

People & Places

# Meat plant owner leads with automation

By SIERRA DAWN MCCLAIN  
Capital Press

CANBY, Ore. — Since purchasing a small meat plant in 2017, Ben Meyer, 44, has quadrupled the facility’s production volume, improved humane livestock handling and saved on labor expenses.

His secret? Technology. Rebecca Thistlethwaite, director of the Niche Meat Processor Assistance Network, said Meyer’s plant has automated in ways that are “innovative and important.”

Small processors often operate with little high-efficiency technology or automation. It doesn’t help, Thistlethwaite said, that only a few manufacturers — including UltraSource LLC, Bunzl and Reiser — offer equipment tailored to small meat plants.

But Meyer hasn’t let those obstacles stop him from automating.

His foray into meat processing began in the restaurant industry as a chef and entrepreneur.

Several years ago, while working in Portland’s Old Salt Marketplace, a restaurant, butcher shop and deli, Meyer noticed that small, independent meat shops were losing capacity, dropping federal inspection status or closing. He wondered if he could do something about it.

Along came a chef friend, James “Jimmy” Serlin, who told Meyer about a meat plant in Canby whose owners wanted to retire.

The plant, Marks Meat Inc., had been built in 1963. Its equipment was “really archaic,” said Thistlethwaite — but it was a place to start.

Meyer and Serlin volunteered at the plant to learn the ropes, then bought the facil-



Sierra Dawn McClain/Capital Press

An employee at Marks Meat Inc. in Canby, Ore., uses a saw blade to slice meat.

ity in 2017. They kept the original name, Marks Meat, for the building, and added a brand name: Revel Meat Co.

Today, under USDA inspection, the company also slaughters for up to 60 local ranches annually.

When Meyer bought the facility, he said, it processed five to eight beef cattle and 30 to 35 sheep weekly. Since making upgrades, Meyer’s team has boosted weekly production to 20 to 24 cattle, 40 to 48 pigs and 40 to 70 sheep.

The first efficiency-boosting installation was a \$105,000 rollstock packaging machine manufactured by UltraSource. Previously, each piece of meat had to be individually vacuum-sealed. The rollstock machine, working at 16 times the speed of the previous machine, can automatically package several pieces at once.

“It’s cleaner-looking, more efficient,” said Meyer.

The second investment was in two scales with built-in label-makers, for \$14,000 and \$19,000.

Additionally, the company invested in a more efficient saw.

The plant also spent \$52,000 on an Ultra-Source hog scalding and de-hairer. The old device could handle one pig every 10 to 12 minutes. The new machine handles one every 3.5 minutes.

Meyer said his most important innovation has been in humane livestock handling.

Before an animal is slaughtered, it must be stunned with a “knocking device” such as a hand-held captive bolt gun.

According to USDA’s Food Safety and Inspection Service, one of the most common enforcement actions against meat plants is ineffective restraint or stunning of livestock — meaning an animal isn’t knocked



Sierra Dawn McClain/Capital Press

Ben Meyer, owner and chief operations officer of Marks Meat Inc. and Revel Meat Co.

out on the first attempt.

Small meat plants often are temporarily or permanently shut down due to failed knocks, and Meyer’s is no exception. In 2017, he had a “mis-knock” resulting in a seven-week shutdown.

To prevent future mis-knocks, he installed a \$10,000 hydraulic cattle headgate, smaller head-

**Western Innovator**

**BEN MEYER**

**Age:** 44  
**Hometown:** Fort Wayne, Indiana  
**Occupation:** owner and chief operations officer of Marks Meat Inc. and Revel Meat Co.  
**Family:** Windsor Meyer, wife, and Wendell Myer, 9-year-old son

**CONNECT WITH BEN MEYER**

Meyer encourages other small meat plant owners to reach out to him at [ben@revelmeatco.com](mailto:ben@revelmeatco.com) if they would like advice or want to share ideas to improve the overall industry.



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to set the record straight.

# Unique farm grows food, community

By ALIYA HALL  
For the Capital Press

OREGON CITY — Gabriella Tordova always wanted to live on the land. She said she has a journal entry from 30 years ago in which she said her dream was to have land where she could grow her own food.

“This was a dream I always had,” she said.

Tordova owns Three Goats Farm in Oregon City that has an acre for farming, 64 fruit trees and 35 acres of forest. She is joined by farmers Levi Barbary, Nicholas Gonzales and Sasha Langesfeld.

The farm practices regenerative agriculture and puts an emphasis on building community. The farm is set up for people who want to join as full-time residents, but it also offers the option for people to be involved in the farm and community without having to live there.

They raise ducks, chickens, pigs and geese as well as grow a variety of produce.

“It kind of happened starting with us wanting to take care of ourselves and then helping other people through selling to friends,” Tordova said.

Three Goats Farm is in its fifth year and sells its products through community supported agriculture — known as a CSA — and farmers markets. They also offer market shares,



Aliya Hall/For the Capital Press

From left, Nicholas Gonzales, Sasha Langesfeld, Levi Barbary and Gabriella Tordova are the farmers of Three Goats Farm in Oregon City. They have created a multi-generational living situation that focuses on building community.

pork shares and a ferment club.

