



ALPACA AWESOME

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY ABBY LAUB

ALVINA MAYNARD'S RICHMOND-BASED
RIVER HILL RANCH YIELDS ALPACA FIBER
PRODUCTS AND ALPACA MEAT

On a visit to River Hill Ranch in Richmond, you might see your next black dress walk off the trailer.

So says the alpaca farm's owner, **Alvina Maynard**, in reference to the beautiful black Suri alpaca that just arrived at her farm earlier this winter. Its luxurious fiber eventually will be sheared.

"You just have to feel it," she said about the animal fiber she has spent the past 3½ years working with on her hillside farm. "Placed in its proper application for the quality grade, alpaca is a dream. On top of its softness, it also is a high-performance textile. So while it may seem like an expensive luxury, when compared to the lifespan of cheaper clothing products, the alpaca is worth the investment."

So much so that Maynard, 33, left a longtime career in the Air Force to start a farm. When she first presented the idea to her husband, whom she met in the service, he asked, "What the heck is an alpaca?!"

At 17, the rural southern California native left home to join the Air Force and found herself traveling the world, jumping out of airplanes and teaching backpacking. On a work trip, Maynard happened to see an advertisement on television for National Alpaca Farm Day and became intrigued, having seen alpacas in their native Peru. Eventually settling in Kentucky with her husband, Maynard gave birth to a daughter, **Aidyn**, in 2010. She then became an Air Force reservist, and River Hill Ranch was born. But why?

"Divine intervention," she said, adding, "I'm weird. Alpacas are awesome."

Maynard noted there are three times in her life when she distinctly felt God strongly telling her to do something. The first was to join the Air Force, the next was to marry her husband, and the third was to start an alpaca farm.

River Hill's motto "Alpaca Awesome" sums up her enthusiastic attitude for the business that has taken her all over the country, had her shoveling manure for hours, modeling alpaca clothing, hosting a Farm to Table dinner, working late nights, writing grant proposals, researching new products, marketing events, administering medical treatment to her animals, and shearing and wrestling the 200-plus-pound alpacas.

Maynard breeds her alpacas primarily for their fiber but also sells meat products and even sells

byproducts for dog treats. When discussing the slaughter of an animal, she can detail where every single piece of it went and what it was used for. And, of course, she is selective about which ones are taken for meat—meat that sells out quickly and is gaining popularity.

"Alpaca meat is a sweet version of grass-fed beef, with the texture of a tuna steak," Maynard explained. "Our favorite cuts are the strip loin and tenderloin cooked hot 'n' fast on a Salt Rox Himalayan salt block. There is no additional seasoning needed because the sweet flavor of the meat itself is better than any marinade."

River Hill sells ground alpaca, chorizo sausage, Italian sausage, strip loin, tenderloin and jerky.

"It is innovative here in the United States, with alpaca as it is still a new livestock species here," she noted. "It did take a while to navigate laws and regulations to get up and running. We are currently the only farm in the state to offer alpaca meat, and one of only a handful in the U.S. We also offer dog treats at Bluegrass Barkery and will soon add fur and leather products,

which are also not normal for the U.S. alpaca industry."

Alpaca leather is thinner and finer than cow leather and can be turned into beautiful products. Like the fiber, the leather is not inexpensive but lasts a long time. Maynard believes in owning fewer pieces of quality clothing.

"All-natural fibers generally outperform

synthetics and are more environmentally sustainable," she said. "Like wool, alpaca retains its thermal qualities when wet. However, alpaca is 30 percent more thermal than wool and naturally wicks moisture, allowing wear into the warmer months. Alpaca also does not have barbs like wool does, making it feel softer than similar grade wool. This same aspect gives it the ability to resist felting naturally, making washing easier."

The pieces she produces with her alpacas are luxurious. And warm. Even on a bitterly cold day, Maynard was wearing what looked to be just a couple of layers, and when I commented that she must be cold, she noted it was alpaca. I, in a long wool coat, was cold for most of our shoot, and she never shivered once.

But her favorite product is the one least seen. "My favorite is for sure the socks," she said.

"Three pairs of alpaca socks are all you need. If I get behind on laundry and am forced to grab something else, I can tell by the end of the day the difference on my body with throbbing feet and aching back. Alpaca socks not only take care

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of your feet, but they support your entire body.

“Another favorite is my Simply Natural Clothing Cape. This piece is so versatile: I can wear it to a formal gala or with a T-shirt and jeans. Most folks think because it looks delicate that I have to baby it. Another great property of alpaca is it resists wrinkling. I wash that beauty up and shove it in my purse with no worry.”

Walking around her ranch, Maynard sees her animals and daydreams about the fiber and what it could be used for. River Hill already sells hats, gloves, headbands, saddle pads, rugs, shoe insoles, dresses, shawls, scarves and other products. She even uses oddball pieces as laundry balls. The balled fiber helps speed up the drying process, cutting

down on electricity usage. And the hard-to-use pieces are turned into colorful, eclectic yarn necklaces or organic-looking dream catchers.

Everything has a purpose, and no fiber is wasted. Maynard and her family worked too hard to toss anything aside as useless. In her garage are stacks of leather hides, and the front yard of her family’s custom-built home is usually full of curious critters.

And curious human critters also can be seen running around. Aidyn, 6, and 1-year-old Sean are part of the family-run operation. The Maynard crew strives to live a different life—a purposeful one where everything is done intentionally.

“I don’t know if our lives are any slower, but life on a farm feels more full of purpose,” Maynard said.



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“Because we grow clothes, we don’t have to go to the mall. Because we grow food, we spend way less time and money in the grocery store, and my kids scarf down their veggies they picked before dinner. My workout is mucking stalls, carrying hay bales, and running the alpacas out to pasture. I love that my kids learn not only math, science and communication, but how to be respectful, work hard, take care of themselves and others. That doesn’t mean it’s always pretty. But even in those moments when you find yourself cursing, crying, or fighting mad, you don’t have a choice but to conquer whatever it is you’re facing. And when you do, it makes you feel more alive.”

Feeling more alive is a gift that Maynard now works to give back to others, specifically other farmers who are service veterans. It’s no secret that veterans in America don’t always have the easiest time settling back into society and “normal” jobs. Nothing about Maynard is normal—as a female veteran farmer, she draws curiosity.

Maynard is officially a Kentucky Proud and Homegrown By Heroes producer, and her Farm to Table dinner last fall helped raise money for other veteran farmers. Homegrown

By Heroes designates farm products produced by military veteran farmers. It was founded by Kentucky Department of Agriculture in 2013 and went national on Veterans Day of that year. She received a grant last year from the Farmer Veteran Coalition of Davis, California, to fund shearing equipment and fencing for more pasture. Maynard makes trips through the FVC and alpaca agencies, even representing Kentucky veteran farmers in Washington, D.C.

Locally, Maynard participates at the downtown Richmond farmers market, was a vendor at the Kentucky Proud Incredible Food Show in Lexington, and sells her meat to popular restaurants around the state. She currently serves as vice president of the Kentucky Alpaca Association and the Iboard secretary and Product Development Committee chair of the Suri Network.

But where she is happiest is sitting on her screened-in front porch after a hard day’s work, sipping some local wine, hanging out with her family, and watching the curiously cute—and often goofy—alpacas roam around their fields. Maynard works incredibly hard, but at the heart of it, lives life the slow way. ➤



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