

Mountain-Raised Organic Lamb

By Jim Ruen, Contributing Editor

Antonio and Molly Manzanares are some of the last sheep ranchers in New Mexico who take their sheep to mountain pastures for the summer. They were one of the first to recognize the value of going organic and secured the website address - www.organiclamb.com - early on.

"We've pastured on the mountain since 1982 and have been marketing as organic since 1998," says Antonio. "We were not far from organic anyway, and we could see it was the coming thing. We saw the marketing advantage."

Organic certification includes rules like no antibiotics and feeding only organic grains and forage. It severely limits livestock medications. That can be hard for sheep producers in areas with high humidity and higher disease and pest pressure.

"We are in a drier area, so we don't have a heavy parasite load," says Molly. "The flock is on the mountain, moving once a week for 4 months. Then we rotate them on fresh pastures the rest of the year. If we have to treat an animal with antibiotics or other unapproved medications, we cull her out."

Working with organics has been a learning experience, but then so has sheep production. Molly came from a cattle ranching family, and Antonio has a degree in psychology and a grandfather who raised sheep. He started with a flock of 14 ewes while in school. By the time he and Molly married, he had 90 ewes. Today they have more than 1,000 ewes in herds of Rambouillet and Churro breeds.

"We made big mistakes and learned the hard way," says Antonio. "We would buy old ewes and run them across about 8,000 acres on the mountain for the summer, keep the lambs and sell the ewes. Other producers loaned us sheep on credit to get us started in fine wool."

How they market their lamb and wool has changed over the years. Where they once sold all their wool and lambs at once, now they market much of their wool and all of

their lamb direct to consumers.

"We joined a non-profit, community organization called Tierra Wools to create a market for local wool," says Antonio. "In 1983 we moved it into an old store, first one room and then gradually expanding. We added a weaving shop and many more wool products."

Eventually as other wool-producing members lost interest or stopped raising sheep, the non-profit became a for-profit. Today it is wholly owned by Molly and Antonio. Products offered include hand-dyed Churro and Rambouillet yarn, some of it dyed with all natural plant dyes like black walnut, indigo and yellow onion skins. Other products include lamb pelts, organic wool blankets, warp for weavers, roving, fleece for hand spinners and rugs. All of it is labeled as coming from an organic certified flock.

A similar progression occurred on the meat side. "We would sell all our lamb in November and stretch the income out all year," recalls Antonio. "Now we process 50 to 60 head every 2 weeks from November through March or April."

When the Manzanares were first told there was a local market for their lamb, they couldn't believe it. "We processed 6 lambs and took them to a farmers market. It opened at 7 a.m., and by 9 we were sold out."

The difficulty with both enterprises is processing. In the case of the Rambouillet wool, much of it is washed in Texas and processed into blankets in New England.

"The Churro wool had a better market, but we had about 4 years of Rambouillet fleeces stored up," says Antonio. "We refused to sell it for the price the big buyers were paying. Molly found a contact in Massachusetts who helped us."

Initially they shipped him 1,000 lbs. and requested it be made into blankets. The Manzanares took them to farmers markets and sold them quickly.

"Next we sent 2,000 lbs. of washed wool and had blankets in more colors made and



Antonio and Molly Manzanares were one of the first in their area to market mountain-raised organic lamb meat and wool. Today their business is thriving.

sold them too," says Antonio. "We finally bit the bullet and sent 26,000 lbs. of wool to be washed and processed into blankets, all 4 years of Rambouillet fleeces."

"I think when we die our kids will still have blankets to sell," jokes Molly.

The Churro wool used to be processed in New Mexico, but the processor closed. They found a new processor when Karen Hostettler took a weaving class at the shop.

"She and a business partner started Mountain Meadow Wool Mill in Buffalo, Wyo.," says Molly.

Mountain Meadow fits the natural marketing message of their company, Shepherd's Lamb. Hostettler uses biodegradable soaps and non-petroleum based spinning oil and recycles half the water used in scouring the wool. They currently process 15,000 lbs. of wool each year.

