

GEM STATE **Producer**

Idaho Farm Bureau

March 2022 • Volume 26 Issue 2

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Photos courtesy of Autumn Baker

Royal White sheep have hair instead of wool and can be bred year-round to produce lean, mild-flavored meat.

Royal White and Babydoll Southdown sheep fill a niche in eastern Idaho

By Dianna Troyer

For Idaho Farm Bureau Federation

Like her Australian forefathers who raised sheep, Autumn Baker decided to follow in their footsteps but with a modern twist.

“I wanted to honor my heritage and bring registered and commercial sheep back into the family business,” she said. “I did a lot of research to pick breeds that would thrive here and fill a niche market.”

Five years ago, she established a flock of two breeds – the Royal White, known for having a tender lean mild-flavored meat, and Babydoll Southdown, renowned among spinners for producing soft and lofty wool.

Baker said she wanted to raise sheep on the family ranch near Lava Hot Springs in southeastern Idaho to complement her parents’ other agribusinesses: custom fencing, raising raspberries and offering wagon rides.

“When they retire and I step up to

run the ranch, I want to be diversified,” said Baker, 40, executive assistant to the Pocatello Fire Department chief.

She chose Royal White sheep for several reasons.

Developed in Texas, the breed is low maintenance, parasite resistant, naturally polled, and produces meat with a mild taste. As a result of having hair instead of wool, they also lack lanolin, which can flavor the meat strongly.

“In fall, their hair grows longer,” Baker said. “Then they shed it off nat-



Autumn Baker raises unusual breeds of Royal White and Babydoll Southdown sheep near Lava Hot Springs in eastern Idaho.

LEFT: Babydoll Southdown Sheep originated in southern England several centuries ago. Farmers with small acreage needed a diminutive easygoing sheep that would produce quality meat as well as wool.

usually in the spring, so they don't need to be sheared."

They can be bred year-round.

"It allows for lamb production to meet specific markets depending on demand," she said. "The moms are great, too. Lamb survival is excellent, and we often have twins, triplets and even quadruplets."

Lambs have a high meat distribution of about 54 percent.

Baker said southeastern Idaho consumers want locally raised meat. She has seen an increase in demand, buoyed by the pasture-to-plate movement.

"People tell me they like the Royal White meat because it doesn't have a greasy texture or aftertaste," she said.

She sells the meat through her website – www.bakerranchlava.com – and the Portneuf Valley Farmer's Market in Pocatello.

She works with a USDA certified butcher and sells a whole lamb or commercial cuts.

"Butcher shops from Pocatello to Sugar City are already booked nearly a year out for processing because of the increased demand," she said.

The demand for locally raised meat was fueled during the height of the coronavirus pandemic. Baker and her partner, Brandon Finck of Blackfoot, also raise a few cattle and hogs to sell directly to the consumer.

"When meat packing plants were shutting down, the demand for pork was high here in southeast Idaho," she said. "Brandon and Debra Hill from Ririe coordinated with local butcher shops to secure processing and transportation for just over 700 hogs that were unable to go to market for a farmer in South Dakota."

To let people know meat would be available, she posted the information on the Baker Ranch Facebook page.

"The response was overwhelming," she said. "Every one of them sold, and we had a waiting list."

Unlike the Royal White, her Babydoll Southdown sheep are more popular for pets, therapy, and fiber rather than for meat.

"I've never tried their meat," Baker said. "To me, they're too cute to eat. They're small, docile and easy to take care of."

Known as the "smiling sheep," they

look like a plush stuffed animal with short legs.

"They're bought for pets, to graze on weeds, or for therapy animals," she said. "People take them to long-term care centers to interact with residents because they're friendly and easy to transport."

Originating in southern England several centuries ago, they were bred for farmers with small acreage who needed a diminutive dual-purpose sheep that would produce quality meat as well as wool.

Standing 18 to 24 inches tall at the shoulder, they withstand the cold well and are not susceptible to hoof disease. They are popular in orchards for keeping grass and weeds grazed down without harming the bark of the trees.

Baker cautions they are such easy keepers, "you have to watch their weight."

Their short legs required her to build steps for them, "so they can reach their heated trough in winter."

As demand grows, Baker will expand the flock.

"They've filled a niche in the area and have been well received," she said. ■