

Dining In

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LIGHTLY SALTED
The Allen Sheep Farm
on Martha's Vineyard.

Farming in Paradise, Where the Lamb Is King

Grass-fed meats are becoming more valuable, but the salt-kissed pastureland of Martha's Vineyard adds a sweet bonus.

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CHILMARK, Mass.— A SMALL pack of male white and chocolate-brown lambs were nudging and shifting, with fleeces tousled by damp weather and heads pitched toward the ground, their focus on the prize: dry, feathery wisps of alfalfa, torn from a hay bale. The alfalfa smelled like sweet tea; their jaws were grinding. It was a special snack on the Allen Sheep Farm, and it was no time to be taking in the view.

Humans are mesmerized by it, though. Surrounding the lambs lay one of the largest, and certainly one of the most beautiful properties on Martha's Vineyard, nearly a hundred acres of open land, evocative of Scotland. Tufted, gold-tipped grasses and outcroppings cover the braided hills. From every point there is a clear and seemingly infinite view of the Atlantic Ocean and the horizon, where sky and sea join in a long, fine thread. It is the kind of view that has in part drawn tycoons and celebrities here, and led them to buy nearly every property around the farm.

As it turns out, lambs like the prime real estate as well. As the grasses grow, the sea spray coats the blades, layering their diet with added salt, as happens with the renowned French salt marsh lamb. There is plenty of room to frolic, and the hills work much like a StairMaster, keeping them hearty and trim, all of which makes for flavorful, succulent lamb. The Allen Sheep Farm sells most of its meat locally, although, on occasion, it is shipped to restaurants like Craft in New York City.

Pasture-raised lamb, which may have seemed a rarity 10 years ago, is nearly common now. "We're seeing a lot of sheep and meat goats out on land in New York," said Dr. Tatiana Luisa Stanton, an associate with the Northeast Sheep and Goat Marketing Program at Cornell University. As dairy farms fold or merge, the land is getting snapped up by farmers raising smaller animals like goats, sheep, pigs and chickens.

There are no studies on just how many farms have started up, but when Jo Robinson, the author of "Why Grassfed Is Best" (Vashon Island, 2000), started Eatwild.com, a Web site devoted to pasture-raised meats, in 2000, 55 farms were listed on it. Now, there are more than 500, broken down by state.

Elana Berkowitz, a spokeswoman for Earth Pledge, the environmental organization, said the number of applications for listings on the Web site farmtotable.org from farms that raise animals on pasture has consistently grown. "Before, it was a trickle," she said, "and now it's more of a steady stream."

It used to be that only if you lived near one of these farms could you buy from them, but now Web sites like www.eatwild.com, www.farmtotable.org and www.meadowraisedmeats.com have made these meats more accessible. You can search for farms near you, find out which markets carry their products, whether or not they ship their meats and what their farming practices are.

In New York State, for instance, more than 20 small farms sell lamb directly to consumers. Some of them, like 3-Corner Field Farm in Shushan, N.Y., near Albany, sell the lamb by mail-order and at farmers' markets (they are at the Union Square Greenmarket on Wednesdays and in TriBeCa on Saturdays). None of these farms will ever be large enough to serve grocery-store chains. The point is to seek them out, if you want true grass-fed meats. It's a commitment that can be costly as well.

WHAT is perhaps most unusual about the Allen Sheep Farm is the reason it became a farm in the first place. Twenty-eight years ago, when Clarissa Allen, the 12th generation of her family raised on Martha's Vineyard, returned to their property in Chilmark, she had no plans to stay. She wanted to settle her father's estate and get on with her life in Boston.

It wasn't so simple. Martha's Vineyard was rapidly changing from a rural community to a destination for the wealthy. "By the time I was 28," Ms. Allen said, "I had three estates to settle. It became really apparent that in order to keep the land, I had to do something with it."

If not, she would be forced to sell the land, which had been owned by her family for more than 200 years. But in a strange twist on modern agriculture, it is the sheep and lambs that have, in effect, saved the Allen property from sale and development.

In a few years' time, they also turned Ms. Allen, then a history student, and her husband, Mitchell Posin, a builder who was raised in Brooklyn, into farmers -- a quixotic outcome. The land they own is worth millions of dollars, yet they struggle to pay their bills.

