

## A new breed of Farmer: A Junction City man is one of the few who can claim the certified organic label for sheep

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JUNCTION CITY - A dozen sheep crowded around John Neumeister as he loaded their feed trough with organic alfalfa and grass. Neumeister, a lanky Ohio-bred man, pulled one of the lambs forward, trapping her briefly with one arm and running his fingers over her back.

"Feel that?" he said. Through the thick fleece, a layer of fat cushioned the animal's spine, a good indicator she was ready for market. Neumeister should know. Steeped in a sustainable agriculture ethic, he's been selling lamb to high-end restaurants and natural food markets for more than 20 years.

His farm, Cattail Creek, lies nestled between gentle hills rising up into the Coast Range west of Junction City. On 17 acres divided into paddocks, Neumeister grazes Romney and Dorset, breeds that originated in England, and Churro, the hardy and now rare breed imported to the Americas by Spanish explorers that the Navajos subsequently built their economy around.

The sheep at Cattail Creek graze on pastures that get no chemical treatments. Neumeister occasionally supplements their diet with Eastern Oregon grass and alfalfa. He has built a reputation for providing consistently good cuts of meat all year.

"He's the only guy I'll ever buy lamb from," said Kevin Hylands, who owns Koho Bistro in west Eugene. "It's fabulous. It's grown sustainably, and it's very consistent as far as the flavor and marbling, the fat content ... We have customers from all over the world and they are just amazed by the rack of lamb, how tender and flavorful it is."

Neumeister's fans aren't limited to the Willamette Valley. For 21 years, he has been selling to Chez Panisse in Berkeley, Calif. The restaurant was founded by Alice Waters, who pioneered the notion of locally grown, sustainably raised food. Her preference for specialty lettuce is the reason mixed greens are just as common in grocery stores today as the once dominant pale heads of iceberg lettuce.

But up until last year, Neumeister's customers had to trust him on his farming methods. He didn't qualify for the "organic" label and he hadn't applied for the lesser-known certification provided by The Food Alliance, a nonprofit group that recognizes farmers who reduce or eliminate pesticides and who practice conservation and habitat preservation techniques on their land.

Things are different now. Neumeister's business has exploded - with customers from Seattle to New Jersey - with help from several key changes during the past few years. He has linked up with a partner in Albany to help supply the restaurants and markets that sell his meat and, last year, his lamb qualified for both the "organic" and Food Alliance labels. For the first time in his 21-plus years on the farm, he has been able to quit the second job that is a financial necessity for most small-farm operators.

## **Always on board**

Neumeister, 58, grew up on a sheep farm in Ohio. After studying film at the University of Michigan and taking the obligatory '60s-era sojourn in San Francisco, he has spent most of his adult life trying to re-create the farm of his childhood.

He moved to Oregon because he had friends here. He got a master's degree from Oregon State University in crop science and took on a succession of old rental farms. He bought Cattail Creek in the early 1980s.

From the start, Neumeister said, he was committed to progressive farming techniques. He served on an original committee that wrote the meat standards that came to be used by Oregon Tilth, the nonprofit group that provides the third-party confirmation that farmers are meeting organic standards.

But those certification requirements are difficult for sheep farmers to meet.

Ruminant livestock, on the one hand, fare well in the Willamette Valley's lush grass pastures. But those pastures also host the internal parasites that plague sheep, and there is no organically approved "silver bullet" to get rid of them. Treat a pregnant ewe during the last third of her gestation for worms and the lamb can't be sold as organic, Neumeister said.

Of Oregon's approximately 3,100 sheep growers, only three, including Cattail Creek, have organic certification.

Neumeister's current silver bullet: ducks. As the sheep move from paddock to paddock munching down the grass, the ducks follow, eating the parasites.

But long before he got to this point, Neumeister's farm attracted a loyal following. In 1984, because of a chance connection at a small-scale farming conference, he linked up with the buyer from Chez Panisse, who visited Cattail Creek on a sunny May afternoon and liked what he saw.

"I've been a regular supplier to them for 21 years," Neumeister said.

That fact might surprise those familiar with the restaurant's "buy local" ethic, but the restaurant can't meet its year-round need for lamb through its California growers, said restaurant sous chef Phillip Dedlow.

Oregon's climate has an extended grass growing season, and Neumeister tinkers with his flock - Dorset ewes have a longer breeding cycle, and he puts a "teaser" ram among the ewes - to make sure he has fresh lamb available 52 weeks a year.

His reliability as a supplier and skill as a communicator make it easy for Chez Panisse to keep coming back, Dedlow said.

"There's feedback and discussion, and we like it that way. You can discuss how he's raising them. You're talking to the producer instead of the broker. Getting close to the source is important."

Neumeister isn't the only Chez Panisse supplier in Lane County. The restaurant also buys pork from Paul Atkinson's Laughing Stock Farm, a Territorial Road outfit that received a favorable write-up in *The Atlantic* last year.

