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FOUNTAIN PRAIRIE INN & FARMS:

Why Cows Have Legs And Grass Has Roots



BICYCLING

Signal
Like You Mean It

PACKAGING

The Many Impacts
Of Wrapping Stuff

RESTAURANT

Local Chemistry
At Alchemy Café

FOUNTAIN PRAIRIE INN & FARMS

Why Cows Have Legs And Grass Has Roots

John and Dorothy Priske of Fountain Prairie Inn & Farms are a fixture at the Dane County Farmers' Market in Madison. Every Saturday morning they can be seen chatting with their many regular customers as they sell high-quality meat from their sustainably raised Highland cattle and Berkshire pigs. For them farming is not just about raising crops and animals and selling them: It is part of a holistic approach to life and earth.

by **GEORGE ZENS**

Fountain Prairie Inn & Farms is located on Highway 16 near Fall River in Columbia County. The beautifully restored late-19th-century Victorian-style house, where John and Dorothy Priske live, also serves as the "Inn" part, a quiet rural farmstead bed-and-breakfast.

The house is surrounded by imposing oak trees; a colorful flowerbed welcomes visitors as they come up the driveway, while, on the other side of the house, a large patio oversees the lawn and a gazebo. A large vegetable garden and hoop house are to the side beyond the lawn.

Behind and to the other side of the house, two big barns, a shed and assorted agricultural machinery indicate that it is indeed a working farm. I point that out because at first and even at second sight Fountain Prairie does not look like most farms in the area.

It is not surrounded by a sea of monotonous corn or soybean fields, but by 280 acres of pasture, tall-grass prairie and wetlands. Its most visible feature is a 50 kW wind turbine that supplies all their electricity and then some. And of course there is the herd of 500 or so Scottish Highland cattle, split into several groups (and on two farms, the other one near Merrimac), larger ones out on pasture, other, smaller ones, in the barns, but with permanent access to the outside.

If Fountain Prairie Inn & Farms is a model of sustainability today, it



Photos by **GEORGE ZENS**

Dorothy and John Priske with one of their main bulls; Highland cattle are fairly docile.

didn't start out that way. In fact, John and Dorothy Priske have a come a long way to develop and realize their vision of farming.

Both have to varying degrees farming backgrounds. Dorothy grew up on a dairy farm in Juneau county ("That's why we don't have dairy cows," she says laughing), while John grew up near Lodi in a family of nine with a father who loved alcohol a bit too much and a mother who had to work very hard indeed to pull the family through.

His family was "really poor". They had a huge garden, "a subsistence farm", from which his mother fed the family first and sold the surplus. On a more commercial scale they grew melons, cucumbers (for the pickle factory in Lodi) and sweet corn. John and his brothers sold mel-

ons to the customers at the Merrimac ferry to earn money for school clothes.

John's grown-up older siblings helped look after the younger ones and occasionally helped out with food from their own farms.

While Dorothy was working on a degree in zoology from the University of Wisconsin, John took a four-month farm short course at the UW, working full time in the process. One day he saw an ad in the paper for a communications job at the Milwaukee Railroad and he decided to apply. He got the job and he was looking forward to make enough money to hopefully be able to start his own farm some day. It was the late 1960s and he was not yet twenty years old.

"I was ambitious and worked

hard," he says.

In 1969 he was offered a promotion to work as a lineman in Chicago and he impressed his superiors enough to be made crew foreman in Idaho two years later at the unusually young age of 22. He and Dorothy got married in 1972 and for the first few years of their married life together, they lived in a boxcar.

"We fished, hunted and gathered, and in five years did not eat anything that we had not caught or harvested ourselves. It was hard work, but it was also an adventure," John reminisces, adding that it was his father who had been his inspiration and teacher for everything related to hunting and fishing.

"We would go out camping in the Pacific Northwest almost every weekend," says Dorothy who occa-



The hoop house and vegetable garden are part of a small business incubator project.

sionally also cooked for the crew.

After five years John got a more permanent job in the Seattle area. They settled down and bought a house.

But then the railroad went bankrupt, and with his severance pay and money they had saved, John went back to school and got a degree in finance.

Not that he was going to make a career of that, though. Instead, he sold vegetables in Seattle for farmers from inland Washington state.

"It's either desperation or inspiration that drives us," he says, without elaborating on which one drove him. "I haven't had a real job since 1980, but I decided that if I was going to work hard, I would do it for myself,"

he adds without any obvious regret.

That was about the time when farmers in the state of Washington started going big-time into asparagus. John researched asparagus farming, thinking that if it worked in Washington, it might also work in Wisconsin. In 1984 he and Dorothy returned to their home state and planted 16 acres of asparagus on his brother Tom's farm in Rio, besides raising other crops and pigs. John farmed while Dorothy worked off-farm.