"The land had really brushed in since my dad was here and we had animals," she said, standing in her house on the property. Ms. Allen, 52, has friendly blue eyes and dirty-blond hair, held back by a pair of eyeglasses that spend more time perched on her head than before her eyes. This chilly Saturday in October, she was eating toasted Balthazar bread, spread with butter. Keith McNally is a weekend neighbor. He trades bread for lamb.

Mr. Posin, 55, a sturdy man with rusty eyebrows, pointed out the back window. "These stone walls that you see were rubble when we got here," he said. He and a neighbor rebuilt more than a mile of wall themselves. "We don't put up a fence in front of the broken stone wall," he added. "We build a stone wall."

But the first thing they did was buy a few goats to clear the land. Once the goats' munching was complete, they brought in some pigs, which naturally till soil with their snouts.

"Then we finally could afford a chain saw," Mr. Posin said. "So we got on our hands and knees and sawed away." Ms. Allen added gleefully: "And then we'd burn things. Great huge fires. It was before regulation." By their third year, in 1978, the land was ready for sheep.

"When I was a child," Ms. Allen said, "we had three ragged feral sheep. They were the vestiges of my family." A few cows were also kept as pets. Her father was a builder, but previous generations had been farmers. Sheep were nothing new.

According to Charles Edward Banks, in his "History of Martha's Vineyard" (Volume II, 1966), there were about 20,000 sheep in Chilmark in the mid-18th century, until the British raided the island during the Revolutionary War and took nearly 10,000 to feed their army. (A story has been passed down in the Allen family that leaves their prized sheep, a Spanish merino, hidden behind a chimney in the house, when the British invaded.) By the mid-19th century, there were still 5,568 sheep in the town; wool was a big industry.

The Allen Sheep Farm now has about 130 lambs, 80 mothers and a few busy rams. The land they inhabit is a terminal moraine, a rugged, hilly terrain, which Mr. Posin said is fine for sheep, but not great for most crops. It is scarred with large outcroppings of granite, called glacial erratics, which slid here thousands of years ago from the White Mountains in New Hampshire.

The diet of the modern generation of Allen sheep probably differs from that of its predecessors. Over the years, Mr. Posin has planted 27 varieties of organic grasses here, including white clovers from Israel and the Netherlands. "If you were an animal, would you want to go out to the field and eat the same rye grasses every day?" Mr. Posin asked.

Such common sense has guided their farming practices from the beginning. "Not having a farming background," Mr. Posin said, "we were open to the new low-tech approaches. What I mean by that is no fertilizers, no fossil fuels, no tractors." The farm is not organic, mostly, they say, because they haven't bothered to fill out the paperwork.

The lambs are never kept in confinement, and on pasture, they are moved from field to field, a practice called rotational grazing, so that the grasses they feed on are vigorous and concentrated in nutrients.

"I resisted it," Ms. Allen said of the pasturing, "because I didn't want fences everywhere."

Mr. Posin added: "This is what happens when a Brooklyn Jew marries a Yankee. You get two perspectives."

Mostly, though, it's really just one. They believe in sustainable agriculture, a movement that has empowered a new generation of small farmers. And like many of these farmers, they have found the agriculture successful. It's the sustainable part that troubles them.

"For a long time," Ms. Allen said, "I beat myself up that we hadn't expanded faster. Now, it's a strong belief of mine that the scale at which you do things affects the quality of the meat."

"I don't mean to brag," Mr. Posin said, "but our lamb, it's good."

Ms. Allen added, "I think it also has to do with the proximity to the ocean." The lambs spend their last few weeks on the south side of their property, close to the ocean and the salt-sprayed grasses. Many farmers save the best pasture for the lambs' last few weeks of grazing, a period called finishing.

"They're finishing from the day they're born, really," Mr. Posin said. Most of their lambs are born during the third week in April and are slaughtered in December.

"They go when the grass goes," Mr. Posin said.

Ms. Allen and Mr. Posin live in the original family house, now renovated, at the center of the property. All around them is largely an expanse of grass and stone, interrupted occasionally by a red oak, swamp maple or chokecherry tree. On a walk through the property, Ms. Allen pointed to a chicken coop. "We call that the eggmobile." The eggmobile is dragged around the property so the chickens' droppings fertilize different plots. For the last five years, the couple has been selling eggs. This year they are trying their hand at roaster chickens; they have 400.

"Here," Ms. Allen said, putting an egg in my hand. "Feel this." It was warm, fresh.

