

Chester County

TOWN & COUNTRY LIVING

**Icelandic
Horses
Come to
Chester**

Display until February 15, 2005

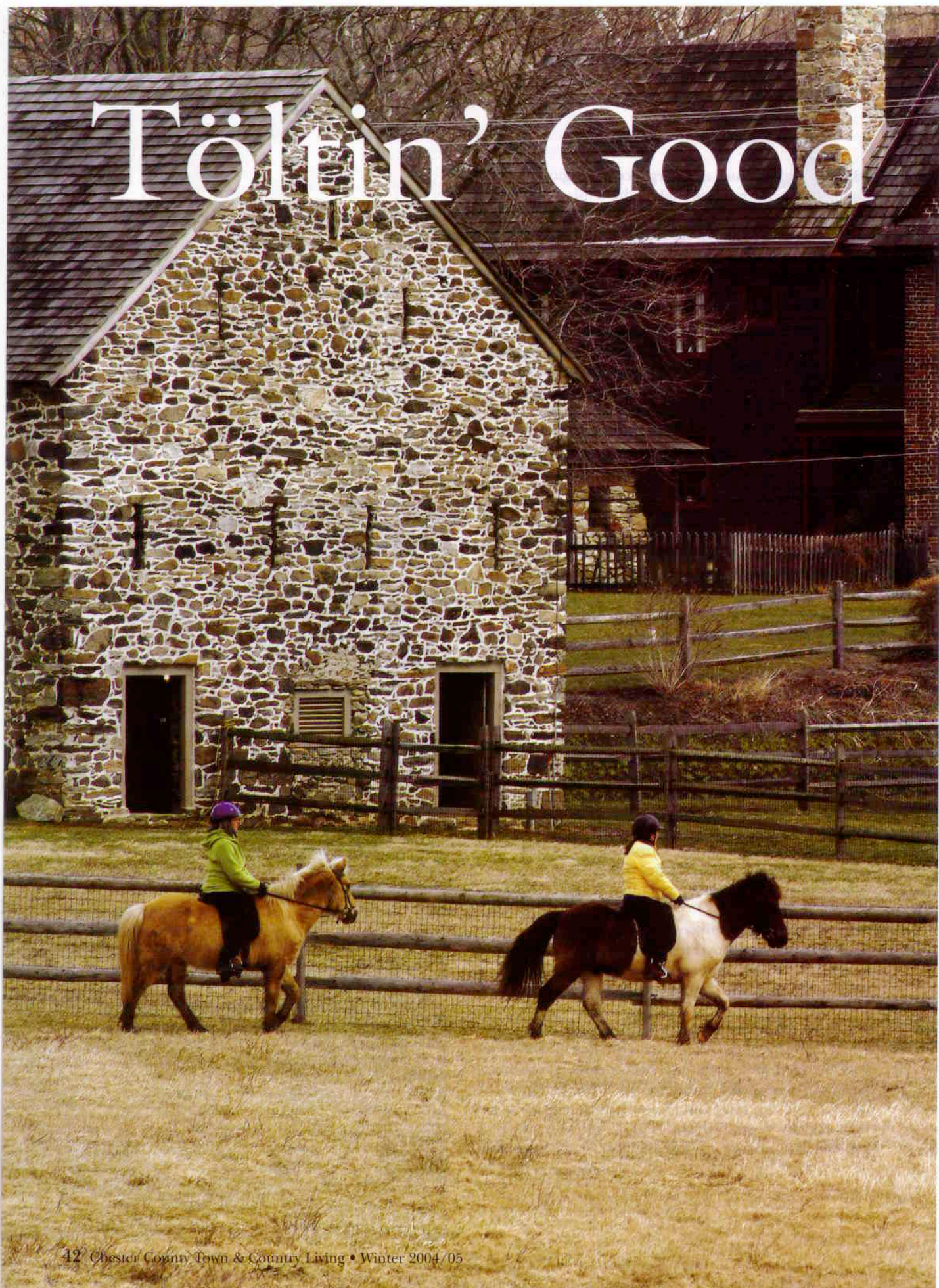


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Heather Hedin Peacock

Töltin' Good



Fun

With their famous tölt gait, Icelandic horses, though relatively new to Chester County's hunt country, are winning blue ribbons with riders and owners

by Kathy Anderson

On a crisp December morning, they slide their hands into form-fitting riding gloves and pull on their warm leather boots. They tuck their hair into their helmets and ready for a brisk morning ride across the rolling hills of Chester County hunt country. But today it's not at hunter pace but at "tölting" pace. Tölting is a gait that's a clip faster than a trot, as smooth as if you're gliding over ice and one of the prominent gaits of the Icelandic horse. Far from their native isle of Iceland and its rocky terrain, and nestled in a rustic barn on a Chester County farm, are Lynne Alfonsi's Icelandic horses known as the Viking Horse. In a county populated with thoroughbreds, these sturdy little equines are a departure and a delight.

