



The barn at Thornewood Farm in Stockton, NJ, has been expanded from nine to nineteen stalls

Beautiful and Blessed

Arabian horses are prized by sheiks, celebrities and more everyday Americans than you can shake a tail at.

by Carla Merolla Odell Photos/Glenn Race

The morning fog hasn't lifted yet. Like gossamer, it softens the green of the summer grass that covers forty lush acres in Hunterdon County, NJ. In the far field, about fifty yards off the country road, Soleil and Rhythm and Blues nudge each other in play. Closer to the main house, Juno and Belalia move in a well-choreographed slow dance.

"Soleil placed in the top ten twice at the Egyptian Event, the most prestigious international show for Egyptian Arabian horses," says Lisa Cifrese. "She's a rare black mare, so she's a bit of a snob." Richard Geha adds, "And Belalia's barn name is

Ginger Rogers because she likes to prance around as though she's dancing."

Lisa and Richard, who own and operate Thornewood Farm in Stockton, NJ, can tick

off the traits of their horses just as parents describe the habits and idiosyncrasies that set their children apart. And though many a mom and dad might refer to a little one as their pride and joy, the horses at Thornewood are Lisa and Richard's pride and joy because many of them are ribbon winners. Not only is Thornewood an Arabian-horse farm, it is home to the rare and intensely sought-after Egyptian Arabians.



Lisa Cifrese and Richard Geha, the owners of Thornewood Farm



Bint Sky, an Arabian foal, enjoys the pasture with his mother.

“These are Arabians of the highest caliber,” Lisa says. “They are exceptionally athletic and beautiful to behold, and they have gentle dispositions.” An expert in all there is to know about these magnificent animals, Lisa was recently named to the Board of Directors of the Pyramid Society, which is the world organization dedicated to the preservation and promotion of the Egyptian Arabian horse.

Stars of Ancient Lore

Mohammed, it is said, proclaimed that Allah had blessed the Arabian horse. Marked by a broad brow, large wide-set eyes, a dished face and flared nostrils (to allow greater air flow, a very definite blessing in arid lands with extreme temperatures), the Arabian “telltale” trait is the tail, which is held high when the horse is moving faster than a walk—surely an indication of pride. Not only is this breed of horse exceptional in a myriad of ways, it has a lineage that dates back eons. Revered and honored by the Bedouins, the horse’s history has been revealed by artifacts that date as far back as 8000 BCE, and pedigree records can be traced to the 1300s BCE.

Long the figures of legend and lore, the horses hadn’t left the desert until the mid-1800s, when a wealthy busi-

nessman named Mohammed Ali, realizing what a great treasure the horses were, took 1100 of them out of the desert. Of the Arabians being bred today, Lisa explains, come from the five families Ali took from the Bedouins.

More than a century later and a world away, Lisa’s love for horses started during her childhood in a town where 4-H was a way of life and when *My Friend Flicka* was a regular show on TV. “When my mother said ‘Dance lessons?’ I answered, ‘Riding lessons.’” While still in school, Lisa began working on a horse farm and ended up falling in love with the Arabians there.

Love, Money and Community

Richard’s love for horses started with his love for Lisa, having met her during the





Bint Bint Felicia, a mare, just placed Top 5 in a very difficult class and is used to having her picture taken.



Lisa Cifrese and Richard Geha with one of their prized horses

early days of their careers in the mental health profession. “I knew what a horse was,” Richard says, smiling. “I even rode when I was little. But Lisa exposed me to this wonderful experience. Horses keep you in touch with that beauty and elegance of which we so easily lose sight. They keep you connected with the magnificence of nature.”

So it wasn’t a difficult choice for Lisa and Richard to build a life together raising Egyptian Arabian horses. There was also no question as to where to do it. “Hunterdon County is God’s country,” Richard says, with an “and-that’s-that” nod. In 2002, they began construction on their 12,000-square-foot home and, with the expertise of Amish crafters, expanded the existing barn from nine stalls to nineteen.

Breeding horses is one thing. Selling them is quite another, and it was not part of the original plan until Lisa and Richard realized that despite the worst economic downturn in recent history, there was money to be made. According to a recent report on CNBC, Americans make up three quarters of the worldwide revenue derived from the Arabian-horse business. In 2008, as one of four affiliated farms of Arabians Limited, Thornewood opened its doors, inviting all to learn about the magic of—and the business involved with—these esteemed horses.

“Doing it this way provides such a wonderful social component,” Richard says. “We all get to interact. Owners participate in grooming and exercising the horses, and their children lead and train and help to bathe the babies.” Lisa demonstrates riding, usually astride Rhythm and Blues, and the surrounding fields have trails. “Together, we’ve created a community of compassion for horses,” Richard notes. “When someone’s horse is ready to foal, everyone rushes out in anticipation and celebrates.”

In addition to the weekend get-togethers, Lisa and Richard host regular cookouts, an annual Christmas party and even a Derby Day party when, Richard observes, “everyone wears a big hat.”



And at next month's September Event, a follow-up to the successful May Event, Thornewood again welcomes the public. Anyone, from adventurer to investor to the merely curious, is welcome—anyone who wishes to learn more about the Egyptian Arabian horse through lectures, discussions and demonstrations. Lunch will be served, and the program concludes with wine and cheese.

Hi Ho Silver, Away!

Some of Thornewood's clients look purely for profit in what Richard emphasizes is a "fully insurable investment." Others share more actively in the care of the horses and the camaraderie of Thornewood, including Joe, a client who grew up watching *The Lone Ranger* and who had always wanted to ride his very own Silver. "However, he had no idea how to get started," Richard chuckles. Egyptian Arabians can be chestnut, bay, gray or black, explains Lisa, "but Joe's mare

had a magnificent filly who is gray now, but she will eventually turn white for Joe, a Silver of his very own!"

Richard has an MA in literature and a PhD in psychology and is a clinical psychologist and a psychoanalyst in private practice. Lisa is a clinical social worker, also in private practice and specializing in eating disorders. Richard says that Egyptian Arabian horses can stand for so many things in our dreams, fantasies and wishes. Lisa agrees and adds, "Yes, and with all their beauty and elegance, they represent enrichment and fulfillment."

Iconic on many levels, Egyptian Arabian horses inspire awe and affection in all who encounter them. ♥

For more information on Thornewood and the event scheduled for September 24-25, contact Lisa or Richard at 609/ 577-1976 or visit www.thornewoodfarms.com.