

MICHIGAN PORK

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Producer Spotlight: The Albrights



Pat and Colleen Albright outside of their Union City, Michigan processing plant, Countryside Quality Meats.

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Producer Spotlight: The Albrights

By: Megan Sprague
MPPA Program Director
Sprague@mipork.org

Building relationships within their community, creating educational opportunities for those interested in pork production, and encouraging families to spend time together are all a large part of what happens at Albright Swine Farms.

Pat and Colleen Albright of Coldwater, Michigan, own and run a 180-200 head sow facility that produces pigs for their hog roasting business, niche market sales, restaurant sales and show pig sales. In 1987, Pat and Colleen took over the family farm to go into full time hog production, but eventually they had to make a decision on what type of facility they were going to operate.

That question was soon decided when their son, Doug, became interested in the show pig industry. Since the farm was already using AI techniques, it was a natural transition into breeding and selling show pigs. They began acquiring purebred sows, and in the last 15 years they have had significant growth, from selling 40-50 show

pigs per year to 500-600 per year. One way that the Albrights have been able to facilitate this growth is through the use of online sales and their website, www.brightswine.com. They have found it to be not only successful, but a very unique way of marketing their pigs.

Doug is still very involved in the show aspect of the operation, as “show pig manager.” He works with their online sales and makes contacts around the country as he travels for his job with Pfizer. The show pig component gives the whole family a chance to participate. Colleen, who does all the record keeping for the farm, is responsible for training and handling their show pigs.

Transitioning into selling show pigs was a wise decision for the Albrights, and really has worked well to give them irreplaceable opportunities.

The Albrights attribute the fact that both their son, Doug, and their daughter, Bailey, have graduated from college and work in agriculture is in



(Above) Bred sows lounge inside the main barn at Albright Swine Farms.

some part due to their experiences on the show circuit, or family “vacation” as the Albrights dub it. Just like families that have kids on traveling sports team, the Albrights view stock shows as a family activity. It gave their kids an opportunity to meet other livestock producers from around the country and develop lasting friendships with quality kids.

“You always knew where your kids were and who they were hanging out with at livestock shows,” Pat Albright commented.

He went on to talk about how important it is for kids to experience different types of shows in different regions, to really go beyond the county fair, and ultimately make more opportunity out of their livestock projects. The Albrights still continue that tradition, even though their kids are grown, with Colleen’s involvement as a facilitator for the Michigan Swine Youth Challenge, a swine project participation competition, and her role as Vice President of the Branch County Fair Board.

Selling show pigs isn’t the only way that the Albrights interact with the next generation. They also in-



(Above) Pat Albright inspects a piglet in one of their farrowing rooms.

corporate student employment into both their hog roasting business and their production facility. Every year new student employees are brought in to learn about agriculture, pork production and hard work. Some of these students have no agricultural background, but have need for a summer job, while others may already have had an agricultural background. Student employees are just one of the many ways that the Albrights try to incorporate and educate others using their farm.

Another educational endeavor at the Albright farm began six years ago when the Albrights began raising Berkshire Hogs. They are now the largest producers of Berkshire Hogs in Michigan. The Berkshires are sought after for their meat quality. Raising Berkshires has put them in contact with small and first time hog farmers. At first, the Albrights assumed that those buying breeding hogs from them would have a basic grasp of concepts such as farrowing, processing, breeding, and general care. Unfortunately, they quickly realized that with the



(Above) The Albrights can go nowhere without their faithful farm dog, Skeeter.

