



Yaks

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site, the nutritional value of Yaks are off the charts, right?

<SB> They're absolutely fantastic! It's really lean red meat. They're really nutrient dense, really high in iron, magnesium and protein. Protein is amazing. Our ground burger is 100 percent Yak, and it's 2-3 percent fat, so 97-98 percent lean. When we make burgers, they don't shrink at all. The meat quality is fantastic. It's not gamey at all like venison, it's just a good, clean red meat. That was another factor in us getting into Yaks. We ordered some from another rancher and grilled it up and tried it and it was fantastic. There's no one in our area who is raising them, so we've been able to fill that void.

When did you make the conversion to Yaks?

We started our herd in 2020 with 13 head. Toward the end of the summer, we bought another 18 or 20 and we bought a bull, and now we're up to 70. We were building up our herd numbers and that's why we haven't promoted or marketed our products.

Are Yaks comparative-

ly priced with cattle when you're looking to increase your herd?

It is a higher price. A cow takes around 18 months to reach market weight, and a Yak is three and a half to four years, so basically double the time.

And like you said, you can't just drive to a neighboring farm and pick up a couple head of Yaks, right?

Exactly.

<CB> It's a small community.

Where's the closest Yak ranch from here?

<SB> There's a gentleman up in Momenue who has 8 or 9 head. I think he's mostly into breeding. Another interesting fact is that they're very efficient animals. They eat about a third of what a cow eats, so we're able to run more head per acre and they don't overeat the forage. They eat down to a certain level and then we're able to move them. They don't destroy the ground they're on. They're light and very efficient.

What's a full-sized Yak weigh?

<SB> A female cow's market weight would be around seven or eight hundred pounds, and

a steer would be nine hundred to thousand pounds.

They eat solely alfalfa?

<SB> We fence in one crop field a year and run our Yaks on it. Then, we'll move them the next year. We plant primarily alfalfa, and sometimes we'll throw a few grass species in. We're growing alfalfa primarily for the nitrogen to grow corn in that crop field. Primarily in the summertime, they'll graze on alfalfa, and then we do have some set aside acres that we've planted in alfalfa grass mix, so in the wintertime, they'll eat alfalfa/grass hay.

The alfalfa allows you to minimize the chemicals you have to add to the soil, and it's just one big circle, right?

<SB> Exactly. The alfalfa crop ahead of corn is at least 80% of our fertilizer. We're able to do a very low input corn crop because of that.

Are you looking to continue to grow the operation, or are you about where you want to be?

<SB> You know, we're always open to growth. <smiles> We've been doing the livestock side slowly and strategically. We had an opportunity to double the number of head we

have, but we wanted to make sure that we got down what we were doing. Then, once we knew what we were doing, we began to scale up from there.

Has your dad always been a farmer?

<SB> Technically, this is a first-generation farm. Our dad isn't really from a farming or livestock background, and neither are we. My dad owned a turkey operation outside of Christman for about 10 years, and then, he also owns the Blossom Basket Florist, in Urbana. So, he's done that. He's always had a little bit of farm ground around the turkey operation, so when we were in high school, we sat down and figured out to farm the ground ourselves. We started from nothing, and we've slowly pieced together the buildings and equipment over the past 15 years.

In a way, starting out something as unique as a Yak farm, you don't know what you don't know, right? So, you can try anything because you just don't know, right?

<CB> No one around here knows, either! <laughs>

<SB> We've worked with a vet clinic over in Covington, IN

and they've been really good to us. They were kind of out of the box because they'd never seen a Yak, either.

Did your farm neighbors give you a raised eyebrow when they first heard about all of this?

<CB> Oh yeah, we're pretty uncommon! <all laugh>

<SB> We're the weird organic farmers anyway, so the Yaks probably fit right in! Honestly, we've had several neighboring farmers who were driving by stop and ask us what we've got out in our pastures.

As far as the grain component of your operation, you raise food grade corn. Do you mess with soybeans at all?

No, right now our crop rotation is spring oats. We plant medium red clover with our spring oats, and we go in and harvest our spring oats in late June or early July and then the medium red clover is already growing underneath it, so that's our nitrogen for our corn crop going in the next year. We've experimented with soybeans, winter peas, winter wheat and almost did sunflowers. We've experimented with a lot of different types of grains.

You really hit it with the oats, right?

Small grain is really a key component of any organic farm. We get our corn out too late in the fall to plant wheat, so we were searching for another crop and oats have worked so far. This is only our second year, so we're still kind of cutting our teeth in it, but so far, it's been working.

Do you have a local market for that, or do you have to haul it quite a ways?

The oats go to Iowa. I've sold wheat to a mill in South Carolina. I sold white corn last year to a processor out in western Nebraska, so all of our market outlets are an hour to eight hours away, so we had to build a couple of grain bins to store it on the farm.

Are you guys married?

<SB> I am married.

<CB> I'm single.

<SB> The Yak bachelor! <all laugh>

Is there anything you would like to add?

<SB> We're extremely proud of our product, and what we're able to have available to the local community. I think we've got a premium meat that I've excited to have people try and enjoy.



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