As you enter the quaint and picturesque Chester County farm and home of the Viking Horse, several horses with very thick long manes trot over to you with friendly enthusiasm from a nearby paddock. You can sense immediately that the Icelandic horse has a lot of personality. A resident of Chester County for 25 years and an avid equestrian, Lynne first encountered an Icelandic horse on a weekend trek in Vermont with her sister Anne. After riding and owning several Icelandics, she decided to share her wonderful riding experiences on the breed and opened Viking Horse in 2002, offering treks around beautiful Chester County.

Lynne discovered the Icelandics' personality when she walked to their paddock and they came

From left to right, Lynne Alfonsi on Gyjar leads two riders from Maryland, Betsy Roese on Skjóni and Anne Jewell on Mani across a snow-patched field by a classic Chester County fieldstone barn.



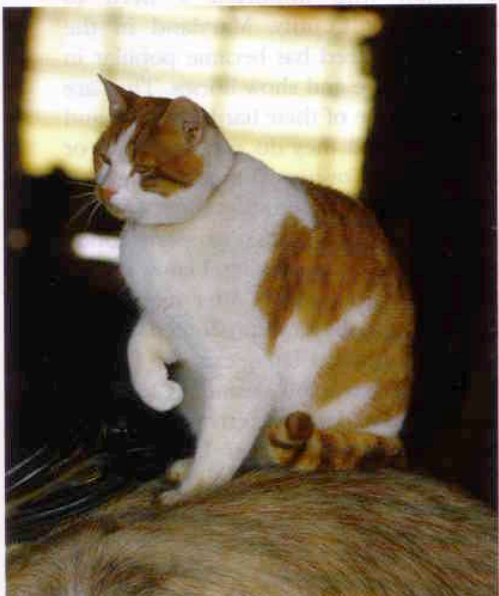
This page, with his head collected at the bit, Gyjar and Augi resemble spirited horses of Norse mythology. Augasteinn (Augi) rests between nibbles of grass hay. Icelandics have a diet of grass hay and pellets. When properly taken care of, Icelandics live well into their 30s and sometimes 40s, and can be ridden well into their 30s. Opposite page, Lynne Alfonsi, owner of Viking Horse. As he watches from his perch on the back of Gyjar, Scooter enjoys being part of the tacking activity in the barn. On cold winter nights, he likes to sleep on Skjóni's warm rump.





when they were called. "They have a depth of personality that I have never experienced with any other breed. They watch you with a keen awareness seemingly accessing the kind of mood you are in today. They nudge and sniff you with a gentle curiosity more like a large dog than a horse." Keeping their Icelandic names, a chestnut named Rúm (pronounced Room and meaning range of speed), a black and white pinto named Skjóni (pronounced ski-OH-knee meaning pinto), a gray dapple named Gyjar (pronounced GEE-are meaning musical harp) and a strong and stocky bay named Augasteinn (pronounced OI-GA-STEEN meaning precious) are just a few of the Icelandic horses that make up Viking Horse's equine family. They stand at about 12- to 14- hands (48-56 inches from the withers) and have a solid conformation.

The Icelandic breed is more than 1,000 years old and has not been interbred. They arrived on the barren island of Iceland in the ninth century most likely brought to the island by seafaring Vikings from a breed known as *Equus Scandinavicus* or descendants of the Arabian and Mongolian breed of horse. The Icelandic horse was highly regarded and renowned in Norse mythology. In Norse mythological stories, several of the Norse gods and their enemies, the giants, owned them. The most famous of all these mythological horses was Sleipnir, the eight-footed pacer. The influence of the Norse myths is still visible, as many riding clubs bear names of mythical horses, as do herds of horses in modern Iceland. The strongest survived the harsh Arctic weather and sparse vegetation while the weak died off. As a result, the horses have grown shorter legs and



