

FARMING FOR THE LONG HAUL

LEGACY LEADERS | BY KEVIN SPAFFORD

Family business builds brand, then markets to high-end grocers

MAINE can be a forbidding place for agriculture. The farmers who call it home are hardy and self-reliant.

For Lisa Webster and North Star Sheep Farm, producing top-grade lamb is worth it all. It's as much a way of life as it is a profession. As she says: "Family farming means sustainable farming."



Lisa and husband Phil, fourth- and fifth-generation Maine sheep farmers, respectively, know their land, the local market

and today's discerning buyers. They acknowledge that the challenges and opportunities of farming in New England may be a lot different than farming corn and soybeans in the Midwest, but the values they share with their brethren across the U.S. are very similar.

FAMILY OPERATION

North Star Sheep Farm is the quintessential family farming operation. It is considered one of Maine's

oldest continuously operating sustainable sheep farms. "My goal is to replicate the beauty of low-impact sheep farming," Lisa says, "and see more emphasis on life on the farm, as opposed to just saving farmland."

Just over a third of U.S. lamb consumption is concentrated in the cities surrounding Boston and New York. However, most of the meat produced to satisfy that demand comes from the western United

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"Family farming means sustainable farming," says Lisa Webster, who raises sheep with husband Phil in Maine.

States, Australia, New Zealand and Iceland.

"Since our area is the No. 1 lamb-consuming region in the nation," Webster says, "Maine is

well-suited to fill that need, without bringing lamb in from elsewhere."

Lisa and Phil are leading the way with diversified farming practices. They source locally grown foods and provide sheep products to restaurants and markets in the Northeast.

LEARNING TO ADAPT

A large part of survival is learning to adapt. Starting out in 1999 with some experience raising purebred sheep and an ambitious plan to grow the operation, the Websters established an annual goal of producing 15,000 head. Lisa's original plan called for establishing 15 Maine farms carrying the North Star label. Now

with five, they supply commercially grown, organic-pasture-raised lamb to 47 Whole Foods stores in New England, and many upper-end restaurants in the Northeast.

The Websters' goal is to sustain the farms well beyond their lifetimes. They've got a good start, and history is on their side. One of the farms was cleared in 1707, and it is adjacent to the country's first water-powered woolen mill.

"Sheep that grazed these fields provided wool for blankets that kept the patriots warm during the winter months of the American Revolution," Lisa says.

For the Websters, the

nature of farming is learning to adapt and grow, given a locale's limited resources. Opportunities abound in agriculture. All it takes is some imagination, the willingness to take on risk, a lot of hard work and a plan.

Like North Star Sheep Farm, succession is about honoring the past, profiting today and securing tomorrow. **FF**

Spafford and his firm Legacy by Design (legacy-by-design.com) serve the succession planning needs of farmers, ranchers and agribusiness owners. Contact Spafford at 877-523-7411 or KEVIN@LEGACY-BY-DESIGN.COM.