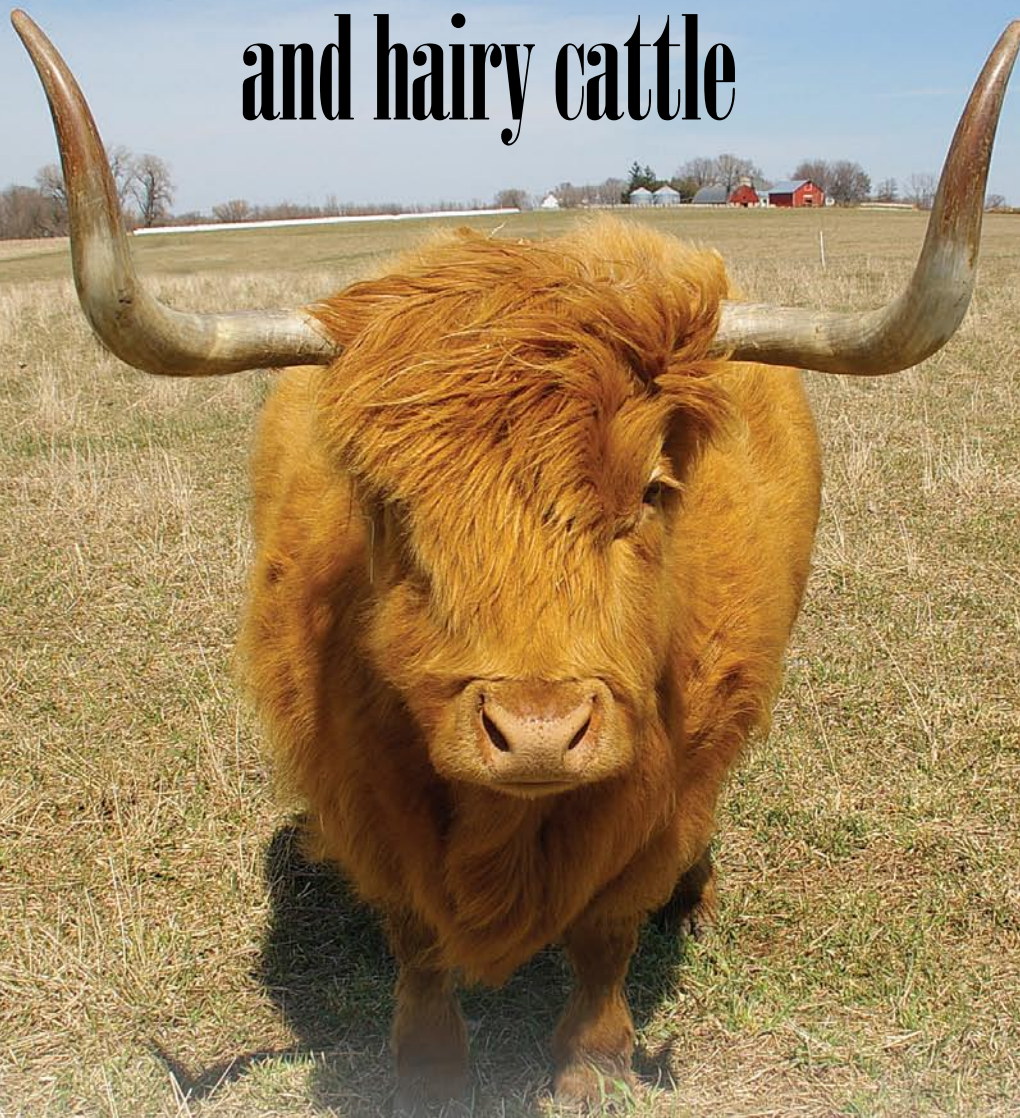


Heritage, restoration, and hairy cattle



by Henry Verden



Being a steward of the land gets a lot of lip service these days. Some people are more committed to it than others. Every once in a while, you meet someone who not only commits to it but makes it their duty and their life. They attack it with a zeal that's astounding and, at the same time, humbling for the rest of us. Encarta Encyclopedia defines a mission as "An aim or task that somebody believes it is his or her duty to carry out or to which he or she attaches special importance



and devotes special care." That pretty well describes John and Dorothy Priske of Fountain Prairie Inn & Farms.

The Priskes were both farm kids. John grew up near Lodi and Dorothy near Juneau. Their jobs took them to Seattle, Washington, but their hearts never left farming in Wisconsin. In 1986 they moved back to Wisconsin to buy a farm. However, the farm they bought was not exactly what they had in mind. John described it. "When we bought this farm,

John Priske's favorite place to sit overlooks the farm, the pothole prairie, and the pasture. It's a place that brings you back to the beauty of the land and reflects the soul of the farmer.



it was one field, and it was all corn and had been for 20 or 30 years. It was kind of a sterile piece of ground. Basically, it was worn out." They continued raising row crops for a few years and then two things happened that would change their lives. The first was seeing both of their dogs die of cancer within six months of each other. The other was a trip to New Zealand where they were introduced to grass fed beef.

