



# A Breed Apart

*On a 40-acre hillside in Corinth, Ben Machin raises a flock of 60 Tunis sheep. They're a "heritage breed"—a domesticated breed of animal that has a long genetic history but is now endangered. As industrial agriculture continues to rely on just a few breeds designed for maximum growth in the shortest amount of time, more sustainable farmers are raising heritage breeds as an alternative—and to save them. Ben, a 35-year-old farmer who also works as a forester with Redstart Forestry and Consulting, is managing the flock that his great-grandfather started in the 1920s. Local Banquet editor Caroline Abels recently spoke with Ben about his unique sheep and why heritage breeds matter.*

## **What's special about the Tunis breed?**

The Tunis is one of the oldest American livestock breeds, dating to the turn of the 18th century, when there were some sheep introduced from northern Africa, from Tunisia, that were then crossed with sheep in America. This breed was developed that way and they were kept by Thomas Jefferson, among others. They almost went extinct during the Civil War because they were popular in the South and were largely destroyed during the war. They were just about wiped out. Now they're a rare breed. They're on the "watch list" of The American Livestock Breeds Conservancy but they're coming back. Their numbers have grown significantly over the last 10 to 15 years.

## **Why do you think that is?**

I think it's a combination of things. The showing of Tunis at fairs, livestock expos, and wool festivals has increased because people like their appearance. They have this cinnamon-colored head, long ears, and they're friendly and relaxed. They're medium-size animals so they're fairly easy to handle. The reason I'm excited about them, and one of the reasons they're growing in popularity, is that they do really well on grass. Historically they haven't been fed much grain, so they don't have really high nutritional needs. In the petroleum era many livestock breeds have become adapted to high production. They're given high inputs, so that means lots of grain, which is all petroleum-based. This is a different approach. Tunis mature pretty fast but don't need grain. The only petroleum inputs here are for the tractors to make hay for winter. Otherwise, it's just grass.

## **How did you come to get this flock?**

My great-grandfather started them in the early or mid-1920s. He got two registered Tunis sheep and started breeding from there. He kept them from when he was 30 until he died, and then my grandfather had them from that point onward. I was visiting my grandfather in the nursing home several years ago, just before he died, and we got to talking about the sheep. He was telling me their story and it was obvious

how much he cared about them. At the time I was interested in getting back into agriculture, having grown up on a farm and not having done any agricultural activities for 10 or 15 years. My uncle was looking after the flock while my grandfather was in the nursing home and he was not going to keep them after my grandfather passed away. I bought them from my uncle right after my grandfather died. So they're 80 to 85 years continuously managed. There's only one other flock in the country that's been managed for a similar period of time.

**Do you buy sheep from other people's flocks and introduce them into yours?**

Yes, but as people have gotten more and more interested in showing Tunis, they've developed larger and larger animals because they compete well in the show ring. So there aren't a lot of flocks left in the country that have maintained the small size that is traditional. I'm going all the way to North Carolina this month to buy some sheep from one other flock that has the attributes I'm looking for: small, fine-boned, good on grass, and not historically fed a lot of grain. I'm trying to keep it purebred Tunis but trying to bring in genetics that are of the old style to build the flock back up.

**Have you been selling them for meat or wool?**

I've been keeping all the female lambs to build the flock and selling all the male lambs at about six months of age. I've only had about 15 to 25 to sell every year, although I expect to have 100-150 to sell each year within three years. Another reason the breed is increasing in popularity is that the meat is very mild flavored. It's sweet; it isn't strong or gamey. All the old records for the breed say it was the preferred breed in the higher-end establishments in all the eastern cities back when Tunis was a prevalent breed. I'm not a connoisseur so I really don't know, but it tastes good to me. I offer the wool to anyone who is interested in spinning or weaving. It's a high-quality fleece, but at this point most of the wool ends up as compost or mulch due to lack of demand.

**Why is it important to keep heritage breeds alive?**

Since they pre-date the era of high technology and petroleum, they're generally simpler animals that anyone can manage. They don't need a lot of grain and don't need a lot of help getting pregnant or birthing. They also tend to be more resistant to parasites because they were in systems where they had to develop resistance, as opposed to being in the more sterile, controlled, indoor environments of today. They also tend to be multiple-use animals—like the Devon cow, which is used for milk and meat. It's a good milking animal but it's not the greatest milking animal. It's not the greatest beef animal but it's a good beef animal. Similarly, the Tunis are not the best at any one thing but they're pretty good at everything: heavy milkers, good fleece, and good for meat production.

**Given the longevity of your flock and the rarity of the breed, do you feel an added responsibility that perhaps other livestock farmers don't feel?**

It's an exciting challenge. When I bought the flock, my mother, whose side of the family cared for the flock all those years, said, "You don't have to do this." So I thought about

it, but decided I wanted to do it. When it isn't fun or doesn't make sense to me, I'll pass it along to somebody else. There are other Tunis breeders out there and I'm confident the breed will survive. I hope I can be part of that, but I'm not the only one doing the work.

*To find out more about Tunis sheep or heritage breeds, start with the website of the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy: [www.albc-usa.org](http://www.albc-usa.org). Soon, Tamarack Tunis, the name Ben has given his flock, will have a website at [www.tamaracktunis.com](http://www.tamaracktunis.com).*



Photos by Elizabeth Ferry