

Hull-O Farms Family Farm Vacations

Ecstatic is how Sherry Hull describes her five-year-old guests as they pick up a still-warm egg from under a hen, scamper around with a litter of kittens in the hay, or hold a bottle of milk for a slurping calf. If children come to Hull-O Farm Family Farm Vacations already smitten with four-legged creatures, they and their parents leave at the end of two nights or a two week stay “with their eyes wide open,” Sherry says, about what life is like on a farm.

Sherry, her husband Frank and their two grown sons divide the work of raising 12 calves, six goats, five sheep, 150 laying hens, 10 beef steer, and 1500 pheasants, as well as few pet cats, dogs, bunnies, red deer , a ferret and an ugly pot belly pig. They also milk six cows every early morning and late afternoon, make hay on their own 130 acres and on some neighboring fields, and raise 40 acres of corn. And they host up to 14 guests a night in three private houses, Monday through Sunday, May through October.

Adults and children from metropolitan New York, New Jersey and Connecticut journey to the 287 acre dairy farm in the northern foothills of the Catskill Mountains like some young families go to Disney Land: to relax and explore.



The visitors are given the itinerary of chore and meal times when they arrive and when then leave the farm, a dozen fresh eggs to take home.

During they stay, they can help to milk and feed the animals starting at 7:30 a.m. if they choose, and are served a buttermilk pancake, sausage and egg breakfast prepared by Chef Jason Hull, Sherry and Frank’s eldest son. Afterwards, guests are offered a hayride, or they can choose to go fishing or wander off the farm to explore the surrounding countryside. Milking starts again at 4 p.m.

At haying time, they are invited to ride the tractor or swing bails from the wagon up to the hay mow. A maize maze in the corn field opens at the end of summer for anyone wishing to test his or her problem-solving skills. And for the pleasure of hunters, the Hulls release their pheasants into an open field at \$20 a bird and offer access to their 150 acre woodlot full of wild turkey and deer.

A kitchen garden with vegetables and herbs is used by Jason in meal preparation, and Frank is considering expanding it to grow basil for a local pesto maker. “We’re always keeping our ears open for what markets are looking for,” said Sherry, reflecting a new perspective she has since the family started diversifying the seven-generation dairy operation in 1994.

Frank was raised on the farm, where he lived quite comfortably with his parents and siblings for many years. He and Sherry took over the operation in 1970, milking 80 cows and shipping the liquid to a cooperatively owned supplier of Cabot cheese.

For 30 years, the couple milked twice a day, seven days a week. Sherry felt as if they were married to their business. “It’s not something where you say, ‘I think I’ll take Saturday off and go to the beach,’” she illustrated. And even though the family worked intensely they never seemed to earn enough to be comfortable. Milk prices weren’t low each and every year, Sherry explained, “but they never seemed to maintain the up-spirals long enough to offset the downward ones,” which put the Hulls into almost constant debt.

As it gradually became clear dairy farming alone wasn't working for them, the family began to shrink the herd and at the same time, build the hospitality arm of the business. When they were still milking 50 cows, the Hulls opened the guest houses to their first clients.

Now, a result of much hard work and their own homespun twinkle of innovation, they have the farm just where they want it. The Hulls are financially stable and can lift their noses off the grindstone now and then.



When Sherry looks up, she's inspired by what her family has created.

At the end of each day, Jason prepares dinner, often featuring beef raised on the farm, and guests gather around the dining room table before retreating to their separate houses. The adults are mostly urban professionals--journalists, lawyers and doctors, and the kids are just kids, alternately rowdy, misbehaved, bright and charming. Whether strangers to one another beforehand or not, everyone at the dinner table has in common a slice of the experience of life and work on a farm.

Occasionally, Sherry eyes the youngsters sitting at her table and imagines any one could grow up to be president. And should that happen, and should the city kid hold dear the memory of collecting warm eggs from beneath a feathery breast, and should she maintain into her adulthood an appreciation for the people who work the land, she may just see to it one day as the nation's leader that family farms be empowered to thrive.

But even if no future United States presidents ever sit at the Hull-O Farm dining room table, the arrangement is still all for the better, according to Sherry. "We get to save and live on our farm and they get to experience the lifestyle and the whole world will be able to reap the benefit of both."

Organization:
Hull-O Farms Family Farm Vacations
Contact:
Sherry and Frank Hull
10 Cochrane Road
Durham
New York
12422
www.hull-o.com
Vacation@Hull-o.com
518-239-6950