

Doing What Comes Naturally

These Montana lamb and wool producers are putting a new spin on ranching.



Love for the land. Becky and Dave parlayed a passion for pasture management into a thriving lamb and wool business.

By Becky Weed, Belgrade, Montana

When my husband, Dave Tyler, and I started ranching in southwest Montana over 20 years ago, I never would've guessed our tentative explorations into small-scale agriculture would turn into Thirteen Mile Lamb & Wool Co.

Neither of us grew up on a farm or ranch. Dave was a surveying engineer; I was a geologist. We both had full-time jobs in town, and a

dual appetite for mountains and high latitudes. It hardly seemed like good training for managing grassland and marketing meat and yarn.

But Dave had visions of sheep going in one end of a barn and sweaters coming out the other, and I had more affinity for shovels, fencing tools and natural fibers than computer screens. In spite of ourselves, we're still here.

Our part-time ventures into raising sheep and cattle for commodity-market prices morphed into a full-time experiment to see if small-scale, decentralized agriculture and industry on one very small ranch could survive in a way that matched our land ethic.

Conventional agricultural markets wouldn't support us on a 160-acre place with a few hundred leased acres. So we delved deeper into finding ways to add value to our raw products—meat and fiber.

Knitting It All Together

After years of missteps and comedies, plus help from books, neighbors and whatever we could scavenge, we have an organic, predator-friendly operation. We sell our own grass-fed lamb and wool, and process natural fibers from start to finish in our mill.



Love for the land. Mill manager Katey Plymesser feeds dyed wool into a carder on its way toward becoming fine

knitting yarn that's sold all across the country.

And we're connected to a diverse community of sustainable agriculture practitioners at the grassroots level around the world.

Now we direct-market all our lamb, and process our wool in the big white barn this place's second owner built in the 1930s with timbers harvested a few miles away in the Bridger Mountains.

The seasons govern our schedule. The cycle of lambing, grazing, haying, winter feeding and spring shearing provides the backdrop and underpinning for the other stuff we've added over the years.

The fascinating and faltering process of creating the wool mill taxed our non-agricultural brains in unforeseen ways, but we eventually assembled an effective mix of old and new equipment.

We sell goods at all stages of production, from raw hand-spinners' fleeces and carded roving to felted, knitted and woven finished fibers. Our primary focus, though, is on high-quality knitting yarns and felts colored with plant-based dyes.

Some yarns are sold here at the mill, but many of them go to independent yarn shops around the country (we welcome more wholesale inquiries) or clothing designers. We sell yarn through our Web site, too.

Buttons from Fenceposts

We also make our own goods from these raw materials, selling rugs, hats, sweaters and other knitted and woven goods to supplement the organic lamb and yarn. I make buttons for hats and sweaters from the heartwood of old juniper fenceposts left behind by our property's original homesteaders.

Whatever they buy, our customers all seem to share our affinity for tactile, natural fibers that have a story of land management and human-scale industry behind them.

Thirteen Mile is a work in progress, and we hope it tweaks the sense of what “progress” really is. We’re committed to organic methods in lamb and wool production. We use solar hot-water heaters on the barn roof to heat the wool wash water. We use only nonlethal methods, like guard dogs, to protect our sheep from native carnivores. And we prefer local economic investment and employment over “cheaper” solutions.

Two years ago, we hired fiber- and systems-savvy Katey Plymesser to run the wool mill part of our operation. Without her, it would be impossible for Dave and me to keep the ranch going while connecting our work here to the community around us.

Although Dave’s two daughters live on the other side of the country with kids of their own, we ponder the connection between farms like ours and the next generation. Everything we do, on the farm and off, is connected to this place and the products and inhabitants of Montana’s grasslands.

To learn more about the Thirteen Mile Lamb & Wool Co., visit our [Links](#).