

More Than Handsome, Tunis Sheep Deliver The Goods

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WAYNESBORO (Franklin Co.) — Tunis sheep will turn your head.

Their slim, coppery faces and long ears are not the most familiar of sheep features. That rusty look, also found on the legs, can range from tan and cinnamon to a rich red. The wool is creamy in color.

It's the darker-faced Tunis that attract many people, according to Don and Miki Schrider, who have been raising Tunis for about eight years on their 10-acre farm between Waynesboro and Greencastle. They maintain a flock of 12-15 breeding ewes, along with two rams and young stock.

"Everybody really wants to get their hands on the deeper red," Don said.

According to the Schriders, however, the best functional qualities of the breed are not related to the degree of pigmentation.

"Color has nothing to do with the economy and production of this sheep," Miki said.

Good mothering ability, efficient growth, top-quality meat, and usable wool sometimes preferred by handspinners are some of the traits that have helped win widespread support for Tunis sheep.

They are also known for their docile nature, high percentage of twin births, strong milk production, and longevity.

The breed has a long, notable history that includes grazing privileges in the pastures of Thomas Jefferson.

Descendants of ancient, fat-tailed sheep, the Tunis breed originated in the arid lands of Tunisia on the northern coast of Africa. The first flock recorded in the U.S. was at Belmont, Philadelphia County, in 1799. Jefferson later owned a large flock and was a leading promoter of the breed, according to information supplied by the National Tunis Sheep Registry, Inc.

Their hardiness and heat tolerance helped make them a favorite in the U.S. South during the first half of the 1800s. Most of the large southern Tunis population, however, became food for soldiers during the Civil War, causing a majority of the flocks to be wiped out.

Flocks originally established in the Northeast have survived and served as seed stock for maintaining a strong gene pool and a thriving population throughout different regions of the country today. In earlier years, Tunis were crossed with some other breeds, including Southdown and Border Leicester. Today, no crossbreeding is allowed for registered animals, Don said.

While considered a fine-boned, medium-sized breed, Tunis grow rapidly through the pasture season and into maturity. For lambs destined for the dinner table, typical slaughter time is early fall for



Miki and Don Schrider, with flock of Tunis ewes, due to lamb soon. Roxy, the dog, is purebred Maremma, an Italian breed noted for its sheepguarding skill.

animals born in March or April on the Schrider farm.

"They produce a 100-pound freezer lamb about as fast as any (breed)," Don said.

Some managers of meat breed flocks, such as Dorset, favor crossbreeding with Tunis sires to produce the lamb crop, believing this use of a Tunis "terminal sire" results in more lambs, greater weight gains, and tastier meat.

According to the Schriders, the meat of older Tunis sheep is also delicious and "in some ways better" than lamb, even when animals are slaughtered at four and five years of age.

As Pennsylvania director for the National Tunis Sheep Registry, Inc., Don noted that the breed standard allows for a certain range of traits, according to personal preference.

While some breeders focus on larger, show-type sheep, others go for a smaller frame they feel is more in line with original bloodlines. Breeders also have varying opinions on other traits, such as the ideal ear length.

According to Don, the differ-

ences in opinion are minor and help demonstrate the breed's genetic range.

"There's a fair amount of diversity that allows for unique breeding programs," he said.

The breed standard allows a bodyweight range of 125-175 pounds for breeding ewes, 175-200 pounds for rams.

Lambs should weigh between seven and 12 pounds at birth. They are born with a double coat, mahogany red on the surface, that gradually turns into a creamy-colored fleece as the animal matures.

At the Schriders, lambs are left to nurse their mothers well into the summer, nearly until the end of the natural lactation period of the ewes. Meanwhile, the lambs are also supplying a large part of their diet by grazing on their own.

The Schriders rely on pasture during the growing season. In winter, orchard grass hay with a bit of alfalfa makes up the bulk of the ration. About two weeks prior to the start of lambing in March, they begin supplementing the ewes with grain, continuing

through early lactation until the pastures are green and ready for grazing.

The Schriders caution other Tunis breeders against feeding more grain than necessary.

As a thrifty breed — historically able to subsist in desert-like conditions — Tunis can become fat from overeating and also risk birthing problems because of overly large lambs, the Schriders pointed out.

They rapidly changed their feeding program soon after starting in the Tunis business. At that time, they culled one of the adult ewes, had it butchered, and discovered its carcass was covered in a layer of fat several inches thick, Miki said.

Now they monitor their ewes' body condition frequently by checking spines with their fingertips, making sure the bone is not covered with tallow but can be felt as a distinct ridge.

Because of their high milk output, Tunis have also been crossbred with dairy sheep, according to Don. A sheep dairy for cheese production in Vermont has some ewes that are one-quarter Tunis, he said.



Miki Schrider with one-day old Tunis lamb, born with a double coat of deep red.

More About The Breed

Origin, History

The American Tunis evolved from a number of importations of fat-tailed sheep from Africa and the Middle East in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. These sheep were crossed with some established European breeds to improve the meat characteristics.

The earliest documented importation occurred in 1799. They came as a gift to the U.S. from the ruler of Tunisia, his highness the Bey of Tunis, and were entrusted to the care of Judge Richard Peters of Pennsylvania who became an outspoken advocate of the breed.

By the 1820's, Tunis were in much demand by butchers in eastern Pennsylvania. Descendants of Judge Peters' sheep, as well as additional importations of fat-tailed sheep became established in Maryland, Virginia, North and South Carolina, and Georgia. Thomas Jefferson imported "broad-tailed" sheep and kept them for many years. He preferred them over his Merinos for their mutton and wool-producing attributes.

The breed was quite popular as in 1892, Ezra Carmen in a chapter of A Report of the Sheep Industry of the U.S. wrote, "But for the introduction of the fine-wooled Merino, these Tunisian sheep would probably have become disseminated throughout the U.S., and in some of them have become the prevailing flocks."

— From Website information.



The Schriders keep two breeding rams on the farm to help maintain genetic diversity. Sampson, front, serviced the flock last fall. The other three are yearling rams, one of which will be selected as a breeder.