"Kids used to keep hot potatoes in their pockets," she added, for warmth. The climate on the island at this time of year can be damp and frigid. A fresh egg is a perfectly engineered hand heater.

As we scaled the hill at the top of their property, a group of female lambs and sheep stood up to inspect their visitors, but then quickly resorted to staring, unmoved. "They know nothing good is in it for them today," Ms. Allen said.

Farther up the hill, we came across a pile of bones. "This is an uncanny kind of thing," Ms. Allen said. There was still some fur visible and a shoulder blade was clear. "You can't keep up with everything," Ms. Allen said. "I remember the first time I was so upset. How could that happen without me knowing?"

Ms. Allen has gotten used to lots of things. Staying up all night during birthing season to help pull out lambs twisted inside their mothers. The haunting thud of rams butting heads during mating season. The mess of butchering.

The couple has learned to be farmers by trial and error. In the early days, they did the butchering on the farm. "We had a book," Ms. Allen said, "Morton Salt's meat cutting book. It still has blood on it, because I was reading as I was going."

"We still have some terrible glitches here," Ms. Allen said. "We have some miniature runty little lambs."

But generally, Ms. Allen is confident about her purpose. "Anyone who wants can come on this farm, any time, and walk through it with me to see how the animals are raised," she said. "What better assurance is there than that?"

While Ms. Allen and Mr. Posin have managed to make money on their lamb, they are not entirely free of financial worries. Over the years they have had to sell some land (they began with 120 acres and are now down to about 94) to pay off various debts, including the renovation of their 230-year-old home, which was so drafty that snow would sometimes blow through the cracks in the wood. They also put nearly 30 of the 94 acres near to the ocean into permanent conservation, which means it can never be developed for housing.

But, Ms. Allen noted, "I don't want to put all this land into conservation. I've always been super liberal, and now in my old age I think I am getting this old-fashioned Republican sensibility about local control. The death tax in this country is so punitive for people who care for their land."

Ms. Allen later asked to retract the statement, worrying she would anger the Democrats who rent her house in the summer. But it is a common hardship for farmers, who may be rich in land but cash poor.

"I panic when I think about it," she said. "I know my son will have to deal with it." Their son, Nathaniel, 19, is now in college.

Ms. Allen and Mr. Posin have had to find other ways to make money. She works for the town of Chilmark as a real estate assessor. Mr. Posin does a few odd building projects and sells organic fertilizer. And during the summer, they live in one of their barns, and rent their house as well as a few other small cottages on their property.

OVER the years, they've been able to rely on local support to help them through. When Ms. Allen was first struggling over estate taxes, a local banker told her, "This bank will not go down in history as letting the Allen farm go under." Then he lent her \$300,000. When a barn burnt to the ground one night, a neighbor was there to offer them money the following morning.

On our way back to the house, we ran into Jack Reed, who in another stroke of luck last year agreed to work for the farm in exchange for a place to live. He was on his way to feed the chickens.

He turned to Ms. Allen, and pointed to the hills behind their property. "The farmer over there told me the other day that if he ever died and got reincarnated he'd like to be a blade of grass on your farm."

A few land-hungry tycoons probably feel the same way. And if Ms. Allen has anything to do with it, that's the most they'll ever get of her property.

PAN-ROASTED LAMB CHOPS

Time: 30 minutes

2 (8-rib) racks of lamb chops, cut into 4-rib pieces, at room temperature

Sea salt

Freshly ground black pepper

1 tablespoon coriander seeds, toasted and crushed

1 tablespoon olive oil

1 tablespoon butter

8 cloves garlic, lightly crushed

8 sprigs rosemary.

1. Preheat oven to 450 degrees. Turn on fan above stove. Season chops generously with salt, pepper and coriander, patting on spices so they cling to meat.
2. In a sauté pan large enough to fit the chops, or two sauté pans, warm oil and butter over high heat. When foam subsides, add garlic and rosemary, then lamb chops, rib-side down. Sauté until very brown and crisp, about 4 minutes. Turn and sauté other side.
3. Transfer pan to oven and finish cooking to your liking -- about 3 minutes more for medium-rare, 5 for medium-well. Remove from oven and let sit 5 minutes. Cut racks in half. Serve with roasted potatoes, beets, a salad or any other seasonal vegetables.

Yield: 4 servings.