## **Expanding the business**

The official "organic" label was less important when Neumeister's customer list was fairly short. For many years, he was selling between 50 and 60 animals a year.

But five years ago, interest in locally grown products erupted. More people began buying their food from farmers' markets. Restaurants wanted to be able to tell their customers where their food came from and how it was grown. Colleagues encouraged Neumeister to try marketing his lamb in Portland. Soon, he was making delivery runs to such notable restaurants as Wildwood, Three Degrees, RiverPlace Hotel and Genoa.

His 17-acre farm couldn't produce more than 50 or 60 animals a year, so he found a partner in Kirstin Holbo of Rain Sheep farm in Albany. Together, they increased sales to between 1,300 and 1,400 animals a year.

In 2001, Neumeister's gross sales totaled \$50,000. By 2004, the number jumped to \$220,000. This year, he's projecting \$350,000 in sales.

"A lot of it is that the market was ready for it," Neumeister said. "A lot of people are interested in getting clean, natural stuff."

But Neumeister also has a way of staying engaged with chefs, chatting them up when he drops off the lamb, passing along innovative serving ideas that he's heard or read about. Lately, he says, the restaurants are interested in the duck eggs he now sells.

"You'll walk in there with \$600 worth of lamb and they're, like, 'Do you have any duck eggs?'"

And his local success has pushed him into a broader national market. Now he sells all over the country, thanks to a connection with an East Coast distributor. That's why outside certification of his farm has become important, he said.

"As long as I'm personally in the restaurant or at Saturday Market standing in the booth and talking to the customers, they are able to build trust in the relationship. That extends to the product. If I'm just dropping off product at the Kiva or the point of sale, there's no human contact there and they rely on the package to tell them that this is what they're buying."

### **Recognizing conservation**

While Neumeister's Junction City lambs have the "organic" label, they also carry another label that extends to his partner in Albany.

That label comes from The Food Alliance, a nonprofit that for the past eight years has provided third-party certification for growers who don't quite meet the stringent requirements of the organic standard. The alliance certifies growers who have reduced or eliminated the use of pesticides, conserved soil and water resources, protected wildlife habitat, provided safe and fair working conditions and humanely cared for livestock.

Neumeister's partner sometimes grazes her sheep on pasture that isn't certified organic. The Food Alliance certification rewards growers who reduce their use of pesticides, and also recognizes other stewardship issues.

At Cattail Creek, about 1,000 feet of the south fork of Ferguson Creek crosses the land, and Neumeister has worked with the Long Tom Watershed Council to improve the creek, which is habitat for cutthroat trout.

Twelve years ago, Neumeister simply erected fences along the creek to keep his sheep out. But that approach brought on an infestation of invasive species, notably roping vines of blackberries. The fencing made it hard to get in and mow, and did nothing for the real problem.

Like many creeks that meander through the narrow valleys of the Coast Range, Ferguson Creek had been straightened by previous landowners to open up more pasture. Channelized, it undercut its banks. The result was deeper, faster-moving water and poor fish habitat.

Neumeister has pulled down the steepened banks with a Caterpillar to restore some meander, and has planted at least a dozen different local species of trees along its bank to help cool the flow, with the goal of creating places where fish can breed and rest.

While the Food Alliance certification requires that kind of habitat work, Neumeister said he has always felt an obligation to the land.

"I didn't just happen to be here. I chose to buy this land, and it is my responsibility to take care of it," he said.

It's probably too soon to tell how big an impact the two certifications are having on his sales. With dozens of different food labels, only the savviest shoppers really understand what they're buying, he said.

That's an opinion shared by Larry Lev, a University of Oregon agriculture professor who specializes in small farms and farmers' markets.

"The whole thing becomes really complicated for the individual consumer," he said. "With so many labels, I don't think there's very many people that would be able to tell you what it stands for and what they're buying."

Lev, who has followed Neumeister's career, attributes his success to skillful marketing and the relationships he's built.

"John's making money because he's a smart guy," Lev said. "He's not just producing lamb. He's marketing lamb and marketing his personality."

The "buy local" trend that has fueled Neumeister's success will likely continue, Lev said. But even as people want to know more about their food and where it comes from, there's a counter-trend in the other direction, evidenced by the growth of Wal-Mart's grocery stores that emphasize low prices above all else, he said.

"There are a lot of people who don't pay attention to food. Those people are trying to minimize the amount of time they spend thinking about paying for it," Lev said.

Neumeister knows he is vulnerable to food trends that can come and go. Because his lamb costs more, the nation's economic swings impact him.

Neumeister also recognizes the irony that the "buy local" phenomenon has brought him a broader national market, a fact he often discusses with Paul Atkinson of Laughing Stock Farms.

"I tell him it's local-plus," Neumeister said. "It's not about local. It's about honest, sincere people establishing direct relationships with customers."