

People & Places

Sheep ranch caters to specialized market

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

ALBANY, Ore. — Knitters and other fiber artists can be highly particular about their wool requirements, which is no problem for the folks at Iron Water Ranch.

The farm near Albany, Ore., raises seven different breeds of sheep with wool characteristics suitable for producing everything from clothing to rugs.

Kirsten Holbo, who runs the ranch, encourages her customers to get even more specific, going so far as to recommend fleeces from individual sheep.

“Oh, Daphne sounds perfect for you!” Holbo might tell a client seeking specific wool qualities. It can be an effective way to ensure repeat business.

“There are standing orders for some of the sheep. They want the same fleece year after year,” she said.

Iron Water Ranch, founded more than four decades ago and named after the high mineral content of its groundwater, raises sheep exclusively for wool and breeding stock.

The operation uses rams and artificial insemination to produce lambs from about 500 breeding ewes that occupy the 140-acre home base and roughly 500 acres of grass fields that are leased.

“We work within our community to ensure we can feed our sheep,” said Zane Van Horsen, Holbo’s daughter, who helps run the farm.

The company’s revenues are generated in equal proportions from wool sales, lamb sales and agritourism that focuses heavily on educating consumers and new sheep producers.

Visitors are invited onto the farm for about five to eight events a year that help them learn about the sheep industry or how to process wool.



Mateusz Perkowski/Capital Press
Kirsten Holbo, left, and her daughter, Zane Van Horsen, operate Iron Water Ranch near Albany, Ore. The sheep farm generates revenues from selling breeding stock and wool as well as agritourism.

For example, the farm’s annual lambing school in January offers advice on nutrition, veterinary drugs and minimizing mortality, among other topics.

The hands-on experience is reassuring for new shepherds who are lambing for the first time, compared to simply reading instructions online, Van Horsen said.

“They can actually handle the lambs,” she said. “It makes you feel a lot less alone if there is someone you feel you can talk to.”

Similarly, the farm’s “April Floom’s Day” event is geared toward teaching visitors about spinning wool into yarn and other ways to use the versatile fiber.

Holbo and Van Horsen are both experienced spinners, with Iron Water Ranch selling value-added products in addition to raw wool, which helps them relate to curious visitors.

“We can tell them what to do with it and how to spin it to their best benefit,” Holbo said. “They feel like, ‘I have a resource I can ask, and I

can move forward and be successful.”

Aside from generating revenues from admission fees, the events can drum up sales of lambs and wool as customers become more confident in their abilities.

Iron Water Ranch has imported genetics from New Zealand bloodlines and concentrates on breeding sheep that naturally thrive on pasture.

Though in-breeding can assist in keeping animals consistent with breed type, Iron Water Ranch avoids the practice to instead reap the benefits of hybrid vigor, Van Horsen said.

It’s more important to the farm to have genetic diversity, she said. “We don’t want to get ourselves into a genetic hole.”

The farm wants to educate consumers about wool characteristics and dispel the misconception that the fiber is itchy and uncomfortable.

Product uses depend on the diameter of the fiber type: Narrow wool fibers are more comfortable on

the skin while wider fibers improve product durability.

Many of the sheep are adorned in jackets to prevent sticks and leaves from attaching to their fleeces, which increases wool quality.

“It’s a lot easier to keep it out than to get it out,” Van Horsen said.

Fiber artists are attracted to naturally colored wool, and the rarity of a fleece can command a premium.

The farm’s fleeces range in price from \$20 to \$80 per pound, with the fleeces vacuum-packed, boxed and shipped around North America.

Iron Water Ranch has built its reputation the old-fashioned way, by participating in fairs and fiber shows where contest victories translate into buzz among wool and sheep consumers.

Social media are also crucial for the company, which promotes its events and sheep on Facebook and Instagram.

