wrong we sold about 20 \$99 Berkshire bundles in 2 days and are still taking orders for them. The really nice thing about selling them in boxes and bundles is that it gives us an opportunity to utilize the whole hog instead of just selling bacon and chops. I think our most popular item so far has been our pork burgers, this is great because I can turn anything into pork burgers. Something new we are excited about offering are brats we should have those available through the summer for people to enjoy.

**How has COVID-19 changed your business? How have you adjusted and how do you think this will impact the future of Hertsel Berkshire Farm?**

COVID-19 actually helped our business. There were a couple of weeks where meat was pretty picked over in the supermarkets. It just so happened that we had just filled our freezers up. We made one video and shared it to Facebook. It was an instant hit and we grew our existing customer base by probably 40% literally overnight. The timing for us could not have been any better. Our experience has been that the hardest part of growing our business is getting the initial sale. Once they have tried it they will usually be repeat customers. We are currently sold out of butcher hogs until August and those orders are filling up fast. We have actually reached out to a couple of other breeders to help us fill our current demand until we can grow into it.



**What advice do you have for other farmers going through this turbulent time with COVID-19?**

In the midst of all challenges there lies an opportunity. Use the network that we have to grow your business. Be creative, remember you have a story that is worth telling and people want to hear it.

**Is there anything else that you'd like to add?**

In the almost 20 years I have been raising Berkshire hogs I have learned a ton. My wife and I have built our business from the ground up, we are very proud of the product we produce. I believe we are filling a niche that our community desires. Often times commercial agriculture is victimized and misunderstood. We do not believe there is any benefit in criticizing commercial production to sell our product. Yes our sows are group-housed, yes they go outside, yes we raise pigs in bedded pens. That's all true but those are not the things that make our product better. The Berkshire breed has done an incredible job of building a brand that we can be proud of and recommend with confidence. We have all heard the term factory farms. I challenged myself to think about that last summer. A factory is simply

a manufacturing facility that produces a product to be sold. If all you are doing is producing a product to be re-sold I would challenge you. There was a time my 6 sow herd was nothing more than a small factory farm. I believe there is a very limited opportunity to be a profitable business if you are a small scale operation that only raises agricultural commodities. However, if you are committed to selling your agricultural commodities and telling your story the potential is endless. •

**Hertsel Berkshire Farm**

Mike and Sarah Hertsel

