

Sheep from A to Z



The A-Z Farm sheep enjoying a catered lunch of hay. The sheep with black heads are a breed that grows hair instead of wool and is raised primarily for meat.



Troy Antoniewicz holds a pelt while Ray shows a sample of the custom-made blankets that can be ordered through A-Z Farm.

A - Z F A R M



Ray and Alice Antoniewicz didn't intend to become sheep breeders, but today they're that and much more. Not only do they manage over 100 sheep, but twice a year they open A-Z Farm to the public at shearing and lambing time. And that's no small undertaking since the public has embraced the idea to the tune of over 7,000 people in a weekend during lambing season!

When Ray bought the farm 40 years ago, it was a horse farm that had a few sheep. The switch to raising sheep occurred when the Antoniewiczs' four children came along. "We had to make a decision," said Alice. "We could either raise the kids or horses, because raising quality horses took a lot of time and travel. We decided to keep the kids and switched from horses to sheep," she adds with a smile. It was certainly a choice that transferred the love of farming to those kids. Even though all four kids are now grown up, they all help out with the farm in one way or another.

The property includes a large indoor riding ring with attached stables. The facility proved equally well suited for sheep events like shearing and lambing weekends. It provides a large clear indoor space to set up pens and shearing areas and space to care for the ewes and lambs when they arrive. The former stables turn into demonstration areas for chickens, turkeys, baby goats, calves, and hogs. And the attached woodworking shop

(BELOW) In addition to sheep, A-Z Farm also raises Rex rabbits and Leghorn, Barred Rock, Production Red, Aracanas, and Easter Egg chickens. (RIGHT) It's all about the lambs at A-Z Farm for three weeks every spring. (BELOW RIGHT) During the lambing weekends, children have an opportunity to cuddle the lambs and see many other farm animals.



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converts into a demonstration area for local spinners, felters, and other craftspeople. It also serves as a warming area if the weather turns a little chilly. When A-Z Farm is not open to the public, it plays host to a regular stream of special tours and birthday parties by reservation.

Ray and Alice believe it's vitally important to provide an opportunity for children and others to learn more about where their food comes from. They charge just \$2 a person for the shearing event and \$3.50 to attend the lambing barn. "We do this so parents have a place to take their children that's a safe environment where they can learn something. We try to keep it so that anybody of any means can enjoy coming out here and being part of our environment."

It seems easy to schedule a date for shearing the sheep (February 16 was the date this year), but it's slightly more complicated to plan for the Lamb Birthing Barn event. Ray explains, "It takes five months minus five days from the date of conception. A few lambs usually arrive a little early or late, but most show up on time. This year the Lamb Birthing Barn days are March 16, 23, and 30."

The public events are not the primary concern in setting the breeding schedule. "By the time the grass starts growing outside, we want the barns to be empty. We want them outside in a natural environment so we schedule them to be born in March," said Alice. "Then we have April to make sure they've got a good start, and by then the grass is growing enough so the lambs can go outside and be with their mothers."

Agritourism isn't Ray and Alice's only business. A-Z is clearly a working farm. They sell breeding stock, feeder lambs, freezer lambs ranging from whole lambs to individual cuts, mutton (a growing segment of their business), lamb pelts, wool, roasting chickens, farm fresh eggs, and rabbits, both for eating and as pets. They sell only at the farm and it's a good idea to call to arrange for pickup. They use environmentally sound, sustainable management practices throughout their operation.

One unique thing they offer is custom-made wool blankets. "We don't really sell the wool blanket," explains





Troy looks over the sheep as they eat.



Spinning is just one of the demonstrations you can see during the lambing weekends.

Ray. "We sell the wool and the customer specifies the size and color of the blanket. Then we send the raw wool to MacAusland's Woollen Mills on Prince Edward Island in Canada. It takes roughly three months to get the blanket back." You can choose anything from a lap blanket to queen size and either solid colors, tweed, or a white background with colored stripes.

Farmers today have to be creative to make ends meet. A-Z Farm has struck a balance that combines producing lamb, chickens, eggs, wool, and what has turned out to be their most successful product, agritourism. The best thing is that the Antoniewicz's have not only created a day-on-the-farm family outing, they have snuck in more than a little education with a big spoonful of fun. It's all waiting for you just outside Oregon, Wisconsin, at A-Z Farm.

• IF YOU GO •

Lamb Birthing Barn
 March 16, 23, 30, 2008
 A-Z Farm, LLC
 1820 Schuster Road
 Oregon, WI 53575
 (608) 835-5553
 www.a-zfarm.com

CELEBRATION LAMB (BONE-IN OR BONELESS LEG)

- 1 tablespoon soy sauce
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 1 clove garlic, crushed
- 1 teaspoon pepper
- ½ teaspoon ground ginger
- 1 whole bay leaf, crushed
- ½ teaspoon dried thyme
- ½ teaspoon dried sage
- ½ teaspoon dried marjoram
- 1 bone-in or boneless leg of lamb

In small bowl, mix together soy sauce, oil, garlic, pepper, ginger, bay leaf, thyme, sage, and marjoram. Place lamb on rack in roasting pan. With sharp knife, make frequent slits in surface of lamb. Move knife from side to side to enlarge pockets. Rub herb mixture into each slit. Rub any remaining mixture over roast. Roast in 325° F oven for 20 to 25 minutes per pound or until meat thermometer registers 145° F for medium-rare, 160° F for medium or 170° F for well-done. Remove roast from oven, cover and let stand 10 minutes. Internal temperature will rise approximately 10°. Pan drippings can be used in gravy or skimmed and served au jus.