

NON-DAIRY LIVESTOCK

Marketing sheep and lambs

By Ulf Kintzel

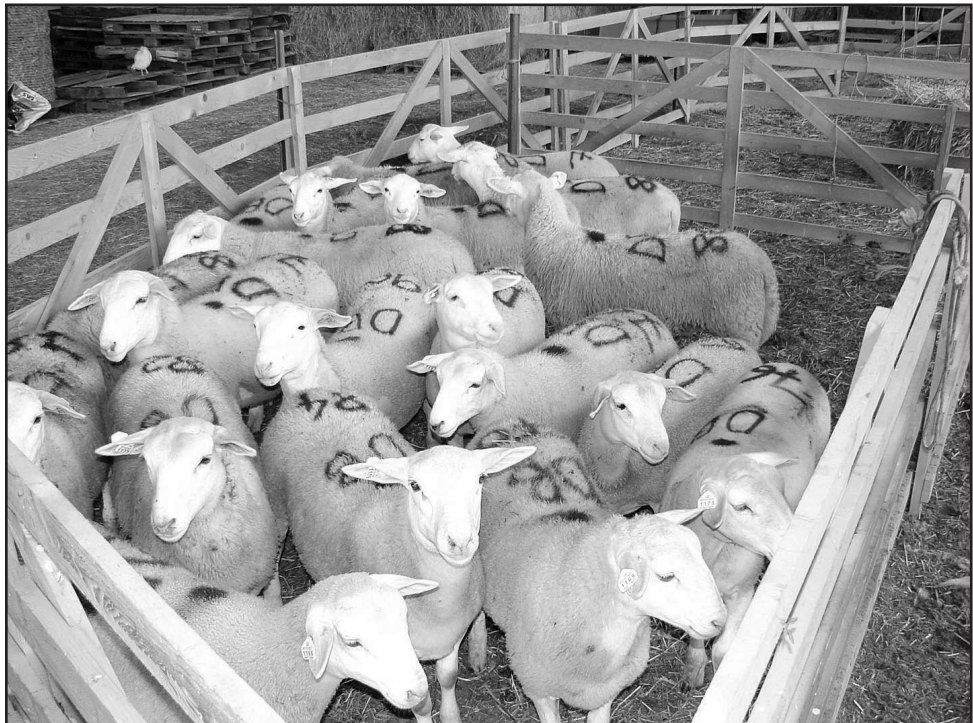
If you are a sheep farmer producing market lambs you can consider yourself fortunate. The demand on the domestic market is bigger than the supply. Our fiercest competitors in Australia and New Zealand have their own share of problems and their production is down as well. The US government has for the most part not subsidized or otherwise influenced lamb and mutton prices, which I consider a good thing. It has kept marginal producers out that would otherwise influence the market

price unfavorably. In addition, market prices for lambs have not only been high for many years now, they have also been quite stable.

When I moved in 2006 from New Jersey to upstate New York I had to find almost all new markets. In New Jersey I sold most of my lambs during the months of October through December at the local livestock auction in Hackettstown. Prices were usually good and I fetched most often an above average price. I had little reason to look for other markets.



Both Texel sheep (front) and White Dorper Sheep (rear) produce lamb carcasses with excellent prime cuts.



This group of market lambs was entirely raised and finished on pasture.

Photos by Ulf Kintzel

That changed when I moved to the Finger Lakes Area. Although there are a couple of sales barns in reasonable distance to me, it appeared that their main focus was on beef and pork. Only a few sheep seemed to be at times at the closest auction. That bears the risk that there is no good lamb buyer there at auction day and somebody snatches them away for a bargain - his or her bargain, not mine. So, I was keen to find other markets and explored a variety.

CUSTOM BUTCHERED LAMB

I run a website that lists my products. This website is also listed on two other websites: localharvest.org and eatwild.com. I have moderate success with my website. I do get customers through it but the growth is slow. Yet, you get very faithful customers this way, customers who return year after year.

I prefer to sell whole or half lambs instead of individual cuts. Individual cuts need to be USDA inspected and you need to keep an inventory which occupies freezer space. I do just a little of this to attract customers. On the other hand, custom butchered lambs can be processed by a state inspected butchering facility. There are more of them and I happen to have a real good one near me. These lambs are always pre-ordered and only occupy the freezer for a little while.

I price these lambs as follows: I start by determining what I want to net per lamb. Then I add my transportation costs and my processing cost to the price. That is the price for a whole lamb, custom butchered, vacuum wrapped, frozen and labeled. A half a lamb costs slightly more than 50 percent of the price for a whole lamb to encourage people to buy whole lambs. For additional orders I offer 10 dollars off.

I had some customers still from New Jersey who initially came all the way out here to pick up a lamb. Most of these relationships faded over time with the exception of one. This one asked if I would deliver to New Jersey. I answered that I would if she finds me customers who buy a total of at least 10 lambs. She did and I now have a buying club in New Jersey that I served twice in 2008. The orders are in for the first delivery in 2009. Thus, I hope that this evolves into a bigger and steady business in the future.

There are also ewes that need to be culled. I try to have as much different sausage made of them as I can. That always sells well. Ground and stew meat from grass-fed ewes is also a hit. Since the ewes ate only grass, legumes and herbs the meat is much milder yet distinguished in taste and does not remind people of mutton.

DISTRIBUTORS

The bigger share of my market lambs is sold through distributors. One distributor is a pro-

ducer of sheep cheese and lamb meat herself. She has a good market in New York City and was in need of more market lambs that are grass-fed. I supply some of these lambs that she needs.

In addition, I am fortunate to have met Stephen Winkler of Certified Natural New York (CNNY) in Rodman. He is the man who has brought me numerous customers. In order to be able to sell under his label I had to meet certain production and animal welfare standards. It included also a farm visit. Here is how he describes his business:

"CNNY is a sustainable local food network of family farms, producing quality livestock that are transported by family run transportation companies, processed in family run slaughter plants, and distributed to high end restaurants and retailers throughout the North East. CNNY has brought together all animal types under strict certification protocols and quality standards. The program is built for the sustainability of N.Y. enterprises, communities, and farms."

BREEDING STOCK

A market that I just started tapping is the one for breeding animals such as ewe lambs, yearling ewes and rams lambs. I started upgrading my flock from a Texel flock to a White Dorper flock. White Dorpers shed and there is no need for a shearer. Many people see that as a plus in times of low wool prices and a lack of sheep shearers. More importantly, Texels as well as White Dorpers are excellent breeds for a forage based sheep farm. This is important in times of high feed prices.

Moreover, grass-fed is the new organic. In fact, it goes beyond organic. Most of my customers care about the grass-fed part of my operation; very few ask if I am organic. I reach a number of my customers who buy breeding stock through my website. Another good way of advertising them is writing articles in various publications such as this one. A third option of advertising breeding rams and ewes is by paid advertisement in sheep farming publications and breeders listings.

Last but not least, I have a herding trial each year on the first Saturday in October. This trial is admission free, spectators are welcome. It is a German herding trial that reflects a shepherd's day in a miniature. A flock of 200 sheep is used. This trial, although fairly new in the area, has gotten a lot of attention. We always have more than 100 visitors and get some good free press in addition. In the end, that too is good for business.

Ulf Kintzel owns and manages White Clover Sheep Farm (www.whitecloversheepfarm.com) in Rushville, NY where he breeds grass-fed White Dorper sheep.

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