

Marketing/Management

Pickled asparagus tickles taste buds

By ANN TONER

NEAL Ely is one son of the prairie who plans to stay close to his roots. When he gets his agribusiness degree from the University of Nebraska in December, he'll head home to Grafton — home to the farm where he grew up, home to a job in ag lending at a local bank and home to the small food business, Ely Farms Pickled Asparagus, that began as an FFA project.

That business canned 9,500 16-ounce jars of pickled asparagus last summer. His product is sold locally, in gourmet shops and specialty grocery stores, and over the Internet at www.elyfarms.com.

"I want to continue to have my business on the side," says Neal. But he doesn't plan to be a full-time asparagus farmer, either.

Now that Neal is coming back to the area, he's exploring the possibility of adding other pickled items to his product list, beginning with colorful pickled peppers in 2008.

Business roots

Neal says he began what would become his business in the eighth grade. Looking

At a glance

- Neal Ely began planting asparagus as an FFA project.
- Making pickled asparagus gave him a year-round market.
- Ely plans to increase his product line and stretch use of the kitchen.

ahead to a future FFA project, after consulting with his FFA adviser and his parents, Michael and Tami Ely, he decided to plant 1,500 asparagus roots.

It takes two years for asparagus plants to establish themselves well enough to harvest even a little of their production, and by then, he reasoned, he would be in high school and could sell asparagus as a money-making project.

By the time his asparagus spears were ready to harvest, Neal had a further plan: pickled asparagus. The pickled product would stretch the marketing season, and he would be less dependent on the local produce market.

He converted a small building into a commercial kitchen, came up with a product label and began pickling asparagus.

As the business grew, Neal turned



ROAD SHOW: Neal Ely goes on the road to special events to promote his pickled asparagus. He is shown at the Fruit and Nut Jam in Nebraska City.

the fresh asparagus portion over to his younger brother, Reid Ely, for his FFA project and concentrated on the pickling business. The asparagus patch grew to about 4 acres.

Employs local people

In addition to the asparagus his brother raises, Neal buys asparagus from California and other places where it is commercially grown. It takes about a pound of asparagus to produce enough of the tall, straight, slender spears he needs for the special jars. Ten people work part time making the pickled asparagus.

Neal earned the National FFA's Star in Agribusiness award in 2006 and is often asked to speak about entrepreneurship.

But Neal says he wasn't what anyone would call a natural-born entrepreneur. "I was the kind of kid Mom and Dad had to push to try anything new. But once I got involved, I would run with it. And I saw the potential of the pickled asparagus."

Neal doesn't plan to raise corn and soybeans like his parents. But he says he'll help out as needed, especially if younger brother Reid, now at UNL, decides to join the family farm.

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