

Dinner on the Hoof

Greenfield Highland Beef

by Sylvia Fagin

Each spring, Janet Stewart prepares a mammal unit for her first-grade students at Morristown Elementary School. On the final day of the unit her partner, Ray Shatney, appears with one of their Highland cattle. The students examine the enormous, caramel colored animal in order to answer Stewart's questions.

"What do we know about mammals?" she asks the students.

"They have hair or fur!" they reply enthusiastically.

"Is this a mammal?" she queries, gesturing to the shaggy animal.

"Yes!" they call in unison.

The students are likely a bit wary of this animal, which, unlike most other cows, bears a gigantic pair of horns on its head. Shatney and Stewart raise Highland cattle, a breed originally from northern Scotland that's characterized by elegant horns and a long, thick, double layer of hair. The shaggy hair hangs in their faces and lends them an air somewhat akin to a mastodon.

Shatney and Stewart don't keep these animals around solely for the education of Morrisville's lucky first-graders. Proprietors of Greenfield Highland Beef, they raise the animals for meat—a lean, flavorful beef so popular they exceeded their first year's sales projections by 800 percent.

When the couple wrote the business plan for their grass-fed beef business, they expected to butcher two or three animals in their first year. Instead, they butchered 24 and expect to double that number in this, their second year.

Their success, according to Stewart, is due to two factors: The social quality of Vermont, where people want and appreciate high quality, humanely raised food; and the Highland breed, whose genetics lend a specific flavor profile to the beef.

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Highland cattle have fur, so they don't need a layer of fat to stay warm in winter; this contributes to meat that is extremely lean. Differences in their connective tissue, compared to other breeds, keep the meat tender. And because the animals are raised for at least two years before slaughter, the meat becomes very flavorful, Stewart explains.



Janet Stewart and Ray Shatney, with silent partner. Photo by Sylvia Fagin.

She has raised them for over 40 years. Stewart's connection to the Highlands is a bit less direct. She and her late husband raised cattle; when their children were young, the couple offered each child a calf. One son wanted a Highland, so a trip was made to Greensboro.

Years later, after her husband had passed away, Stewart called upon Shatney for his tree-trimming services. They got to talking about cattle and breeds and when she heard that he had a herd of Highlands in Greensboro, well—there could only be one such herd in Greensboro. "The rest is history," she smiles. Shatney moved some of his herd to her Plainfield farm, where they complete the landscape. "It seemed empty without animals," she notes.

Each location nurtures a herd of cows, steers, babes, and one bull. "Lance is the key to this herd," Stewart says, noting the 2,200-pound bull in the Plainfield pasture. Recently,

learned a lot about where some of these sayings come from," Stewart laughs. Lance won't get more than a tail's length away from the cow until he's "settled" the cow—impregnated her, or at least made a good faith effort. Stewart notes that these details are not part of the first-grade mammal unit.

When not teaching, Stewart manages the marketing, matching the right cut of meat to the right retail outlet—burger to Restaurant Phoebe, steaks to Ariel's, tenderloin to The Kitchen Table, and a little bit of everything for their very loyal customers at the Capital City Farmers Market in Montpelier. "It's such a stable, appreciative market," she notes. "We could not do this without the farmers' market."

When Shatney's not grilling beef at the market for potential customers to taste, he clears trees from electrical lines for the Washington Electric Co-op and has his own tree-trimming business. As mentioned above, Stewart is a schoolteacher. Both put in 12, 14, sometimes 16 hours a day—seven days a week. "I wouldn't say either of us are proud of it," Stewart says. "The goal is not

beef grows, they can spend less time working off the farm.

It's easy to see why they'd want to. The Plainfield location sits atop a hill, offering a scenic view of the Worcester range to the west and Spruce Mountain to the east. Stewart's gardens of roses and black-eyed susans invite a slowing down. Shatney talks in wistful tones of finding time to go fishing once in a while. Besides, this lifelong farmer is happiest in the pasture, caring for his animals.

As one of the calves comes bouncing, literally, up a hill, Shatney cracks a smile. "That's fast food," he quips.

Greenfield Highland Beef can be found every Saturday at the Capital City Farmers Market in Montpelier, and online at www.greenfieldhighlandbeef.com.

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