

# Deerly beloved

By MELISSA HEMKEN

**H**ENRY Ahern is well-practiced in his "tour talk." He regularly gives tours of his Bonnie Brae Farms at Plymouth, N.H., for chefs, schools, farmers, politicians and anyone in between.

Why the fuss? Henry raises 300 head of red deer, an animal gaining in popularity for its healthy venison. And that's what brought last fall's attendees to New Hampshire's Small and Beginner Farmers' Conference to his farm.

About 14 years ago, Henry and brother Bruce also were investigating endeavors to bring their third-generation farm back to life. Options included aquaculture, ostriches and llamas. Red deer were nowhere on the radar screen.

"We were attending the New Hampshire Farm and Forest Expo in February 1993 for a fish farming seminar," recalls Henry. "We discovered a session on deer farming, and it changed our whole plan."

In 1994, Bonnie Brae Farms became a reality with the arrival of 27 red deer. Today, the brothers raise the animals on about 70 acres.

Take a walk through the farm with Henry, and he'll be quick to point out Molly, the last of their New Zealand stock. "People ask how long red deer will live and still have a healthy calf," he says. "I used to tell them about 16 years. Now I just say, 'Molly is 23 years old, and had a baby this past spring.'"

## Tourism on track

The Hobo Railroad's and Winnepesaukee Scenic Railroad's tour trains run the track that splits Bonnie Brae Farms in half. "We've actually found a good use for the trains that sort of offsets the nuisance," Henry notes.

A deal was worked out with the railroads to make the farm an official stop. "We'll hop on and talk about the benefits of eating venison and sell some of our meat products."

Out of the 26 deer and elk farms in New Hampshire, Bonnie Brae Farms is the largest, the second oldest and also does the most publicity. The Aherns market venison to five restaurants, local farmers markets, through mail order and at the farm.



**SWEET BIZ:** Henry Ahern and brother built state's largest red deer enterprise.

## Key Points

- Bonnie Brae Farms started 14 years ago with 27 red deer.
- Today, the Aherns harvest about 100 deer a year, plus antlers.
- They direct-market to chefs and via farmers markets and the Web.

## EQIP'ed with fencing

Fencing is the biggest single cost for starting to raise red deer. The Aherns are currently cost-sharing some of it via the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service through the Environmental Quality Incentive Program.

The funds are being used to construct a fence around a new pasture that abuts a wetland.

September 2007 also saw the completion of an EQIP Heavy Use Area Protection contract to improve the railroad crossing and manage the runoff water from the farm and pastures on both sides of the tracks. Now, the Aherns don't have to shovel a layer of gravel and dirt off of the tracks after rainstorms.

Bonnie Brae Farms harvests roughly a 100 animals a year in Windham, Maine.

Females can be used for meat from 2 to 10 years in age and males from 18 months to 36 months.

## The harvest comes in

The Aherns normally market stags between 26 to 30 months of age, allowing antler harvest in the "velvet" stage. With 55 to 65 days of growth, antlers are encased in soft, fuzzy hair (velvet), marketed as Velvet Antler, which is used as a nutritional supplement. It's touted for anti-inflammatory properties, and to help increase energy and stamina. Antlers are ground into meal and packaged in capsule form in Maine.

"The stags do have nerves in their antlers when we harvest velvet," Henry explains. "So we use a local anesthetic when we cut them off."

"Taking their antlers early before they drop them in the fall doesn't harm them. All the stags grow them for is to impress the 'women.'"

To learn more about Bonnie Brae Farms and raising red deer, visit [www.bonniebraefarms.com](http://www.bonniebraefarms.com) or call 603-536-3880.

Hemken is an intern for USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service in New Hampshire.

## Northeast News & Notes

### Food trends worth watching

As food producers in the Northeast, many farmers have a keen monetary interest in what consumers are buying. Take a peek at these "top 10 food trends" cited in *Food Technology*, a publication produced for the Institute of Food Technologists:

■ **More dining in.** Economic pressures are causing more Americans to eat and cook more dishes at home.

■ **"Good food" talk.** Word-of-mouth is becoming a key factor in new food-product success, particularly among chefs.

■ **Functional form.** Reducing food preparation steps is a surefire way to boost sales.

■ **Sensory appeal.** The trend is toward texture (fiber), crispness (freshness) and crunch.

■ **Kidding around.** Children populations are on the rise, and baby foods are taking on gourmet cache'.

■ **Doing without.** Selecting products without undesirable ingredients is accelerating.

■ **Local motion.** While fresh is most desired, local, seasonal, handmade, natural and the like are rising preferences.

■ **Seriously healthy.** Reducing risk of developing health conditions has rising influence on food buying.

■ **"Next-gen" beverages.** Drinks targeted to younger generations set the pace in sales and innovation.

■ **Snackin' and sharin'.** Light meals and after-school socializing make snacks and minimeals "hot" market opportunities.

### Need a 'Guide to Farming'?

Do you need a permit to a new enterprise? How should you structure your business?

These questions, and a slew of others, are being posed by an increasing number of rural landowners who are exploring how to use their land for economic return. They're also the genesis behind a new guide published by Cornell Cooperative Extension and Cornell's Small Farms Program. It's titled "Guide to Farming in NYS: What Every Ag Entrepreneur Needs to Know."

Copies are available through Cornell Cooperative Extension county offices. You can download it for free at [www.smallfarms.cornell.edu](http://www.smallfarms.cornell.edu). Click on "Guide to Farming in NY" under "Quick links" on the home page.



## Nominate your candidates now for Mid-Atlantic Master Farmers

**W**INNERS of the 2008 Mid-Atlantic Master Farmer Award will be announced in the next issue. But now's the time to nominate your candidate(s) for the 2009 honor.

If you know a farmer who is a community leader, a savvy business person and a true role model for agriculture, be sure that person is nominated. Nominate individuals, couples or siblings. Businesses are not eligible.

Since 1927, the Master Farmer Award has recognized exemplary farmers from Delaware, Maryland, New

Jersey, Pennsylvania and West Virginia. This prestigious lifetime achievement award is co-sponsored by *American Agriculturist* and Cooperative Extension in the above-noted states.

### Who's eligible

Size of the farming operation isn't a deciding factor. What really matters is that the farming businesses have demonstrated growth and superb management over the candidate's career. Candidates must also demonstrate leadership in agricultural and civic organizations.

My 2009 Master Farmer nominee is ...

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Mailing address \_\_\_\_\_

Town \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP \_\_\_\_\_

Nominator's name \_\_\_\_\_

You may nominate one or more persons by sending the requested information from the accompanying coupon to: Mid-Atlantic Master Farmer Program, in care of *American Agriculturist*, 5227B

Baltimore Pike, Littlestown, PA 17340. Or fax it to 717-359-0250. Or e-mail your nomination to: [jvogel@farmprogress.com](mailto:jvogel@farmprogress.com). Please be sure the mailing address is current and complete.