

ALPACA FARMING IN THE HUDSON VALLEY— WHO KNEW?

by Grace Zimmermann



Gypsy Rose With Newborn Son Don Brio. Photo: Leda Blumberg

Drive the back roads that traverse the Hudson Valley and the landscape becomes eye candy; sweeping Hudson River and reservoir views, picturesque stone walls, forests and wetlands, charming homes, horse farms and alpaca farms.

An alpaca farm in the Hudson Valley?—who knew?

Depends on whom you ask...media personality and local Westchester County resident Martha Stewart knew. She did an entire segment on Faraway Farm on her popular television show. So did *More*, a popular weekly lifestyle magazine and website. The publication features a website slideshow on the farm's first year raising alpacas entitled "A Visual Diary of One Woman's Reinvention", as told by Leda Blumberg, the wife half of the husband-wife team who own and operate Faraway Farm.

Blumberg and husband Steve Cole began this enterprising operation, now in its fourth year, with the knowledge of a growing national trend of demand for the fine alpaca fleece and a desire to derive additional income from a working farm that has been their home for many years. In fact, Faraway Farm was Leda's childhood home.

Some 60 years ago, Leda's parents purchased the farm, "not because they were farmers, but because they loved the property," she explained. The couple left Brooklyn in 1951 to the dismay of friends

who said the new home was too 'far away.' And thus the name Faraway Farm.

Leda grew up riding horses on Faraway Farm, helping tend sheep and chickens, eventually leaving for college and life beyond the farm. In the early 1980's Leda returned, raised a family and remained. With Steve by her side, they have transformed the former "gentleman's farm" into a viable business, which in four years time has grown from a herd of four to fourteen of these exotic animals, a growth trend indicative of the state and nation.

According to Alpaca Registry, Inc., the largest alpaca pedigree registry in the world, the number of newly registered alpacas has risen steadily with more than 17,000 newly registered in 2010. To date, there are more than 155,000 registered alpacas nationally, though most of the world's alpaca population, numbering about 4 million, live in their native lands of Peru, Chile and Bolivia.

The current herd on Faraway Farm lives peacefully on 10-plus acres of rolling pastures. Charisma, Aphrodite, Diego and Zofia, among others, provide luxurious fleece, often dubbed "fiber of the gods," for which they were bred to produce as their ancestors have done through the centuries since the early Incan civilization domesticated them some 5,000 years ago. Recognizing the unique attributes of their fleece, the Incan culture elevated the animals to a central place in their society. Royalty clothed themselves in garments made from

highly prized alpaca fleece, which today still maintains that standard of luxury and excellence. Alpaca fleece is arguably warmer than wool, soft as cashmere and highly durable. With availability in twenty-two recognized colors, alpaca fleece is noted to exist in more natural colors than any other fiber-producing animal. The fleece is a fiber artist's and knitter's gold. Faraway Farm not only markets their homegrown yarns, but also breeds, raises and sells alpacas. Spring is a busy time on the farm with baby alpacas (called crias) being born and the annual shearing – a painless process.

"After the alpacas are shorn each May, we send the fleece to a small fiber mill



Handmade Alpaca Garments Adorn Faraway Farm's Store. Photo: Leda Blumberg

where it is washed, carded and spun into yarn, which we sell on our farm and through our website,” explains Leda.

A former sheep barn serves as a farm store, featuring everything from alpaca shawls, socks and mittens to luxurious sweaters, sofa throws and handmade toys, some imported from Peru and others knitted locally.

“We are in the process of developing our own Faraway Farm product line and moving towards carrying more products that are handmade locally from our own yarns,” according to Leda. “We are working with the designer Karen Chien, and a local senior citizens group to help develop our new line of garments. Currently, our farm store features handmade garments from local artisans as well as items hand-crafted in Peru. We love that alpaca garments are soft and warm and can be made naturally without the use of any pesticides or chemicals.”

While alpacas are their passion, both

Blumberg and Cole are able to continue in their professional lives. Leda is an author, photographer and editor/co-founder of Hudson Valley Horse Source, a resource directory for equestrians. Steve, with a Ph.D. in experimental psychology, is an adjunct professor in psychology at Emory University and co-owner of Research Design Associates, a research consulting firm. They work from their home on the farm and travel as business dictates, getting the best of both worlds.

Many readers may wonder why would anyone want to raise alpacas? “They are an outstanding choice for livestock ownership because they have a charismatic manner, do well on small acreage, and produce a luxury product which is in high demand,” touts the Alpaca Owners and Breeders Association (AOBA).

In their own words, Steve and Leda reflect, “Years ago, when we met our first alpacas, we were totally smitten. These wonderful creatures enchanted us, but we wanted to

make sure that raising them would be a viable business. We attended conferences, seminars and alpaca shows. We visited countless farms around the Northeast, and finally, after months of careful consideration, picked out our foundation herd.

“We’ve been loving every aspect of the alpaca world – the births, the shows, the alpaca people – and, of course, the alpacas themselves. When you look at those big beautiful eyes, fuzzy heads and whimsical movements, you just have to smile.”

Though it’s certain Faraway Farm’s Leda Blumberg and Steve Cole can attest to the merits of alpaca farming, it isn’t the DIY project for everyone. Everyone can, however, enjoy the products the fleece of these exotic animals produce. Here are some tidbits of information about alpacas shared by Faraway Farm:

- Alpacas are closely related to camels and llamas.



Steve Cole and Leda Blumberg With Slow Champion Marimba. Photo: Doug Hermann

- Alpacas are pregnant for an average of 11 ½ months.
- Alpacas have leathery footpads with two hard nails on each foot.
- Alpacas are shy, but very curious.
- Alpaca fleece is warmer, softer and lighter in weight than sheep wool. The fashion industry considers alpaca fleece a luxury fiber.
- Alpacas are modified ruminants, having three-part stomachs.
- Alpacas use a communal dung pile and, thus, are very clean animals to take care of.
- Alpacas don't have top teeth in front. They don't bite people and kicking is rare.
- Treasured by the Incas, alpacas are now prized by the modern world for their beautiful fleece, and are raised by people from diverse backgrounds. Alpaca farming has become an important agricultural industry around the world, growing steadily with more than 150,000 alpacas now in North America.
- There are two breeds of alpaca — huacaya (wa-Ki'-ah) the more common of the two has a fluffy, fine fleece. Suri, the rarer breed, has silky fiber that falls in lustrous long locks. Over 90% of the alpacas in North America are huacayas.

Faraway Farm's store is open weekends Thanksgiving through Christmas and year round by appointment. Please come visit!

For more information about Faraway Farm Alpacas, including links to "The Martha Stewart Show" segment and *More* magazine slideshow, visit their website:

www.farawayfarmalpacas.com

Visit the following websites for more information about the alpaca industry:

www.alpacainfo.com

www.alpacaregistry.com

www.empirealpacaassociation.com