The Priskes original reason for getting the Scottish highlanders wasn't primarily commercial. "They have a very tough mouth and throat. They can eat almost anything," explained Dorothy. "We learned of a farm where the cattle helped with the process of restoring an oak savannah. We had

an area that we wanted to restore, especially the stream running through our property. We wanted the highland cattle to clear out unwanted plants, till it up with their horns and hooves, and fertilize it." John added, "The riparian area (the buffer of vegetation between water and land ecosystems) is full of canary grass and willow brush. We hoped the cattle would work up the soil so we could reseed with a grass that was better for wildlife."

It proved a successful strategy. Along with the stream, the Priskes



were determined to restore 61 acres of prairie wetland, called a pothole wetland, that had been drained by the previous owner. Ditches that drained the area were blocked and the area was left to refill with water. An abundance of wildlife now thrives in the wetland including killdeer, geese, ducks, and more.

A prairie wetland is no good without a prairie, so 28 acres were restored to tall grass. "We had two small remnant prairies just east of the wetlands. We hand-harvested seeds from those and also planted four warm season grasses and 28 forbs (flowering herbaceous plants such as clover, sunflower, and milkweeds)."

It's not just about land and livestock for John and Dorothy, it's about people too. They feel a critical part of their effort is education. They often speak to schools and groups about what they're doing at Fountain Prairie Farm. The Priskes also converted their 5,400-square-foot farmhouse into a bed and breakfast so that people and families could experience a farm firsthand. John explained, "We don't have an estate with a mansion, we have a working farm with a big house. Part of our philosophy is to spend a lot of time taking guests out onto the land and share what we're doing. We will learn something from you or you can't go home and you will learn



The 5,400 sq. ft. farmhouse B&B is spacious and comfortable with 5 guest rooms, one with a private bath and 2 person whirlpool bath.

something from us. Our farm is a place where you utilize all of your senses. We talk a lot about that. You get to see what's happening around you, take in the honest smells of the farm, you hear the birds, you just fire up all of your senses." Even the layout of the farm is meant to encourage guests to safely interact with the land and animals. The livestock paddocks are laid out so that wide lanes run between them leading to the restoration areas, perfect for a relaxing stroll in the great outdoors or a picnic.

Whether it's talking to a classroom full of kids, hosting a wedding on the farm, or answering endless questions from a curious writer, the Priskes do so with grace and enthusiasm. The thing that strikes you most is that John and Dorothy really like what they're doing and what they've already accomplished. You can tell by looking at John that he and the farm share the same soul. "Our job is our life. We're here, we live it every day," said John. "Our commute is from the bedroom to the kitchen, then I only have to go a short way from the kitchen and I'm on the job. What's better than that?"

• IF YOU GO •

Fountain Prairie Inn & Farms

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www.fountainprairie.com

Fountain Prairie Farm meats are also available at the Dane

County Farmers' Market and online through

www.heritagefoodsusa.com.



An online extra!

Download more recipes at
www.BountifulCupboard.com

FOUNTAIN PRAIRIE HAM AND ASPARAGUS PUFF PASTRY QUICHE

- 1 sheer frozen puff pastry—thawed for 30 minutes
- ½ cup diced Fountain Prairie Farms deli ham
- 1 cup grated Swiss cheese
- ¼ pound asparagus, cut into 1" pieces
- 1 large egg
- 2 teaspoons chopped fresh tarragon
- ¼ teaspoon black pepper
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- pinch of nutmeg
- ½ cup sour cream

Preheat oven to 400°F. Line a baking sheet with parchment paper. Unfold puff pastry on paper-lined baking sheet. Blanch asparagus in boiling water for 2 minutes. Drain well. Top puff pastry with ham, asparagus, and cheese, leaving a ½ inch border all around. Whisk together egg, tarragon, salt, pepper, and nutmeg. Whisk in sour cream. Spoon over toppings on puff pastry. Bake until pastry is puffed and golden and toppings are set, about 25 minutes.

Serves 4.



This two-day-old calf will soon join Fountain Prairie's herd of 300 cattle.

HIGHLAND BEEF

Originally developed in the highlands and western coastal regions of Scotland, highland cattle were bred to be hardy with compact bodies, short stout legs, widespread horns on both males and females, and a long, shaggy coat. That shaggy coat is also ideal for our cold Wisconsin winters as it provides enough insulation that Scottish highland cattle can stay outside year-round. In fact, they prefer it.

Because of genetic advantages, Scottish highlands are resistant to many bovine diseases and health problems. Long eyelashes and forelocks protect their eyes from insects reducing pink eye and cancer eye. Stress diseases are much less of a problem as highlands do not stress easily.

Despite a somewhat fearsome appearance, highland cattle are even-tempered and intelligent. Many have been trained to the halter without too much effort.

Because of that warm coat, their meat is very lean. They don't need the subcutaneous fat that other breeds need to keep warm. The cattle thrive on grass and their meat is considered especially flavorful.

Scottish highland beef is one of the great undiscovered foods but that will undoubtedly change as more people become aware of it. Succulent and tender, highland beef has a unique flavor and is featured on the menus of some of Madison's finest restaurants including L'Etoile and Cafe Soleil, The Madison Club, and Brasserie V.