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SMALL FARM QUARTERLY

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**MARKETING****I Want to Leave a Market****A conversation with small farm champion Lydia Ratcliff**

by Martha Herbert Izzi

She sits on her tractor on her good days tethered to an oxygen tank and sets out to mow the fields. She'll need 10,000 bales of hay over the winter to feed her goats, sheep, cows, and veal calves. What hay she doesn't need she will sell as part of several income streams needed to keep her farm going. She won't give it up despite the effort that it takes just to get on the rig. It is through sheer will and feistiness that this Vermont farmer, seventy-four year old Lydia Ratcliff, gets through the days to work the farm and the phones.

The phone and fax are her financial lifelines. In addition to farming, Ratcliff manages Fancy Meats From Vermont, a product marketing group which sells the custom meats, eggs and cheese from about thirty small farmers. Their products, and often their farm names, are on the menus many of top-of-the-line restaurants in New York and Boston.



Lydia Ratcliff heading off to mow.

Photos by Martha Herbert Izzi

**FANCY MEATS FROM VERMONT**

Fancy Meats From Vermont is currently generating about \$400,000 a year in sales, with a volume and return that is optimal to balance producers sales. Ratcliff's philosophy in terms of running the organization is to "Keep it small, lean, sharp manageable, personal, and customized." To that she adds, "We have never failed to pay any producers. We have no debts. We have low overhead. And the customer is always right."

Ratcliff is known to some of the nation's most acclaimed chefs. And if there is any language barrier, she will speak to them in fluent French or Italian, an undoubted asset for a class of chefs who don't expect to work with bi-lingual farmers.

But chefs know that Lydia Ratcliff is no ordinary producer. Over the many years since she became her own marketing and sales agent, they've seen this woman matter-of-factly carry whole meat carcasses into their kitchens on her delivery rounds through the city. Today, a paid driver makes twenty to thirty weekly deliveries in New York City and Boston for Fancy Meats From Vermont.

To be sure, Ratcliff is an unusual woman with an unusual background. Foremost in her mind is to establish a marketing model for small farm survival, and for the most part hers is a success story.

When she moved to Vermont and began farming her 125 acres in the mid-seventies she chose to return to her own back yard, New York City, for her market and went to the people with whom she had something in common. Good fresh, locally grown food. Those were the days when that phrase was largely unfamiliar to most of us, but one that she espoused. She takes some credit for the years that she doggedly worked to connect farmers with consumers with fresh products at fair prices.

To those who know her she is a farmer and an eccentric, strong-willed, some would say, dictatorial leader. She is also a teacher who will share her encyclopedic knowledge of husbandry, genetics, philosophy, writing or anything else one may want to know or even not want to know. She has no trouble telling someone where they failed...and what they might do



The "almost-round" barn at Ratcliff's Lovejoy Brook Farm.

to succeed.

She is also a writer who once worked as a researcher for Time Magazine. Later she spent thirteen years partnered with Sylvia Porter whose Money Book was published in 1975 and sold millions of copies.

With the money she made from that effort she came to Vermont, bought an 1820 farm house and built a twelve sided, almost-round barn. Although she began her life as a pig farmer, she quickly diversified, and thinks every small farmer should do the same.

Apart from the fact that Ratcliff spent two weeks early on in a Massachusetts slaughter house learning the craft, she is largely self-



Some of Ratcliff's 75 breeding ewes.

taught. She rails against the "office-bound professors of Agriculture who don't know what it takes to keep a farm afloat or to make it economically." She never married nor has any children so she did most, if not all, of the hard work and "got accustomed to the leanness and poverty that went with it."

She says that everyone who is in farming should do the same thing, "and also have an outside job." Among other things, she edited professional papers for faculty and researchers at the Harvard Medical School for many years, often in the wee hours, to supplement her farm income.

**LOW OVERHEAD**

The conversation turns to the specifics of the business. It begins with introductions to the four people who help Ratcliff operate her farm. Two of them are trainees who live on the farm. When she speaks of low-overhead she means it. We are in her living room. "This is the office." It is a card table piled with papers, a phone and the ubiquitous oxygen apparatus.

"I'm the manager, which means selling and helping the bookkeeper collect funds. I'm the coach... I'm involved with the farmers from the beginning. How they grow. What they grow." Ratcliff has someone go out to visit each farmer, to check their breeding and feeding programs in an effort to maintain consistent quality.

Maintaining quality, she says, "is very difficult for small producers." She points out that "we sell all sizes of young lambs plus mutton - depending on what the customer wants." The farmer gets \$5.50 a pound (carcass weight) minus the marketing fee for prime young lambs, well above the auction prices.