“A lot of people like to

Western Innovator

IRON WATER RANCH
Founded: 1976
Operators: Kirsten Holbo and her three children, Zane Van Horsen, Kieran Van Horsen and Adrian Van Horsen.
Location: Albany, Ore.
Acreage: 140 acres at the home base, another 500 acres leased within 20 miles.
Sheep breeds: Romney, Bluefaced Leicester, Merino, Corriedale, Columbia, Romeldale, Jacob.
Revenue sources: Breeding stock, wool products, agritourism.

know where their wool actually comes from,” Holbo said.

Initially, Holbo intended to become a veterinarian when she was an undergraduate studying animal science and business at Oregon State University.

After traveling to New Zealand as part of a student exchange and working for sheep producers, however, she became more interested in production agriculture.

Once she earned a master’s degree in agriculture and resource economics, Holbo worked a variety of jobs while raising livestock at the family’s Iron Water Ranch.

The operation has been constantly evolving since then, she said. “Markets change and situations change and opportunities change. You just always have to be paying attention.”

Northwest berry breeder inducted into ARS Science Hall of Fame

Chad Finn developed industry-leading cultivars for growers

By GEORGE PLAVEN
Capital Press

CORVALLIS, Ore. — Known for his booming laugh and crushing bear hugs, USDA plant geneticist Chad Finn left an indelible mark on the Northwest berry industry.

For 26 years, Finn worked at the Agricultural Research Service station in Corvallis, Ore., breeding new varieties of blueberries, blackberries and strawberries. His cultivars have generated \$450 million in sales for growers over the last decade.

A tragic accident claimed Finn’s life on Dec. 17, 2019 while he was on vacation in Hawaii. He was 57.

On April 13, Finn was posthumously inducted into the ARS Science Hall of Fame, cementing his legacy with the agency’s highest



Capital Press File

USDA/ARS berry breeder Chad Finn

honor. Inductees are selected by a panel of their peers from the ARS, other federal agencies and academia, recognizing lifelong achievements in science and technology.

“It is quite an honor,” said Bob Martin, Finn’s longtime friend and boss at the ARS.

Martin, who is now retired, was one of several colleagues who helped put together the nomination for Finn. Over the course of his career, Finn released or co-released 51 berry culti-

vars, some of which have gone on to become industry standards.

Tillamook — the name of a strawberry variety Finn developed and released in 2014 — is now the No. 1 planted strawberry in Oregon. Two of his thornless blackberry cultivars, Columbia Star and Black Diamond, have also become the most widely planted in Oregon during the last five years, and are highly sought after by processors.

Last year, three more late-season fresh market blackberry varieties developed by Finn were released, named Galaxy, Eclipse and Twilight, which Martin described as a hybrid of eastern erect-cane and western trailing blackberry traits.

Finn’s breeding program was one of the most diverse in the world, Martin said, hosted visiting scientists from countries such as Argentina, Australia, Canada, Chile, China, France, Germany, Japan, Mexico, Russia, South Africa and Spain.

“He certainly was a people-person,” Martin said. “By collaborating with people, they could bring more expertise into the program.”

Before he died, Martin said Finn had other cultivars in the pipeline that new ARS breeders will be able to carry across the finish line.

Bernadine Strik, a horticulturist and extension berry crops specialist for Oregon State University, worked closely with Finn on a collaborative breeding program

between the university and the local ARS laboratory. Finn was a regular fixture at the OSU North Willamette Research and Extension Center, teaming with Strik on field trials.

One of their accomplishments, Strik said, was pioneering a commercial blueberry variety, called “Mini Blues,” unique for its small berries and intense sweetness. Since the fruit cannot be economically harvested by hand, Finn and Strik studied how they could grow the crop with minimal labor inputs and machine harvesting.

“That cultivar is widely adapted,” Strik said. “I think that variety will add a real interesting piece to the commercial blueberry industry.”

Seeing Finn inducted posthumously into the ARS Hall of Fame is bittersweet, Strik said.

“We all miss him,” she said. “Chad was a really generous, friendly, outgoing, kind person. You weren’t just a colleague. You were a friend.”

CALENDAR

Submit upcoming ag-related events on www.capitalpress.com or by email to newsroom@capitalpress.com.

