



## **“Whole Sheep, Whole Farm”**

**(Wholesome Demand)**

**by Tim King & Nathan Griffith**

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Kathy Taft Boyden of Kind Horn Farm (near South Duxbury, Vermont) doesn't believe in wasting anything. That is why she sells the whole sheep from the chops to the horns.

Kathy, and her husband Doug Boyden, raise certified organic and registered Icelandic sheep in the mountains of Vermont. They focus on selling wool, lamb, and breeding stock but they also sell pelts, hand woven rugs, horns, and are even making plans to make buttons from the horns. The idea that nothing should be wasted is a fusion of both the economic and philosophical beliefs of the couple.

*Kind Horn Icelandic sheep convert rough grazing on cutover woodlands into premium value organic wool and meat.*

“For me, all of the things that we do are intertwined,” Kathy said. “We are trying to be as sustainable as possible in our farming operation here. The Icelandic sheep certainly have their

role in our whole sustainability goal. They are the key to bringing back the pastures. They are happy to eat most anything, including brambles, burdock, saplings, and all kinds of weeds.”

The “waste not” ethic may also rise from the rather unforgiving land on which they raise their sheep.

“We bought 265 acres from one of the logging companies after they logged it,” Kathy said. “The Icelandics can utilize lower quality pasture. They would likely enjoy high quality pasture but what came back here after the logging was brambles, saplings, nut sedges, and stuff like that.”

With substantial help from the sheep, Kathy and Doug are slowly improving the old woodland pastures. But the limited (and somewhat low quality) forage has been negatively affecting the number of sheep the land will carry.

“We keep about 50 sheep in the summer and overwinter around 20 to 25,” Kathy said. “As the pastures continue to improve and can support more animals, we will increase our flock numbers.”

Kind Horn’s forage-based feeding plan is based on the farm’s still-developing pastures. “We feed pasture until it runs out,” Kathy confides. And then the sheep get plain dry hay. “Silage, they don’t seem to care for and we aren’t really set up to feed large round bales. So, we use small square bales.”

The pastures’ former covering of trees derived nutrition from tap roots that could absorb and convert mineral-laden water from deep in the ground into leaves, bark and wood. Building up fertility and organic matter in the topsoil so high-yield forage species can thrive takes time. “We don’t have enough pasture where we are now,” Kathy says, “so we have to buy hay for the winter.



## Kindhorn Farm's Icelandic Lamb: Well-Grown, Well-Marketed, Well-Demanded

At present the demand for Kindhorn Farm's top-quality Icelandic lamb is outstripping the supply. Last year Kathy ran out of lamb even though the certified organic meat sells for \$10 a pound based on the carcass hanging weight. Kindhorn Farm also sells individual cuts. Loin chops, for example, sell for \$19.95 a pound. Like everything else on the farm, the organic certification has philosophical roots that bring fortunate economic results.

"I believe organic practices are good for the land and the animals," Kathy said. "It's harder to raise them organically, especially with the depleted land we have here, but I got certified organic because I wanted my customers to feel certain that they were getting the best when they were paying premium prices."

The farm's meats are sold mostly in frozen form and none are processed on-farm at this time.

Kathy explains, "We use a certified organic, federally inspected facility. Sometimes I pick up the meat from the butcher just refrigerated. It depends on when they get it ready and how soon I can get there. Once in a while I'm able to go to the farmers market with fresh, not frozen, cuts."

Organic production and the breed's reputation can be very powerful selling points—so powerful that verbal and print descriptions alone have been enough to get consumers to make that all-important first trial purchase of Kindhorn Farm lamb. Kathy has discovered certain phrases that help encourage strong buyer confidence. She discloses a simple but unequivocal profit wording: "It seems to sell well based on the descriptions "Gourmet Icelandic Lamb" and "Mild, tender, and sweet."

What cuts of meat sell best this way?

“Oh, people like shanks, ground, stew. Really all cuts,” says Kathy. “Leg of lamb is quite popular too; chops, rack, shoulder roasts—even neck slices sell.”

### Dealing In Wool

Kind Horn Farm also receives premium prices for roving and yarn. A four-ounce skein of moorit (honey brown) colored two-ply yarn sells for \$24.00. A blended roving made of 60 percent Icelandic wool combined with 40 percent llama fiber sells for \$4.25 an ounce. And a one pound, five ounce certified organic lamb's fleece sold for \$38.00.