"I deal with individual chefs about individual lambs and I know which lamb went to which chef. We sell lambs, pigs, goats, rabbits, veal, eggs and sheep's milk cheese as well as goat milk cheese. I get a 6% commission and no charge for the management."

**WHAT CHEFS WANT**

Ratcliff will go to great lengths to please a chef and even though it might not be profitable, it will reap rewards the next time she calls to get an order. Some chefs want specialties such as offal brains, innards, calf head, heart, lungs and cheek. "Cheek is one of the most succulent parts of a pig, veal or beef," she says.

She says that pigs have really taken off. "When I started out in pigs some thirty years ago, I learned that they were hard to handle, that we had a high mortality rate in babies. They eat an enormous amount and I was feeding them for six to eight months. The alternative is to sell young suckling pigs for the same price as baby lambs. A fifty pound suckling pig dresses at thirty pounds at six weeks. So why not get them off farm before they cost you? It's the same for baby lambs, we make mom do most of the work and then ship them at ten weeks versus ten months."

As for grass-fed meat, Ratcliff says, "the chefs think they want it until they order it once. Then they don't like it. I'm a firm believer in giving grain to our animals for our market. Grass feeding produces a darker color which chefs see as a sign of older age. Grass-fed animals are tougher, redder, with little or no fat. Most people prefer meat which is marbled."

Ratcliff's producers don't pasture lambs. They are grain and hay fed in small areas where they move around freely but don't run up and down pastures where they will gain muscle and become tough. "Chefs want melt-in-your mouth baby lamb, with a fat cover from grain and corn which results in light colored, tender meat with a delicate flavor."

We move on to the challenges of keeping the business going in an era of savage competition in the restaurant industry, spiraling gas prices, and a litany of agricultural rules and regulations. "The top five per cent of restaurants will charge what they want," she says, "but the vast middle are struggling and most are lowering prices to compete."

**LIVESTOCK PROCESSING CHALLENGES**

Ironically the rules covering slaughtering and processing are becoming stricter and more prohibitive just as the demand for fresh, locally grown products is skyrocketing. A stunning example reported by the operator of one

slaughterhouse is that he must complete three forms just to kill one cow and twelve forms in the course of a day's work.

Ratcliff says there is a "rumor floating around that we might see a shift in the inspection process from the Federal level to the States," and she hopes it is true. It might help reduce costs and perhaps some of the documentation process. "Our state inspectors are more realistic, more attuned to our problems and they have ways of appraising big and small dangers."

"We are being strangled by dubious regulations," she says, citing one which requires that "eggs and meat can't be in the same processing room. They cannot even be in the same cooler together... There is no one in New York City who is doing any curing or smoking, because they have been regulated out of business by people who have never made a sausage. People are scared of sausage. People are being forced to abandon a major part of their cuisine, or they are making them illegally... I cannot imagine that there isn't some constructive approach to work with cultural and culinary traditions."

The other potentially crippling issue is the ever-decreasing number of slaughterhouses. She and her producers are trucking and hauling animals as far away as Goffstown, NH and Altamont, NY. It is not surprising that she laments her age and says "I would be a lobbyist in another life and would concentrate on promoting intelligent deregulation."

As for the small farmer, she says, "We need cash. I would like to have a dime for every program to help small farmers... Some form of direct subsidy is necessary. Only pennies get to the farmer when what they need is \$1,000 to \$5,000 a year to keep afloat. Farmers are feeding people, they are the land stewards, keeping land open and free from becoming overgrown." They are a boon to the tourist industry as well.

**REWARDS OF FARMING**

As our discussion winds down Lydia Ratcliff speaks to what makes her want to continue. What makes anyone choose a lifestyle that demands so much, for comparatively little financial return? She has to be smart and take advantage of any and all income possibilities. She rents rooms, she has local customers, she sells Maremma puppies at \$400 a dog.

But for Ratcliff, "the benefits of small farms don't get counted" in a purely economic calculation. "Being your own boss, land stewardship, attending to the soil, the benefits to children who have their own jobs on the farm, animals, an opportunity to work with parents" are huge motivators.



Lydia Ratcliff in her "office"

And she has heroes. "The inventors of the land trusts and intentional communities... Dan Barber, a New York chef whose heart and soul has been to buy local, to know and support small farms... Robert Rodale, a legend in the organic farming movement... E.F. Schumacher and the Schumacher Institute in the Berkshires who wrote and lived by the creed that Small Is Beautiful."

And so does Lydia Ratcliff.

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