



Couple gambles on beef cattle

Ranch grows in Northern Maine

BY JULIA BAYLY
BDN STAFF

Erin Parisien has the heart and soul of a gambler. Now she and her husband, Richard Nielsen, have gone all in, raising and selling beef cattle in northern Maine, and they're betting the area's appetite for locally produced beef will pay off.

The couple founded Aroostook Beef Co. in 2014 after moving to Maine from Nebraska and purchasing land in New Canada, just south of Fort Kent.

"We started off with Black Angus beef," Parisien said over breakfast at a local diner recently. "That's what we raised in Nebraska. That's what we know."

A native of Maine, the 28-year-old rancher moved as a young girl to Nebraska said cattle ranching was never anything she'd given thought to as a career, much less in Maine.

"I was a city kid," Parisien said. "I grew up just outside Omaha, and in high school I thought cow tipping was a real thing."

For a time, she planned to head to Las Vegas and score big playing poker. She even saved up the money to fund the venture.

But when her fellow poker partner backed out, she found herself working at a diner, where she met Nielsen, an experienced cattleman. The two eventually decided to go into the cattle business as a team.

At first, she said, they were looking at land in Montana, but visits to the St. John Valley — where Parisien has family — and the availability of land that met their criteria changed those plans.

"Northern Maine is actually good beef country," Parisien said. "It's working pretty well. There is open pastureland and a lot of water. In fact, when I first went out on our pastures and saw water actually bubbling out of the ground, I thought that was the neatest thing ever."

Roughly half the ranch is wooded, and it's in those shady woods where most of the cattle spend hot summer afternoons.

Days at Aroostook Beef Co. start at sunup, with feeding and watering the 100-plus member cattle herd and tending the large flock of chickens and several pet goats.

With the recently warm and finally rain-free weather, haying has begun.

"We do give them a lot of treats," Parisien said. "So if they hear us coming, they'll usually come running."

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JULIA BAYLY | BDN
A calf at the Aroostook Beef Co. maneuvers through the herd toward some treats.



ASHLEY L. CONTI | BDN
Keith Bodine pours a sample of Sweetgrass Farm Winery and Distillery's apple brandy in Union recently.

Distilled to the essence

Farm-fresh wine, spirits made in Maine

BY ABIGAIL CURTIS
BDN STAFF

Keith and Constance Bodine's journey toward operating a distillery on a bucolic farm in Union was long and circuitous and included detours in Napa Valley, Florida and even China.

But fans of the couple's award-winning spirits and complex, delicious fruit-based wines are just glad they made it to Maine to create Sweetgrass Farm Winery and Distillery in the end.

Two of those fans, Deb and Ed Maxwell of Brookfield, Massachusetts, stood at the long, wooden bar of the tasting room that overlooks the rolling green hills of Union on a recent July day. They enthusiastically sampled the gin, wines and some of the other offerings meticulously crafted on the property. The Maxwells had visited before, on a prior Maine vacation, and made sure to come back to the distillery on this year's trip.

"It's fantastic," Deb Maxwell said of the spirits she sipped on the sunny summer afternoon. "Everything is such high quality, and I like how everything is done in such small batches. It's local, and I love it."

That kind of feedback is music to the ears of Keith and Constance Bodine, who pride themselves on making only things they love at Sweetgrass Farm, located what seems like a world away from where they met as freshman students at the New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology in Socorro, New Mexico. After graduation, Keith Bodine got a job in New Hampshire, working as a software engineer, but it didn't take long before he wanted to make a career change.

"After five years there, Keith decided he couldn't stand what he was doing," Constance Bodine said. "He wanted to make wine."

But his first homemade batches were terrible, his wife recalled, and she urged him to learn how to do it right. So he headed to the University of California at Davis, which is known for its winemaking program, and got a master's degree in oenology. After that, Keith Bodine worked for a while in California but wanted to get back east with his growing family. They wanted to raise their three kids in Maine, where Constance Bodine's family was



ASHLEY L. CONTI | BDN
Sweetgrass Farm Winery and Distillery is located in Union.



ASHLEY L. CONTI | BDN
Sweetgrass Farm Winery and Distillery's Back River Gin won the Bronze Award of the American Distilling Institute in 2013.

from, but getting there was circuitous.

They spend time in Virginia, where Keith Bodine worked as a winemaker, and China, where he helped develop that country's wine industry. After just a year abroad, Constance Bodine had to come home to take care of her sister, who was paralyzed in a car crash. Keith found a job making wine on Long Island, New York, then at a winery and distillery in Florida. Finally, after another stop in Massachusetts, the couple began searching for a place to buy in Maine.

In 2005 they found the old Carroll Farm in Union, a 66-acre former dairy farm and apple orchard that borders the Medomak River. They fell in love with the property and decided it was the right place to start their small winery and distillery.

"We really, really enjoy the peace of it all," Constance Bodine said.

More than a decade later, time has proved them right. Their signature Back River Gin is made with Maine blueberries, among other botanicals, and Wine Enthusiast Magazine called it "creative and sophisticated."

The couple also is proud of their cranberry gin, Calvados-style apple brandy, wines and liqueurs. On the farm, they grow some of the apples, rhubarb and maple syrup they use and buy much of the rest from other Maine farmers.

