

Little darlin's : Miniature donkeys at Seein' Spots Farm in Ballard

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While day-tripping around the Santa Ynez Valley, visitors often make a point of seeking out the area's agricultural oddities.

In Solvang, there's the feathered flock at OstrichLand USA and Quicksilver Ranch's miniature horses. While driving the back roads of Ballard, you might see watusi cattle with their unusual giant horns.

And if you keep your eyes peeled along a quiet stretch of Baseline Avenue, you could be seein' spots.

The herd of miniature donkeys at Seein' Spots Farm, that is.

"I'm the donkey goodwill ambassador," Linda Marchi told the News-Press with a smile during a recent visit to the farm, which she oversees and owns with her husband, Brett.

Minutes before, a middle-aged couple had pulled their motor home off the road to stop and admire the diminutive herd.

"They are precious! They are so sweet," said Linda Armendariz of Orange County, taking in the sight of about half a dozen minis, all grazing in the enclosed pasture at the front. "We just can't help stopping at the fence and feedin' or pettin' or taking a photo."

As one of the females let out a bray, she said excitedly, "Hey, that's donkey talk! That's a talkin' donkey."

The donkeys are all different colors, from a typical grayish-dun and sorrel to pure black. Mrs. Marchi, who's partial to spots on animals of all kinds, tries to breed them so they're spotted -- hence the name of the farm.

"Horses, they can take you or leave you, but donkeys just crave attention, as you can see," she said. A dark brown one named Shadow had plopped its head in the crook of a reporter's arm, leaving a small trail of slobber behind.



Linda Marchi, with Noel, a miniature therapy donkey, co-owns and oversees the breeding operations at Seein' Spots Farm. "My grandfather was a vet and he always told me how wonderful donkeys were," she said.

PHIL KLEIN / NEWS-PRESS PHOTOS



Hannah Marchi gets a nuzzle from Nicole Kidman at Seein' Spots Farm.



Nine-month-old Dapper Dan is off and running while Linda attempts to pet him.

To be classified as a mini, donkeys must measure no more than 36 inches tall, according to Mrs. Marchi. (Standard donkeys are about 36 to 48 inches; and the next size up, "mammoth" donkeys, are as large as horses, about 56 inches and greater.)

Unlike some kinds of minis, such as horses and dogs, her donkeys aren't bred down from regular-size animals. Rather, they're a unique breed of donkey from the islands of Sardinia and Sicily, descended from wild asses from North Africa.

In the Mediterranean, they "were used as working animals. As small as they are, they're very strong," Mrs. Marchi said. Like other pack animals, they can be loaded up with goods and taken on trips. "They're very sure-footed, so they can go up steep hills and carry heavy loads."



Several spotted miniature donkeys graze in the front pasture at Seein' Spots Farm in Ballard.

In the early 20th century, the equines -- known as Mediterranean donkeys or Sicilian donkeys -- were imported to the United States and Canada, according to veterinarian Anna Clarke. (The Santa Maria resident bred minis for about 10 years before retiring, leaving the Marchis' operation as the largest in the area.)

Some of the donkeys at Seein' Spots Farm can be traced back to those original Mediterranean imports, said Mrs. Marchi, who keeps certificates of each animal's pedigree.

Nowadays, the Marchi family lets visitors come and learn about their donkeys throughout the year. Children, age 7 and younger, can go for rides on the docile creatures, which can be saddled up and led with a harness or pull a cart.

Families often come to visit the farm in the fall, when they pick apples on the property, which was formerly the Ballard Apple Farm. At one time, the farm had some 800 trees; about a dozen types of apples grow there currently, including some heirloom varieties from Europe.

"People have been coming here for 30 years picking apples," Mrs. Marchi said. "They know the trees better than I do."

Though they have a donation box, the Marchis don't charge for the rides, and they often let school groups and children with developmental disabilities come through to meet the animals.

"I love sharing them with people," said Mrs. Marchi, who's originally from Huntington Beach. "They're very hardy, very easy keepers. They rarely get sick."

