

Case Study:

Young Entrepreneurship in the Field of Food - Josefin & Dennis Norrback

Josefin and Dennis Norrback are siblings and young entrepreneurs in the field of food in Pjälax, Finland. We're visiting them a crisp morning in December. The rural landscape is covered with fresh snow that lightens up the day, and the sun is up even if it's lingering low on the horizon at this time of the year. There's a calm and peaceful atmosphere at the Norrback family farm, that Josefin and Dennis took over in 2021.

The Norrback farm is an organic sheep farm with around 140 female sheep, or *ewes*. In spring, during the lambing season, the number of animals at the farm more than doubles. The main product of the farm is organically produced meat, and autumn means a busy time since the time for slaughter is after the grazing period during the summer months, and before winter. The wool is cut, or *shared*, twice every year, in spring and autumn. Sheep farming is very much depending on seasonality and this time of the year, mid-December, is a calmer period, while the period from March until October is more intense.

Josefin and Dennis are inviting us in for a coffee in Dennis' house, close to their childhood home. Josefin is living with her boyfriend in a neighboring municipality, Ilmajoki. Dennis, the younger brother, has a Master in Economics from Hanken School of Economics in Vaasa. "The possibilities are quite many when you have a degree in Economics" Dennis says, "And that was perhaps the most important



reason why I chose the School of Economics". Dennis studied Marketing for his Bachelor's degree and chose Accounting for his Master's degree: "I think it is a real good combo, marketing is kind of the external part, and accounting the internal part of having a business". It wasn't always clear that Dennis would take over the family farm, but a career involving entrepreneurship was something he thought of a lot.

Josefin, the older sister, has a Master in Agricultural Sciences from the University of Helsinki. She started out with a Bachelor's degree in Agricultural Sciences at Seinäjoki University of Applied Sciences, and added two years of Master studies at Helsinki University, since she was really interested in the area and felt she wanted more than just Bachelor studies.

The Faculty of Agriculture and Forestry at the University of Helsinki and Yara Suomi Oy encourage students to think about food production from a sustainable productive agriculture perspective through annually awarding Sustainable Productive Agriculture scholarships. Josefin received the 2021 Sustainable Productive Agriculture scholarship for her master's thesis: "The effect of nematode infection on activity and behavior of first-time grazing lambs". She wrote her thesis in collaboration with SLU (Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences) and it is a study on whether parasite infection have an effect



on activity and behavior in first-time grazing lambs. One of the biggest challenges in sheep farming is parasites. One way to deal with this would be to treat parasite infections at the individual level instead of at the group level – so not medicating the whole heard of sheep, but finding and medicating the individual sheep that carry parasites. It does seem like lambs that carry parasites grow more slowly and show different behavior, which in turn can be used by farmers to single out the individuals to treat. The findings can be used for developing technological innovations that could be of important use for sheep farmers.

Together Josefin and Dennis decided to take over the family farm. They were not pressured in any way to do so, and did always have their parents' support to do



whatever they wanted to do. Their father Bengt is retired since a couple of years ago, but has been helping out while Josefin and Dennis finished their studies. Josefin is the expert in the agricultural part of the business, and Dennis is the expert in the business part. During the calmer winter months Dennis is also working with accounting, mostly for agricultural entrepreneurs. "It's a perfect combination" he says, "since the winter months are really the most intense in the accounting business".

The sheep are sold through the Finnish Sheep Cooperative, that convey them to slaughter houses that in turn convey the meat to various retailers and food stores around the country. So far there has not been enough time to sell the farm products directly to the consumers. "There are other farms of the same size that sell almost all their meat directly to consumers", Dennis says, "So it is possible. You just have to find the consumers that want specifically lamb meat". "The big challenge

is that the meat is to be sold fresh in autumn, or as frozen goods during the rest of the year", Josefin adds.

Josefin and Dennis are third generations agricultural entrepreneurs. There has been dairy cattle and poultry on the farm earlier, and vegetables grown in greenhouses. In the early 1990's the first sheep arrived and the dairy cattle was let go of in 2004. The building where the sheep are kept in wintertime was built 2001. The farm land became classified as organic 1998 and the sheep farming accessed organic status in 2006. The adult sheep are grazing on wood land and areas bordering to wet lands during summers, keeping the landscape open. The lambs are kept closer to the farm. A dairy farm has rented parts of the empty farm buildings for their cattle and the meadows close to the farms can be alternated between sheep and cattle grazing. Josefin points out that this is really good for keeping the parasitic load down.

