

Making Farming Work Above Franconia Notch

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Cooperative Extension Lends a Hand



KRISTINA (KRIS) AND BERT VON DOHRMANN ARE THE OWNERS OF OTOKAHE FARM. LOCATED IN JEFFERSON, N.H., THE FARM FOCUSES ON RAISING REGISTERED BELTED GALLOWAY CATTLE WITH THE HELP OF VALUABLE SERVICES PROVIDED BY UNH COOPERATIVE EXTENSION.

Kris and Bert von Dohrmann, co-owners of Otokahe Farm, a small, family-operated cattle farm located in Jefferson, New Hampshire, wake up and see the White Mountains from their kitchen window. On one rainy morning in May, the scene is even lovelier with clouds snaking through the canopy of deep green.

If you think you might want to wake up everyday and see the White Mountains up close from your kitchen window, the von Dohrmanns will happily educate you about the realities of running a family farm in the state's North Country. First, it's a lot harder than

it looks – and it looks hard. “Working a small family farm is a 24/7 job,” says Kris von Dohrmann. You have to be self-reliant. “However, you cannot do it alone.” When a storm levels your barn or one of your cows decides to calve at noon on Easter Sunday – both unexpected events happened to the von Dohrmanns – your whole community becomes first responders.

The von Dohrmanns are grateful for good neighbors, but they are no less grateful for the presence of UNH Cooperative Extension staff such as Steve Turaj and Sue Buteau, who help to keep the couple in business. “Small producers generally eat the product they make, so we don’t make anything bad,” avers Kris von Dohrmann. Such farmers may not have giant teams of experts, she adds, but they deal with small volumes and are very meticulous. “I can tell you what steak came from what animal, when it was born, and where it liked to graze,” says von Dohrmann.

A cattle farmer for more than 20 years, von Dohrmann started her own herd of registered Belted Galloways in 2003. Two years later, she married Bert von Dohrmann, a retired forest ranger with whom she runs the farm.



BERT VON DOHRMANN REMOVES A TRAY OF BEEF JERKY FROM A DEHYDRATION OVEN SET UP IN A SPECIAL PROCESSING BUILDING ON HIS AND HIS WIFE, KRIS'S, FARM.

Several years ago, Turaj, a specialist in food and agriculture in the UNH Cooperative Extension’s Lancaster office, reseeded the von Dohrmanns’ pastures with nutrient-rich grasses that flourished in the mountain air during different times of year. He also designed an elaborate network of paddocks to support rotational grazing and allow

them to make the most of their limited acreage. (The von Dohrmanns own four and half acres and barter with neighbors for 20 more.)

Two years ago, searching for “value added” uses for their product, the couple decided to move into the commercial beef jerky market. Confronting a Sargasso Sea of federal and state regulations, often at odds with each other, they turned again to Turaj, who steered them through the regulations they would have to meet to build a special processing building – complete with commercial kitchen, a freezer for storing beef, and a dehydrator for bringing beef to a precise water density.

In order to sell commercially, the von Dohrmanns also needed to become certified in food safety. Here, again, they reached out to another Cooperative Extension educator, Buteau, a food safety expert who guided them through sanitary inspection, food safety course, and food production issues.

“If we’re concerned about supporting local producers, we owe it to ourselves to ask the same questions of them as we do multi-nationals,” says Buteau matter-of-factly. “What I admire about Kris and Bert von Dohrmann is that they are not out just to make a profit, but also to make a really good product. Food safety is prime concern and never more so than with meat.”

Thanks to Turaj and Buteau’s counsel, the von Dohrmanns built their state- and USDA-approved kitchen and began testing their jerky project on some *very willing* subjects who included friends as well as members of the Bretton Woods ski patrol. “They were going through about 50 pounds a month, so I guess we knew we were on the right track,” says Bert von Dohrmann, who immediately assumed the role of chief cook and bottle washer of the jerky business.

Today, Otokahe Farm sells four different flavors of jerky and has added more acreage in the hope of expanding their business in the coming years by using the Farm Fresh Network to sell to restaurants and hotels as well as individual consumers.



BELTED GALLOWAY CATTLE GRAZE IN THE FIELDS NEAR OTOKAHE FARM IN JEFFERSON, N.H. ORIGINATING IN SCOTLAND, THE GRASS-FED COWS ARE AT HOME IN THE RUGGED TERRAIN OF THE STATE'S NORTH COUNTRY.

Belted Galloways, or “Belties,” are short-legged, thickly built cows that arrived in the United States from the rugged and hilly seacoast region of Scotland. Distinguished by a white ring or “belt” around their midsection, they are renowned for their docility as livestock and for their lean and flavorful meat – the result of a double hair coat that reduces the need for them to build a thick layer of fat.

Given their origins, Belties feel right at home grazing on the sunny, wind-swept grasses of the Jefferson Highlands. Kris von Dohrmann, whose encyclopedic knowledge of Belties has earned her a place on the national council of the Belted Galloway Society, estimates the number of Belties in the U.S. at 15,000. At a given time, between 18-28 live at Otokahe Farm (“Otokahe” comes from the Lakota Sioux for “new beginning”) along with two mares named Tiger and Baby, a St. Bernard named Monk, and a mouser named Coral.

The couple runs a tight ship: the cattle are meticulously bred not only for their “structure” and meatiness, but also for a genetically predisposed willingness to play well with others in the barn. While a core herd of breeding stock live out their natural lives roaming Otokahe’s fields or being sold to neighboring farms in need of their own breeding stock, the others spend a year and a half or so – most Belties reach adult weight by age two – before being culled and turned into steaks, stews, burger, and other “freezer” products.

With fuel and feed costs rising during the past decade, Turaj estimates that the number of commercial farms operating in New Hampshire have dropped about 20 percent, to 134. “It’s not always so sweet as people might imagine,” he says of the business side of

small farming. “It can be a real roller-coaster ride,” with those sticking it out “doing so because they love it, or it’s a family tradition.”

But they aren’t naïve to the challenges. That’s why farmers such as the von Dohrmanns protect themselves by diversifying into vegetables, yogurt, or jerky. “So we have to travel farther to see a doctor or go to the bank...” reflects Kris von Dohrmann, brushing the hair back from her eyes and leaving her train of thought unfinished as a late afternoon breeze stirs and cows low as though picking up the scent of a new shower hiding behind the nearest peak.

Links of interest:

[Otokahe Farm](#)

[Belted Galloway Society](#)

[UNH Cooperative Extension](#)

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