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What's New

Roads traveled:

Mary Bergin — 6/30/2007 10:30 am

It is John and Dorothy Priske's 35th wedding anniversary, and they had chosen to spend part of the day with me, driving around their farm near Fall River in Columbia County, trying to explain what makes all the work worth it.

Their truck bounces down a long swath of newly cut pasture, then veers through a sea of tall grassland that almost reaches the vehicle's windows. It is hard to know where the pasture ends and 60 acres of restored prairie/wetlands begin.

When John shuts off the motor, all we hear is a happy chorus of twitterings, which is the point of our little trip. "Meadowlarks and bobolinks -- we see a lot of them," he says. "It wasn't that way before," when the Priskes farmed 900 hogs and grew corn.

A diet of 90 percent corn fattened the animals for market quickly, and insecticides followed the corn planters to keep the crop free of pests and natural diseases. It was an efficient operation, but about seven years ago the Priskes decided it wasn't enough to satisfy their soul.

They wondered about their two farm dogs that died of cancer within a six-month period. They took a trip to New Zealand and were amazed at the quality of meat from animals that were grass-fed and brought to maturity slowly.

So when the Priskes returned to Wisconsin, they devised a plan to duplicate this type of farming, slowly transforming cornfields into a nutritious mix of tall-growing grasses.

The 280 acres of Fountain Prairie Inn & Farms today include lush pastures for about 300 head of Highland cattle, a heritage breed -- one that has not been manipulated genetically through generations. Chefs at restaurants from Madison to Sheboygan, Brookfield to Wisconsin Dells serve the dry-aged beef from this farm.

"The Highland is a show stopper," says Dorothy Priske, because of its reddish brown coat, long hair and long horns. Visitors like the looks of the cattle, so the animals are a draw for Dorothy's farmstead bed and breakfast.

The five guest rooms in her 1899 Victorian farmhouse are quiet and lovely, typically decorated with quilts and wallpaper from the era. Only the Suite Times has a private bathroom, which contains a two-person whirlpool, but having a slew of modern amenities is not the point when staying here.

It delights the proprietors when they are able to reconnect people with the land and enhance their understanding of how food gets to the table. They are evangelists for the Slow Food movement, which is all about returning to the way food used to be raised and prepared, in response to corporate food production practices.

"Are we really farmers or environmental activists?" John asks rhetorically. "I guess we're both." To some neighbors, they also were odd, as in "What happened? You used to be good corn farmers."

The transition has been a huge step for the Priskes, who are not flashy risk-takers but are accustomed to challenges. "When you're out on the deep end, there aren't a lot of people with you," John notes.

They were raised on Wisconsin farms, and John long ago sold melons at the Merrimac Ferry

boarding point. "That's how I bought my clothes for school in the seventh and eighth grades," he recalls.

"We were self-sufficient and dirt poor," he says of the eight siblings in his family, "but we always ate well" and knew the taste of good food.

Some people consider July 7 -- that's 07/07/07 -- to be the perfect date for doing something great, as in life-changing. Tory Miller of Madison is no exception.

The chef and co-owner of L'Etoile, one of Wisconsin's finest restaurants, will marry Liliane Calfee that day at Fountain Prairie Inn.

"It was our first choice," Tory says, describing the Priskes as "like family to us" and the setting as "picturesque and peaceful -- a perfect choice" for their wedding, or "just to hang out on a Sunday afternoon."

Dorothy notes that Tory's predecessor, Odessa Piper, was the farm's first customer who bought beef to serve in a restaurant.

"Our intent wasn't to sell so heavily to restaurants, but Odessa bought some short ribs, then shanks. She liked our method of dry aging," and word got around to other restaurateurs.

Both Odessa and Tory have accepted invitations to cook at the James Beard House in Manhattan, and Odessa has won James Beard awards, which chefs describe as the equivalent to winning an Oscar in the culinary world.

Fountain Prairie Inn & Farms is at W1901 Highway 16, at the intersection with Highway 146 in Columbia County. For more: www.fountainprairie.com, 920-484-3618. The Web site includes a list of some of the Madison restaurants that offer beef from Fountain Prairie.

Tory and his sister, Traci Miller, operate L'Etoile and the more casual Cafe Soleil at 25 N. Pinckney St., on the Capitol Square in downtown Madison. L'Etoile routinely fills its menu with local ingredients and lists the producers on its menu. For more: www.lettoile-restaurant.com, 251-0500.

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Some of Wisconsin's finest restaurants serve the Highland beef raised at Fountain Prairie farm. The grass-fed cattle graze as they roam on farm acreage; only a small amount of grain is added to the diet. No hormones or other chemical additives are used.

[View Our Map](#) W1901 Highway 16, Fall River, WI 53932 priske@centurytel.net
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