

profile

Alpaca Breeding: a Rewarding Lifestyle

The Jersey Breeders Story



By Glori Gayster

Jersey Breeders, a well-established alpaca-breeding farm in Tabernacle, recently opened a new retail store stocked with a wide selection of certified alpaca products. Jersey Breeders owner, Jerry Braatz says, "The store is a natural expansion of our farm and business. We take great pride in breeding our alpacas, and our store offers the highest quality alpaca-related products. There is no other place like it in South Jersey."

High-end alpaca fiber clothing, outerwear, and yarns

The Jersey Breeders retail store, The Alpaca Shoppe, offers high-end, classic apparel including sweaters, socks, scarves and other outerwear accessories. There is also a complete line of golf apparel with a

choice of cardigans, and vests.

"I like to say that alpaca fleece warms without weight, so for some who don't like the heaviness of a wool sweater, these items are a great fit," says Jersey Breeders operations and marketing manager, Chris Gray. "And, for that someone on your holiday list who has everything, we have many great 'one-of-a-kind' gift ideas." For the home, there is a selection of blankets, throws, and even dolls. Jersey Breeders also sells sorted and natural dyed yarns produced from their animals for knitters and spinners.

"The store is an exciting mix from well-known designers, such as Inca Fashions, but also local artists, who we strongly support," says Gray.

Open on Fridays and Saturdays from

10 a.m. to 5 p.m., the Jersey Breeders retail store will have expanded hours between Thanksgiving and Christmas. If these times are inconvenient, Gray encourages you to call Jersey Breeders for a private appointment.

The Jersey Breeders story

After 30 years in the financial and insurance fields, Jerry Braatz was ready for a change. He and his wife, Lynne, began exploring opportunities for a new lifestyle; their research eventually led them to several alpaca breeding farms. It quickly became clear this was just what the Braatzs were looking for—a sound business venture and rewarding lifestyle all in one. In August 2004, Jersey Breeders was born.

"I grew up on a dairy farm in the Midwest so I understood the risks along with the work and commitment involved with raising livestock. I also had experienced the lifestyle first hand," Braatz explains. "It was a return to my roots. We haven't looked back."

Today, the 20-acre Jersey Breeders farm is home to more than 60 alpacas. The Braatzs' mission is two-fold: to breed a diverse, high quality herd and to mentor new breeders in the development of their

Specifically, the hands-on mentoring program covers the operational requirements, including barns, fences, and pastures, as well as daily maintenance. Jersey Breeders provides nutritional and health information for the alpaca herd along with details about birthing and neo-natal care. Since breeding is a business, Braatz and Gray offer insight on the development of business and marketing plans plus retail-related opportunities.

More than a business investment, alpacas can make wonderful pets—a peaceful addition to families of any size with children at any age. “If I had to compare, I’d have to say an alpaca’s temper is most like that of a cat,” says Gray. “They are quietly curious and inquisitive.”

Alpacas are a community affair

As a member of the alpaca breeding community Gray says, “There are a number of family-oriented alpaca events throughout the year for businesses and pet owners, including local and state fairs, alpaca farm open houses and auctions. Some breeders also like to show their animals but no primping is allowed. They arrive and show in pasture condition only.”



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Jersey Breeders also hosts and participates in events to foster awareness of the alpaca breed and their unique qualities. As part of National Alpaca Farm Days, sponsored by the Alpaca Owners & Breeders Association, Inc. (AOBA), Jersey Breeders will hold an open house on September 25-26. Guests are invited to explore the farm, take advantage of what Gray says are the “many great photo opps”, and meet people who relish living such a rewarding lifestyle. “In 2009, I personally gave tours to about 750 guests,” says Braatz.

“For the holidays, we are excited to host our Alpaca Heritage Holiday Sale on Saturday

Nov. 27,” says Gray. “It is a great time to find all your favorite alpaca products—from warm mittens and blankets to fine yarns you can use to knit your own. The sale promotes the animals and product sales from local breeders, who are a part of the Alpaca Heritage Group.” Gray adds that it’s another perfect time to bring your camera.

Through Jersey Breeders’ affiliation with the AOBA, with which they are strongly aligned, the Braatzs support charitable efforts in South America including raising funds for the indigenous Quechua people, the primary shepherds of alpacas. Closer to home, the Braatzs donated four of its herd to the Paws Farm Nature Center alpaca exhibit in Mount Laurel.

Gray fondly remembers, “When I sit gazing at these smart, curious animals, I think of that teddy bear—grateful for my new found lifestyle.” ♦

Jersey Breeders is at 364 Tuckerton Road in Tabernacle and welcomes visitors to its farm and new store throughout the year. Their Open House will be Sept. 25-26, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. For more information or to browse the alpacas available to sale, call (609) 268-8656 or visit JerseyAlpacas.com.

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Photo by Bob Graham

own successful alpaca breeding business.

Chris and Jon Gray began working for the Braatzs earlier this year, lending their near decade of experience in the alpaca farming industry. Like Braatz, Chris Gray left behind the corporate world in search of a less stressful lifestyle. "I often tell the story that it was actually a teddy bear made from alpaca fiber that changed my life," she says. "I was struck by its softness and started researching the breed. As I learned more, I realized it was a lifestyle that might just be the right fit for us."

Alpacas are easy to raise

Members of the camelid family, alpacas are native to South America. Unlike llamas whose appearance they share however, the domesticated species is specifically bred for its soft fiber. "When people see an alpaca, their initial reaction is 'cute and fuzzy,'" Gray laughs. "But, alpacas are also safe in that they don't bite or butt. They are smart, clean and easy to train."

Alpacas are relatively quiet, communicating with a soft hum. They can range in height from 4.5 to 5 feet and weigh on average between 110 to 180 pounds, eating mostly grass and hay. Fairly disease-resistant,

alpacas can have a lifespan of 15 to 18 years and easily adapt to various habitats making them great investments for both business and as pets. Braatz says, "For those interested in owning alpacas, I would add that they do not require any special shelter—just something to provide shade—and in general, 4 to 7 alpacas can live on one acre of land."

Family-friendly lifestyle

New Jersey is home to nearly 90 alpaca breeding farms in New Jersey. The lifestyle, which is filled with responsibility and joy, is popular to people from all walks of life. The Braatzs says the lifestyle is ideal for retirees and families with young children. The experience can be rewarding on so many levels—a great way to spend time together as well as teach kids the responsibility of caring for these cute, loving animals. "For some, alpacas are a primary source of income yet for others they make great pets, are excellent sources for spinning and knitting fiber, and are a great part-time business venture. In all cases, it is a source of pleasure."

Revenue for alpaca breeders is most commonly generated through the sale of alpaca and their offspring. While many fac-

tors go into an alpaca's value, including color and quality of its fleece, females can range in price from \$6,000 to \$15,000 while males may demand on average from \$7,500 to over \$100,000 each. Pet-quality alpacas can cost as little as \$500. As with most assets, alpacas may be insured.

Alpacas are also a tremendous investment in terms of harvesting the animal's luxurious fleece, a product often in high demand. Alpacas are shorn once a year at any age and no harm is done to the animals. The result is a generous three to five pounds of pure alpaca fiber from each. The fiber, which does not contain lanolin like that of sheep, is soft right off the animal and is used in any number of products, including yarn, clothing, blankets and even teddy bears.

For those interested in breeding, Jersey Breeders has more than just the alpacas. Says Braatz, "We love the alpaca business and the lifestyle it affords. When you buy one of our animals, we are there every step of the way—for the newest of owners to experienced breeders. Our mentoring program is designed to provide the tools needed to get started quickly, maintain efficiency and create a successful business."

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