

Farmer Profile
Don and Heather Minto
Watson Farm

Grass-Based Farming by the Sea
By Michele Gauger

While interviewing Don Minto of Watson Farm in Jamestown, Rhode Island over the phone, I was wishing I were able to conduct this interview in person and see he and his wife, Heather's operation first hand. According to Don, their current 256-acre property is one of the oldest, continuously farmed acreages in the United States, originally cleared by the Narragansett Tribe practicing slash and burn agriculture in their production of corn, squash and beans. When the first English settled in the region, Conanicut Island was already in grassland.

The Minto Family has managed the Watson Farm, owned by Historic New England since 1980. Their mission has been to manage the farm in the most sustainable manner possible and to provide public access, educational programs and programs to connect people to the land. The farm is open three days a week from June 1 to October 15 to anyone wishing to hike the property or take a tour or pasture walk along the $\frac{3}{4}$ mile shoreline.

According to Don "I grew up in suburbia, but we turned our yard into more vegetable gardens than actual grass." Don attended the University of Rhode Island, where he studied plant and soil science and also met his wife Heather. They both had an interest in farming, as Heather was studying historic textiles and wanted to eventually raise sheep.

Don and Heather leased a few farms and around 1979 began looking for their own farm. However the cost of land made this dream slightly out of their reach. Luckily they formed the partnership with Historic New England and when they first arrived at what is now Watson Farm, they took over an existing cattle herd, overgrazed pasture and poor fencing.

"We had an interest in setting up rotational grazing in order to produce grass-fed beef and lamb. We set up permanent high tensile fencing and used portable fence to subdivide the pastures. We worked progressively to raise the pH of the pastures from 4.5 to 6.8 using lime and farm-made compost was applied to about 26 acres per year. We are still continuously improving our pastures by no-till seeding legumes and grasses, utilizing foliar applications of fish oil, trace minerals and soil amendments.

Over the year it became evident that proper genetics were essential for producing quality grass-fed beef. Today red Devon cattle are the breed of choice at Watson Farm due to the breed's docility, tenderness, intramuscular marbling and the ability to finish extremely well on grass alone. Watson Farm is now home to about 90 head of red Devon cattle for seed stock sales as well as for the local market.

The Watson Farm also produces wool and lamb from their 50 Romney cross ewes. The Mintos market their own wool as the "Conanicut Island Blanket" and through the statewide "Rhody Warm Blanket" initiative.

"Our biggest challenge right now is to find a suitable USDA processor," said Don. "We have been able to develop a wonderful customer base and sell at a local farmers' market but we have to haul cattle 6 or 8 hours to get them processed." Don mentioned that about four years ago, he acquired a permit from the Rhode Island Department of Health to sell meats direct to the consumer at their farmers' market. They were the first farmers in Rhode Island to get such a permit, although other farmers were still selling "under the radar." Don reports that today there are about five other producers in the state that also have this type of permit.

"Currently we sell about 15 head of cattle during the farmers' market season and one whole lamb per week at our market which runs May - November" continued Don. We also provide customers with whole lambs and 30 lb. portion packs of grass-fed beef during the winter months. Shortening the distance between the farm gate and the dinner table has been their primary goal for keeping the farm and community sustainable.

For more information on Watson Farm, contact Heather and Don Minto at 401-423-0005, watsonfarm1796@yahoo.com.

Editor's Note: The Mintos were part of the Thursday Pre-Conference track at the PASA conference entitled "Grass-fed, Grass-finished Beef." To order recordings of that workshop contact Cocalico Cassettes at 717-336-4179.

What do you see as some of the critical issues concerning agriculture today?

Some of the important issues for us are the problems with the industrial model of agriculture and the health of our food system. In addition, the collapse of the agricultural infrastructure particularly the USDA livestock processing plant issue and the high cost of fuel.

What is unique about your farm?

Watson Farm has a rich agrarian past with the land being used continuously for agriculture for over 2,000 years.

This 265-acre, seaside farm was bequeathed to Historic New England, www.historicnewengland.org, a preservation organization in 1980 to be preserved in perpetuity as a working farm with public access and educational programming.

How has your operation evolved?

In 1980 we began our enterprise with the goal of managing the grasslands for production of high quality grass-based beef and lamb and marketing it to the local community. Today we have evolved to raising Red Devon cattle of the right type for breeding stock marketed to other grass farmers and market fifteen head per year direct to consumers at the Coastal Growers Farmers' Market.

Why did you join PASA?

Our philosophy has always been to "learn by doing." We joined PASA and started attending conferences in the early 1990's for the quality and content of the workshops offered, networking, and the comradery of like-minded farmers.