

Local deer farmers set sights on global venison market

By Linda Hunter

There's something new in the Canadian farming market and it's getting its start in Grafton.

Large scale deer farming has found a niche in the local agricultural industry for the first time, says farm owner Habib Tawawala.



Tawawala

And while over 1000 of the tiny deer graze upon hundreds of acres of fields surrounding Ste. Anne's Inn, it's easy to believe that the livestock aspect of farming in Canada is being revolutionized before your eyes.

"Our main intention is to become a leader in the world of deer farming," says Tawawala.

The owners of the Tayeba (a feminine Arabic adjective meaning pure or virgin and natural) Deer Farm first came up with the idea to locate their operation in Ontario after travelling to New Zealand and Australia. There, over 800,000 deer are currently being farmed by the largest suppliers in the world.

In Grafton, the terrain, shelter and climate are relatively similar to that of Tawawala's only competitors. And when the Corcoran family's 500 acres came available last spring, Tawawala says he knew he'd found a home for his new business.

But more important than location, he adds, was the economic enticement of a large scale operation in Canada. Ta-

wawala admits that the start up costs are high, (over \$2.5 million so far) but that the investment will pay off considerably down the road.

"The demand for venison far exceeds supply all over the world," he explains. "When we looked at the economics of it, we concluded that the return on our investment will be tremendous."

He says that Japan alone could currently take all the venison that is raised in New Zealand but that the product is distributed world-wide. That kind of demand makes venison prices soar.

Deer is considered to be a multi-product animal, with very little waste. Its meat is a high-protein, low cholesterol red variety, that is a very popular delicacy in European countries and one which is gaining ground in North America. The deer is also used for breeding stock, for its skin, and by Asians, primarily North Koreans, for the velvet of the stag's antlers.

According to Tayeba farm manager John Sixtus, the vel-

vet is often used as an aphrodisiac by the Koreans - although he admits, "it didn't do anything for me" - and can fetch up to \$300 per ounce.

Locally, the Tayeba Farm currently is home to about 1050 Fallow deer, and will soon also house another 600 Red deer, both native breeds to New Zealand and Australia.

The animals are considered to be the least labor intensive of all livestock, because they literally look after themselves.

During summer months, they graze clover and rye fields, and in winter they will eat hay and some corn provided by the farmer.

"It's not a problem for a farmer to look after 2000 or 3000 deer at a time," says Sixtus. "They're very hardy, require very little medical attention and no man-made shelter."

Sixtus is a New Zealand-born farmer who arrived at Tayeba with his wife and two children in April to look after the local operation. He has been responsible for establishing the grounds upon which the ani-

mals will graze. That includes the construction of a mile-long, 2 metre-high fenced raceway that corrals the animals when its time for them to be slaughtered. The complex fencing system has been specially designed to keep predators out by utilizing small mesh and an electric barrier at the top and bottom of the wire.

The deer, who arrived shortly after Sixtus, following a six-month quarantine in New Zealand, won't be ready for market for at least another year, says Tawawala. In the meantime, the owner hopes to establish a visitor centre on the grounds, where people can come to learn about deer farming. He says he will also be bringing in New Zealand deer farming experts to offer advice and information for others who are interested in getting into the business.

"Farmers in Canada are having a tough time right now, but this is a diversification that can complement their existing operations," says Tawawala.

But be warned adds Sixtus, "it gets into your blood. I know of a number of farmers back home who started with a couple of deer and have now abandoned all other types of farming."

Tawawala is proof positive that this advice should be taken seriously. For the chemical engineer turned deer farmer, he says his "baby is born."



Sixtus



Thousands of deer roam the quiet pastures near Ste. Anne's Inn.

Photos by Jeff McIntosh