



NAME: John & Carol Steitz, Steitzhof Merinos

LOCATION: Kalispell, MT

BREED OF SHEEP: Merino. Specifically we raise naturally colored, polled merinos.

PRODUCTION SCHEME:

We utilize our sheep in a regenerative scheme aimed to improve the soil where we are. We are 40% open pasture and 60% silvopasture. 15 acres is divided into 10 lots and grazing management is a key part of our plan. We utilize holistic techniques as much as possible. One lot is the winter safe lot where they bed nightly but they are released to another lot daytime for mobile hayfeeders that we use as our version of bale grazing. We have no irrigation.

LAMBING METHOD:

We pasture lamb in May and jug the dam and lamb(s) for 3-4 days after. Part of that duration is because we jacket our sheep. (more below) This is a safety procedure. It also allows us to weigh daily, band tails and monitor. Families then spend a month with other ewes and lambs before rejoining any unbred ewes.

BUSINESS STRATEGIES:

Our prime market is wool. We do select for dual purpose traits but wool is our #1 goal. We sell raw fleeces annually nationwide, Canada and Europe to artisan handspinners. We have a portion of our wool processed into yarn and roving. The belly wool is used as mulch in the garden. All sales are direct-sales, mostly utilizing marketing on internet. We do maintain an online farm store. We jacket all our sheep all year to preserve cleanliness and reduce UV fading. We sell breeder lambs nationally. We also utilize fiber shows (Black Sheep Gathering, Copper K, Eureka and others for sales, marketing.

HISTORY OF OUR INVOLVEMENT IN THE SHEEP INDUSTRY:

I grew up raising production sheep in PA. We failed miserably and sold out. I guess that was a good lesson and went to a full engineering career. In 2011 we moved to Montana for a new chapter with a goal of building a sustainable small farm as a semi-retirement project. That plan included sheep. My new plan, lessons learned, was 25 max sheep and manage them like a baseball team. They compete to stay here. Colored finewool merino were my

choice for this niche market idea. We selected carefully to start, built, shaped and progressed from there. Competition was never a goal but a way to both measure progress and market our sheep. We brought the 2019 Black Sheep Cup for best 5 handspinning fleeces home to Montana for the first time. Also the Grand Champion, NCWGA national Champion Colored Fleece as well as Reserve Champion Colored Fleece. This is arguably the biggest fleece show in the west. Now MT is on the trophy along with CA,OR,NV,CO,MO,ID and WY.



John and Carol Steitz with the 2019 Black Sheep Cup.

WHAT ARE A FEW OF YOUR BIGGEST CHALLENGES ON YOUR OPERATION?

Genetics. A small flock focused on color brings a unique challenge beyond simple genetics. Maintain the color spectrum from black to gray to brown(moorit) solid and spotted. We maintain 3 completely unrelated (brown, gray, black) rams with cutting edge merino traits from some of the finest breeders in the nation who utilize AI from other countries in their breeding program. That is a big investment but the return is worth that challenge and investment. Fine wool and color are not our only goal and challenge. We are actively working toward a smooth skinned, clean faced, less leg wool merino. All 3 rams are pretty much there but it will take generations to fully get there in our flock. Location is definitely a challenge being



far from any volume market but looking back that was a gift. We needed to look outside the box if we wanted to survive and we did. Feed cost (we buy all our hay and grain) is a challenge like any other small flock. We manage our predator exposure with fencing, a llama and 2 LGD's. It's a layer approach. Our dogs are Sarplaninac. We have been very fortunate.



Freshly shorn rams.



WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE A NEW SHEEP PRODUCER?

Start with the best quality you can for your goals. Let your budget determine the number. The sheep will multiply and you grow with them. It isn't just raising sheep. It is marketing and sales if you want to be sustainable for the long run.

WHAT BENEFITS DOES YOUR MWGA MEMBERSHIP BRING YOU?

We may be a small flock that we run in project mode, but we share a goal of producing the very best wool quality possible. To be amongst some of the best wool sheep people in the world is an opportunity to learn. MWGA pulls us together. We are different, yet similar.

THANK YOU TO JOHN AND CAROL FOR SHARING THEIR OPERATION IN THIS NEW COLUMN, SHOWCASING OUR MEMBERSHIP!



A beautiful naturally colored fleece.



The flock at Steitzhof Merinos