
The Charismatic KuneKune

A NEW ZEALAND HERITAGE BREED ALMOST WENT EXTINCT BEFORE
FINDING ITS HOME AMONG AMERICAN HOMESTEADERS

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SUMMARY: KuneKune

(pronounced “cooney cooney”) pigs are a good option for small farms and homesteads. The animals’ gentle nature, manageable size and low input requirements beyond minimal rations and standard veterinary care like vaccinations and de-worming, make them a smart pick for those looking for an entry point into livestock production.

For those looking to produce meat for friends, family and paying customers at a farmers market or a farm-to-table restaurant, the KuneKune yields a succulent and high-quality product. Sows reach 200 to 300 pounds at maturity on average, but males can weigh up to 250-400 pounds.

In contrast with more commercial breeds, KuneKune pigs require a time period to mature — in some cases up to 16 months. They also have a higher proportion of fat that can be a dream for making charcuterie.

However, if the goal is quality over quantity, KuneKunes are a strong contender when considering a heritage breed. Famous for their fondness for grass, vegetables and fruit, they require little supplementary nutrition beyond two cups of a pelletized grain mixture, twice a day, per pig.

Additionally, the KuneKune’s gentle disposition makes it an ideal fit for a family homestead with small children. Unlike some breeds, KuneKunes are not destructive or prone to root.

When purchasing KuneKunes, it is important to do your research and find reputable breeders. The American KuneKune Pig Society, a member-driven registry of pure-bred KuneKunes, is the best place to start.”



Matt Burton, a co-founder of the American KuneKune Pig Society, grew up on a 250-acre farm in Pennsylvania.

His family focused on vegetable production mainly on the 250-acre plot, but his grandfather liked to keep a few commercial hogs around to stock their freezers. The family also raised cattle and chicken for personal use, and canned the vegetables they didn’t sell.

“Growing up, we didn’t buy meat from the grocery store,” Burton said.

Burton found his own niche on the farm with goats. He started

showing them back when he was 8 years old. By his early 20s he was judging goat shows and learning the ins and outs of animal breeding.

“My focus, most of my life, has been goats,” he said.

Years later, when he found himself living on his partner’s 300-acre family farm in Mississippi, he thought back to his grandfather’s livestock, specifically the hogs. The big, 800-900 pound commercial breeds he used back then wouldn’t work for his current circumstances. They were too big, too aggressive and too destructive to a landscape.

“You really have to be careful around them,” he said. “I didn’t want an animal I couldn’t interact with.”

However, an advertisement in a magazine back around 2008 caught his attention. It touted the unique qualities of a small, gentle and intelligent pig called the KuneKune. Burton was intrigued. He began researching the breed and found his interest only growing stronger. He wanted to try them out, but first he had to find one.

At the time, there weren’t many breeders in the U.S., and so Burton put his name on a waitlist. Eventually, he was able to find a boar, which he named Templeton.

“We fell in love with the breed, he said.

Burton wasn’t the only one. The KuneKune’s keen intelligence — as well as their deeply flavorful meat and adorable appearance — has endeared this heritage breed to homesteaders and breeders in the U.S. since the mid-2000s, when they were first introduced to the United Kingdom and the United States from New Zealand, where they almost went extinct back in the 1970s.

Burton admits he was skeptical at first that the KuneKune would live up to the hype, but he quickly came around.

“They are a true grazing breed. I didn’t believe it at first,” he said. “When I got my first one, I still thought it was a marketing scheme. But after I got that first one and turned him on the pasture it was the weirdest thing I’ve ever seen. These pigs were eating grass. I also didn’t believe they would be as docile as they were. Pigs are usually pretty high-strung.”

But not Templeton.

“He would run up to us for attention in the pasture,” Burton said. “They want attention. They’ll flop at your feet and demand a belly rub. They love that.”

Burton was hooked. It was then he decided he wanted to bring his expertise in goat breeding to KuneKunes.

“We decided we really wanted to pursue helping preserve the breed,” he said.

Finding suitable stock proved difficult, however. One of the larger breeders in the

country, who imported the KuneKunes from New Zealand, focused on the pet market, meaning she sold only pigs that had been spayed or neutered. Burton, however, was looking for gilts he could use in his own breeding program. Eventually, he found two of them and built up a small herd with the help of Templeton.

Burton wasn’t satisfied, however. He knew he might have to go outside of the country to find bloodlines that could help him increase the genetic diversity of his herd. With a small amount of animals available, Burton said there was “a lot of line breeding,” which can result in health and reproductive issues for the animals if done poorly.

“You’re taking half-siblings and breeding them back to each other,” he said. “Line breeding can be a great thing, but it can also be a really bad thing. It can really turn out very poorly for the animals. You need that diversity in the genetics. I realized that we did not have that genetic diversity.”

Because KuneKunes were so rare in the U.S. at the time, most of the pigs being produced were being used to breed. That means lesser quality animals were being used as stock. Usually, the goal of animal breeding is continuous improvement toward a breed standard, Burton explained.

“People weren’t putting them in the freezer,” he said. “Every animal had value because of the scarcity.”

Burton wanted to change that.

“I felt if we could bring in different bloodlines we could focus on improving the breed and not focus on keeping every animal for breeding stock,” he said. “We wanted to produce pigs that are as close to the breed standard as possible.”