THROUGH SATURDAY MAY 8
Junior Livestock Show of Spokane (live): 9 a.m. Spokane County Fair and Expo Center, 404 N. Havana, St., Spokane Valley, Wash. The Junior Livestock Show of Spokane will be in person this year. A live auction will be May 8. Face masks and social distancing are required. Website: www.juniorshow.org

WEDNESDAY MAY 12
Poop in the Pasture? Ideas for Pasture Management (virtual): 6-7:30 p.m. Join Clark Conservation District to learn about best management practices for your pasture. Whether you continually graze or rotational graze, there are solutions to improve productivity. Lisa Schuchman from USDA-NRCS will teach you how to get the most out of your pas-

ture system while also keeping poop out of surface waters. This is the second of a three-part webinar series, Manure Matters. Contact: Sam Frundle, sfrundle@clarkcd.org

THURSDAY-SATURDAY MAY 13-15
Washington FFA Convention (virtual): The convention will maintain its traditional agenda, with one session streamed on Thursday and Friday evenings and two on Saturday. The new state officers will be announced Saturday evening. Website: www.washingtonffa.org/91st-convention

FRIDAY-SUNDAY MAY 14-16
California FFA’s 93rd State Leadership Conference (online): This year California FFA members from all corners of the state will have access to the premier leadership event offered by our association as it will be delivered through a multi-fac-

eted online platform. The conference will be three days jam packed with learning, growth and inspiration. Website: www.calaged.org

TUESDAY-WEDNESDAY MAY 18-19
Oregon Board of Agriculture Meeting (virtual): The Oregon State Board of Agriculture will hold its quarterly meeting on May 18-19 by video/conference call. To attend you must join the meeting remotely. Call in details are available on each agenda. The meeting agendas and pre-meeting materials are available on the State Board of Agriculture webpage, <https://bit.ly/3xkoNDX>. Resolutions under review relate to collective bargaining for agricultural workers and permitted uses on lands zoned exclusive farm use. To provide written public comments to the board, submit them by email to Karla Valness at kvalness@oda.state.or.us prior to 5 p.m. May 12. Include BOA Public Comment May 2021 in

your email subject line.

WEDNESDAY MAY 19
Manure Matters — Keeping Poop Out of the Water (virtual): 6-7:30 p.m. Have you ever wondered what effect your critters’ poop is having on our watersheds? Join Clark Conservation District to learn about the monitoring Clark County does on bacteria in our waterways. Experts Brent Davis and Eric Lambert from Clark County will present on county regulations and cover what you can be doing to keep our local watersheds free of your livestock and horse manure. This is the third of a three-part webinar series, Manure Matters. Contact: Sam Frundle, sfrundle@clarkcd.org

MONDAY-THURSDAY MAY 24-27
Natural Products Expo West (online): Virtual presentations and an online trade show focusing on natural products and foods. Web-

site: www.expowest.com/

WEDNESDAY-FRIDAY JUNE 9-11
World Pork Expo: Iowa State Fairgrounds, Des Moines. The world’s largest pork industry-specific trade show brings together pork producers and industry professionals from around the world for three days of education, innovation and networking. Website: <https://worldpork.org/>

THURSDAY-SATURDAY JUNE 24-26
United Fresh Convention and Expo (in person and online): Los Angeles Convention Center. Whether online or in person, United Fresh is your partner connecting the global fresh produce industry. Sponsored by the United Fresh Produce Association and the Fresh Produce and Floral Council. Website: <https://www.unitedfresh.org/united-fresh-convention-expo-2021/#>



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To Reach Us

Circulation 800-781-3214
 Email Circulation@capitalpress.com
 Main line 503-364-4431

News Staff

Idaho
 Carol Ryan Dumas 208-860-3898

Boise
 Brad Carlson 208-914-8264

Western Washington
 Don Jenkins 360-722-6975

Eastern Washington
 Matthew Weaver 509-688-9923

Oregon
 George Plaven 406-560-1655
 Mateusz Perkowski 800-882-6789
 Sierra Dawn McClain 503-506-8011

Designer
 Randy Wright 800-882-6789

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