She even has a trained therapy donkey, Noel, who visits area retirement homes. The gentle beast "will go up to people in wheelchairs. She'll just lay her head in their laps," she said, while playing with the spotted donkey's ears.

The Marchis raised miniature donkeys and other livestock, including mules, a mammoth donkey, goats and chickens, when they were living in San Juan Capistrano.

But when a landslide destroyed their barn and corral in 2005, the couple decided to relocate with their children, Nick, 19, Chad, 17, and Hannah, 11. "We didn't want to live without all our animals, so we went looking for a bigger property."

That year, Mrs. Marchi and her husband, a commercial architect, bought 10 acres of undeveloped land in Ballard. A little more than two years ago, they purchased from Donna Wallace the bucolic five acres, then known as Sassafrass Farm, across the street, which they renamed Seein' Spots Farm, where they currently live.

Since then, they've bought, bred and sold minis to other people who have farms or ranches. In a typical year, they keep about 20 donkeys in their herd and 10 to 12 donkeys are born. "This year, it's close to 20," Mrs. Marchi said of the newborns. "It just seems to keep growing."

The jacks (males) start at about \$1,500, while the jennets start at \$2,500. Since they're herd animals, they're usually sold in pairs, unless an owner already has another equine.

The Marchis like to give funny names to their donkeys. They've had Thelma and Louise, Laverne and Shirley and Dapper Dan.

"I just sold Milton Burro. The kids didn't get it. They thought it was a horrible name!" said Mrs. Marchi.

Sometimes people buy them just to look at, for their children to ride, or as companions for horses and other equines. One area winery even bought a donkey to cart wine around during tasting events.

"They're a good starter animal," said Mrs. Marchi. "A lot of ranches buy them for little kids to start on."

In fact, the Marchis' youngest son, Chad, initially had the idea of breeding the minis before his attention turned to trucks and Mrs. Marchi took over the business.

But their daughter, Hannah, still enjoys going with her parents to donkey events around the state and showing them.

The best thing about them?

"They're always so friendly," said Hannah, who's grown up around the donkeys her whole life. "If you do something wrong, they don't bite or kick. They forgive you immediately."

Nicole Kidman, a rare cream-colored donkey, hung her head over Hannah's shoulder, then took a clump of her long blonde hair gently into her mouth, but soon let go of it.

"With donkeys, it's like, 'I'll scratch your back if you'll scratch mine,' " said Mrs. Marchi.

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IF YOU GO

Seein' Spots Farm, located at 2599 Baseline Ave. in Ballard, is usually open to the public from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Wednesday through Sunday.

School visits to the farm and rides for children age 7 and younger can be arranged. The donkeys are available to appear at birthday parties, picnics, wine tastings and other events.

Photos of miniature donkeys for sale are posted at www.seeinspotsfarm.com.

For more information, call 688-2275, e-mail linda@seeinspotsfarm.com or go to the Web site.

DONKEY DETAILS

- Miniature donkeys usually measure between 18 and 22 inches when they're born and can grow to be up to 36 inches tall.
- The donkeys can live to be 30 or 40 years old.

- A "donkey cross" is a dark mark running up and across the back, visible on most donkeys. Legend has it when a donkey stood next to Christ on the cross and turned its back to him, the shadow that fell across its shoulders remained.

- While patterned horses are called "paint" or "pinto," donkeys are "spotted."

- Miniature donkeys can be trained to run through obstacle courses, do jumps, race and wear costumes.

- A common problem with new donkey owners is overfeeding. Donkeys don't mind a diet of plain hay.

- The Marchis' donkeys have appeared as guests on the Ellen DeGeneres show.

- For the past three years, a mother and son -- Dolly and PJ -- have been part of the living nativity at the Santa Barbara Mission during Christmas.

- Just like their bigger counterparts, mini donkeys have expressive ears. "If a horse rides by, you'll see every ear turned that way," said Linda Marchi. Likewise, during the Jesusita Fire, her donkeys seemed to sense something was happening.

Source: Linda Marchi of Seein' Spots Farm