



# PARTNERS IN GOOD TASTE

*Unionland Feed & Supply and the Iowa Food Hub team up to serve local markets*

BY RENEE BRINCKS

Customers shopping at Unionland Feed & Supply in West Union will find products typical of a traditional farm and home store, including livestock feed, water softener salt, pet snacks, birdseed and basics for the garden. But, step through the double glass doors adjacent to the main warehouse, and it's clear that some shelves display items more commonly found at a farmers' market. Depending on the season, there might be watermelon from Mitchell's Melons in Fayette, tomatoes from J&J Produce in Hawkeye or leafy greens sourced through the Iowa Food Hub. The dairy cases hold yogurt, milk and cheese from WW Homestead Dairy in Waukon and Hawkeye's Country View Dairy. Slabs of ham and flats of bacon hail from Reicks View Farms near Lawler, while beef and chicken might be from Fayette County's Fagle View Farms. The store also carries eggs, dry soup mixes, organic corn chips, sunflower seeds, salsas, sauces, olive oil and more.

Such a selection takes some patrons by surprise, says Unionland Feed & Supply co-owner Gary Steinlage.

"We had a guy in last week who had been driving around town looking for us. He was looking for a feed place, but he said this just didn't look like a feed store," he laughs.

It's been a decade since Steinlage, a former dairy farmer who also works as a crop adjuster, founded Unionland. He operates the business with his son, Justin, and their commitment to regional products extends back to the store's very beginning. Though Unionland opened as a dedicated feed and supply store, Steinlage also sold some eggs from an area farmer. When those proved popular, he added meat and a few dairy products from around northeast Iowa. Business was brisk, but it all came to a halt when a fire gutted the operation in 2013.

After surveying the damage, the family evaluated their options and ultimately decided to rebuild in downtown West Union.

"It was a good time to make a transition and focus on the food industry," says Steinlage. "My son was working with me, and we wanted to keep forging ahead. The community wanted us back, too."

The expanded emphasis on local food was especially fitting, given that the original Unionland building once housed a grocery store. And, after a redevelopment project that reshaped West Union's streetscapes wrapped up in 2013, there was additional momentum downtown. Unionland is located not far from the Fayette County Courthouse, in the middle of the community's central retail area.

"We get travelers coming in who are just amazed at how the downtown looks. We designed the new building to match in," says Steinlage.

In addition to welcoming travelers, the store serves locals looking for unique gifts and basic provisions.

"We have farmers who come into the store to get feed, and then they'll grab milk, beef sticks or other groceries. Sometimes, when Justin delivers feed, he'll take along some granola or a case of yogurt that someone has asked for," says Unionland employee Chelsey Matthias.

Matthias is Gary Steinlage's niece, and she coordinates local food purchases for Unionland Feed & Supply. Working directly with growers, and through distributors like

That Iowa Girl and FarmTable Delivery, Matthias sources a wide range of produce, proteins and value-added products. Most goods come from Iowa, with a few items from the surrounding states. Soup mixes, cinnamon-roasted pecans and baby-back ribs have been some of Unionland's biggest sellers lately, but Matthias is constantly restocking other products, too.

"People like the uniqueness of it all. This is a family-owned business, and when shoppers come through the door, we help them find what they need. If they want a product we don't carry, there's a good chance we can get it from one of our suppliers," she says.

Thanks to a recent partnership with the Iowa Food Hub, Matthias has been able to multiply the local options available at the store. Formed to connect small farms with new market opportunities while also improving food access for underserved communities, the Iowa Food Hub is a non-profit with business offices located in Decorah. Late last year, the organization was looking to expand into a facility with a loading dock that was big enough to accommodate more refrigeration equipment. Gary and Justin Steinlage were only using part of their new building for Unionland, and Iowa Food Hub felt like an ideal partner. The nonprofit relocated their distribution center to West Union at the beginning of 2015.

Iowa Food Hub Coordinator Nick Mabe calls the Unionland partnership a mutually beneficial arrangement.

"It's a great facility," he says. "We've expanded our capacity with the walk-in cooler and freezer, and that's allowed us to grow quite a bit. Plus, the Steinlages have been around this area for a while. They've introduced us to a lot of growers and producers that we weren't previously working with."

Thanks to the new space, Mabe and his team have ramped up their farm-to-school programs, wholesale distribution services and retail food box programs that bring affordable fresh food to eastern Iowa families. The nonprofit also boosts visibility by stocking a cooler at Unionland with seasonal produce.

"It's very easy for an entity like us to be in a concrete box in an industrial area," says Mabe. "While we don't sell out of our own space, being in this store on the town square now exposes us to a lot of different people."

Sharing contacts and working together helps Unionland and the Iowa Food Hub create unique opportunities for small producers, he adds.

"We see economic benefits stem from keeping more money in the area. By supporting local farmers, we're allowing people to spend more time doing this kind of work. Maybe they won't need that off-farm job, eventually, or maybe they can better supplement some of the operations they already have going," Mabe says. "In terms of food access, getting fresh, whole, non-processed foods back on the dinner table is also very important. Through rural grocers like Unionland, and through our food box and farm-to-

school programs, we are making that happen."

Just down the road from Unionland, Country View Dairy sells its farm-fresh products through both Unionland and the Iowa Food Hub. The food hub distributes yogurt to schools across Iowa, and the store was one of the first local retailers to stock the dairy's products.

"For the size of the store, it's amazing how much yogurt Unionland goes through," says Bob Howard, Country View Dairy's director of marketing and sales. He sees the retailer's Iowa Food Hub collaboration benefitting producers as well as customers.

"I think a lot of people enjoy going to farmers' markets, but they're not always at convenient times or in convenient locations. This partnership is one way to help bring more local food to more people," he says.

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