“We send most of our wool to Still River Mill in Connecticut,” Kathy says. “We use their services because—although they are not *certified* organic—they adhere to all the certified organic practices. That way, when I send my wool out to customers, I can say it's the certified organic wool and it's been processed using organic processes.

“I also use Morning Star Mill in Ohio. The operators keep Icelandic sheep and process a lot of Icelandic wool. They do an excellent job. I send them my non-organic fiber. My entire initial breeding stock was non-organic because organic breeding stock wasn't available at the time. I still have some non-organic fiber.”

Kindhorn's select grade Icelandic wool sells well on its own merits. In order to get the fiber sold, the farm doesn't have to sponsor special classes or teach people unique crafts and skills that require or involve their products.

Roving made from the farm's Icelandic lamb's wool finds excellent demand, as do blends of Icelandic wool and llama fiber. Both typically sell out well before the next harvest.



*Icelandic wool is composed of an outer and inner coat that furnishes a unique, very lightly spun*

*yarn called Lopi.*

One uniquely valuable item with very special craft demand is Lopi style yarn.

Lopi yarn is essentially an Icelandic breed signature product, arising from the fact that the breed's fleece consists of two kinds of fiber. One kind is composed of stout, tougher strands that grow without much curl or wave and form a water-repellent outer layer to the fleece. This fiber is called *tog*. The other type of Icelandic fiber is called *thel* or *pel* and forms the fleece's inner coat of soft, fine wool that is highly insulative.



*Lopi yarns are a luxury item and a signature Icelandic product. Hand crafted goods made of it have no factory-made equivalent.*

Both fiber types are blended to make Lopi yarn, which makes the finished product feel very light in relation to its bulk. It's not as dense most knitting wool, the very name "Lopi" originally meaning not spun at all.

Lopi yarn is a unique product, invented about 100 years ago, by textile crafts workers who discovered that unspun Icelandic wool made unique sweaters and other knit goods. Today it is only lightly spun and retains its luxurious warmth and light weight.

"People are generally very excited about our Lopi style yarn," boasts Kathy. "We often get comments on how much softer and nicer our Lopi is than the conventional, imported Lopi sold in yarn shops."

### **Other Products & Practices**

Breeding stock is another component of the “whole farm, whole sheep” approach at Kind Horn. The organic certification of the breeding stock gives them the opportunity to stand out. Kindhorn Farm is one of the very few certified organic flocks in the northeast. But Kathy and Doug haven’t stopped there in their effort to create a high value specialty product.

“We have registered Icelandics and we import semen from Iceland,” Kathy said. “They raise the sheep in Iceland primarily for meat so with the semen from Iceland you see a huge improvement in muscling. They also breed for wool and conformation. In Iceland they select the best of the best rams. It costs quite a bit to import the semen and that is reflected in the cost of our breeding stock. We are doing our own artificial insemination here.”

In addition to lamb, wool in various forms and breeding stock, Kindhorn Farm sells pelts, hand woven rugs, llama fleeces and handspun llama yarn, batts for felting and of course the horns.

“We have all horned Icelandics so ewes and rams have horns,” Kathy said. “They are very distinctive—they don’t look like your typical sheep. My father is a dairy farmer (cows) and when he first saw them he thought they were goats.”

It is that need for—and interest in—education about Icelandics that takes Kathy to the Montpelier, Vermont farmer’s market during the winter.

Selling at the farmers’ market is just one part of the farm’s commercial distribution efforts. Kathy and Doug sell their products to families nearby and on their farm. Kathy says she enjoys knowing that meat from their farm is nourishing local families. They also sell some of their products via the World Wide Web. But Kathy says the farmers’ market is important to her.



*Beautiful Icelandic sheep with their huge variety of natural wool color patterns and large horns*

*provide alluring profits from fiber, tanned pelts and horn products.*

“I enjoy the farmers’ market because we can talk to people about what we are doing and get lots of feedback,” Kathy says. “It’s fun to tell people about Icelandics. I reserve a certain amount of the lamb to sell at the farmers’ market. Going to the farmers’ market also helps me sell the roving, yarn, horn, pelts, rugs, and other products. If I didn’t go to the farmers’ market I’d only have my on-line sales.”

For Kathy the farmers’ market is part of the “whole sheep, whole farm” approach. She finds customers for her more unusual products, builds a customer base for the farm’s expanding flock, and in the process has fun talking to people about the sheep she loves.

For more information about Kindhorn Farm, visit their website at [www.kindhornfarm.com](http://www.kindhornfarm.com).