

# Marin veterinarian raises rabbits, lowers Haitian hunger problem

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Much of America was discovered only because early pioneers survived on rabbits. Yes, as in hunted and consumed.

Somehow, though, the animal became this warm and fuzzy creature -- think Easter Bunny. Or stuffed animal for little kids to hug at bedtime.

"It was a survival food, initially. Rabbit played a big part in our migration. It's not a luxury food we think of now," said Myriam Kaplan-Pasternak, veterinarian and co-owner of Devil's Gulch Ranch in the Marin County hills of Nicasio.

Kaplan-Pasternak works with Partners of the Americas' Farmer to Farmer program and Haiti's Makouti Agro Enterprises. She has been pivotal in establishing a rabbit-for-food program in Haiti, which in turn helps farmers there.

Kaplan-Pasternak has been to Haiti nine times, six of which occurred between 2008 and 2010. She has worked with the Makouti team to overcome the challenges of raising rabbits in an economically disadvantaged country.

At the family farm, Kaplan-Pasternak oversees roughly 10,000 rabbits. Many do end up in high-end restaurants, oddly the other end of the eat-for-survivor spectrum.

It started 13 years ago when the ranch started getting requests from Marin restaurants. Then came Kaplan-Pasternak's interest in Haiti, an ailing nation devastated by the 2010 earthquake.

Rabbit is a lean meat, "one of the most efficient" at converting food to protein, is easy to digest and higher in protein than chicken, turkey, lamb or pork, said Kaplan-Pasternak, emphasizing that rabbits "do not compete with humans" for food such as corn or soy.

"You can feed them kitchen waste or garden waste," Kaplan-Pasternak said. "For people in poor countries, there is very little cost."

Because of a rabbit's propensity to reproduce, "they're much easier to replace," Kaplan-Pasternak said.

Kaplan-Pasternak started the Haiti project about three years ago.

"We had a pretty good impact with one visit," Kaplan-Pasternak said. "I knew that for them to achieve their goals, I needed to keep coming back and helping this whole process evolve. It wasn't a one-shot deal. And I've been going back ever since. People are incredibly receptive."

Since the rabbit project started, farmers have seen incomes increase by as much as \$4,500 a year, Kaplan-Pasternak said.

In a country where many survive on \$1 a day, "that's pretty significant income," she said.

Kaplan-Pasternak was a week into a scheduled two-week visit when the 7.0 earthquake hit, and, perhaps, was saved only because of a problem with a credit card transaction.

"We were in the process of locating a new site and were incredibly fortunate," Kaplan-Pasternak said. "The person running our credit card kept doing it wrong. It took 45 minutes to get it to work and it might have saved my life. I would have been in the building that collapsed."

Surviving that serendipitous act of incompetence, "makes me a lot more patient," Kaplan-Pasternak said.

Recently, Kaplan-Pasternak began the Haiti Coffee project, where the ranch sells coffee from Haiti with the money going to the farmers and Haitian communities.

"If we stay focused on Haiti, I really believe we stand a chance of solving hunger and poverty worldwide," Kaplan-Pasternak said. "We need to be able to achieve that in Haiti."

Because of Haiti's proximity to the United States where "resources are available," Kaplan-Pasternak said that if "we can't solve (hunger and poverty) there, I don't think we have a chance to solve it worldwide." Kaplan-Pasternak has visited El Salvador with her husband and fellow farmer, Mark Pasternak, to develop rabbit production, and she's consulting with Rwanda.

Kaplan-Pasternak hopes to return to Haiti in January where she's known by her first name to many.

"I do have a hard time leaving there," she said. "It is very challenging. But you see it is a very hopeful place. Haitians are wonderful people. I'm fortunate to have the opportunity to work there and have a big impact on their lives."

Though Kaplan-Pasternak believes she'll be assisting Haiti for a long time, "I'd love if they didn't need me any more."

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