Meet Donna Oshaughnessy and Keith Parrish of South Pork Ranch

Every now and then you meet someone with the rare and wondrous capability of seeing the world for what it could be, not for what it is. Donna Oshaughnessy and Keith Parrish, owners and operators of South Pork Ranch, are those people.

It was a balmy 36 degrees when I met Donna- a virtual heat wave compared to the sub-zero wind chills that we’ve been experiencing for the last two months. The cows, who had resorted to huddling in the barns, were now venturing out to the pasture, the ducks and chickens and peacocks were waddling at the edge of the open barn door, the dogs were bounding across the still snowy ground, and in fact the entire farm seemed to be bustling with life.

Donna was no exception. Bundled in a camouflage jumpsuit, wisps of gray hair escaping from underneath the hood, she hustled to and fro from the barn to the adjacent farm store, to her house, helping a customer purchase one of her prized Red Wattle hogs while simultaneously touring me around the farm and telling tales of how she and her husband came to own and manage their little lot of land.

Donna and Keith have managed to build the only pasture-raised certified organic farm in Illinois that sells pork, beef, and milk. But if that isn’t unique enough, they are also one of the very few farms in Illinois selling 100% raw (non-homogenized, non-pasteurized) whole milk, and the only certified organic farm in the entire U.S. that raises and sells the critically endangered Red Wattle Hog. Their entire operation consists of 11 dairy cows, 25 steers, 40-70 pigs depending on the time of year, a small apiary, and a flock of chickens, ducks, guineas and even peacocks…because why not? All of their South Pork Ranch products are available at the small on-site farm store, which boasts a freezer...
paid for entirely with bartered milk. Also available at the store are Donna’s homemade soaps and a variety of other local products from nine surrounding area farmers, including chicken, eggs, flour, teas, and cornmeal. Business has been good. So good, in fact, that Donna and Keith stopped selling their products to retailers and restaurants and now sell exclusively direct to consumer from their farm.

Things weren’t always that way though. It was the classic tale of big city girl falls in love with small-town farm boy that brought Donna to the farm in Chatsworth, Illinois 18 years ago. At that time, it was her husband Keith who was in charge of the day to day operations. Keith was a country boy born and raised who had worked as a farm hand on other dairy farms, so transitioning into owning his own small dairy operation was a natural fit. Donna on the other hand, started off as a full-time RN and would help out on the farm on the side. At that time, the farm only consisted of dairy products that they would sell at a nearby food co-ops and beef products sold direct to consumers.

After 10 years of full-time work, Donna decided to accept a part-time nursing job that would allow her to divide her time more evenly between her job, the farm, and her growing family of four children. It was also at that time when the couple decided to dedicate the farm to becoming certified organic. It was a decision that would make a world of difference, as the demand for organic food grew in the coming years. “We didn’t really know what we were walking into,” says Donna, “We always believed in organics. It was always our philosophy. We hated the use of antibiotics and chemicals, but I can’t say that we really planned to be organic because of the marketing aspect, it was more of our philosophy first.”

It was also around that time that they decide that they really liked raising their own pork. “We would raise it through feeder pigs that we would buy from other farmers,” Donna explains, “and we would raise them over the summer and sell the meat to family and friends. We wanted to have that meat available year round, but what we found sadly, is that when we bought confinement feeder hogs, they wouldn’t do very well outside. Those little piglets were used to extremely controlled environments and didn’t have the immune systems to survive in the sunshine and the cold, and we would end up losing about half of them. So that’s when we decided to raise the Red Wattle Hogs.”

Red Wattle Hogs are a critically endangered species; less than 2000 are registered in the world today. They originally came from islands near Spain and were brought to the U.S. in the 1800s. They were popular with the pioneers for a while because of their rapid growth rate, disease resistance, and hardiness, but because their meat didn’t contain as much fat as other breeds, they eventually fell to the wayside and were thought to have become extinct. That is, until the 1970s when a small herd was found in Texas and a few Texas farmers decided to try to bring them back.
The return of the species generated a bit of a buzz, sparking an article that Keith would read, and eventually leading him to purchase a Red Wattle hog for himself from a breeder in Indiana, and later, older and better breeding stock from one of the original Red Wattle Hog Association founders. Since then it’s been only Red Wattles for Keith and Donna.

The Red Wattle Hog has played a huge part in the success of their farm. The diet of whole raw milk and organic feed gives these pigs a distinctive flavor that is often described as a cross between pork and beef. That flavor, along with the rarity of the breed, and the certified organic label created a very unique product that caught the attention of many high-end restaurants and retailers, particularly in the Chicago area.

Their decision to sell only raw organic milk was another crucial element in the success of their farm. Originally Donna and Keith sold their milk at co-ops but the co-ops later decided that they would not allow the farmers to sell raw milk. Because they were struggling to make money off their milk anyways, they decided it was time to sell direct to consumers. Now visitors come to their farm with their own mason jar, or purchase one from the farm store, and fill up their jars with milk from the holding container all on their own. Since the cows producing the milk are 100% pasture-raised, the milk has higher butter fat and protein content, lending it a distinctively delicious flavor and more health benefits than regular milk. Any leftover milk that isn’t sold is fed back to the animals on the farm. As for Donna and Keith, they can now set a competitive price, can milk half as many cows, and can make a better living than they were capable of previously.

While the Red Wattle Hogs and the raw milk were great decisions that helped the farm to become more financially viable, it wasn’t until three years ago, when Donna retired from nursing completely and began marketing the farm full-time, that the farm really took off. With Donna taking the lead on marketing and Keith keeping the farm running, business has never been better. It’s been so good, in fact, that Donna and Keith are ready to give it up. The farm is now for sale and Donna and Keith are looking towards their retirement. Their idea of retirement: living an entirely sustainable lifestyle on a 7-acre farm in which they raise their own meat, produce, eggs, and honey; cook over a wood fire; and live in an underground home, all below the poverty line of $15,000 a year. “We’re going to pull away from the material world as much as we can,” says Donna.

Crazy? Maybe. But one look at Donna and Keith, smiling and holding hands as they talk about their farm, and you won’t be able to help wondering if that’s the kind of crazy you should be too.

If you’d like to learn more about South Pork Ranch, hop over to Donna’s blog at: http://midlifefarmwife.blogspot.com/
Visit their website at: http://www.south-pork-ranch.com/who.html
Or stop by and visit in person at: 32796 E. 750 North Rd, Chatsworth, IL.
(The milk alone is worth the trip!)