

## **MN Agriculture: Sarah and Dan Brouwer, "The Strawberry Express"**

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Day 7 of my "30 Days of MN Agriculture" is Sarah and Dan Brouwer, owners and operators of the Strawberry Express - a strawberry farm in Raymond, MN. Raymond is located southwest of Willmar, MN. Sarah and Dan have been in the strawberry business for about 15 years.

First, I will say I love strawberries! Every summer I venture to a U-pick strawberry farm about 45 minutes from where I live. I pick my own strawberries and freeze them. I absolutely love to freeze and can fresh produce. After reading about Sarah's strawberries and looking at the pictures, I think I will be making a trip to Raymond. Enjoy her story!

#### **Social Media Sites:**

- Facebook: [BrouwerBerries](#)
- Website: [BrouwerBerries](#)
- Blog: [BrouwerBerries](#)

Sarah's format for this blog will be a little different. She wrote an article that really answers many of the standard questions. With her permission, I am reprinting the article. At the end of the article, she does answer a couple other questions.

#### **All Aboard the Strawberry Express**

“See this berry?” I ask a group of eager young children crouched down on clean straw, in the middle of rows of strawberry plants laden with red fruit. “The strawberry is like a bottle of pop; all the sweetness is locked up inside. Pick it gently, and keep the green lid on top, or the fizz will start bubbling out, just like a pop bottle. When you are ready to taste it, twist off the green top, and pop it into your mouth – a juicy, sweet strawberry!”

Fifteen years ago, my husband casually mentioned to me that he’d bought a few strawberry plants.

“How many?” I asked, somewhat distractedly.

“Fifteen hundred,” he replied. At this point, my eyes jerked open, and I started spluttering. “What on earth for?” He explained that he and his mom were going to start a strawberry U-picking farm, but he was sure it wouldn’t affect me in any way.

### U-Picking

Since that time, a wonderful mix of people of all ages have come strawberry picking at our farm, Brouwer Berries, just eleven miles west of Willmar. Today, we have fifty thousand plants. Everyone who comes eagerly joins in the harvest experience. A field-fresh strawberry tastes fantastic!

More and more, parents want their children to participate in the farm-to-table experience, and there's no better lesson than harvesting your own food.

But beyond that, picking your own fruit is tons of *fun*, and makes for a great day trip. Everyone enjoys riding the Strawberry Express to and from the field, and parents love to wander around the gardens, or enjoy some time in the shade, while the kids run around looking at the farm critters.

There are plenty of farm critters lurking. Banty hens, ducks, kittens, turkeys, bunnies, and some Hereford cow/calf pairs give everyone a chance to see and smell life on a Minnesota family farm. Once, a curious customer asked, “Why aren’t the chickens penned up?” She was shocked to find out that ‘free-range’ means the critters actually get to range freely!

### Pre-Picked

Not everyone has the time or health to U-pick, which is good news for the local teenage population. Last summer, we hired twenty wonderful teens. Pre-picked strawberries literally flew off the shelves as orders came in via telephone, e-mail and Facebook.

Strawberries are a finicky crop, and we've done a lot of experimenting to figure out what varieties will grow well in our heavy, alkaline soil. Harsh winters, late frosts, powerful winds and heavy rain all threaten our berries, but that only makes the rewards of a ripe basket even sweeter.

**What makes your farm/business unique or special? What are you proud of?**

"We are one of very few strawberry farms between the Twin Cities and the Rocky Mountains, due to increasingly challenging soil and climate as you head west. This is one reason why people, particularly from western MN, are willing to drive many hours to pick strawberries at our farm."

**What is one thing you wish consumers knew about what you do or your farm/business?**

We may only look busy 3 weeks of the year, but we are always farming. We often say, "I wish we could bill all the hours we spend thinking about strawberries!"

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Read the other people featured in my ["30 Days of MN Ag."](#)

There are others that are also participating in the 30 Days of Blogging Challenge. Feel free to check these out:

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- [Janice Person aka JP Loves Cotton: A Month of Memories](#)
- [Rural Route 2 – 30 Days of Farm Girl Faith](#)
- [Prairie Californian – 30 Days of Food](#)
- [Mackinson Dairy – Women in Dairy](#)