



Felix and Sarah Tornare at their Carbondale ranch

MOVERS AND SHAKERS

ON THE MENU: PASTRIES AND GRASSFED BEEF?

BY LAUREL MILLER

As the son of a baker in Winterthur, Switzerland, the last thing Felix Tornare ever dreamed of becoming was a cattle rancher in the American West. Yet today, he has solidified his reputation as one of the Roaring Fork Valley's most talented bakers, as well as a producer of some of the finest grassfed beef in the nation.

The owner of Aspen's wildly popular Louis' Swiss Bakery is also the co-force behind Milagro Ranch, an 87-acre horse and cattle spread Felix shares with his wife and business partner, Sarah. His story begins with his childhood in Winterthur. Felix's father, Louis, owned a bakery, and from an early age, Felix, his older brother, Rene and their six siblings worked in their parents' shop, learning the art of baking and pastry-making.

Although Felix also harbored dreams of becoming a mechanic, baking was in his blood, so he began a formal baking apprenticeship in 1979 in Switzerland. (Felix eventually went on to train as a mechanic, as well.) In 1982, after completing his apprenticeship, Felix immigrated to the United States to assist Rene, who that same year had opened Louis' Swiss in an existing bakery space in the Aspen Airport Business Center. The name was an homage to their father, who had loaned Rene the money to start his own business. After a shaky start ("At first we lived in the bakery," laughs Felix. "We had no money at all.") the bakery flourished. In 1988, the elder Tornares closed up shop in Winterthur and moved to Aspen to assist with the bakery and be close to their sons.

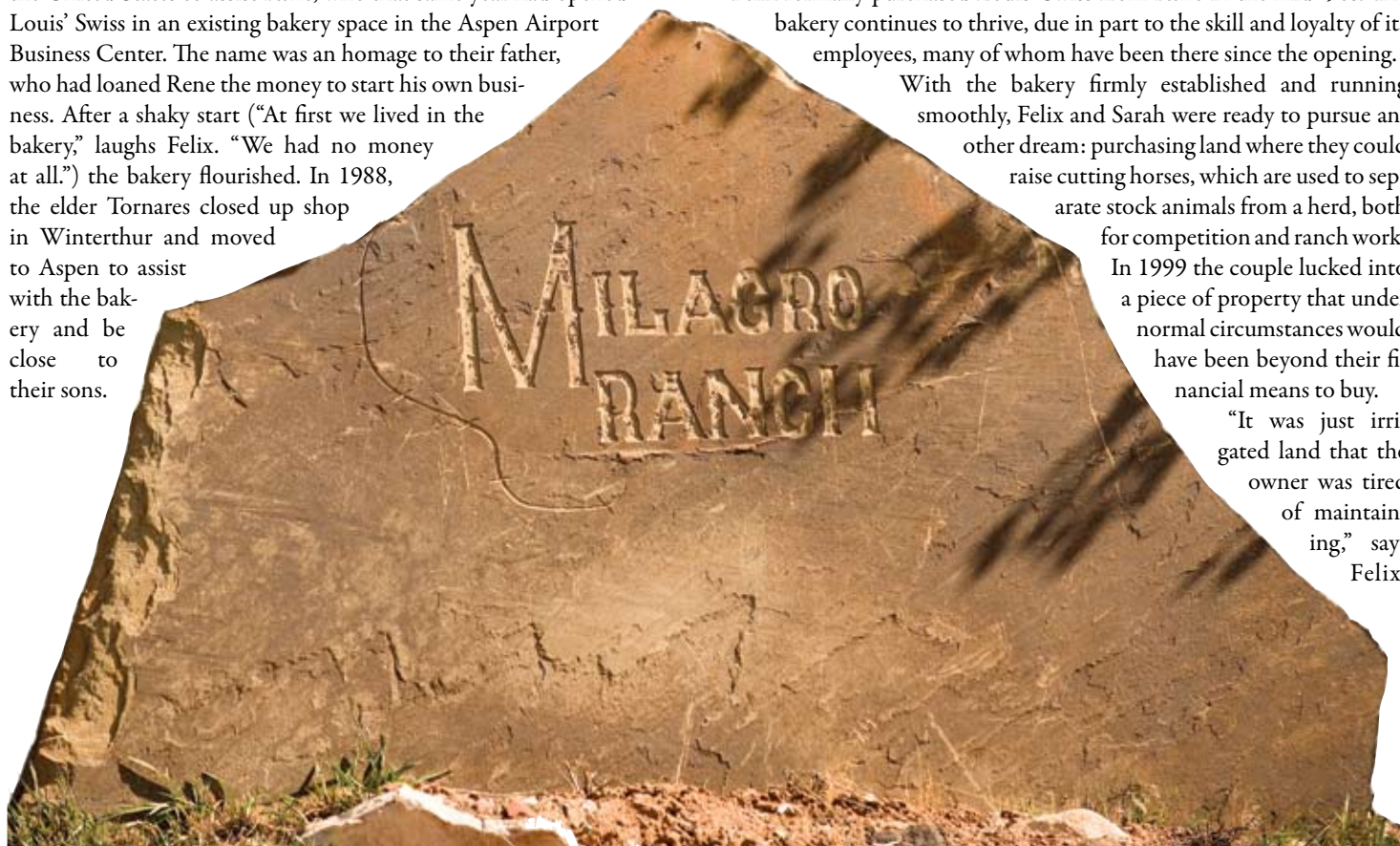
At the time, Felix was making bread deliveries to a guest ranch in Snowmass. While his only horseback experience had been as a child in Switzerland, he asked his employer if he could ride in exchange for work. Eventually, he left the bakery to become the summer ranch mechanic. It was there he met Sarah, one of the wranglers and a lifelong equestrienne. They married in 1987.