At the time they could not afford to buy a farm of their own, but in 1986 they heard about a farm for sale in Fall River:

"We were told that the 96-year old owner had kicked his son, who

himself was 70, off the farm for not doing a good enough job farming, and decided to sell the farm," John says. "As they say, in farming, if you want to make a small fortune, you better start with a big one, and this looked like a way to get there. He wanted to sell us the farm for \$300,000, but it was in really bad shape – it was just one large field, there was seed corn stored in the house, underground storage tanks that had to be ripped out, everything was in bad shape."

But they decided to give it a go. They now had 300 acres and started growing the abc of vegetable farming: asparagus, broccoli and cauliflower.

"The farm had the right soil and

plenty of water," says John, "but the broccoli and cauliflower didn't work out anyway."

He expanded the farm into large-scale corn and soybean growing, including custom planting for other farmers, and at some point was working 1,000 acres. They also raised hogs, up to 700 at a time.

"We got farther and farther removed from sustainable agriculture. We also depended way too much on government subsidies, and wanted and needed to get away from that."

Then the price for hogs went through the floor, to the point where they lost money on every hog they sold because they got less for the finished hogs than they had paid for



The wind turbine supplies the farm's electricity.



Shaggy, yes, but also very tasty. Highland cattle are well adapted to Wisconsin winters. It's the hot summer they don't like much.

them as small feeder pigs.

"That's when I decided that I wanted to be the price setter, not the price taker; it was a big change in attitude."

It was also at about that time – the late 1990s – that both their dogs died of cancer

"A lot of things came together at that point," says Dorothy.

She and John took a holiday in New Zealand, where they spent time on a sheep farm and saw a different way of raising animals – not confining them in feedlots, but letting them eat grass.

Back home, inspired by, among

other things, books by Wendell Berry and Aldo Leopold, they adopted a more holistic management approach ("Goals are nothing but dreams written on a piece of paper," as John puts it.) that includes a bigger focus on quality of life.

It also made them realize that working with nature was the right way to successful and sustainable farming:

"Cattle has legs and grass has roots," John explains. "Working with nature, we let the cattle do the harvesting and the fertilizing, and we have restored the natural cycle."

After doing extensive research,

they decided to get Scottish Highland cattle.

"They fit the bill; they are rugged, gentle and they can stay outside during Wisconsin winters."

In fact, it's the summer heat and humidity that gets to them, and this year, the Priskes lost several cows and calves to the high temperatures.

They raise their cattle sustainably, but they are not dogmatic about it. They don't feed them growth hormones or antibiotics as a matter of course, but when members of their herd caught pneumonia this year, they were treated by a vet.

They use rotational grazing, mov-

ing their herds to different parts of the pasture, so that the grass has time to recover and is not overgrazed.

Fountain Prairie's grassland is certified organic, but the animals are not, and while they spend most of their time out in pasture and always have access to grass and hay, they are grain-finished before going to the butcher's.

What was once soybeans and corn fields is now then organic pasture and 60 acres of restored tall-grass prairie and wetland.

"There is a lot of wildlife in the prairie and the wetland, and also in the pasture," says John. "It is great



Cattle grazing in the far background, with the wetland on the far upper left, manure in the center and the bull (lower right) enjoying the scenery.

for hunting and trapping.”

It is part of the Priskes’ holistic view of farming, to integrate different habitats into their land. It’s how farmers should take care of the land.

In keeping with their determination to be price-setters, they sell their meat directly to the end-users (at the farmer’s market for instance) and to restaurant chefs, a practice that started when Odessa Piper, the founder of L’Etoile in Madison, liked their beef so much that she made them her supplier. The tradition continues with L’Etoile’s current owner and chef, Tory Miller.

You won’t find Fountain Prairie

beef (or pork for that matter) at grocery stores, however:

“We don’t sell to stores because all they want to do is depress the prices for the producers and mark them up for the customers,” says John emphatically.

Great believers in spreading the message about the importance of sustainable farming and being good stewards of the land, John and Dorothy Priske also help others get started. Thus the vegetable garden and hoophouse mentioned earlier are part of a small business incubator that they have established on their farm:

“We provide opportunities for people, we try to help them reach their potential.”

The vegetable operation is run by Jon Steiger and Tyson Fehrman under the name of ‘Farm By George’. Fountain Prairie supplies the land, infrastructure, water and manure, while Farm By George supplies the labor and seeds. The proceeds are split, and so far it seems to work out well.

Fountain Prairie is one of only 16 farms to be accepted into the state of Wisconsin’s Purchase of Agricultural Conservation Easements (PACE) program, guaranteeing that the land

will not be used for development.

The Priskes were also named ‘Conservation Farmer of the Year 2011’ by the Columbia County Land & Water Conservation Department, and they are one of three recipients of this year’s UW Arboretum John Nolen Award for Excellence in Ecological Restoration Practices.

They have come a long way on a great journey.

*Fountain Prairie Inn & Farms
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