Today people come to Tierra Wools from all over the country to buy Shepherd's Lamb products. They also have a thriving online business. Machine-woven blankets start at \$145 for a 45 by 45-in. lap-style and go to \$925 for a hand-dyed, handwoven, 3 by 5-ft., Rio Grande style-blanket. Yarn starts at \$18 for a 2-oz. skein and goes up from

there, depending on the type and how it was dyed. Churro lamb pelts sell for \$400 and handwoven rugs range from \$350 to \$1,550.

Selling the meat is not a problem, with well-established direct sales and also retail sales through co-op stores and restaurants. Processing is the tough part. The nearest organic meat processor is in Durango, Colo. The owner has certified organic pasture near his processing center. This allows the Manzanares to bring a load at a time to him.

"We travel 120 miles to process the lamb and then go 90 miles or more the other way to sell in Santa Fe," says Antonio.

Lamb is stored in a walk-in freezer for weekly sales, but in the fall, customers from around the country order whole lambs shipped frozen. Local customers in New Mexico get their lamb fresh or frozen as desired.

Check out the Shepherd's Lamb video at www.farmshow.com.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Shepherd's Lamb, P.O. Box 307, Tierra Amarilla, New Mexico 87575 (ph 505 795-3671; shepherd@organiclamb.com; www.organiclamb.com).

Old Or New Wool Processed At Minnesota Woolen Mill

The St. Peter Woolen Mill in Minnesota cleans and cards wool for individual sheep producers as well as for owners of old wool-stuffed bedding.

"We have a lot of local sheep producers who bring in a single fleece at a time or wool from an entire, small flock," says Hank Kearns, St. Peter Woolen Mill. "We will scour the fleece before carding it and make wool batting for quilts or comforters, as well as custom processing it for hand spinning, felting or weaving. We can also make it into custom bedding."

Prices for custom processing of new wool starts with washing at \$4/lb. and carding at \$8/lb. Contact the company for a detailed price listing.

Kearns encourages larger volume wool producers looking for custom processing to contact the St. Peter Mill's sister mill in Montague, Calif. The Woolgatherer Carding Mill is a larger scale wool processor.

"The Montague plant has a 1-bale (500 lb.) minimum due to the set up required with the larger equipment," says Kearns. "However, for larger amounts it can be more economical."

While the Woolgatherer Carding Mill offers custom carding, it also sells a variety

of wool batting from locally sourced flocks, including domestic dark wool batting. Batting is also available from New Zealand produced wool, including organic certified wool scoured with organic agents. The mill also markets a variety of other fibers.

The St. Peter mill has more than 150 years of experience with wool and will also process mohair, llama and other exotic fibers. Kearns notes that these fibers often require adding some wool for carding.

One thing that really sets the smaller mill apart is the work done with old wool batts. Over time wool batts used in mattresses, comforters, pillows and even quilts can settle and collect dust.

"We custom wash, card and process them," says Kearns. "We'll refresh them like new for quilts, mattress toppers and pillows, adding new wool if needed. We also do custom recovering with custom stitching patterns."

Sheep producers can have their own new wool used to make a variety of bedding products by the mill. Prices for those services can range from \$67 for a completed crib-size comforter to \$240 for a king size.

The mill also makes and markets its own Nature's Comfort brand wool bedding, using all domestic wool, most of it from the



Carded wool exiting a carding mill at the St. Peter Woolen Mill in Minnesota.

Midwest. The comforters, mattress pads, pillows, batting and neck rolls all come with a 30-Day Better Sleep Protection Plan. It includes a full refund if not 100 percent satisfied.

The bedding is available from the company, as well as through retailers. The Deluxe mattress pad is priced from \$271 to \$497, depending on size. Comforters range from \$140 for a crib size to \$366 for a King. Virgin natural wool batting is priced at \$21/lb., and

re-carded batting is \$17/lb.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, St. Peter Woolen Mill, 101 W. Broadway, St. Peter, Minn. 56082 (ph 507 934-3734; toll free 800 208-9821; www.woolenmill.com); or Woolgatherer Carding Mill, 610 S. 11th St., P.O. Box 155, Montague, Calif. 96064 (ph 530 459-5900; www.thewoolgatherer.com).