

# FARMING FOR THE LONG HAUL

LEGACY LEADERS | BY KEVIN SPAFFORD

**Family business builds brand and then markets directly to high-end grocers and restaurants across the Northeast**

MAINE can be a forbidding place for agriculture. The farmers who call it home are hardy and self-reliant.

They've learned to adapt, survive hostile weather, and work through strict regulations, limited spaces, excessive input costs and discriminating buyers.

For Lisa Webster and North Star Sheep Farm, producing a top grade of lamb is worth it all. In fact, it's as much a way of life as it is a profession. As she says: "Family farming means sustainable farming."

That pithy statement speaks as much to her



opportunities of farming in New England may be a lot different than farming corn and soybeans in the Midwest, but the values they share with their brethren across the U.S. are very similar.

**FAMILY OPERATION**

North Star Sheep Farm is the quintessential family farming operation. It is considered one of Maine's oldest continuously operating sustainable sheep farms, and Lisa intends

intend to maintain their farms as "a working part of the rural landscape."

Just over a third of U.S. lamb consumption is concentrated in the cities surrounding Boston and New York. However, most of the meat produced to satisfy that demand comes from the western United States, Australia, New Zealand and Iceland.

"Since our area is the No. 1 lamb-consuming region in the nation," Webster says, "Maine is well-suited to fill that need, without bringing lamb in from elsewhere." As sheep farmers, Lisa and Phil are leading the way with diversified farming practices. They source

locally grown healthy foods and profitably provide sheep products to restaurants and markets throughout the Northeast.

Lisa works tirelessly to remain a leader in the industry, too. She knows adaptability is vital to their long-term survival. For Lisa and Phil, beyond a lot of hard work, the keys to lasting success include:

- producing a commodity or specializing in a crop that is compatible with the limited resources available in the local farming environment
- serving the demands of consumers while working to understand buyers' concerns about sustainable farming

"Sheep that grazed these fields provided wool for blankets that kept the patriots warm during the winter months of the American Revolution." — **LISA WEBSTER**

heart as it does to her head. Lisa and husband Phil, fourth- and fifth-generation Maine sheep farmers, respectively, know their land, the local market and today's discerning buyers. They acknowledge that the challenges and

for it to remain in business a lot longer.

"My goal is to replicate the beauty of low-impact sheep farming," she says, "and see more emphasis on life on the farm, as opposed to just saving farmland." The Websters



"Family farming means sustainable farming," says Lisa Webster, who raises sheep with husband Phil in Maine.

ALL PHOTOS: FOLIO MARKETING + CREATIVE

methods

- giving back and helping other farmers improve their operations, their farming practices and their relationships with the public
- knowing and being known to consumers on a personal level, especially those who may not have the opportunity for frequent and direct contact with farming professionals
- always considering the concerns of the customer and acknowledging that, as a local producer, North Star's relationship with them is reflected in their care for the lambs, pigs, and chickens on the farm

### LEARNING TO ADAPT

A large part of survival is learning to adapt. It's taking advantage of what you have, rather than pining for what you don't. Starting out

in '99 with some experience raising purebred sheep and an ambitious plan to grow the operation, the Websters established an annual goal of producing 15,000 head. Lisa's original plan called for establishing 15 Maine farms carrying the North Star label. Now

with five, they supply commercially grown, organic-pasture-raised lamb to 47 Whole Foods stores in New England, and many upper-end restaurants in Massachusetts, Vermont, New Hampshire and New York.

The Websters' goal is to sustain the farms well beyond their lifetimes and for future generations to come. They've got a good start, and history is on their side. One of the farms was cleared in 1707, and it is adjacent to the country's first water-powered woolen mill.

"Sheep that grazed these fields provided wool for blankets that kept the patriots warm during the winter months of the American Revolution," Lisa says.

For the Websters, life on the farm is learning from experience and producing quality meats to satisfy consumer demands.

The nature of farming is learning to adapt and

grow, given a locale's limited resources. Opportunities abound in agriculture. All it takes is some imagination, the willingness to take on risk, a lot of hard work and a plan.

Like North Star Sheep Farm, succession is about honoring the past, profiting today and securing tomorrow. **FF**

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*Spafford and his firm Legacy by Design ([legacy-by-design.com](http://legacy-by-design.com)) serve the succession planning needs of farmers, ranchers and agribusiness owners. Contact Spafford at 877-523-7411 or [KEVIN@LEGACY-BY-DESIGN.COM](mailto:KEVIN@LEGACY-BY-DESIGN.COM).*



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