

Dennis Wright – Sunflower Oil

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

The Sunflower State. That is a fitting nickname for Kansas, especially when we learn about innovative farm family members in the northwest region of the state who are adding value to their sunflower production. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Dennis Wright and his father Don are the founders of Wright Enterprises and the makers of Wright Farms Sunflower Oil near Bird City. "We are fourth generation farmers here," Dennis said. "My great-grandfather first homesteaded the place," he said.

Dennis grew up on the farm with his parents Don and Donna and went to Fort Hays State where he met Dana. They married and lived in Hays for a few years. "When we had our first child, we decided Bird City would be a good place to raise a kid," Dennis said. They now have three children.

Dennis and Dana moved back to Bird City and joined the family farming operation in 2005. "The only constant in farming is change," Dennis said. The Wrights looked to expand or diversify their operation, which included sunflowers and other crops. "We were asking, how can we make what we raise more valuable?" he said.

Since they produced sunflowers, they researched the possibility of producing sunflower oil and found that most such oil is sold as a refined product. The Wright's focus groups identified consumer interest in health-conscious items. The niche which Wrights pursued was in unrefined sunflower oil.

"Refining uses heat and chemicals to deodorize and treat the oil," Dennis said. "Instead, we use a cold-pressing process with an expeller press that squeezes the oil while keeping all the nutrients and vitamins in it," he said.

They then use a plate filtering system with multiple layers of vegetable cloth to clean the oil further before bottling it. They built a plant in a small building on the original homestead. "Dad is an electrician," Dennis said. "We were able to set up our own automation system where the seeds can feed into the press and stop automatically," he said. "It's farmer ingenuity," he said with a smile.

They call the product Wright Farms Sunflower Oil. The Wrights also joined the From the Land of Kansas program at the Kansas Department of Agriculture. "They've been awesome," Dennis said of the From the Land of Kansas staff.

Today, the Wright's sunflower oil is available for sale online and at approximately 30 independent grocery, gift shop, and museum stores across Kansas. "Unrefined sunflower oil is high in Vitamin E and has a lot of antioxidant properties," Dennis said. "It's a healthy oil in that it has a higher ratio of unsaturated fats to saturated fats," he said. "It has a lower smoke point so it is suited for low and medium heat cooking, rather than deep fat frying," he said. "My cousins say it is perfect for sauteeing. We use it as a marinade too," he said. "It's more like olive oil."

Sunflower oil also has other uses. “I call it the WD-40 of cooking oils,” Dennis said. Because it has high vitamin E, it is good when applied to skin or hair. “I use it to oil chains or moisturize my hands,” Dennis said.

Wright Farms Sunflower Oil has been included in the From the Land of Kansas gift baskets which have gone from coast to coast and beyond. Since their plant was built on the original homestead, their production literally goes from field to finished product on the farm, which is located near the rural community of Bird City, population 447 people. Now, that’s rural.

“We do tastings and bread dippings,” Dennis said. “We’ve been told it cooks just like butter with a nutty taste,” he said. “We also designed a continuous filtration process so it has a nice mild flavor.”

For more information, go to www.wright.farm.

Since Kansas is the Sunflower State, how fitting that a sunflower oil production process would be designed by an innovative Kansas farm family. We commend Don and Donna and Dennis and Dana Wright for making a difference with entrepreneurship and innovation in value-added agriculture. I think this sunflower oil process is in a good state.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.