

Tom Circle - Pecans

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

Pecan groves in Kansas? The idea might seem rather far-fetched. In fact, some would say it sounds nuts. But today we'll learn about a family-owned business in southeast Kansas which is raising and marketing pecans and more. It's today's Kansas Profile.

During the last two weeks, we have learned about local foods in southeast Kansas. A USDA Rural Development grant is supporting K-State's Technology Development Institute in building markets for local foods.

Tom Circle and his family represent another example of a value-added, local foods producer. In this case, the food is pecans.

"We are on the northern edge of the pecan belt," Tom said. He grew up on the family farm here where his parents and grandparents raised traditional row crops. During the farm downturn of the 1980s, his family wanted to diversify.

During the late 1960s, a neighbor of theirs had grown a few pecan trees, but the pecan grove had not been maintained. In 1992, Tom's father bought the property and started to improve it, clearing brush, flagging the trees they wanted and transplanting the trees into rows. Then they began grafting and improving the varieties they wanted. The pecan trees did well.

One natural pest affecting pecans is the pecan weevil. Tom's grandfather designed a weevil trap to monitor and control these pests. That innovative weevil trap is used nationwide today.

"(My dad) started selling a few nuts in an old building at the corner of the highway," Tom said. Their roadside stand was open only in November and December during pecan harvest.

The business continued to grow, and the Circle family remodeled the old building. Tom's father kept thinking of ways to add products and value, and his mother started baking pecan pies, for example. Pecan pie, by the way, is my absolute favorite.

Tom went to college and spent a few years away before he and his wife Barbara came back into the family pecan business. Another building expansion took place in 2011.

Today, Circle's Pecans and Country Store is open year-round. The store offers pecans and much more. There are pecans in the shell, those which are called cracked and blown, and those which are completely shelled as halves and pieces. Then there are pecan pies, fruit pies, cream pies, and homemade ice cream. Did I mention pecan pies?

Circle's Pecans and Country Store includes a full bakery and deli with a daily lunch menu. The food is homemade, using family recipes handed down from Tom's mother and grandmother. The sandwich meats are shaved by hand for deli sandwiches. The store also offers other Kansas products, such as jams, jellies and homemade fudge.

Breakfast is offered on Saturday mornings. On the third Saturday of each month, there is an open mike, bluegrass pickers jam from noon to 4. "We're just

down home folks and we want to welcome everyone,” Tom Circle said. His son helps part-time, making four generations which have been involved with the family business so far. Grandkids are also on the way.

Circle’s Pecans and Country Store is located along Highway 400, making it a convenient stop for tour busses, travelers, and the local regulars. The store is situated between Parsons and Pittsburg, near the rural community of McCune, population 409 people. Now, that’s rural.

The business website reports that interest in pecans is up, due to the nutrient-dense nature of the pecan meats. Pecans are said to be high in fiber, zinc, important vitamins such as E, and other essential minerals that support strong bones and good digestion. Pecans contain superior levels of antioxidant flavonoids and cholesterol-lowering plant sterols, more than any other tree nut. In fact, pecans are the only nut to rank in the top 20 antioxidant-rich foods.

For more information, go to www.kansaspecans.com.

Pecan groves in Kansas. Not only can these be found within our state, this entrepreneurial family is adding value by marketing pecans and related products directly to the consumer. We commend Tom Circle and family for making a difference by creatively marketing this special crop. If you haven’t guessed it by now, I must tell you that I’m nuts for pecan pie.

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