

Successful businesses must change to keep up; with the times; Grande Natural Meats of Del Norte may have undergone more change than most. Rich and Jan Forrest have adapted to keep their business thriving.

In 1997, they bought a ranch, moved to the Valley and began preparing to raise elk—tearing down vestiges of an old cattle ranch and rebuilding anew. Over the next three years, they achieved their goal of developing a herd of fine elk breeding stock, selling elk velvet for medicinal purposes and establishing an elk boarding facility. However, in late 2001, the landscape for elk ranching changed. With his engagingly dry sense of humor, Rich said, “Our plan went down the tubes.”

What happened was drastic and sad. On September 11, 2001, the Colorado State Veterinarian arrived at the ranch and quarantined all the animals due to a diagnosed case of rare Chronic Wasting Disease in a purchased elk. The state required euthanasia of all 200-plus resident elk. To make matters worse, as the bureaucracy slowly churned, Jan and Rich had to feed and care for the animals for eight months, keeping up with all of their expenses with virtually no income. Times were tough financially and emotionally.

Not only did this couple survive, they thrived in the face of adversity. Today, Grande Natural Meats is the largest retailer of elk meat in the U.S. This is their story.

URGEDC: *Our introduction encapsulates your first few years. How did you transition from elk ranch to meat retailer?*

Rich: More adversity. In mid-June, 1998, a 1-inch hail storm hit our ranch, destroying our entire alfalfa crop. We had lots of animals but no feed. Jan came up with the idea of selling elk meat right from the ranch. Prior to the late 90s, there was but a small domestic market for venison and elk. Probably 95 percent of the elk and venison sold was imported from New Zealand. There was no domestic industry.

Fortunately, we had our fledgling elk meat business prior to the events of 2001. But, it was the adversity of loosing all of our animals (none went to meat) that got us thinking about expanding this small aspect of the business. In 2002, still under our ranch quarantine, we started growing the elk meat business, this time using other farmer’s animals.

URGEDC: *How many locations have you had and how many employees?*

Jan: We’ve always been at this location. When we started, it was just Rich and I. Now, we have 11 employees—7 full-time, a few part-time, plus Rich and I as owner/operators.

URGEDC: *What are your primary products?*

Rich: Our primary focus is USDA-inspected meat from elk, buffalo, goats, three kinds of deer and seafood. The deer species include red deer, white-tail, and, if I can get them,



fallow deer. All the animals are raised domestically using all-natural feed products. No other company offers elk or deer venison like this on a national scale. Buffalo is our second largest category with deer products catching up.

Additionally, we are seeing a huge surge in our pet food lines. We carry antler and smoked bones for dogs in a variety of sizes and shapes, organ meat for pet snacks and treats, as well as pet supplements. We also have an elk velvet antler supplement available for both humans and pets; works wonders on arthritic aches and pains.

URGEDC: *What geographic area do you serve?*

Rich: The Internet provides our primary national market. We sell only within the U.S. because of difficult regulations governing the export of elk meat and meat products. You can find us at ElkUSA.com. Additionally, we have a few local business customers like the Valley Food Co-op, Kip’s Grill and the South Fork Malt Shop. Lots of tourists who are heading east or west on U.S. Highway 160 stop in. Primarily, we sell online.

Jan: We also wholesale to scores of retail natural grocery stores. I spent months going door to door to find stores to carry our products. I hit every health food and small grocery store within a 600-mile radius. The biggest obstacle was that most people have never eaten elk and most stores have never carried venison. Stores weren’t sure if they had a market for our products. We got a few brave souls and then more and more stores added on. Now, our products are sold from St. Louis to LA.

URGEDC: *How do you reach your retail customers?*

Rich: I studied Yahoo and Google searches and ad words. Once you can make Google work for you—then



Yahoo, MSN and other search engines fall in line. We rise to the top five for searches related to elk meat products. I know where we need to be for a steady flow of orders.