Until now, they've only been able to sell their spirits in Maine, but recently they have contracted with HUB Beverage, a Boston-based fine craft spirits distributor, and have expanded their sales to the Bay State.

"We're so happy to have our gin in Massachusetts," Constance Bodine said. "It's a big deal for us."

Maine facility not going cage-free

State continues probe of Turner farm

BY JULIA BAYLY
BDN STAFF

While one of the country's leading egg suppliers has announced a plan to transition to "cage-free" systems, the company won't be making changes to its facility in Maine — the same facility that was the focus of an undercover filming operation alleging animal cruelty there.

According to the announcement released earlier this month by Pennsylvania-based Hillandale Farms, the company is shifting its focus from traditional to cage-free systems in reaction to consumer demands. Construction is currently underway at Hillandale's Ohio and Connecticut egg-production facilities on the new, cage-free housing and is expected to be complete sometime in 2017.

However, the facility in Turner, Maine, which Hillandale operates and leases from Austin "Jack" DeCoster, has no immediate plans to also convert to cage-free housing.

"Any expansion at any Hillandale facilities must be cage-free," Hillandale spokesperson Melanie Wilt said. "But because we lease the facility [in Maine] we don't have the full ability to make those changes there now."

However, should any future expansion take place in Turner, it would include construction of cage-free housing for the chickens, she said.

A company spokesperson said it has nothing to do with the video released last month by the Humane Society of the United States

"Consumers are asking for [eggs from] cage-free raised chickens," Wilt said. "In response to the marketplace, Hillandale wants to supply that product, so it makes sense for us to do this."

On Monday a company spokesperson said it has nothing to do with the video released last month by the Humane Society of the United States. For four weeks in May a whistleblower secretly videoed conditions in the 70-building Turner egg production facility.

That video, according to Paul Shapiro, HSUS vice president, showed chickens "crammed into cages, dead birds rotting in cages with live birds actually laying eggs on the dead birds, massive piles of dead chickens, birds with their heads stuck in cages dying from dehydration inches away from water, massive amounts of rodents [and] numerous other horrors."

Since taking over operations at the facility a year ago, Hillandale has made improvements to the chickens' cages, updated the barns on the premises and expanded employee training, Wilt said.

Both the HSUS and Hillandale called for state and federal investigations into the video's allegations.

The state's investigation is ongoing. On Tuesday, John Bott, director of communications with the Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry, said his department does not comment on open investigations.

At the federal level, on July 19 the HSUS received a letter from the United States Food and Drug Administration saying the FDA had last inspected the Turner facility in 2010, when it found the company — then operated by DeCoster — failed to take steps to prevent the transfer or introduction of Salmonella enteritidis among the poultry houses and insufficient documentation of biosecurity measures and pest control.

In October 2010, according to Sheehan, the FDA received a letter from the poultry facility's management listing its responses and corrective actions in response to the FDA's findings.

In his most recent letter to the HSUS, Sheehan did not reference the animal rights groups' most

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Organic farmer to head up Maine Grain Alliance

BY KATHLEEN PIERCE
BDN STAFF

As an organic farmer focusing on lettuce, Tristan Noyes seems an unlikely choice to head up the Maine Grain Alliance.

But with a fresh burst of energy and a passion for grain growth in Maine, the 33-year-old farmer from Caribou is writing a new chapter for the Skowhegan-based organization. Now in its 10th year, the Maine Grain Alliance continues to unite and strengthen working efficiencies of growers, millers, bakers and brewers.

"It's a part-time job and a full-time commitment," said Noyes, who recently took over for founder Amber Lambke. "I'm super proud to be part of it."

Noyes, whose parents run a flow-

er shop and greenhouse in Aroostook County, has operated Gromaine, an organic farm, with his brother Jon Noyes for three years. Lately he's taken a sharp interest in corn and wheat. And he wants to increase the momentum.

"The local grain economy is on the verge of exploding across the state," he said.

That's in large part because of the Maine Grain Alliance and its Kneading Conference, which celebrates 10 years in Skowhegan July 28 and 29. Noyes will be overseeing the event and artisan bread fair July 30, which fills Skowhegan State Fairgrounds with seductive aromas.



Noyes

"The alliance has done a lot to inspire everyone from bakers to maltsters to researchers to farmers. There is a piece of this that is very much about community building. I was so struck with the board of directors, blown away with how passionate they are," said Noyes, who lives in South Portland.

And the feeling is mutual.

"Tristan grew up in northern Maine in a farming family who taught the importance of socially responsible environmental and economic stewardship of our land. He is familiar with how to build community and partnerships that strengthen the opportunities around healthy food access for the region," said Lambke in a prepared statement.

As a junior at Bowdoin College, Noyes co-founded the school's or-

ganic garden. Planted on land owned by the Brunswick Topsham Land Trust, it was so successful, the college eventually moved the garden to the center of campus. It's been thriving for 13 years.

Looking to expand into grains for his business, Noyes came across Maine Grain Alliance while conducting research on Fort Kent Golden Corn. The Maine Grain Alliance helped Gromaine increase its supply of flint corn seed.

"In reading the newsletter, I saw they needed a new director. It seemed like a perfect match. I have such a vested interest in seeing the local grain economy grow," he said.

Lambke had that same vested interest and stepped away to focus her attention on running Maine Grains, out of The Somerset Grist Mill. Both directors are

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