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A Merry Menagerie

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Tucked in the golden, rolling hills just north of Vacaville, California, [Menagerie Hill Ranch](#) is a small, family-run alpaca ranch . Deb Galway and Kirk Howard, the owners and operators, started keeping animals with just a few sheep to keep the grass down some twenty years ago. The ranch is appropriately named: over the two decades since their beginning, they have had a changing roster of animals, including goats,

sheep, horses, pigs, steer, rabbits, ducks, pheasants and chickens, not to mention dogs and cats. They acquired their first alpacas in 2008, starting with just five animals. As time went by, the couple found they like alpacas, and the size of their flock increased. Currently the pair has 33 alpacas at their ranch, 6 of which are herd sires.



On a hot day in early autumn, Deb and Kirk gave us a tour of their property, the animals and barn. When I arrived, the young alpacas, born earlier this year (the appropriate name for which is 'cria,' as I learned), were chasing each other around the pen they shared with their mothers. After their impromptu race, the majority of the animals visited with one another in the shade of one of the black walnut trees that dot the property. Some of the crias piled atop their mother, named Music, which Deb said was pretty typical. There are a few different enclosures for the animals, which are separated based on the amount of food they need. The herd sires are kept apart, in a pen upslope, with the resident llama, Einstein. "When we got him, his hair stuck out all over his head, so he kind of looked like Einstein," explained Kirk. Einstein's 'do has since calmed down, but the name remains.



Many of the animals similarly have names with stories: Moonshadow, for example, is a cria born this year who had to be bottle-fed, leading to Deb and Kirk seeing the moon on many a late night; Stormchaser was born during a thunderstorm. When Deb and Kirk were in with the animals, they called many of the mamas by name, and knew the personalities of each: it is clear that they enjoy and care about the animals they keep.



In fact, the love Deb and Kirk have for the animals seems to be what keeps them going in the work. The two stay plenty busy throughout the year, what with the constant parade of activities that goes along with raising livestock. Aside from the simple weekly chores of feeding the animals, cleaning pens, and checking up on their health and well-being, the couple also participate in a number of events. These include taking animals to the local fairgrounds for Ag Day (a program for schoolchildren), having booths at various fiber and agricultural fairs, and showing them competitively at various alpaca shows. In addition, they

rent out their animals for breeding, weddings / special events, and sell them as breed stock or for fiber / pasture pets.



The weekend that preceded our visit had seen over a thousand guests pass through the ranch as part of National Alpaca Farm Days. They had graciously kept their farm store set up for us to see, where they sell their alpaca fiber in many forms: raw fleeces, roving and batting, as well as yarn, and knitted pieces made by a local customer. The fiber that Menagerie Hill Ranch sells is all left undyed to highlight its natural colors, and many of the yarns had beautiful, subtle color variation throughout the strand.



Deb and Kirk currently manage the land and animals themselves, but over the years they have had help from a number of young people, including 4-H members and veterinary school students. “The animals are much more accepting of their attitudes than they are of adults,” said Deb, with regard to the presence of young people on their farm. The couple is also enthusiastic about the potential of working with individuals on the autistic spectrum: they have had a few such youth out on the farm, and been impressed by the differences they have seen the experience make in those people’s lives. Deb described the alpacas as being soothing and mild-mannered, qualities that one can imagine being helpful to anyone, young or old.

Over time, Deb and Kirk have begun to notice a rise in public interest in alpacas. More folks are buying their alpaca manure to use for fertilizer, realizing how much better it is than what can be found in stores. More people are curious about the alpacas, and Deb remarked that she is seeing new alpaca farms start up every year.



As the current interest in local, quality fiber increases, one can imagine small, family-run farms continuing to arise. And if the ranchers are as attentive, kind, and genuinely caring as Deb Galway and Kirk Howard of Menagerie Hill Ranch, both animals and fiber artists alike will benefit.

See more about upcoming events at Menagerie Hill Ranch, including onsite ranch days and fiber shows, at their website www.menageriehillranch.com

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