Combining cutting-edge genetic science with the best in sustainable farming practices, SVF Foundation and Tamarack Tunis have joined forces to revive an endangered breed of heritage livestock — the old style Tunis sheep. This collaboration is part of the growing movement to protect the world’s food supply from the perceived threats of long-term commercial agriculture, namely, diminished animal biodiversity and the degradation of land and water.

Tamarack Tunis, a sustainable farm located in Corinth, VT, maintains the nation’s oldest working flock of Tunis sheep in the “old-style” of smaller and finer boned animals. SVF Foundation, located in Newport, RI, is one of the nation’s leading conservers of heritage breeds through cryogenic germplasm preservation. Together, the two are working to conserve the critically endangered traditional Tunis bloodlines, which have become increasingly rare as farmers focus on larger-framed, show-style Tunis sheep. With its ability to withstand drought conditions and to breed out of season, not to mention its succulent meat and fine wool, the Tunis sheep is an important and rare treasure trove of genetic strengths.

The partnership of SVF and Tamarack Tunis emphasizes several important goals: to preserve the planet’s biodiversity through conservation of endangered breeds, to practice stewardship of the environment through sustainable farming and to offer consumers alternatives by way of supporting a niche market. By preserving Tunis sheep and raising them in an environmentally beneficial manner, SVF and Tamarack Tunis represent a partnership between science and agriculture that can restore the ancient traditions of food, farming and culture.

More about the Tunis sheep

Tunis sheep — known as “redheads,” for the cinnamon-colored hair on their face and ears — are native to North Africa and are descendants of the ancient “fat-tailed sheep” of Biblical times. This hearty variety was first introduced into the United States in the late eighteenth century as a gift from the Bey of Tunis. Praised for its mild, tender meat and docile demeanor, the Tunis sheep is one of the oldest breeds of livestock in the country. Founding fathers John Adams and Thomas Jefferson acclaimed the Tunis Sheep for its favorable qualities. The breed has a high resistance to disease and is both well-suited to the heat and humidity of the South, and are robust and thick-fleeced enough to handle cold northern winters. Early American breeders blended the Tunis into European-derived stock, developing a distinctly American variety. This breed was prominent until the Civil War, when high demand for meat led to the Tunis’ near extinction.

The breed’s small size and slow growth rate also contributed to its near demise in the wake of modern, high-yield factory farming. Today, the Tunis remains on “watch” status by the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy.

The Tunis is a handsome, pleasant animal, of medium-sized and slender build. It has long, pendulous ears and is naturally hornless. Tunis wool is long, thick, and cream-colored, known for its signature red-brown coloring on the sheep’s head and legs. Tunis ewes lamb easily and provide excellent mothering to their young; they produce a high quantity of milk and commonly lamb out of season — a boon for lamb production in the fall. Tunis sheep can pasture in marginal conditions; they make efficient use of what they eat, producing a large quantity of meat for their size.

The traditional Tunis bloodlines have become critically endangered, as farmers tend to focus on larger-framed, show-style Tunis sheep.

Slow Food USA, a promoter of whole foods and sustainable farming, praises the Tunis’ delectable flavor, including the Tunis among only four breeds of sheep in its “Ark of Taste.” This recognition piqued a growing interest in the breed among chefs, restaurateurs and foodies.

Tamarack Tunis and sustainable farming

Located on 40-acres in Corinth, VT, Tamarack Tunis is home to the nation’s oldest working flock of Tunis sheep, first established in 1920 with two lambs. Operated by Ben Machin and family, the flock’s fourth generation of shepherds, the farm features a sustainable system of grass grazing with rotational pastures, making efficient use of the region’s seasonally abundant verdure. Along with heritage breed grass-fed lamb, Tamarack focuses on the sustainable production of wool products, such as: yarn, wool comforters and sheepskins.

The Tunis breed evolved when animal agriculture relied entirely on grazing and before the meat industry turned to less sustainable inputs. Rotational grazing allows the grass to regenerate, builds topsoil, and supports a healthy ecosystem of plants, insects, and bacteria. In all of Tamarack’s farming practices associated with haying and grazing, no chemical fertilizers are used; manure and compost are placed on the fields, and lime and wood ash are used as mineral supplements.

The farm offers a way to maintain open space and utilize agricultural lands to produce food, and creates niche markets for small family farms. For livestock, grass farming means almost daily access to fresh grass, sunshine, fresh air and room to exercise.

Red meats like lamb and beef from grass-fed animals, especially those entirely grass-fed, are increasingly regarded as health foods, and as key parts of a balanced diet. However, one of the challenges with grass farming, especially with focusing on the “old-style” Tunis, is that animals grow more slowly and attain a smaller size than grain-fed livestock. This translates into higher prices — at times — but also better tasting, healthier food. Tamarack Tunis and sustainable farming partners with SVF Foundation and genetic conservation

The mission of SVF Foundation is to preserve germplasm (embryos, semen and genetic material) of rare and endangered breeds of livestock. Though they’ve existed since the earliest days of animal domestication, “heritage livestock” are becoming

Jon Walker, of SVF herding Tunis sheep.

The Tunis is the nation’s leading conservers of heritage breeds, to practice stewardship of the planet’s biodiversity through conservation of.

Photos courtesy of SVF Foundation
Turkey is more than a nutritious food choice, holiday meal staple for MSU researchers

As turkeys are raised to be bigger, it's important to stabilize the rate of growth to reduce the number of fatal injuries that can result when the bird gets too heavy to hold itself up. Photo by Sally Colby

Cover photo by Elizabeth Tomlin
Rob Hudyncia places a protective arm around his "not for dinner" family pet, Winston.

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Tunis from A2
Increasingly rare as a result of modern commercial agriculture's focus on a few breeds engineered solely for high yield, Consequently, many breeds of sheep, goats, pigs and cattle are facing imminent extinction. These breeds contain such resistance to parasites, good birthing and mothering instincts, adaptability to harsh environments, and uncommonly good-tasting meat. The monoculture of today's global agribusiness leaves the industry vulnerable to disease and other dangers, threatening the world's food supply with possible collapse. SVF Foundation preserves heritage traits in the event of such a calamity, and could reawaken a breed with its full genetic diversity within one generation. Much like a seed bank protects plant diversity and food security, SVF is one of the few institutions to collect and store animal germplasm in a frozen state for future use. SVF supports "on the hoof" conservation of heritage livestock by introducing breeders to ever-wider markets, as well as educating the public to the importance of diversity in our animal agriculture. SVF's current project with Fair Food Farmstand underscores this effort to connect breeders and consumers.

Located in Newport, RI, on historic Surprise Valley Farm (aka "Swine Village"), SVF was founded by Dorrance Hamilton in 1989. The Foundation is seated on 45 scenic acres and operates in collaboration with Tufts' Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine.