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8TH ANNUAL YEAR IN IDEAS

Minicattle

By CLAY RISEN

Half a century ago, American cattle averaged less than 900 pounds. Today they average a hefty 1,300 pounds — which means more beef but also more waste and the need for more land. With declining farm sizes and the skyrocketing cost of animal feed, farmers are turning toward what sounds like a sideshow joke: miniature cattle.

Livestock bred to stand some 42 inches high and weigh about half as much as regular cattle, minicattle have been around for decades. But miniature-cattle breeders say that recently they have seen a sharp rise in demand, according to an article this year in *The Journal of Agriculture and Food Information*. “I’ve had a number of visits to my farm over the last few months, and frankly I don’t have enough cows to sell,” says Charles Townson, a breeder of minicattle in Cowpens, S.C. “Every calf I’ve had this year I’ve sold.”

Some minibreeds, like Townson’s Dexters, are naturally smaller than regular cattle, while others are petite versions of full-size breeds like Angus and Hereford. (According to purists, Dexters are therefore not technically miniatures.) What’s the advantage of smaller cattle? Miniatures, it turns out, are more efficient than their larger cousins. They consume a third as much feed, but they still manage to produce more than half as much meat. “The productivity per acre is at least twice as much as large animals,” says Richard Gradwohl, a retired business professor who, at his Washington State farm, developed 18 of the world’s 26 breeds of miniature cattle.

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Breeders say miniatures are in particular demand from newbie farmers, whether they're retirees looking for a second career or families who want to grow more of their own food. "A lot of people keep them as a homestead calf, just enough for the family," says Chuck Daggett of the American Dexter Cattle Association. Smaller cattle are also bred to be docile, he says, making them more attractive to families with small children.

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