



PRODUCER PROFILES: Gilda & Dan Gieske

By Tim King

Whole Farm Cooperative Correspondent

SAUK CENTRE - Gilda and Dan Gieske take pride and pleasure in eating what they raise. When we visited with them, Gilda had prepared a delicious soup from eggplant, zucchini, onions, garlic, and mushrooms. Everything except the mushrooms came from their large garden. Also on the table that evening was a sampling of the wide variety of fresh and colorful tomatoes that Gilda loves to grow. We were especially taken by the sweetness of Pink Beauty. Some of the other varieties included Opalka, Sara Black, and Blush. Blush is a yellow roma-like tomato with a few light streaks of pink.

The meal was topped off by Gilda's homemade bread sticks and a lime green melon, brought by guests, called Passport. The Gieske garden does not include any cantaloupe this year but it does



Gilda & Dan Gieske in their garden.
Photo by Jan King.

include watermelon varieties such as Blacktail Mountain, Cream of Saskatchewan, Pony Yellow, and the early ripening Russian heirloom watermelon Katanya.

Eating well from the garden and fields is routine for Gilda and Dan. They raise a wide variety of fruits and vegetables as well as Icelandic sheep. They also have a flock of Rhode Island Red hens who provide them with plenty of eggs. The lamb, vegetables, and eggs are also available to customers of Whole Farm Cooperative.

Gilda, who originates from Cincinnati, Ohio, was one of the co-founders of Whole Farm Cooperative in the late 1990s. She and Dan came to their farm, just off U.S. Highway 71 between Long Prairie and Sauk Centre, via the Twin Cities. For Dan it was an opportunity to return to his extended family and to the rolling hills of southern Todd County, where he grew up. For Gilda, moving out of an urban area was an opportunity for her and her children to become part of an extended family.

"We moved here twenty-one years ago," Gilda said. "In Cincinnati our family was small. I wanted my children to be part of a large and welcoming family."

The Gieske family embraced the children and in turn the children embraced the rural life. Although they have grown and moved on, their 4-H prize ribbons still hang in the Gieske home.

The Gieskes got into commercial gardening by accident. Dan unwittingly planted too many

cucumbers and Gilda had to figure out what to do with them. She sold some and has never turned back. She began selling vegetables to neighbors, at farmers markets, and Whole Farm Cooperative. Then she started raising poultry.

“Dan’s folks had a chicken coop and we eventually inherited it,” Gilda said. “We moved it over here. At first we just supplied the family with eggs.”

One thing led to another and, during the early years of Whole Farm Cooperative, Gilda was known as the Poultry Princess.

“I candled thousands of eggs,” she said. “Now the coop members are responsible for candling their own eggs.”



Fourth of July variety of tomatoes. Photo by Jan King.

Gilda and Dan started their egg career with Leghorns. They lay white eggs and are very excitable, according to Dan. After getting out of Leghorns they’ve had what are known as the “heavy breeds” such as Barred Rocks and the current Rhode Island Reds. Those breeds lay brown eggs and are a bit more placid. But, unable to resist a bit of variety, the Gieskes have often had a few Araucana hens and roosters. Araucana lay blue-green eggs.



The Honeymoon Suite. Photo by Jan King.

“The honeymoon suite was originally for the Araucana,” Gilda said. “We wanted to get some fertile Araucana eggs so we built it and put some hens and a rooster in it.”

Gilda and Dan say the failure to hatch any Araucana eggs was a management fault and not the rooster’s fault.

Gieske’s Araucanas are colorful and showy birds. Their Icelandic sheep are beautiful, too. Their thick fleeces range from midnight black to rich coffee brown to the color of clouds. Both the rams and the ewes have horns. Gilda and Dan sell the spring lambs to Whole Farm Cooperative. They also have a few beautiful lambskins, with long richly colored fleeces, for sale.

The Gieske farm is full of variety in all shapes and colors. Both Dan and Gilda see their farm as a place not only to feed themselves and their customers but as a place for their creativity and experimentation. Dan, for instance, has been experimenting with planting native prairie grasses. Both he and Gilda have been working on a project to increase seed for Mandan Red corn. Dan has discovered that this ancient corn variety, when fed to chickens in the winter, will give their eggs the nice dark color they have in the summer.