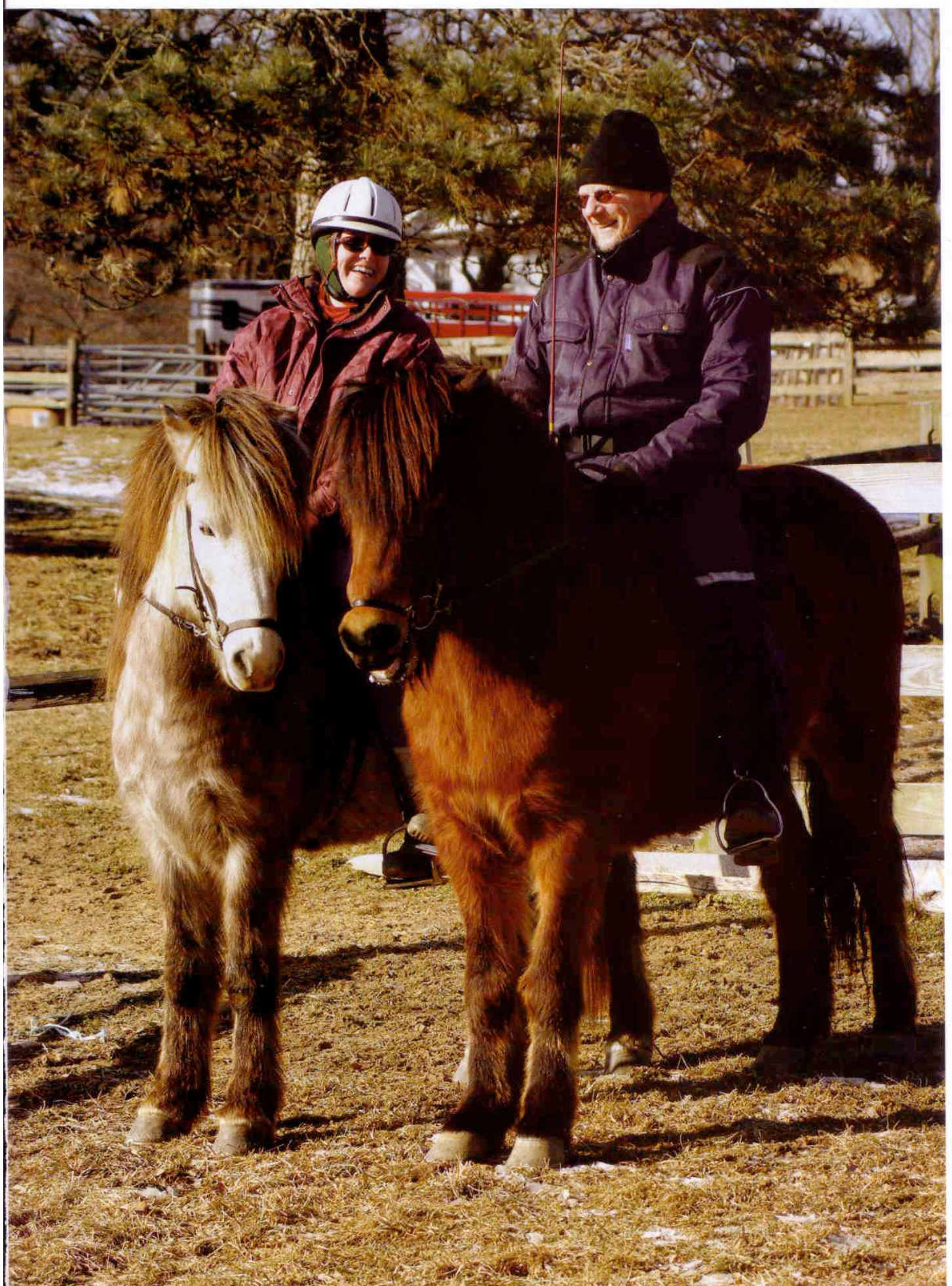


Top, Gyjar finished having his mane brushed and now waits to tack up for his morning ride in the snow. Above, looking spiffy with his freshly brushed mane, Augasteinn (Augi) watches the barn activity with a keen curiosity. Opposite, from right to left, visiting Icelandic trainer, Halldór Gisli Gudnason, a native of Iceland who now lives in Denmark, on Augi and Lynne Alfonsi on Gyjar swap Icelandic horse stories.

