



THERE'S A LOT TO like about alpaca

Vineyard farm spreads the word about this gentle animal's many attractive qualities

BY MATTHEW J. GILL • PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHARLES STERNAIMOLO



LET'S CALL THIS A STORY OF LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT.

A little over ten years ago, Barbara Ronchetti of Edgartown came across a few cute faces while perusing the animals and exhibitions at the annual Martha's Vineyard Agricultural Fair. How cute are we talking? Very, very cute! The animals attached to those faces were soft too, and gentle, curious and friendly.

A decade after viewing an alpaca for the very first time that day, Ronchetti says the experience changed her life. "When I saw them at the fair," she says, "I thought 'I need to have these animals in my life.'"



The wheels were in motion. A longtime advertising representative and graphic designer for *The Martha's Vineyard Times*, Ronchetti was so taken with the animals that in 2005 she purchased a 19-acre property on Head of the Pond Road in Oak Bluffs; in the years that followed, she left her position at the newspaper, built a barn on the property—and in the fall of 2007, opened the doors to a brand new business.

Since then, Island Alpaca Company has been introducing the Vineyard—and visitors from around the world—to alpaca. Ronchetti says the majority of her business involves selling and breeding the animals—and the company was the first on the Vineyard to do the latter. "The reception

overall is very positive," she says in reference to her island neighbors. "The best thing about the farm is having people who have never experienced alpaca discover them here. There are so many special things about them."

She elaborates. "They don't bark, they don't bite, and they're very gentle," Ronchetti says. "They do make great pets." In addition,

alpaca produce a fleece that is considered to be one of the world's finest fibers. It's attractive for a number of reasons, including the fact it is hypo-allergenic, its insulation quality is very high, and it's super soft!

Each year, the animals are shorn at the end of April and on average yield five to ten pounds of fleece which, the



company's website describes as "warmer, lighter and stronger than wool." Also, the fleece grows naturally in 22 distinguishable fiber colors—with even more shades in between.

Ronchetti adds that alpaca, which generally weigh between 140 to 180 pounds as adults, are cost-effective when compared with horses and llamas and easy to keep. "All you need is hay and water and a little bit of feed," she says, adding that the animals eat about one-fifth that of a horse.

Members of the camelidae family, which also includes camels and llamas, alpaca are native to South America and are commonly found in Peru, Chile and Bolivia. They can seemingly adapt to any climate, though, and have reportedly flourished on farms from Florida to Minnesota—and to Martha's Vineyard. The animals' life span is often 20 to 25 years or more. In addition to fleece, Ronchetti says the animals produce another rich, if overlooked, byproduct: alpaca poop—a wonderful fertilizer.

In a typical year, Island Alpaca sells 10 to 20 animals, and the customers doing the buying hail from far and wide. Ronchetti quickly rattled off



Top: Island Alpaca owner, Barbara Ronchetti, embraces the alpaca, Angelina.

Above: Ronchetti stands in the gift shop, which sells a variety of products made with alpaca fleece.

Opposite: Employee Lillian Robinson carries one of the babies.

the home states and towns of a few of her customers: New York, New Jersey, New Hampshire, she says, Woods Hole and Osterville. Once, she delivered an alpaca by meeting the new owners—and completing the transfer—at a rest stop in Greenwich, Connecticut. The cost of individual alpacas can range from as little as \$500 for a pet-quality "fiber animal," to \$50,000 for a champion herd sire. "One year," Ronchetti adds, "a girl bought eight!"

In October of this year, the farm's herd numbered 71 alpaca—and one llama, the 17-year-old Sadrina. Many of the animals on the farm are given Italian names, an homage to Ronchetti's heritage. Others have names inspired by a particular characteristic or personality trait they display.

"They are all so different," Ronchetti says. Luna, for example, has a white stripe on her head that resembles a moon. Hottie is social and feisty. "She's hot and cold," Ronchetti says. "She prefers men." And then there's Estrada, a male. "He's very chill," Ronchetti says. "In addition to his championship wins, his offspring carry on his chill personality." Other members of the herd include Apollo, Arias, Bella Notte, Bosco, Eclipse, Khan d'or, Nightengale, Samuel Bellamy, Spock, Lorenzo and Zambrotta. Ronchetti adds that Angelina, an 8-year-old female, may be the most valuable of all due to her heavenly fleece.

Ashleigh Plante, 21, a graduate of Martha's Vineyard High, has worked at the farm since she was 16. "It's peaceful being around them," she says of the animals. "They're very therapeutic. They're different than any other livestock around." In the winter of



In addition to selling alpaca the Vineyard company also offers training courses on the basics of owning and caring for the animals.



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2014-2015, Plante baked alpaca-shaped cookies for her fellow staff members, and the sweets were decorated to represent the individual animals. The "Luna cookie," featured Luna's moon!

There are also t-shirts and coffee mugs, postcards and mouse pads. Looking a little longer, the visitor will find a manger scene with little golden alpaca figurines standing in for the cattle, alpaca dolls, greeting cards, and yarn—the shopping list goes on and on. Also available are packages of Alpaca Poo, a sweet, uniquely shaped concoction of dark chocolate and raspberries.

Looking back, Ronchetti says she may be able to explain the powerful *alpaca-traction* that changed her life. "I always wanted a dog growing up," she says. "I think this is me compensating for all those years not having a pet. Discovering alpaca is really something everyone needs to do. I think every home should have two."

Located at 1 Head of the Pond Road in Vineyard Haven, Island Alpaca is open daily. Learn more at islandalpaca.com, or call 508-693-5554.

Matthew J. Gill is the editor of
Cape Cod LIFE magazine.

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Island Alpaca has seven employees, but the staff is expanded to 14 during the summer. The extra help is needed: during the island's busy season, Ronchetti says more than 1,000 visitors stop by the farm each week.

Coinciding with alpaca sales, the company also offers training courses on the basics of owning and caring for the animals as well as alpaca investment and sponsorship opportunities. There's even a live "alpaca cam" video stream broadcast on the company's website.

In the gift shop, the shelves and displays are loaded with pretty much any gift item one can imagine—in an alpaca-related form. First and foremost, there are many items made from the soft and warm alpaca fleece, including sweaters and socks, scarves and shawls, hats, blankets and fingerless mittens.

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