

# Baronners Set Standard For Local Produce

BY MARGIE FUSCO

**Cambria Co. Correspondent  
HOLLIDAYSBURG** — Bill Baronner helped to put the nine Kovach kids through college and trade schools. He's done the same for two generations of Kellys, close to three dozen youngsters, not to mention countless others in Blair County. How? Through summer jobs at his produce stand.

Since 1949, Baronner's stand in Hollidaysburg has set a hallmark for local produce. Today, from the unimposing wooden front on the concrete-and-brick building, Bill Baronner and his son Bobby know they can sell almost 4,500 dozen ears of sweet corn a day, in season. From the fields behind the stand, they can anticipate moving as many as 4,000 quarts of strawberries daily, about 70 percent of which are pick-your-own.

The Baronner produce station tradition began in 1918 when Bill's father began selling wholesale produce. The Baronners intended to stay in wholesaling, but after the end of World War II, the profit margin began to fall. "Chain stores were attracting buyers and they were dictating prices," Bill recalls. As an alternative one year, the Baronners erected a modest building with an apartment above and decided to try a roadside stand. The stand has been open from the start of strawberry season until Halloween every year since.

Although corn and strawberries are the main attractions, people who stop at the stand in Hollidaysburg near the State Police barracks can expect to find head lettuce, spinach, snap peas, sugar peas, wax and snap beans, broccoli, squash, cantaloupe, cauliflower, seedless watermelon, tomatoes, eggplant, kale, beets, peppers, late cabbage and pumpkins. To supplement the offerings, Baronner's purchase green onions, plums, peaches, apples, pears, and potatoes (from local growers whenever possible) to sell in their market.

The key to Baronner's success can be traced to quality. This reporter can tell about it firsthand. Not only have I tested the plump, sugary ears of corn... I'm married to a former crew boss, one of the nine Kovaches who worked a dozen summers in Baronner's fields and at the stand.

There are standards set at Baronner's that most produce sellers would be hard-pressed to match. "We don't pass off any wormy corn here," Bill says. To be sure of that fields are sprayed every three days and soil is fumigated.

Picking standards are also tight. Bill has been known to throw out entire wagonloads of corn that was picked a few hours too soon or too late. "The corn has to have just the right plumpness, that pearly color that tells you the sugar is at its peak," former crew boss Dennis Kovach explains. To keep that corn at its peak, what doesn't sell immediately from the yield is



Bill Baronner spends most of the time in the market while his son Bobby manages the fields.



Customers can select from a wide variety of top quality produce.

kept under a shower of cool water. When strawberries are picked for sale in the market, they're graded carefully. People shopping at the stand know they won't find any white-tipped or orange berries hidden at the bottom of a basket. The procedure is the same with all the vegetables that come in from the fields; each item is graded by hand, and every questionable piece is discarded.

Bobby Baronner admits sometimes the emphasis on quality can get in the way. He likes to tell about the crew member he had to remove from the pick-your-own fields because the man intimidated people by grading their strawberries, throwing out over- or under-ripe berries, and making the people go back and start again.

But the reputation for quality has made Baronner's stand a stopping place for people from several counties around. Baronner's strawberries have even

attracted the attention of a famous out-of-state visitor.

When former President Jimmy Carter was visiting on the Harpster farms in Centre County this past June, it was Baronner's strawberries that graced the table. Bill is modest about the honor, saying, "Old Mr. Harpster used to love one kind of strawberries we grew here, and he got into the habit of calling on us when he wanted some. I guess the rest of the family just kind of picked up on it."

A director of the Pennsylvania Vegetable Growers Association, Bill Baronner is interested in new crop varieties. "This year we're trying out about 20 new varieties. There are only two we're considering to plant next year, and that's about average."

He admits there's some risk in trying new varieties. "You have to try them out for several years. For example, last year we had a real disaster with a cantaloupe variety that was great the year before. One year isn't going to tell you all you need to know."

He keeps about 90 acres of his land planted in sweet corn, about 70 percent of which is bi-color and white. He has 14 acres of strawberries, primarily in Early Glo and All-Star, in 10-inch raised beds with tile drains in the fields.

He owns about 275 acres and rents an additional 60. Much of it is fertile bottom land along the banks of the Little Juniata River and Canoe Creek. He keeps only about 175 acres in production at a time.

When autumn comes and the stand closes down, Bill likes to take some time for hunting. He's been as far away as Alaska for Dahl sheep and Canada for moose. He



This attractive building houses Baronner's Market, which draws customers from several surrounding counties.

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