necks and longer winter coats. One of their predominant features is their very long and thick mane. Their mane covers their eyes and neck and provides shelter to warm the rider's cold hands. Although small in stature, they're capable of carrying up to 275 pounds. There are approximately 200,000 Icelandic horses worldwide, with less than 3,000 in the United States. Their gaits are walk, trot, canter/gallop and the gait called the "tölt." The tölt is a four-beat running walk and resembles the "rack" gait in other gaited horses. You sit a little further back in the saddle to the tölt then you would in an English saddle and your stirrups are a little longer as in a western saddle or dressage saddle. The tölt is the smoothest gait to ride; sitting to it you can reach speeds up to 25 miles per hour. The fifth gait, which does not occur in all Icelandics, is called the Flying Pace. It is a two-beat lateral gait where there is a moment of suspension. The Flying Pace can reach speeds up to 35 miles per hour.

Chester County graphic designer and veteran equestrian Joan Mason Sacks rides cross-country and in hunts on a 16-hand Thoroughbred Appaloosa mix. After riding Rúm she said, "She was a blast to ride. The gait is interesting—very comfortable to sit. The canter was cute—really fast-moving little legs! Very short strides. As for the height? Very different from my usual mount, and a shorter drop getting down out of the saddle." Fred Hoopes, a Chester County high school guidance teacher said, "On an Icelandic horse, I just leaned back, relaxed and enjoyed the ride. It was like moving through space on a gently rocking chair. The other thing I noticed was that, even though an Icelandic is not very large, I did not have the feeling that I was closer to the ground than if I were riding another type of horse. In fact, when I dismounted, the ground was surprisingly closer than I expected." Andie Summers, a 92.5 WXTU country radio personality, said, "The funny thing about the size of the Icelandics is that after a few hours of riding, you forget they are not as tall as a thoroughbred until you happen upon one. They look like giants! The Icelandics, however, are powerful enough to hold their own."

One of the first people to import and breed Icelandics in the United States was Samuel Ashelman who imported a herd to Montgomery County, Maryland in the 1960s. The breed has become popular in the United States as pleasure and show horses. They are full of staying power because of their hardy stamina and endurance. Lynne has found they do great on long or short treks. "Many Icelandic owners compete with their horses in cross country, gymkhana and endurance rides (that are 50-100 miles in length) when properly conditioned. They can also be used for jumping. I know several folks who hunt with their Icelandics." After negotiating the rough terrain of Iceland, they are sure-footed without being cloddish and alert without being skittish. On this day, Joan Mason Sacks offered her assessment: "Rúm was brave, forward moving and had no concern as to where in the pack we were. She was happy to be there! And she took very good care of me. She was careful but confident on steep downhill or questionable footing." Icelandics show







Above, from right to left, Lynne on Augi, Joan Mason sacks on Rúm and Cindy Malrait on Mani “fet” (the Icelandic word for “walk”) across an old stone bridge over the east branch of the Brandywine. Left, from right to left, Lynne on Augi, Nicole McGregor on Rúm and Walter McGregor on Skjóni enjoy the solitude of a snowy cornfield. Top right, Halldór Gisli Gudnason on Augi shows how to properly ride the gait known as the tölt: sit straight up in the saddle, feet deep in the stirrups and have close contact with the reins.



and place in gaited and regular horse shows. Kelly Pierce of Sundaze Icelandics, a horse trainer and Icelandic owner in Dauphin County, found “many of the walking horse clubs in the area have opened their arms to Icelandics in their gaited shows. I have won in several classes, but lately I enter the open division, which is the hardest, and you ride against the top riders and horses. It’s really an honor to win.”

Icelandics are a wonderful horse for all age equestrians. Their mettle is strong and spirited but gentle and playful in nature, making them a perfect horse for the young rider. “Size and personality are two key positive characteristics for children. Icelandics, generally speaking, love children and will actually ‘take care’ of the rider. The thing to remember with the Icelandics is that they are still horses. Very strong and powerful horses—not ponies,” says Lynne. Their gaits are extremely comfortable and smooth, which is an attractive trait for the older equestrian or an experienced rider who, perhaps, hasn’t ridden in a while and wants to “get back in the saddle again.” Connie Bloss, a consulting analyst from Chester County, said “Riding an Icelandic is so much fun. They are very strong, sturdy and energetic. When you are riding an Icelandic, you don’t feel like you are on a small horse; their energy and heart are as big as any horse. The Icelandics are much easier to get on and off also, which is a plus when you are trail riding and there is no mounting block around to help you get back on. The Icelandics shorter height also comes in handy for mounting as one gets older and is not as flexible as one used to be.”

