

Fountain Prairie

Inn & Farms



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What's New

Around the Table

By Vesna Vuynovich Kovach

Lovable, charismatic moptops from the British Isles?

No, they're not the Beatles — they're Scottish Highland Cattle. And you'll find hundreds of them at Dorothy and John Priske's Fountain Prairie Inn and Farms.

Visit Dorothy and John Priske just outside Columbus and you'll find 250 magnificently shaggy heritage-breed beasts on their grassy pastures. At Fountain Prairie Inn and Farms, the Priskes have combined their passion for environmentally sustainable farming with a beautifully restored 1899 Victorian farmhouse, which now serves as the backdrop for their bed and breakfast. Add 50 hogs on 28 acres of tall-grass prairie and 35 acres of wetlands, and you've got yourself a fabulous get away weekend.

For 18 years, the Priskes have been a mainstay at the Dane County Farmers' Market. Their offerings include pork and dry-aged, grass-fed, grain-finished Highland beef — the same beef served at L'Etoile, the Greenbush Bar and several other fine dining establishments.

The Farms and Inn keep the Priskes, married 33 years, busy full time. Dorothy once worked for a stockbroker in Madison but says she prefers farm life.

"All of our stock now is four-legged," she says with a laugh.

What's life like now? Take a look:

Vesna Vuynovich Kovach: Have you always been into sustainable agriculture?

Dorothy Priske: We've done a total switch. We used to do industrial row-crop farming, soybeans and corn. But things didn't seem right to us anymore. After both of our dogs died of cancer in the same year, we thought, 'Oh! — they're the canary in the mine shaft.'

VVK: How do Highland Cattle fit in with your goal of a more natural farm environment?

DP: We had to decide, if we have everything in grass, what's going to eat the grass? That's how we came upon the Highlands. They're known for cleaning up brushy vegetation. They have a tougher tongue and throat than other kinds of cattle. They've been known to take down small trees!

They have two layers of hair, so they don't need housing in winter. They get really shaggy in the winter. They look almost prehistoric when it snows. The snow doesn't melt — it just sits on their back. And as a result of the extra layer of hair, they don't put on an outside layer of fat. Of course, they also make a wonderful attraction for a bed and breakfast. On a foggy, misty morning, they look so cool.

VVK: How would you describe the Highlands' personality?

DP: They're just so sweet. They seem smarter than Holsteins — though I shouldn't say that in Wisconsin! Even the bulls are docile. One of ours is named Lover Boy, and there's a new bull named Rohan, a handsome fella. Then there's Daisy. One of her horns goes up, and the other goes down. We call her "Crazy Daisy."

The lead animal is a really nice cow named Gretchen. Everybody knows Gretchen is boss! She drinks first. When it's time to move them, she leads the way. She breaks up fights between the

cows. We think she's even intervened to keep us from harm when an animal is being aggressive toward us. She gives them a nudge and gets between them and us.

[Regarding aggressive ones] ... Those are genetics we don't want to pass on to the breed. When something like that happens, they end up in the freezer within a few weeks.

VVK: Is slaughtering difficult, emotionally?

DP: Yes. Yes. It's not as hard now that there are more of them. But number 39 was special, and I cried the entire week. They're a heritage breed, and the way to preserve them is to eat them. And it is difficult. But we know that's their purpose. We don't name the cows that we're going to slaughter so that we become less involved. But they are around for at least two years. You get to know them, and some are friendlier than others.

VVK: Does Highland meat taste different from regular beef?

DP: The flavor is incredible. The animal is older, more mature than at the supermarket. And what really brings the flavor up is dry aging for 21 days. Excess moisture evaporates, and the flavor is really intensified. The texture is different, because enzymes break down the muscle and make it tender.

VVK: What do you see for the future of beef?

DP: We're really encouraged about prospects for natural beef. Sales have increased 20 percent in the last year, which I think is a really good sign. No animal by-products or antibiotics in the feed. No hormone implants. We did all those things years ago. I don't know if we'll go for organic certification or not. There are a lot of costs involved, and the federal regulations have been watered down. I believe in the importance of local and sustainable over organic.

VVK: What do you love most about Fountain Prairie?

DP: We like knowing who eats our meat. We really enjoy working together and working at home. We adore the animals. We were talking this morning about how much we love the smell of cow breath. Kind of sweet and warm. I wonder if it makes a difference that they don't eat silage and animal by-products like conventional cattle do [Laughs]. But I'm not going to go around sniffing cows!

I love watching the wildlife — waterfowl, deer, Sandhill cranes. The other day I took a walk with Ace, our English Springer Spaniel. The entire herd followed us. I like to go out and look at the cows, just to sit or stand and see who wants to come over and talk to us. And to see who wants a scratch.

Vesna Vuynovich Kovach is a consummate foodie and loves writing about local food mavens. If you know of someone interesting, e-mail Vesna c/o ANEW at editor@anewmagazine.com.

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