As its name suggests, Louis' Swiss specializes in European-style breads and pastries, with an increasingly organic and local focus. Although successful, by 1992 the brothers were at a crossroads. "Rene wanted to stay small," says Felix, "but I wanted to get bigger. It's a family business, but we had different work ethics. He'd work 24 hours a day if he could, while I wanted to work hard and be successful, but still have a life. I was married, and eventually wanted to buy some land and horses. We were clearly going in different directions."

In the end, Rene leased the bakery to his younger brother for three years while he took time off to travel and decide upon his next venture. Felix formally purchased Louis' Swiss from Rene in the mid-'90s. The bakery continues to thrive, due in part to the skill and loyalty of its employees, many of whom have been there since the opening.

With the bakery firmly established and running smoothly, Felix and Sarah were ready to pursue another dream: purchasing land where they could raise cutting horses, which are used to separate stock animals from a herd, both for competition and ranch work. In 1999 the couple lucked into a piece of property that under normal circumstances would have been beyond their financial means to buy.

"It was just irrigated land that the owner was tired of maintaining," says Felix.



Photographs: Michael Brands

GRASSFED VS. CONVENTIONAL BEEF

Most beef cattle are raised on open pasture before being shipped to a feedlot for three months of grain finishing. The animals are slaughtered between 18 to 20 months of age, when they have reached the appropriate weight and fat ratio. Grain finishing and growth hormones are used to achieve that ratio in a short time frame, which allows for a faster turnover per animal.

Critics denounce feedlots as little more than confinement factories, with up to tens of thousands of animals living in a relatively small area, resulting in stress, disease and inhumane living conditions. The cattle are given sub-therapeutic antibiotics in addition to hormones. Overuse of antibiotics can result in resistance to them, and hormone use in meat production has been linked to disruption of the human endocrine system.

Feedlots also devastate soil and groundwater quality, which affects public health, including negative impacts on the health of farm workers. Sixty-six percent of grain grown in the U.S. is for livestock feed, much of it from genetically modified seed. Livestock animal feed also contains pesticide residues and animal by-product, which can spread a variety of diseases.

Feeding and finishing ruminant animals, such as cattle, on grass is more humane, has a lower environmental impact (the manure and urine are dispersed over a wider area) and requires no grain production. Grassfed farming operations are often small, family-owned enterprises committed to sustainable growing practices, and significant health benefits are associated with grassfed meat.

Grassfed beef is high in conjugated linoleic acid, Omega-3 fatty acids and beta carotene (Vitamin A), which has been shown to lower cholesterol and help prevent heart disease, cancer, hypertension and diabetes. It is also lower in cholesterol, fat and calories. If raised properly and of a breed suited to a completely foraged diet, grassfed beef has a richer, fuller, “beefier” flavor than beef fattened on corn or other grains. While not as tender as grain-finished beef, grassfed is more authentic to what “real” beef tastes like. Because it is leaner, grassfed meat (aside from tougher cuts such as chuck or brisket) requires a shorter cooking time and should be cooked to no more than medium-rare to compensate for the lack of fat.

The Denver-based American Grassfed Association (AGA), established in 2003, has a set of standards to which its 300 members must

adhere. The association defines grassfed food from ruminants (including cattle, bison, goats and sheep) as “those food products from animals who have eaten nothing but their mother’s milk and fresh grass or grass-type hay from their birth.” The organization’s ultimate goal is to help establish a federal standard for the term “grassfed.” Currently, the USDA permits animals confined to feedlots, given antibiotics and growth hormones and finished on grain to be labeled as “grassfed” so long as they are predominantly fed a foraged diet. In February, the AGA announced it would begin certifying grassfed meat operations under a new standard overseen by Food Alliance, which owns a comprehensive national eco-agricultural label.

—LM





“We got a great price because the owner didn’t want to see it developed or parceled. We named it Milagro [Spanish for “miracle”] Ranch, because it was a miracle we were able to buy it.”

Although Felix’s personal ranching experience was limited to the Snowmass guest ranch, he and Sarah wholeheartedly threw themselves into farm life. They grew vegetables and raised chickens for eggs and meat. Cattle are required for training cutting horses, so they purchased some cows in 2002. The cattle grazed on pasture and were finished on grain to supplement their diet. As the Tornares added to their herd, they butchered a few animals for food, leading them to research healthier, more sustainable ways to raise beef cattle.