The wool has been sold to a spinning company and in autumn 2022 Josefin and Dennis has gotten back the farm's own yarn for the first time. They also have their own sheepskin. So far, they've been selling these by-products to consumers on demand only, since they haven't had the time for marketing yet. They also need to build up an inventory to have some bulk for sale. We have look at the Norrback yarn, a sturdy yarn that makes lovely warm garments. The wool is shared twice a year, and Dennis does the work. Last year he even started cutting for other sheep farmers in the region and he's thinking on expanding the services.





The farm has mainly Texel and Dorset sheep, some crossed with some Finnish Landrace, also called Finnsheep. The Texel and Dorset are often used for meat production and have coarser wool. The Finnsheep have finer wool. Different breeds have different wool, as Josefin explains: "You cannot say that yarn from a specific breed is better or worse, just different. It all depends on what you are after. For myself, I like coarser yarns."

A challenge with selling agricultural products are often the lack of knowledge on the consumers' part. We talk a while about the fact that fewer persons are involved in primary food production these days, which means that a growing part of the population has little insight in for example how the different seasons affect farming. Consumers are used to find any product at any time of the year in the shelves of

the local food store. The Norrback farm use to have visits from the local school once a year. They've also participated in Farmer Time, a project which connects school classes digitally to different farms for a digital tour of the farm and interaction with the farmer. The background thought is that it'd be easy for both the school classes and the farmer to interact digitally, without costs for transportation.

Before we leave the Norrback farm Josefin and Dennis show us their sheep and we're accompanied by one of the two working Borders Collies of the farm, Affe. The younger dog, Säkä, is currently on sick leave after injuring his leg, but he'll soon be fine and back to work. The sheep are eying us curiously, before going back to eating. They have a large, airy space with lots of straw on the ground. They are also able to go out, and some of the sheep

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head out in the snowy landscape. Farm dog Affe is showing off his skills, trembling with eagerness while waiting for Josefins commands.

What kind of advice does Josefin and Dennis give to other young people that are thinking about a career in entrepreneurship? "It depends" Josefin says, "if you like to read and study independently, then the Internet is full of information. I like to spend time with people and learn through interaction. Get a summer job or internship at a business, for example, and let the people there know that you are interested in the business part. Find a mentor!". "If you haven't had any previous experience, then finding a summer

job that will get you experience is really good", Dennis adds. "And networking with other entrepreneurs is really valuable", Josefin says. "Generally speaking, everyone you talk to is very helpful", Dennis says, "For example, in the Economy Lab of the Ostrobothnian Producer's Association, ten sheep farmers have come together to discuss economy. We've also had guest lecturers".

What are the best things about being an entrepreneur? "Being your own boss", Josefin says and laughs. "I think that's most important for me, the freedom", Dennis adds. "To develop and be able to influence on what you do, yourself", Josefin continues. "I really like a physical job", Den-



nis says, "and to be outdoors. These are things you seldom get from other jobs. If you like to be active and outdoors, this is a really good work". "I think it's a real nice thing to live by the changing seasons", Josefin says, "and it really is emphasized when you work with sheep". A good thing with being two in the business is that it is easier to have some time off. Josefin and Dennis can take turns for example having a weekend off, the other sibling can take responsibility for the farm meanwhile. In Finland, 26 days of vacation is provided for farmers, with farmers substitutes coming in for feeding the animals during vacation days. The substitutes will not do the other chores of the farms, however, they will just feed the animals.

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Photos & Layout: Sara Kåll-Fröjdö, Centria University of Applied Sciences.

What about working with a sibling, then? Josefin and Dennis seem to complete each other in many ways. "I think that on the large questions, we are of the same opinion", Dennis says. "Of course, you can be of different opinions", Josefin adds, "But you have to be able to respect the other's opinions. It's really good that we have studied different subjects, and we have different angles on things".



The visit to Pjelax and the interview of Josefin and Dennis Norrback was conducted as a part of the **HEADLINES** project in Centria University of Applied Sciences, to provide inspiration and a case study of a young entrepreneur in the field of Food.

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