

MN Agriculture: Betsy Jensen Growing Barley, Sugar Beets, Navy Beans, Wheat

Day 21 of my 30 Days of Ag "All Things Minnesota Agriculture" is Betsy Jensen. Betsy lives in Stephen, MN. Betsy and her family operate a crop farm in the far northwest corner of Minnesota. They also own a seed company. Their family farm mostly sells wheat and barley seed, and custom clean wheat and barley seed for area farmers. They also grow sugarbeet, soybean and corn seed.

Did you know the state of Minnesota is number one for sugar beet production? Did you also know that sugar beets are a biennial crop for seed production? That's right. Sugar beets are harvested only once every two years to harvest seeds for future plantings. For sugar production, sugar beets are harvested yearly. Seed production is in the Willamette Valley, Oregon.

In addition to farming, Betsy is also the editor of the [Prairie Grains Magazine](#). I met Betsy through the MARL (Minnesota Ag Rural Leadership) program and once I learned about her farm, I knew immediately I wanted to feature her in my "All Things Minnesota Agriculture" series. As a farmer from southern Minnesota, I knew our farms were different than those in the northern part of the state. And her story just reinforces that. Yes, they do grow some corn and soybeans, but they also grow other crops that are fairly foreign to southern Minnesota farmers.

Social Media Sites:

Website: www.jensenseed.com

Facebook: www.facebook.com/jensenseed

How long have you farmed or been in business?

"My husband Brian and I are the 4th generation on the farm. Jens and Marie started in 1911, followed by Lorna and Alfred in 1945, and John and Jane in 1970. Brian started farming in 1994, and I joined the family in 1997."

Tell me a little about what you grow/raise/produce/or service provided.

"We raise wheat, barley, soybeans, edible beans (mostly navies), sugarbeets and occasionally corn."

Where do you sell or provide services to? Who is your end consumer?

"Most spring wheat is exported. Minnesota produces high quality bread wheat, and Asian countries are a top destination for it. That loaf of bread in your cupboard also probably contains Minnesota spring wheat. If it's not Minnesota wheat, then it came from North Dakota.

Our navy beans are sold to a Canadian company, Thompsons Limited. You may find them on your grocer's shelf in bulk. If you're ever in England, buy some canned Heinz baked beans with tomato sauce for your toast for breakfast. (yes, that's a common breakfast) Those beans may be from our farm. I also make a mean ham and bean soup. If you're planning to stop by, let me know and I'll make a batch.

Our barley is contracted to Anheuser Busch and is eventually beer. YOU'RE WELCOME!

Our sugarbeets are processed by the cooperative American Crystal Sugar. We're members of the co-op, and there are 5 processing plants in the Red River Valley. Even if the sugar in your cupboard is a store brand, it may still be Crystal Sugar. It is also sold in bulk for your cereal, candy bars, and cake mixes.

About half of our soybeans are seed production, and the other half are sent to local elevators. We have no soybean processing facilities in our area, so I would guess the soybeans end up being exported."

The Red River Valley is flat, flat, flat, but you would be surprised at how much variation there is per field. There are still plenty of ridges, depressions, and ditches in each field. Water control is a huge issue in our area. You may not notice it while driving, but from an aerial view, it's amazing how much land is not productive because of standing water. I believe learning better methods to control water will have a huge impact on our production growth. We have installed drain tile on a few fields, but it is still quite rare in the Red River Valley."

What do you wish consumers knew?

"I wish consumers would understand how much unique care each crop requires; different soil types are better for different crops, different fertilization rates and nutrient requirements, seed, disease, equipment, it is chaos. Take for example wheat and barley. Most consumers would not be able to tell a wheat field from a barley field. They look alike at first glance. But in barley, you get a premium for LOWER protein. In wheat, you get a premium for HIGH protein. So your fertilization goals are different. Diseases are also quite different. Barley also requires swathing prior to harvest, where most wheat is straight cut with the combine.

Navy beans and soybeans also look alike in the field, but navy beans are high maintenance.

Harvest is a 3 step process: Knife the beans, windrow the beans, and finally harvest with a special navy bean combine. Then the navy beans require bean ladders in the bins so they don't split when you fill the bin. Instead they fall short distances down the ladder as you fill the bin. Soybeans are a lot easier to raise, but profitability for navy beans is usually better (not always).

Think of the crops are your children. Child 1 has football after school, band on Tuesdays and refuses to eat anything but macaroni and cheese. Child 2 has ballet on Tuesday nights and violin on Thursdays, and also has an art project half finished on the kitchen table. Child 3 plays soccer on the weekends and has a peanut allergy. Each child is unique, and has different care requirements. The crops are our children, with their own needs. Farmers are always continuing their education through extension seminars and field days, always learning how to be better "parents" for our crops. Every year we tweak something, based on the newest research.

I wish every night for GM wheat. Right now, we have Lr21, a gene resistant to leaf rust. Unfortunately, new strains of leaf disease are beginning to out smart Lr21, and it's the only tool in our tool box. If a wheat variety has resistance to leaf disease, it has the Lr21 gene. If we can't find a new gene, we will have to begin spraying fungicide on the wheat almost immediately after emergence. Conventional breeding will likely take too long, so I hope we can isolate a resistance gene, and get new and better varieties sooner than later. No one wants Roundup Ready wheat, but disease is a huge issue for wheat growers, and if we can just find a gene that will allow us to spray fewer chemicals, farmers would rapidly adopt that technology. (I'd also like to add bacterial streak, fusarium head blight, tan spot, stripe rust, stem rust to my list of things to solve with GM wheat).

Finally, I wish everyone would add "Sugarbeet truck driver" to their bucket list, right next to "See the Grand Canyon" and "Visit Mardi Gras." Sugarbeet harvest is crazy, and we are always short of help. It is certainly a unique experience, and if you can drive a truck, we can find you a job. Even if you can't drive a truck, American Crystal Sugar is always looking for help in the labs and piling stations during harvest. Many of the season workers have been retirees who are looking to make a few thousand dollars before heading south for the winter. If you have an RV, park it in any campground in the valley, meet other seasonal workers, and make some vacation money! Adding "sugarbeet worker" to your bucket list could give you enough money to cross off that trip to Paris that is also on the list."