Marjorie Bedinger of Constant Effort Farm in Maryland said her husband, Jim, who is a retired engineer, fell in love with the Icelandic because of the tölt





and their personality. "While some men might go buy that red Corvette for a change in lifestyle," she said, "Jim bought a racy gray Icelandic gelding, Stirnir frá Feti, with a heart as big as the sky, even though he is just 13.2 hands. They have had wonderful trail rides and swims in the creeks. Stirnir loves the water and once he goes into a creek, he remembers where that entry point is and will head right for it the next time he goes by that way. He also loves having little girls pet him and fuss over him." Marjorie and Jim do a lot of pleasure riding on their Icelandics and a little showing, some demos and training. "Outside of riding them we just have a wonderful time being around them, grooming and playing with them. Last summer some Icelandic horse owner friends came to visit. So naturally we are all sitting around in the barn aisle with a couple loose horses wandering around. One of them decides she just wants to be in on the conversation and comes and stands between two of the chairs in the circle, drops her head down and snoozes. After a while, she backed out of the circle, walked off, got a drink and a few bites of grass and then returned to the same position."

For Lynne, Marjorie and Jim and Kelly, owning one Icelandic usually leads to developing a herd of them. Laughing, Marjorie said, "I think every owner of an Icelandic has found that they develop 'the potato chip syndrome'—you can't have just one." Lynne owns seven Icelandics, as well as having several additional horses

continued on page 71



Opposite, Lynne gives Augi a sweet candy cane as a special treat. He never had any treats in Iceland and now sniffs Lynne's pockets in hopes of satisfying his newly acquired sweet tooth. Top, from right to left, during one of his lessons, Hallodór Gisli Gudnason on Augi tells Lynne on Gyjar to call out when her horse's hind leg is lifting, so she can keep him properly gaited. Above, from right to left, Lynne on Augi gives the Icelandic command for cantor/gallop—"stakk," and she and Joan Mason Sacks on Rúm take off for a rousing run.

Tolting Good Fun

continued from page 51

for sale; Jim and Marjorie have 15 and Kelly six. "It is their strong personalities that makes it very important that prospective buyers and horses be well matched to each other," said Marjorie, "particularly, if one is looking for a real horse partner and family member."

But buying and owning an Icelandic takes some care and attention. Since there are very few in the United States, it's best to find one in Iceland. Lynne and Kelly go to Iceland to buy Icelandic horses to be resold in the U.S. They oversee the importation process, then acclimate them to America and train them for the trail. They pick the horse through a trustworthy buyer in Iceland. According to Lynne, the buyer arranges the deal for you and handles getting the exportation arranged. Importation has to take place through an exporter in Iceland. Prior to the exportation, the horses have to be vetted. The buyer pays for the vetting as long as the horse passes. The vet certificate must be completed in order for the horses to leave the country. The vet certificate along with the other paperwork on the horse (used to include its "birth certificate," but now it is a "passport") is mailed to the buyer. The exporter also makes arrangements with US Quarantine. US Quarantine is located in Newburgh, New York. The horses must stay in Quarantine for three days. The buyer either picks up the horse(s) or arranges for a U.S. transporter to collect them."

Lynne also added, "Transition to this country can be stressful to the horse. A newly imported horse should not be ridden for at least the first four weeks after its arrival. Climates as well as environment are generally very different. For example, most Icelandics have never seen a tree. It quickly became clear to me that two of the horses I had imported had never eaten out of a bucket. They snorted and fussed and it took a little while for them to understand that this was the way they would be

fed. But, they are very smart and learn quickly. The key, as with any horse, is patience."

As with most people devoted to their breed, there are Icelandic riding clubs. One such club, the Frida Icelandic Riding Club, is a group of Icelandic horse owners from Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia, New Jersey, West Virginia, North Carolina and New York. The club is named after Frida Gudmundsdottir, an Icelandic woman and horse owner who made a major contribution to the sport and the breed in the Mid-Atlantic region. Besides enjoying the camaraderie and shared interest in the Icelandic,

The landscape resembled a Wyeth painting in its stark simplicity as the soft winter sunlight cast shadows from empty tree branches.

they also host clinics with renowned Icelandic trainers and breeders, such as Halldór Gisli Gudnason from Iceland. Halldór trains and teaches in Denmark and Sweden but comes to the United States several times a year to teach his clinics about training and riding the Icelandic horse.