Jan: We also did a lot of work here at the ranch making it a tourist stop. We remodeled the original homestead cabin and turned it into a gift store where we sell a variety of items including all of our meat and dog products. Other buildings have been modified into a pseudo-1880's look.

URGEDC: *How did you find your niche?*

Rich: Our business continually changes; although, maybe not as drastically as it did at first. You always have to be ready for the next challenge. When we blindly started the Internet site, we had problems running an Internet business from a ranch which, unlike town, doesn't have fast, reliable Internet connections. Because of our remote location, we developed a system using dumb terminals to accept orders as an offshoot to our then-current business. Now, we are working with an Arizona IT guy to build a software/hardware business that enables communications from remote areas, Omnibus, but that is another story. Omnibus eliminates bottlenecks by using dumb terminals between the rural locations, the central server and the "cloud." We minimize data transmission and maximize speed.

Jan: In addition to the meat business, we have a thriving antler business, Grande Natural Antler, that also derived from the original elk business. We started it in 2005, selling sliced and diced hard antler to a few dog stores and individuals for their pets.

Rich: Within three or four years, this sideline went viral, going from two or three of us selling antler chews online to hundreds. Our customer base grew too. We had about 40 or 50 percent market share for antler chews 5 years ago. Now we have, say, 5 percent. The entire market for antler has changed. Dog chews are the largest end use of hard antler in the U.S., finally surpassing export to Asia.

Jan: You have to be flexible and look for opportunities.

URGEDC: *What advantages and challenges does the San Luis Valley offer? Describe benefits, opportunities, weaknesses and any other relevant issues.*

Rich: Our rural location has posed some challenges. For example, we have a main Internet connection, wireless broadband. We also have cellular and satellite backup systems in place. Rarely do all three go down, but you never know. Electric power availability is always a worry with big freezers, but SLVREC has always worked well for us.

Jan: We struggled with shipping options. Fed Ex won't serve our area with outgoing one-day delivery so we ship via UPS. We had to come up with a shipping box to keep meat frozen. The components are not available locally, so we must stock a large inventory of shipping supplies.

Rich: It helps that we are located along a major highway. And UPS has been stellar. They make our Internet business possible. But, our biggest challenge has been the lack of ex-

isting infrastructure. It's something we had to overcome. On the other hand, that created opportunities—like Omnibus. One of the local SLV Counties now uses Omnibus.

Jan: Finding qualified people who want to work can be harder in a small community.

Rich: Another big concern has been funding. Our business isn't traditional. Since we do things differently, it took a while to convince a bank that what we are doing works. That can be a difficult task. On the positive side, if you like living in a rural area, the Valley can't be beat. We both came from the Front Range, and there are many good things about living here that you won't find anywhere else.

URGEDC: *What advice would you give to someone thinking about starting or moving a business to the San Luis Valley? Are there specific opportunities or types of businesses the Valley needs and can support?*

Jan: I encourage consideration of Internet-based or tourist-based businesses. A small business could make it, a mom and pop kind of a place. But if you want to grow, that's harder.

Rich: You can't rely on the local economy if you want a large business. There just isn't enough money in the system here for that. You'll need a nest egg if you plan to start something that falls outside of the normal Valley business profile. You will need to sustain until you can prove what you are doing works. The banks here run a tight ship, and off-season business can be pretty slow.

If you do something outside the box, give it time. If you are new and doing something different, plan a strategy to bring local people on board. Just like anywhere, there are pros and cons with the Valley. ♦

For more information on Grande Natural, visit www.ElkUSA.com or call the ranch at 719-657-0942 or 888-338-4581.



This business profile, was produced by the Upper Rio Grande Economic Development Council (URGEDC). This on-going series about 'Doing Business in the San Luis Valley' series offers an honest assessment of the benefits and challenges associated with owning and or operating a business in the Valley. Taken as a whole, URGEDC believes these profiles can provide insight, education, direction and inspiration to existing businesses, new businesses, community leaders and local government. Visit www.urgedc.com to learn more!