

TOGETHER TONGANOXIE THRIVES

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THESE LOCAL BUSINESSES

Next to Nature Farm opens ag education center

By Shawn F. Linenberger
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Next to Nature Farm owners Chad and Megan Gilliland view their rural Tonganoxie business as a key piece of a growing agritourism landscape in this part of Kansas.

The business, which opened in 2015, just unveiled its agricultural education center this past weekend on its 10-acre farm at 23338 Kissingner Road, Leavenworth.

Next to Nature opened its center Friday, complete with an indoor observation beehive, commercial kitchen, local food and personal care products and a slew of future plans that have the Gillilands, well, buzzing.

Chad and Megan's farm a few miles northwest of Tonganoxie has variety — goats, chickens, peacocks and bee hives, to name a few features.

The farm has a 125-fruit-tree orchard and a 185-member flock of chickens, most of which currently are producing eggs. Stroll into the store and one can see an array of honey products, local jellies, jams and salsas.

Oh, and honey. Lots of honey.

Whether it's raw, infused or creamed, honey is plentiful at Next to Nature Farm. And, the business also touts Kansas' only honey tasting bar. Think winery tasting room, but instead of wines, Next to Nature offers 30 varieties of artisanal infused and creamed honeys, with plans to have 50 total at the end of the year. They also have exotic flavor options from around the world.

Pandemic regulations have limited the tasting bar, but the business is taking necessary precau-



Shawn F. Linenberger/Staff

CHAD AND MEGAN GILLILAND at their honey tasting bar Sunday at Next to Nature Farm. The agritourism business had its opening weekend this past weekend with the unveiling of its agricultural education center. The business will be open Fridays through Sundays.

tions with social distancing. Normally a regular at farmers' markets and festivals, Next to Nature has increased online and local delivery orders during the earlier stages of the pandemic.

The tasting bar should be in full swing once the state moves to later re-opening phases.

On Sunday, Megan was working on grape jelly in the commercial kitchen made from grapes grown on the family's farm. Her face lit up talking about the family's products and, as the business name reflects, is as close to natural the products can be. The farm is pesticide-free and products not grown from their farm are obtained from other farms

that avoid pesticides. "What we're trying to manage is the inputs into our products," Chad said. "People want to know and people are critical as to where their food comes from. We don't use preservatives, dyes or colorants."

The kitchen also was built with other entrepreneurs in mind. With it being a commercial-grade kitchen, it meets state regulations for people to make their products. For instance, Max Sybrant has resurrected original family salsa and taco sauce recipes after some 20 years from the Rose Room restaurant.

By the end of the day Sunday, Next to Nature Farms was sold out of the

salsa and sauce it had on hand. The restaurant formerly operated in Bonner Springs and then Basehor. It's the only retail option for the product. Chad and Megan will continue to offer the kitchen for rental space to interested entrepreneurs. They also sell food products and other items such as eggs, vegetables, cheese and more from area farms.

Daughter, Tori, is a junior at Tonganoxie High School and has been running the Next to Nature booth at farmers markets in Bonner Springs and Lenexa the last few years. Son, Garrett, a first-grader at Tonganoxie Elementary School, has started Itty Bitty Bee Keeper, a informational Facebook

page about beekeeping. Megan operates social media and the Next to Nature website as part of her specialties with the business.

Chad will be offering bee-keeping classes at the education center and items for people interested in raising bees. The family is gearing up for a bee-to-bottle tour this summer for customers to experience the entire process of cultivating honey. And, the Gillilands plan to install a butterfly house this fall that would open next spring. Visitors will be able to walk through the pollinated gardens and feed butterflies.

"Just kind of taking in Mother Nature's beauty," Gilliland said. "So many people take it for granted, especially with these times we're in with the pandemic. Just settling in and enjoying the beauty around us instead of dealing with all the negativity we're dealing with currently."

The farm also could be a place to enjoy hard cider and honey mead down the road. Chad said he is looking further into regulations, but it's his understanding that if a state-certified agritourism business sells raw product to wineries,

they can purchase back the finished product, and with a permit, then sell it at their stores.

Next to Nature has beehives on site, but in total manages some 80 beehives across Leavenworth County and expects to be at 100 later this year.

"They get the benefit of pollination services and we get the benefit of utilizing the nectar sourcing plants on their property," Chad said.

The Gillilands hope the farm will be one of many local agritourism businesses that attract visitors to the Tonganoxie area like bees to flowers.

"We really wanted to put together a solid group of local agritourism businesses that have a common goal in place to draw visitors to the area and feed off each other to draw the interest to Leavenworth County with so many wonderful little niche businesses for folks to get away and enjoy a bit of the countryside and a little bit of something they aren't exposed to on a regular basis," Chad said.

The business is open 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Friday through Sunday and can be found online at nexttonaturefarm.com and on the farm's Facebook page.

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