

# salmon creek ranch

Goats and ducks on the range // BY ANN MARIE BROWN



No goats, no glory: Lesley and John Brabyn at their Sonoma County ranch

When most people plan a career in ranching, they usually have a certain type of livestock in mind. Not so for Lesley and John Brabyn, who purchased their 400-acre ranch near Bodega Bay first and later figured out what animals to raise.

The answer was a bit like Noah's ark: the Brabyn's Salmon Creek Ranch is home to approximately 100 goats, 800 ducks, a passel of grass-fed cattle, a colony of honeybees, and five Anatolian shepherd dogs who keep watch over them all.

"We had to fit what animals would work well with our land," Lesley says. "This is not prime grazing land, and it's not crop land. Originally, we thought we'd raise sheep. But when we bought this place, the pastures had been neglected for 30 years, so we thought we'd get goats to clear the brush," she says.

As it turned out, the goats provided additional benefits besides trimming up the pastures.

"There's an increasing awareness in this country about the benefits of goat meat. It's the most widely consumed meat in the world. It's low in fat and healthy. But more importantly, goats are very sustainable. They are light on their feet and they nibble here and there when they eat. A herd of sheep can shear off an entire pasture, and cows can cause terrible erosion. Goats don't harm the land, and they like to eat the stuff that nobody else likes to eat," Lesley says.

The Brabyns sell their organic, free-range Kiko goat meat at farmers' markets, at their ranch store, and on their website, [www.salmoncreekranch.com](http://www.salmoncreekranch.com). "The Kiko breed descended from the goats that were left in New Zealand by Captain Cook in the 1700s," John says. "They went feral and survived. The New Zealand government was going to round them up and shoot them, but then someone decided to breed them as meat goats."

Salmon Creek Ranch's other major product is Muscovy duck,

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which the Brabyns sell to restaurants in Sonoma and San Francisco. The ducks forage throughout large tracts of pasture 24 hours a day, while the ranch dogs guard them from predators. The Brabyns say the ducks' varied diet is what keeps the birds healthy and makes their meat taste good.

"We feed the ducks a locally produced organic feed, but they also eat grass and bugs and worms," John says. "After it rains and the worms come out, the ducks get really excited and run all over the place to find them."

Lesley warns consumers against putting too much trust in poultry packaging labels that claim 'free-range.' "Many of those animals are kept in small pens on a small patch of land. That fits the USDA definition of free-range. Sure, the animals get to eat grass, but they never get any exercise. You have to ask pointed questions about what 'free-range' or 'cage-free' actually means. It's not always very humane."

The Brabyns also raise Khaki Campbell ducks for their eggs, which are sold at Whole Foods Markets in the North Bay. "Duck eggs have five times the amount of vitamin B12 as chicken eggs and a lot more protein. If you made a cake out of a generic cake mix and you used duck eggs, it would be like pound cake. Duck eggs provide loft and richness to baked goods," Lesley says.

Running Salmon Creek Ranch is a second career for the Brabyns, who bought the ranch as part of their retirement plans. "When most people retire, they downsize or move to Palm Springs," Lesley says. "But this ranch is what we wanted to do; it was always our dream." ■