

Meet Rhonda Dortch

Neo Mountain Mama

BY LYDIA PRESTON

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN W. FARRELL

RHONDA DORTCH remembers the moment she knew she would come to live and work in West Virginia. It was October, 2008. Seeking respite from the demands of a small business that she says no longer satisfied her soul, she was driving north from her home in Monroe, North Carolina, “just looking at the colors.” Two hundred and twenty miles into her journey, she reached Bluestone Lake outside Hinton. “I thought it was the most beautiful sight I had ever seen,” she recalls. “I knew I would get my life back when I got to the other side of the Bluestone River.”





After running a demonstration farm in North Carolina, Dortch has graduated to the full-fledged real thing in Summers County, West Virginia. She produces eggs, goats' milk soaps, and most of the food it takes to sustain her.

Eight years earlier, the divorced mother of two had been inspired by her childhood dreams of becoming a farmer to create a demonstration farm modeled on a typical circa-1900 American family homestead. Called Black Swan Farm, it became a popular field trip destination in the Monroe area and spawned a spin-off company to produce artisanal goat's milk soap.

"I was living my dream and getting paid for it," says "Farmer Rhonda," as she came to be known. But by 2008, she knew she wanted something different: a real farm where she could expand her soap-making business and put into practice the lessons she had learned teaching traditional agriculture to school children.

Today she is realizing that new dream with Bluestone Mountain Farm in Summers County. The largely self-sustaining 14-acre property teems with livestock and is checkered with garden plots painstakingly brought to life by Dortch's singlehanded labor. She grows most of her own food, as well as vegetables, seeds and grains to supplement the diet of her pastured goats, rabbits, donkeys, cow, horse, pony, and a diverse collection of meat and egg-producing poultry. The huge flock includes 43 rare Ancona ducks, a critically endangered breed she raises for their extra-large, protein-packed eggs. Nothing goes to waste, from the animal droppings that fertilize her gardens to an old metal barn roof she used to build the brooder shed that houses baby chicks.

The leased farm—organic and certified "Animal Welfare Approved" is not what Dortch envisions as her "Forever Farm", a much larger piece of land she hopes to eventually find and purchase outright. There she plans to further enlarge both

her poultry and soap businesses as well as grow cash crops of heirloom grains and vegetables. She also wants to teach other people how to raise and cook healthful foods. "A lot of people want to grow their own food but don't know how," she says. "I want to be a resource for them, because there's a steep learning curve in farming."

Years of trial-and-error entrepreneurship have proved there can also be a steep learning curve when it comes to running a business. Witness the growing pains experienced by Dortch's Bluestone Mountain Soap company. Hand crafting the specialty bars of essential oil-laced goat's milk soap keeps her standing over a hot kitchen stove, hoisting heavy containers of liquid ingredients for hours on end. The chore cuts into her time outdoors, and makes it tough to keep up with paperwork. Recently, Dortch received some welcome help in addressing some of those issues from Lean Start-Up60x, a West Virginia State University Extension program designed to aid small West Virginia business owners with 60 days of targeted assistance. In her case, that included a crash course in Quickbooks, an upgraded business plan and a complete overhaul of her long out-of-date website.

With her attention and seemingly boundless drive newly focused on the future, Dortch reflects on a few of the qualities that continue to sustain her entrepreneurial spirit. "I've always wanted to make it on my own and do what was in my heart," she says. "You have to feel that way. You have to follow your instincts and think of something you can create—something unique of your own that motivates you and keeps you going even in hard times. And you can't ever give up."



Bluestone Mountain Farm is one of four farms in West Virginia certified "Animal Welfare Approved" by the nonprofit animal watchdog organization of the same name. Designed for small independent farms, it requires that animals be raised entirely on pastures or ranges and prohibits factory farming methods such as the use of feedlots and cages.

