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## **Heather Ridge Farm**

### ***“A new farm that’s 200 years old”***

***Carol Clement***

That’s my husband John’s way of describing our farm. I usually call it a “diversified grass-based farm.” We’re both right.

Heather Ridge Farm is located on the former Wilson Hulbert dairy farm, on Broome Center Road where the vista opens up to the panoramic view of the Catskills. This “hill farm” had been a family dairy since the early 1800s and operated in the same family for generations until the mid-1980s when the federal milk buyout program was the end of many such businesses. I was a neighbor on an adjoining property, sandwiched between two family farms and overlooking more in Bates Hollow below. I raised feeder pigs and lambs and kept bees on my 15 acres next door, while I ran a small marketing agency. My home was surrounded by several two-century-old farms, but they were suddenly all going out of business.



A few years later, I purchased the land after Wilson and Marian Hulbert quietly passed away. I wasn't sure exactly what I was going to do with the property, but I was determined to save it from developers, who were

circling like sharks. Around that time, I was hired to produce a videotape on rotational grazing, a farming method that some thought might help the remaining dairy farms survive. I interviewed a dozen farmers, mostly dairy, but also sheep farmers, who patiently explained on camera for the benefit of other farmers how rotational grazing worked, how it lowered their expenses and capital outlay, how they had less need for tractors and chemical additives, and how their animals were healthier. I not only was excited to get this information to other farmers; I thought, I could do this.

Race ahead to 2000, and with a lot of studying, visiting other farms, and the help of farmer mentors, my husband and I made the commitment to build the farm into a full-time business. Using rotational grazing, also known as managed intensive grazing, we would bring the old dairy pastures back into production. This system allows a diverse combination of animals to harvest their own feed, fertilize the fields, and “free range” in a relatively stress-free environment. (Interested readers can find out more in the popular books by Joel Salatin). The fresh air, fresh water, fresh grass, and constant rotation of small groups of animals keep them in a healthy environment, minimizing stress. And all the outdoor labor keeps us, the farmers, healthy. There’s no tractor on this farm, though we have hired one for two days each year. This method of rotational grazing is said to be healthy for animal, environment, farmer, and consumer.

We decided that we would concentrate on direct marketing to the customer, so there would be no middle man. We would plan to stay small, concentrate on the quality of our farm for them. We would be diversified for them. We would be diversified, not having all our eggs in one basket! We sell from our informal “farm store,” at a couple farmers markets, and to several area restaurants.

Our farm produces all grassfed beef and lamb, and pastured pigs, chickens, and turkeys. “Grassfed” means the animals eat nothing but grass (or hay off season). Cattle and sheep are ruminants, with stomachs built to digest grasses, and only in recent history have they been fed grain to boost milk production or fat marbling, often compromising their health. “Pastured” means they live out on grass, eating as much grass, bugs, roots, etc. as they want, but are supplemented with a grain mix, which pigs and poultry need. We use a grain mix with no medications or hormones, purchased from a supplier who uses as many locally grown grains as feasible.

Most of what we do could qualify as organic, but we are not certified as organic. We don’t feel that we need to be certified because we sell directly to the consumer. We don’t need third-party verification when the customer can come to the farm, can talk to the farmer, and see the animals.

Our cost of production is high, as any small-scale, labor-intensive project would be, and the resulting cost of our products is more than conventional supermarket food. It’s the true cost of the food we produce, since our production is not subsidized, not made more “efficient” through the use of artificial fertilizers, growth enhancers, regular antibiotics in feed, confined and regimented quarters, or other means. Like any other kind of farming, this is a real commitment and an all-consuming lifestyle.

There is a growing consciousness in a portion of the market seeking this kind of commitment from the farmer. These are people who are concerned about what is in their food, how the animals are raised, and the impact on the environment. They believe that getting food raised locally pollutes the environment less than food that is trucked across country or internationally, and having local food available is a form of national security. They want to know “their farmer,” be able to see the production, and establish a trust that the food they are getting satisfies all these issues.

Of course, it wouldn’t sell if it didn’t taste great and wasn’t presented well. We compete on quality and farming methods. We start with the best animals we can get and treat them as well as we know how. We process most of our meat with a mobile meat processing unit, or butcher shop on wheels, that comes to our farm. (Our farm

is one of only four licensed in New York State to use a mobile unit). Our certified kitchen allows us to make our own sausages and do other processing as well. This helps us maintain a level of quality throughout, from growing the animal to the finished product.

All we farmers need each other. There is a need to “eat local,” as well as to produce some foods more efficiently to feed many. For agriculture to survive in this area, we small specialty farms need the large dairy farms to stay in business, too. We need the feed stores, the supply houses, the truckers, and the rest of the farm infrastructure to stay in place, no, in fact, to grow, if our farm business is to survive.



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March 4, 2010