At the time, grassfed livestock production was growing in popularity, but the Tornares stumbled upon it by accident. “It started out as a mistake,” laughs Felix. “We had no idea at the time that grassfed was the next big thing. In 2002 we’d started selling some of our beef to friends and neighbors. We ran out of meat, so we had to pull one of our grassfed cows to meet demand. It turned out to be not only delicious but healthier and more sustainable. We started doing research on grassfeeding and saw how good it could be if done correctly.”

Grassfed beef takes longer to mature than industrial beef because it’s not supplemented with growth hormones. This means the rancher has a higher production cost and lower yield. Thus, the Tornares were initially uncertain they would be able to make their beef financially viable.

The first person to take a commercial interest in Milagro Ranch was chef Ryan Hardy, of The Little Nell’s Montagna restaurant. Hardy is known for his commitment to supporting local growers and sustainability issues, and at the time (2004), he was unable to get local beef that suited his needs. After trying the Tornares’ beef, he told them he’d like




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to purchase a whole animal. “Heart, tongue, everything,” recalls Felix. “He paid good money for it and made us see that [grassfed ranching] could be done.”

The Tornares began working to perfect the quality and consistency of their beef. “You really have to pay attention when you do a completely grassfed diet,” says Felix. “If they lose weight, they lose fat, which affects the final product by making it watery or dry; grassfed beef is already lean to begin with.”

Initially, the Tornares were raising “every type” of beef cattle, theorizing that a large breed would yield more meat. The opposite was actually true. “Large animals just mean bigger bone. Now we raise Australian Lowlines,” says Felix. “They’re the smallest breed and don’t have a big fat layer, so they don’t bulk up. That means they don’t require the extra energy in calories or eat as much as other breeds.”

When the steers are taken to the abattoir in Delta for butchering, their weight averages 1,100 pounds. “The hard part,” says Felix, “is when I have to pick which ones to sell, because often I’ve helped with their

SARAH TORNARE’S SPICY BRAISED BEEF

Sarah loves to serve this slightly piquant dish on blustery fall or winterlike days.

2 pounds chuck roast or eye of round,
bone out

Salt and freshly ground pepper

Olive, organic canola or vegetable oil

1½ cups water

2 tablespoons dry mustard

2 tablespoons Worcestershire sauce

2 teaspoons kosher or sea salt

2 teaspoons curry powder

½ teaspoon cayenne pepper

1 yellow onion, peeled, ends sliced off
and cut into eighths

2 carrots, quartered

8 new potatoes (red or yellow Finn,
or any fingerling variety), halved
lengthwise

Preheat oven to 325 degrees. Season meat on both sides with salt and pepper. Add just enough oil to coat bottom of Dutch oven or heavy, ovenproof baking dish. Over medium high heat, sear meat on all sides, using tongs to turn. Remove from heat.

Add remaining ingredients to pot, cover and place in oven for 3½ hours or until meat is fork tender (add more liquid, if necessary, as it cooks). Serve with a full-bodied Cabernet Sauvignon and fresh, crusty bread. Serves 4.



births. But I'm thankful when I eat my own beef—they've given their lives for us, and I don't have to worry about what I'm eating, in terms of food safety."

The 80 to 90 head of cattle graze on pasture from spring through fall. In winter, the animals remain pastured, but their diet is supplemented by alfalfa and grass hay the couple grows on surrounding acreage they take care of in exchange for custom irrigation. The Tornares are also co-producing beef with local rancher Mike Strang, to increase their supply.

As word spread about the quality of Milagro Ranch beef, Mark Fischer, the chef/owner of Carbondale's Six89 restaurant, was the next to feature the meat on his menu. With continued support and education from two of the valley's best chefs, the Tornares were able to develop the premium product they have today. Milagro Ranch beef can now be found at the valley's top restaurants, including Montagna, Six89, the Roaring Fork Club, Ajax Tavern, and Cloud 9 Alpine Bistro and the Merry-Go-Round at Aspen Highlands, as well as in the meat pies and pizza and sausage rolls at Louis' Swiss Bakery. Home cooks can buy Milagro Ranch products directly from the Tornares.

Felix encourages the public to visit his ranch. "We want them to see what we do, how we feed and how much we care about our animals. Grassfed ranching is hard work, but you have to enjoy what you do, and I have a heck of a partner in my wife. It feels good to produce a humane, healthier, sustainable quality product. I feel much better raising and selling my meat myself and being able to be honest with my customers about how it was raised." ❧

For more information on grassfed beef, go to www.americangrassfed.org. To order Milagro Ranch beef or arrange a visit, call (970) 963-3446.

Louis' Swiss Bakery, Aspen Airport Business Center, Suite C, (970) 925-8592

Laurel Miller is a food travel columnist for The Oakland Tribune/BANG Newspapers and a freelance contributor to publications such as Gourmet, Outside and Dining Out Guides.