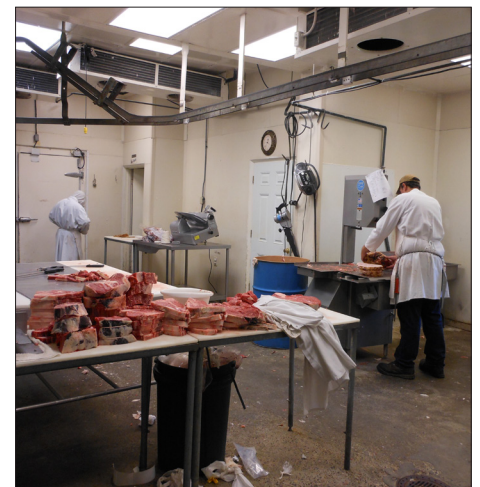
(Below) The Albrights have nine hog roasters that they use for events all over the state.



growing information and popularity of Berkshires on the Internet, many of these people had little to no experience in raising hogs. The Albrights began offering, for a small fee, animal husbandry training. They bring groups of inexperienced hog farmers onto their farm for the day to teach them about moving pigs, animal welfare, injections, processing and the many other aspects of raising pigs. This gives them not only hands-on experience, but a look into what the Albrights call a scaled down version of a commercial operation. These classes also give the new farmers a resource in the Albrights, and it seems to make them more comfortable asking questions in the future. Although bringing in that many people could leave them vulnerable, especially because of biosecurity, it was easy to make the decision to allow people in because they were accustomed to having people on their farm to look at show pigs. Albrights are very proud of their PQA Site Assessed status and the work they have done to ensure a quality environment where they can showcase pork production in a way that would be difficult in a different business model.

Their relationships with niche producers continues because they bring a lot of business into the Albright's processing facility, Countryside Quality Meats in Union City, Michigan. At Countryside, they process cattle, hogs, lamb, goats, and some deer and produce delicious products such as jerky and brats. They also offer a "share of a farm" promotion, where they pair up with a vegetable grower to deliver fresh meat to their customer's doorstep. It allows them another opportunity to interact with niche producers and build those relationships.

With all these business ventures, including their 150 hog roasts per year, one would think that they might be too busy to be involved in different organizations. Remarkably, for the Albrights, being involved in organizations inside and outside of agriculture remains a top priority. Pat has been a member of his community's Rotary Club for over twenty years. He is the only farmer in the club, and finds that agriculture is a frequent topic of



(Above) At Countryside Quality Meats employees process and package meat products for customers.

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discussion.

“If I didn’t go to Rotary who would answer their questions?” Pat says, reflecting back to the many conversations he had with his fellow members during the “Swine Flu,” H1N1, crisis. Not only is it a service to my community, but there is no substitute for the relationships and trust I have built with the people I talk to at my Rotary meetings,” Pat says. “Agriculture is missing a huge opportunity by not being more involved in community organizations outside of agriculture.”

Because the Albrights emphasize being part of organizations outside of agriculture, one could ask why they also work so heavily with agricultural organizations like Michigan Farm Bureau and Michigan Pork Producers Association? They believe that every farmer should be involved in their commodity organizations. In their opinion, it allows you to be a part of changes that affect your livelihood, and Pat comments, “if you are not participating in that change, then you really have no reason to complain about

those changes.” He also appreciates the benefits to his business that come from working with other MPPA Board members. His involvement in MPPA allows him to utilize other producer’s skill sets, network with other producers, and see what they do and apply it to his operation.

“Pat Albright, like every member of the MPPA Board, brings a unique and beneficial perspective to the board,” says Sam Hines MPPA Executive Vice President, “and I think Pat and the other board members enjoy being a part of that interaction.”

When asked what the biggest challenges for today’s pork producers are, Pat mentioned the drought as currently being the big issue, and while it will be difficult to overcome, he believes the pork industry will come through.

Secondly, it was not surprising that the Albrights emphasize education as the key to future success for agriculture. Not just education of consumers, but of fellow commodity producers.

“Welfare issues are huge for producers, but no issue outweighs the



(Above) The Albrights multi-generational farm resides in Coldwater, Michigan.

need to educate fellow farmers. When we divide over issues that we haven’t educated ourselves about, HSUS (Humane Society of the United States) is winning. We need to learn why other industries practice certain ways, and everyone needs to learn from other commodities’ past successes and failures. When that is accomplished, so many other issues will be overcome easily,” Pat says.

The Albrights are passionate about family, community, and agriculture, and have done a wonderful job at finding a way to put all of those passions together to gain a positive reputation and maintain a successful business.



(Above) A crossbred Duroc piglet at the Albright farm.

