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Yaks find home on Vt. range

Mad River Valley farmers introduce exotic bovines to state

By Lauren Ober, Free Press Staff Writer

WAITSFIELD — Driving along Vermont 100 toward Sugarbush, you can expect to see certain things: postcard-perfect barns, lush pastures, sparkling brooks. You do not expect to see woolly yaks lounging in a hillside paddock.

But cruising past the Vermont Yak Co. just north of the village of Waitsfield, yaks are exactly what you'll see. The fledgling enterprise's new herd of royals, a black and white breed of yak, is occupying the roadside paddock functioning as a sort of living advertisement for the business.

The yaks are a pleasant surprise. If you ignore the white farmhouse just beyond their pasture and the cars parked in the driveway, you might think you were in the Tibetan Plateau on some exotic adventure. But you are in Vermont, home to the only yak herd in New England.

The Vermont Yak Co. is the brainchild of three families in the Mad River Valley who wanted to find a way to bring an old dairy farm back to life. Ted and Susan Laskaris, Dave and Paul Hartshorn and Rob and Kate Williams knew each other casually, but never anticipated going into business with one another.

The yak idea came when the Williamses took a trip to Montana and ate yak meat. Rob Williams, a professor at Champlain College, loved the meat, as did his kids, and thought yaks would be the perfect ruminant for Vermont.

He pitched the plan to Dave Hartshorn, an organic farmer whose property is adjacent to the Laskaris' Steadfast Farm. Soon the three couples and their children were knee-deep in all things yak.

Yaks are particularly well-suited to Vermont weather and terrain. They thrive in the cold weather and they rarely if ever want to go inside a barn. The climate in the dead of winter is much like that of the Himalayas where the animals originally came from.

Compared to cows, yaks are far more efficient grazers. Three to four yaks eat what one cow will eat and they never graze the pastures down to nothing, Rob Williams said.

Yak meat, which will be the focus of Vermont Yak Co., has one-sixth the amount of fat of beef and 40 percent more protein. Because the meat is considered exotic game, consumers are willing to pay far more for it than beef, with yak tenderloin fetching upwards of \$30 a pound.

Of the six partners in Vermont Yak Co., only one had any farming experience and it was not with pastoral farming. The rest have jobs that have nothing to do with agriculture. There's a therapist, a stay-at-home mom, a college professor, a chief technology officer and an executive director of a nonprofit. That might have dissuaded some people from following through with the idea, but not these families.

"All six bring complementary skill sets to the table. It's cool. It's a very neighborly process," Rob Williams said.

It's one thing to have an idea for a company, but it's quite another to take the initiative and make it happen. To make the yak farm a reality, they needed yaks.

At the time they were looking for a herd, a farmer in Minnesota was looking to get rid of his. The partners got their first 24 animals for what Kate Williams calls a "smokin' deal," and recently added about a dozen more to the herd. A bottle-fed baby sells for about \$1,000 to \$1,500, while a breeding bull sells for around \$3,500.

The partners have really jumped into their project headlong. Susan Laskaris sports a yak pin on her hat; Rob Williams spouts kitschy yak puns that one can't help but laugh at.

"We're just chillyaksing with the yaks," Williams said on a recent afternoon.

As expected, the six partners' children are head over heels about the yaks, especially the few babies that roam the farm. As 11-year-old Emma Laskaris drove the Gator around the farm, she "yakked" about her new buddies.

"They're really cool. A few of them are a little mean. They'll charge you," she said, "but they're pretty nice."

The first few animals were taken for slaughter last week and the partners expect to slowly get local chefs on board by letting them sample the products before they are ready for mass distribution next spring. In addition to meat, the partners anticipate shearing the yaks for their hair, as well as breeding animals for hobby farms around the region.

"This is clearly a market that has been untapped," Williams said. "Yaks are the perfect Vermont bovine."

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