“We’re pretty much doing everything,” Barbary said. “(Customers) have been really into it and I think they appreciate the single source for things.”

He added that on the last day of the farmers market someone bought a jar of sauerkraut and called them to say that he “had to be on our CSA,” he said.

Building their soil is a crucial part of their farming practices, Barbary said.

They utilize insect netting, stale

seed beds, crop rotation, drip irrigation and variety selection to minimize weeds, insects and fungus as well as maximize their production. Stale seed beds is a technique in which weed seeds are allowed to germinate and then are killed before the crop is planted.

One of the big goals for the future is to continue building the community through farming. Tordova said there is a community farming program near Vancouver, B.C., in which people from the city participate on the farm on weekends.

“We just hope to attract more people to join us,” she said, adding that they’ve been doing it informally with friends and other volunteers. “But we want to make it more formalized ... and be a bridge between people in the city so they can have more experience of where their food comes from.”

Tordova said when she bought the property the plan was to create a multi-generational living situation. As more families have joined the farm, they bought the house neighboring the property.

One of the challenges the farm faces is limited water rights, but Tordova said in the future they might acquire an adjacent piece of land that has more water rights. Their property also allows room for expansion in the forest.

“There’s all kinds of possibilities, like mushroom farming and more grazing, because that’s not water dependent,” she said.

Although the farm didn’t face much impact from the COVID pandemic, Tordova said she hopes that it proves that “this way of life is resilient and will be a good option for people....”

“Hard work isn’t what is harmful for people,” she said. “It’s work that has no meaning or work where people don’t feel empowered or autonomous. That’s the reward here, getting to explore new things all the time.”

## CALENDAR

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swaps, networking, and farm tours.  
Website: <https://seedalliance.org/>

**FRIDAY- WEDNESDAY  
JAN. 7-12**

**American Farm Bureau Convention:** Georgia World Congress Center, 285 Andrew Young International Blvd., Atlanta, Ga. This is an opportunity to help set the agenda for the leading voice of agriculture in Washington, D.C., and much more. Participate in educational workshops to advance your leadership skills, expand your business acumen and gain insight into the trends and realities impacting food production. Website: <https://www.fb.org/events/afbf-convention/>

**WEDNESDAY-  
FRIDAY  
JAN. 12-14**

**Northwest Agricultural Show:** Oregon State Fair and Exposition Center, 2330 17th St. NE, Salem. Join us at the fairgrounds for a good ol’ fashioned farm show. We’ll also have a full slate of exhibitors,

presentations, seminars and events.  
Website: <https://northwestagshow.com/>

**SUNDAY-TUESDAY  
JAN. 16-18**

**NFU Women’s Conference:** Holiday Inn and Suites Nashville Downtown Convention Center. Topics will include business management, leadership, community building and more. Website: <https://nfu.org/womensconference/>

**TUESDAY-  
WEDNESDAY  
JAN. 18-19**

**The VISION Conference 2022:** Renaissance Phoenix Glendale Hotel and Spa, Glendale, Ariz. The conference engages leaders throughout agricultural technology to address the dynamic recent advances in technology, systems and platforms enabling interconnected solutions from farm to retail. Website: <http://www.thevisionconference.com>

**WEDNESDAY-THURSDAY  
JAN. 19-20**

**2022 Northwest Hay Expo:** Three Rivers Convention Center, Kennewick, Wash. Sponsored by the Washington State Hay Growers Association, this is a one-stop information center for all things hay. Website: [www.wa-hay.org](http://www.wa-hay.org)

**SUNDAY-WEDNESDAY  
JAN. 23-26**

**Dairy Forum 2022:** J.W. Marriott Desert Springs Resort & Spa, Palm Desert, Calif. Presented by International Dairy Foods Association, the forum will feature what’s new, now and next for dairy foods. Website: [www.idfa.org](http://www.idfa.org)

**TUESDAY-THURSDAY  
FEB. 1-3**

**Cattle Industry Convention & NCBA Trade Show:** George R. Brown Convention Center, Houston, Texas. The convention will include industry speakers and educational events. Website: <http://www.ncba.org>

**TUESDAY-THURSDAY  
FEB. 8-10**

**World Ag Expo:** 9 a.m. International Agri-Center, 4500 S. Laspina St., Tulare, Calif. One of the world’s largest ag shows returns this year to Tulare, Calif. With hundreds of exhibitors, presentations, seminars and other events, the World Ag Expo attracts attendees from around the nation — and the world. Website: <http://www.WorldAgExpo.org>

**WEDNESDAY-SATURDAY  
FEB. 9-12**

**Organic Seed Growers Conference:** Oregon State University Campus. The Organic Seed Growers Conference is the largest event focused solely on organic seed in North America, bringing together hundreds of farmers, plant breeders, researchers, certifiers, food companies, seed companies, and others from across the U.S. and around the world. Farm tours and short courses are held prior to the full two-day conference. Website: <https://seedalliance.org/>