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## Celebrating the Abundance of New Mexico, from Albuquerque to Taos

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### Southwest Nation

#### Art and the Art of Ranching: Talus Wind Ranch by Deborah Madison

Like many of us, Tim Willms' association with New Mexico started with casual visits. But unlike most who relocate, he bought a ranch, rather than a house in town. Located about six miles south of Galisteo, the dry grasslands of Talus Wind Ranch rise to a rocky prominence from which the eye travels to the Sangre de Cristo mountains, crossing the broad Galisteo basin. It's a stunning, spacious view.

Tim Willms is also unusual in that he straddles two very different worlds--of art dealer and rancher--which he strives to join. "It wasn't uncommon in the 19th century for artists to paint farms and farm animals," Tim points out. "So in a way, art and ranching weren't so far apart for me. Art serves as a tool for communicating an idea, and I've often used my art history background as a tool for communicating concepts. My hope is that I can enlighten others that art and raising food share the potential to nourish a regional community."

As is often the case, the idea for Tim to become a rancher happened by chance, not design. "I started raising a few sheep, a few turkeys, some rabbits. One Thanksgiving I served my turkey. When my guests said it was the best turkey they had ever tasted, that got me to thinking that I could make raising animals a viable business, not just a hobby."

Tim's first job was to restore his overgrazed land. He worked with a government agency to figure out how much livestock the land would sustain. His 400 acres, he learned, could sustain 20 sheep if grazing rotation were in place--hardly a viable model for a working ranch. But turkeys didn't need to graze much, so he began breeding Bronze, Standard Bronze and Rio Grande turkeys. (Today he maintains his flocks by raising his own turkey chicks.) Then Tim went onto sheep, but using a different plan. "I have an 110-acre pasture that I keep undisturbed for eight months. I put sixty lambs on it for about four months, alternating days on the pasture according to rainfall. In the process of grazing they help fertilize the grasses, but then they come into paddocks and I supplement their feed."

Tim raises heritage breeds (hence the moniker Talus Wind Ranch Heritage Meats) such as Navajo-Churro, Southdowns, Miniature Southdowns, Rambouillet and Finnsheep. All of them have their virtues, except for a feisty Finnsheep ram who fights with the other males. In addition to the chatty turkeys, there are New Zealand rabbits, running ducks, Pilgrim geese, ornamental pheasants, miniature horses and a potpourri of pretty chickens. All are protected by a pair of the enormous Anatolian shepherd dogs, several donkeys and Oscar, the spotted lama. One of the early difficulties Tim ran into in trying to raise animals for sale was how to process them, given the lack of processing plants. "When I realized how many small processing facilities were going out of business across America, I became irritated; local food had become a luxury, and not everyone had the opportunity to explore that option."

Tim responded by purchasing the Mountainair processing facility in 2006. "It was during a difficult transition period, shifting from the New Mexico Livestock Board to USDA, but we did it. Now I'm USDA certified for beef, lamb, goat and pigs." (Rabbits and poultry need their own facilities because of the potential of salmonella.)

Although being USDA certified means a rancher can sell across the state lines, when a group of visiting chefs from the East coast tasted Tim's lamb and turkey then asked about ordering for their restaurants, Tim turned them

down, encouraging them instead to find local suppliers in their area. Tim's own goal is to keep his products within a 200-mile radius. With only sixty lambs, that would make sense, but it turns out that Tim has created a much larger project.

"After trying to raise more sheep than I was qualified for, I decided to reach out to families who have been raising sheep here for generations and whose lambs were being shipped off to feedlots in California or Colorado. I spoke with the Perez-Cravens, Hindi and McFall families, and to others raising from 50 to 1000 lambs. I told the families that we were interested in keeping their lambs in New Mexico. We agreed that their practices fit into my protocol regarding the care and feeding of the animals; we agreed on a price, and when ready for slaughter, we would transport them directly from the pasture to processing. They never see a feedlot. We like to give the animals at least 48 hours to acclimate and we try never have more than forty head at a time to avoid the adrenaline rush that tightens up the meat."

The twin goals of traceability and transparency that Tim strives for imply that it's possible to track each animal from ranch to refrigerator, and that the animals are guaranteed raised by traditional ranching methods on properties that are environmentally sustainable. These partnerships enabled Talus Wind Ranch to process 680 lambs last year, enough to take part in Sysco's Born in New Mexico program, enough to supply fifteen local restaurants (and more), and enough to give away meat to schools and food banks. This is starting to build towards more of an "ag in the middle" concept, producing quality food in quantity while keeping local foods local.

"But I'm just the go-between," Tim adds. "Ranching is hard work, but we need more people doing it so that more people can afford local foods. The way I see it raising livestock is similar to publishing an edition of prints in that it's a collaboration of talents and skills. I have come to see these other ranchers as agricultural artists that share my vision of having sustainable, local food sources. Some of the ranchers have a soft voice and they need someone to amplify it so that their vision can be seen. That's what I want to do--bring a voice and an opportunity to these ranchers. I really want to give ranching the honor it deserves."

This desire comes, in part, out of Tim's own humbling entry into the world of ranching. "I didn't realize how hard it was for farmers and ranchers to live. I'd go to the grocery store, pick up a chicken breast and make the foolish assumption that this was helping some farmer somewhere. I just didn't grasp what had happened over the past forty years, that food has become so untraceable, so unsustainable and so disconnected. People have been talking about it vis-a-vis Slow Food, but I didn't realize the difficulties until I started raising animals myself. To see a lamb born and see that its life is here to feed us is awesome. To make full use of it is essential."

To that end, Tim would like to see more chefs use the entire animal not just the racks. "I'd like to see them revisit the other cuts of meat, the way it used to be. We have wonderful talent here and many chefs realize that not only are they providing a great dish, they're also a link in the education process. When chefs cook our food--and other local foods for that matter--they are helping their community and it's important because in the end we only have ourselves, really."

For more information, ordering and contact, go to <http://www.taluswindranch.com>  
In our restaurants, look for Talus Wind Heritage Meats.