

Diversified

The Solsma's Punkin Patch offers all things Iowa including the family's Hereford beef.

by Julie White



Solsma family members (l to r) are: Amy, Claire, Blake and Jay.

It's a crisp fall day and Jay and Amy Solsma sit by a small pile of pumpkins on their farm in northwest Iowa, waiting for local customers to swing by and purchase this year's crop. They enjoy this seasonal hobby with their two small children, Blake and Claire.

Today, 10 years later, the small pile of pumpkins has grown into fields of orange. In addition to the locals, Jay, Amy and their kids have welcomed visitors from 29 states and three other countries to enjoy the Solsma's Punkin Patch in Sanborn, Iowa.

"It just grew by word of mouth," Amy says. "When we had kids, we thought it would be fun."

Jay and Amy began their business in 1999, selling only a small cartful of pumpkins. As demand grew during the following three years, so did their farm. They increased the acreage of pumpkins planted and added attractions to give visitors a fun farm experience.

A corn maze was added five years ago and is a popular activity for groups from August to October; around 700 visit the maze yearly. The Solsma's Country Store is open during the season and is an avenue for selling Iowa products, produce and their homegrown Ruby Red Popcorn and Hereford beef.

"I've always been in farming and beef production," Jay says. "We've intentionally blended these to form the Punkin Patch because it fits."

Jay bought his grandpa's Angus herd in 1985 and primarily bred and sold club calves. In 2000 he purchased a bred Hereford show heifer, and the herd has evolved to 30 head of Hereford cattle. Blake,



14, and Claire, 11, became interested in the cattle as well.

“We didn’t want to show high-strung crossbred cattle,” Jay says. “We ran across this show heifer, and by using embryo transfer, we rapidly built up our herd from that one cow family.”

The Solsmas raise their Herefords hormone-free and do not use antibiotics. The beef is for sale year-round at the Country Store.

“We want to be honest with our customers and verify what is going into the animals,” Jay says. “The customers can feel confident and trust the source.”

The cattle fit well with the Punkin Patch. “Our show barn is on the north side of the farm and open for visitors,” Jay says. The Solsmas also have a pet goat, rabbits and a cat available in the barn for people to interact with during the season.

The Country Store is also home to the gourmet Ruby Red Popcorn.

“People are so used to microwave popcorn,” Amy says. “Our popcorn tastes different, and they love it. Our customers appreciate something natural and healthy.”

The store also hosts goods from numerous consignors. “We focus on Iowa products,” Amy says. “We want to give more options and are always looking for something else to add to the store.” Goods sold include candles, crafts, fall décor and produce like eggs, apples, pork, chicken and honey. “We’ve also started selling Iowa wine. Many people do not know that every state can produce wine.”

Amy says the Punkin Patch is a labor-intensive operation, and

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the work begins in early May with planting. “We have to touch every pumpkin and pick each by hand.” Amy grew up helping her family garden and sell produce to get a little extra spending money.

Even though they stay busy, family members find time to show cattle and get involved in the community.

Blake and Claire help out with the business and are also involved with numerous 4-H projects, the Iowa Junior Hereford Association and the Iowa Junior Beef Breeds Association.

2007 was a stellar year for the children at the Iowa State Fair. Blake exhibited the Grand Champion Hereford Steer and Claire showed the Reserve Grand Champion Polled Hereford Heifer in the open show with a heifer they raised.

Jay has been a 4-H leader for 15 years and coaches winter league volleyball for fifth- through eighth-grade students. He is also a deacon at the church his family attends. Amy is a softball coach in the summer and a substitute teacher when the Punkin Patch is not open. She is an active member of her church and sings in the choir.



The Solsmas enjoy the fall because of the opportunity to share with others the agriculture they are so passionate about. They open up for business a little early to catch visitors of the 10-day Clay County Fair just 20 miles down the road. People also come from large nearby cities like Omaha, Neb., and Sioux City, Iowa.

“Not many people live on farms anymore,” Amy says. “I get to teach them about agriculture. I love it when our visitors can’t believe how many types and colors of pumpkins there are.”

When school children visit the Punkin Patch, Amy demonstrates how tiny seeds need water, dirt and sun to grow into plants. “I give them an idea of how things grow.”

In the next 10 years, the Solsmas want to see their Punkin Patch continue to evolve. “We want to continue to build our beef sales and establish a market so consumers realize the quality of our products,” Jay says. Above all, Jay, Amy, Blake and Claire plan to promote the diversity of agriculture in the state they call home. **HW**