I grew up in Delaware County and rode thoroughbreds as a teenager. Now I live and work in Los Angeles and ride mostly quarter horses—the horse of the west. My introduction to Lynne and the Viking Horse was on a ride with my niece a couple of Christmases ago. My first experience tölting was quite a thrill! I had ridden gaited horses before (Missouri Fox Trotters and Paso Finos), but the Icelandics solid, smooth tölt was a dream and I quickly became a new enthusiast and ride a Viking Horse whenever I am in Pennsylvania. I have found that riding Icelandics in every sea-

son in Chester County offers a sensory experience of sights, aromas and physical challenges. Recently, when we were out on a cold crisp day in December, the hills were brown in color except for a few patches of white snow. The landscape resembled a Wyeth painting in its stark simplicity as the soft winter sunlight cast shadows from empty tree branches. Stillness became my companion and riding in the cold air cleared my mind of agendas and "to do lists," and I lived in just that moment. After some tranquil time in the saddle, my "riding seat," the balance that keeps you centered in the saddle was challenged as Lynne led us down an embankment of mud and snow. The Icelandics negotiated the hillside deftly with confidence and sure-footed balance. I was reminded that riding requires mine and my mount's attention and that it's a team sport. After the morning ride, my niece and I enjoyed a hearty lunch and cozy fireplace at the local Four Dogs Tavern in Marshallton.

Riding with Lynne Alfonsi and Viking Horse is a physical and mental challenge and a chance to escape the rat race for a day and experience Chester County and all its charm and beauty. Besides riding over the bucolic farm area, Viking Horse goes out on picnic lunch rides and special weekend treks that include overnight stays at a bed and breakfast and rides through Valley Forge Park.

Töling through Chester County hunt country on the back of an Icelandic horse is revitalizing and the ride adventurous, comfortable and great fun. Perhaps, Connie Bloss sums it up best: "The Icelandic horses have brought a new love and passion to my life!" She has since bought one of her own.

For more information about Viking Horse, visit (www.vikinghorse.com) or contact Lynne Alfonsi at 610-517-7980 or via e-mail at (lynne@vikinghorse.com). ♦

A Pennsylvania native, Kathy Anderson is an award-winning screenwriter who works in the film industry in Los Angeles.



FROM MY DESK

I

'm never quite ready for winter—wanting the painted leaves to stay a little longer—the nights not to come so quickly—staving off the wearing of boots and layers of woolen clothing for just a few more weeks. But once the last leaf has fallen, and the winter birds return to my backyard feeders, I acquiesce. For despite my apprehension of its coming, winter in Chester County brings with it a few of my favorite things—baking pumpkin pies, the aroma of a roasting turkey in the oven, holiday house tours, trimming the tree, sharing traditions of the season with family members and friends.

It's also a time to enjoy our beautiful countryside. Horse riding has always been a tradition in Chester County, no matter the season. Kathy Anderson, in "Tölting Good Fun," introduces us to a new kind that's gaining ground in our county—taking to the fields on an Icelandic horse. As Kathy explains, the main gait of the Icelandic, the tölt, is much easier on older riders—a nice welcome for any of us. If riding in the snow doesn't get you out, then Bruce Vogel's photo essay "Snow Falling on Chester" surely will. Bruce captures the majestic beauty of winter in our Brandywine Valley. Lionville is the town, and Frank Quattrone, as always, rises to the bar in the telling of its history, and Joel Zarska's photographs do much to bring it to life. A picturesque town at any time; yet, in winter, dressed in a soft veil of white, it's easy to imagine the days of its early settlers—more than 300 years ago.

Keeping with the traditions of the season is Patti Guthrie's story about Joyce Laramy Benfer, whose collection of the putz takes on Broadway proportions at Christmas time. The tradition of special holiday foods is part of all cultures. In Stefanie Ryan's "Lebanese Delights," we meet the very charming Semaan Semaan, who shares some of his family's traditions, including a recipe for his delicious tabbouleh. When next you're in Wayne's Farmers Market, stop by his stand to say hello and try some of his wonderful cuisine—handmade by himself and his handsome son, George Anthony. Beth Buxbaum takes us to the home of Rosanne Paone Petrucci and Frank Furness, who have lovingly restored their 100-year-old house and added a few of their own traditions.

Rounding out the issue is our own tradition of bringing you stories on art, crafts, garden, workshop and calendar.

Wishing you all the joys of the season.

Diana Cercone
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Chester County

TOWN & COUNTRY LIVING

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