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Alpaca Love

[peggy sijswerda](#)

Skyfiber Ranch: Science is Key

Tucked amid hills in pastoral Fauquier County, Skyfiber Ranch spreads out over 30 acres and is home to 60 alpacas. Owner Aimée Matheny greets me at the gate as two huge dogs bound across the pasture toward us. “These are our alpaca guard dogs,” Matheny explains. “They keep the herd safe from predators.” These ace livestock guardians are Kangal shepherds, a Turkish breed, and members of Skyfiber’s troop of five: Fiona, Seamus, Lyra, Stella, and Sebastian.



Matheny and her husband, Mark Minorik, a technology consultant, moved from Texas to Virginia with their herd of alpacas in 2016. “It’s a better environment for alpacas,” Matheny explains and shudders slightly when she recalls the Texas heat. We sit inside her barn, where chickens come and go and cats sleep peacefully nearby.

Soon Matheny and I are deep in a discussion about genotyping, dominant-recessive genes, histograms, and microns—scientific terms that are important in her breeding program. I madly take notes and ask lots of questions because these concepts are beyond my liberal arts background. Matheny studied biological anthropology and is currently pursuing a master’s certificate in genetics at Stanford University.

“We breed for fleece and conformation,” she explains. Skyfiber’s goal is to produce alpacas that are true blue-black with fleece that lacks any reddish tint. “This year every alpaca born that we bred for true black is true black,” she says proudly.

Science is key. Matheny collects blood samples and sends them to a lab in Canada, where they are tested for color genotyping. “It’s very challenging because the fleece characteristics of blue-black are different,” she says.



Fleece characteristics are paramount when you’re breeding for quality fiber. Matheny shows her top alpacas at competitions across the country and explains that judges look for uniformity of micron, or fiber diameter; uniformity of color; and staple, or fiber, length.

Like other alpaca farmers, Matheny has several revenue streams. Besides showing her alpacas, she sells breeding stock, offers stud services, boards alpacas, and harvests and sells her fiber. “The market is good particularly for blue-black fleece,” she says.

We walk across the pasture to meet a few alpacas, who look up curiously as we approach. “For me there’s something very peaceful about the alpacas,” Matheny says. “I can come out here and sit and listen to them having conversations with each other.” What she’s referring to is the humming sound alpacas make when they’re feeling content. It’s almost like a quiet kazoo.

Alpacas are very earth-friendly, Matheny says. “Because they don’t have hooves, they don’t tear up the ground when they walk.” Alpacas also “trim” the grass when they graze, instead of tearing out roots.

The alpaca business is very show-centric, Matheny says, but she’s hoping to spread the word that these animals are perfect for small farms. She also wants to promote the fiber’s unique characteristics and why it’s “worth the money to buy something made out of alpaca fleece.”

