

# Value-added Agricultural Success Story

## *Honeyberry Farm*



This story is one of a special series of value-added agricultural enterprise successes in Tennessee. The entrepreneurs featured have worked with specialists at the Center for Profitable Agriculture in different ways to achieve various levels of start-up, sustainable and long-term enterprise success. I hope their stories will be interesting, informative and inspiring.

*Rob Holland, Director, Center for Profitable Agriculture*



*Brenda Camp Hubbell's 10 flavors of **Honey Jelly** have always been prepared and packaged in a small processing facility in her hometown of Knoxville, but she needs more space to expand.*

After 30 years as a food technologist, Brenda Camp Hubbell decided in 1998 to risk job security and her financial future for an idea she developed for a unique agricultural-based product.

Brenda grew up on her family's farm in West Knoxville where she learned about beekeeping from her uncle, other family members and friends. "I understood the reverence they had for their bees, and, of course, I loved the taste and appearance of the honey," she recalls.

After college, Brenda worked for national companies like Stouffer's™, Banquet™, Reily Foods™ and regional favorites White Lily™ and JFG™. "One job I had required that I taste-test a Danish roll with a sticky pecan topping. I liked the flavor so much that I wanted to recreate it in a product that could be made available to other consumers like me."

Brenda continued to work full-time, but kept the idea in the back of her mind. Then in 1995 she had a dream – a flash of insight, she says. Using her scientific background, Brenda decided to experiment with honey as the key ingredient. "Rather than using pectin as a jelling agent, I tried gellan gum, which holds more honey and therefore provides more honey flavor," Brenda explains.

The result was a unique value-added product she named *Honey Jelly*, which is 70 to 85 percent honey with the texture and spread of a smooth jelly. Brenda used some of her savings to apply for her patent, which she received in 1998.

Convinced she had a great product, Brenda wanted to know if her idea was really viable. She contacted Rob Holland and Kent Wolfe at UT's Center for Profitable Agriculture for advice. The feasibility study they conducted determined there was a market for *Honey Jelly*, and their financial estimates and pricing analysis provided great insight.



One year Brenda made only a \$9,000 profit, but she had confidence her gourmet jellies would be successful. Many weekends are spent at food shows and festivals; she also cross-markets with Sweetwater Valley Farms.

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"Kent took *Honey Jelly* to a regional upscale grocery chain, and it was quickly approved at the corporate level," Brenda recalls. The drawback was that store managers had to be contacted individually before it could be placed on shelves. With no sales staff, she had to pass up the opportunity.

Honeyberry Farms has always been a family operation. Both of her parents helped in the early days, and sister Connie Ford has been instrumental to the success of the business, particularly with marketing. The sisters are, in fact, full partners. "Connie is the other half of my brain," says Brenda.

In the beginning, Brenda planned to make 300 jars of *Honey Jelly* each day. Without a retail contract, however, she decided to take *Honey Jelly* on the road to sell at wholesale gourmet food shows across the Southeast. Her first attempt at Atlantasmart flopped. "I paid \$1,300 for a booth but didn't know what to do after I got there, so I left it vacant," she recalls.

That is when Connie stepped in. "She knew how to put a booth together and how to talk to people," says Brenda. "I was painfully shy. I would hide behind the curtain while Connie gave out free samples and pulled people in." Their two-year "road show" paid off: 10 flavors of *Honey Jelly* are now sold in more than a dozen states.

"Honey is a very healthy and versatile food product," Connie points out. The recipes on the Honeyberry Farm Web site were developed by Connie.

Two years ago, the sisters landed a private-label contract with a major upscale grocery chain. To supply their retail contract, weekend travel shows and Web site orders, Honeyberry Farm produces 500 to 600 jars a day.

Brenda has three employees: a jelly maker, bookkeeper and a labeler/shipper. Brenda is still in charge of quality control. All four make, label and sell jelly. She would like to take *Honey Jelly* national and is exploring opportunities to accomplish her goal of doubling sales in the next two years. More immediate plans call for moving into larger facilities in Knoxville.

"You really have to know yourself in this business," says Brenda. "But from the beginning, it has been a joyous growing and learning experience for my family and friends, but especially for me."

**The mission of the Center for Profitable Agriculture is to help farm families improve income by identifying new ways to add value to food and fiber products through processing, packaging and marketing. We focus on three areas:**

- Working with families and entrepreneurs to analyze value-added agricultural enterprises;
- Implementing market development studies to determine the viability of new products;
- Conducting educational programs for Tennessee farmers and agricultural leaders.

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