A breed standard is an exhaustive list of desired attributes for each body part of the animals, as well as for temperament. For KuneKunes, the standard calls for medium-sized and upturned snouts, strong legs and feet that enable them to carry weight and litters, well spaced teats and many other characteristics.

Burton looked to the United Kingdom for help — specifically to KuneKune breeder Wendy Scudamore.

KUNEKUNE FACTS

ORIGIN: A cross between Berkshire and Poland China, as well as other breeds, possibly from Indonesia. They were found in New Zealand, but did not originate there. Arrived in the U.S. and U.K. in the 1990s after facing near-extinction in the 1970s.

ABOUT THAT NAME: It’s pronounced “cooney cooney” and its derived from the Maori and means “fat and round.”

WEIGHT: Females are between 200 and 300 pounds. Males tip the scales at between 250 and 400 pounds.

HEIGHT: They are between twenty four and thirty inches high.

POPULATION: There are more than 17,000 registered KuneKunes in the U.S.

For various reasons, Scudamore no longer raises KuneKunes, but she still has an enduring fondness for the breed.

“They were my first foray into pig breeding and they taught me so much. They were so easy and fantastic to learn from,” said Scudamore, who tends 5 acres in Herefordshire, England. “They’re almost dog-like in personality. I’ve trained them and took them to countryside shows and put on displays. It made people aware of what an intelligent animal the pigs is, really.”

Back in 2011, Burton, along with his partner Chris, and Scudamore hatched a plan to import KuneKunes to the U.S. About a year later, crates containing 9 pigs arrived at John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York City. After a lot of red tape, personal expense and a mandatory 30-day quarantine at a USDA facility, Burton and his partner drove from Mississippi to meet their new KuneKunes.

True to their reputation for being laid back, the pigs were healthy and happy, despite the long journey to the U.S.

“I remember showing up to the USDA facility and we were loading them on to our trailer and they were happy go lucky, Burton said.

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ORIGIN STORY

Today's KuneKunes (pronounced "cooney cooney") hail from New Zealand. The name itself is a Maori word that means "fat and round." However, the pigs aren't indigenous to the area. While their true origin remains somewhat mysterious, the general consensus is that they are a mix of Berkshire and Poland China, along with some possible Indonesian lineage.

According to the British KuneKune Pig Society, there are multiple theories about their provenance: "The Maoris may have taken them there, as the pig was very important to the Polynesians, and there are still pigs with tassels in the South Pacific Islands. Early whalers and sealers may have taken them, to be released to breed, to be culled for food on their next voyage, or they could well have been taken by the people who settled to farm in the country."

In the 1970s, the breed neared extinction as the Maoris no longer incorporated KuneKune meat into their diet as they traditionally had. However, two wildlife park owners, Michael Willis and John Simster, developed an interest in preserving the KuneKune and began buying up as many as they could find. At the time, that added up to only 18 pigs.

While the KuneKune population stabilized in New Zealand, the breed wouldn't catch on off-island until the 1990s, when they were imported to the U.K. and later to the U.S. Among breeders there, an emphasis was placed on tapping into a wide variety of genetic stock. Today, the American KuneKune Pig Society has registered more than 17,000 KuneKunes.

BREED CHARACTERISTICS

KuneKunes are medium-sized pigs: They range in height from 24- to 30-inches high, with fully-grown females weighing between

200-300 pounds and adult males hitting the scales at between 250-400 pounds. They are known, above all, for their gentle and friendly disposition.

They sport a full covering of hair, goat-like wattles under their chins, short- to medium-sized snouts, short legs and rotund bodies. One trait that many KuneKune fanciers find attractive is their dramatic color variations, which include cream, ginger, brown, black and spotted.

The preferred look of KuneKune changes as with fashion, but breeders stress the importance of preserving these variations.

"The Maoris preferred black pigs, but in this country spotted pigs seem in favor at the moment," according to the British KuneKune Pig Society, which was founded in 1993. "We must be careful and breed all types and colors of Kunes. To help a rare breed you must preserve as much of the gene pool as possible ..."





KUNEKUNE ADVANTAGES

CHEAPER TO KEEP: Grass is the KuneKunes main food and because of their upturned noses they don't root. These pigs grow and thrive on pasture with a supplement of hay when grass isn't growing, and a couple of cups of pig grower twice a day. The only mess in a KuneKune pasture is around the water source. The pigs love to get wet and spend a lot of time soaking, a 300-pound sow displaces a lot of water.

FRIENDLY TO OTHER ANIMALS AND LIKE PEOPLE: Unlike commercially grown hogs, the KuneKunes don't eat chickens alive, or behave aggressively toward people or other animals. They are sweet natured and crowd the fence whenever a human comes by. Even small children can walk in their pastures with only the fear of too many KuneKunes wanting to be scratched at the same time.

STRONG FENCING ISN'T REQUIRED: They are built more to keep predators out than pigs in. KuneKunes show few of the escapist tendencies of many farm animals. Their days are spent grazing, getting in water, communicating with each other and lazing around digesting. Noise making is one of the disadvantages of keeping them inside—they talk all the time.

Source: American KuneKune Pig Society.

Typically, KuneKunes must grow to 9 or 16 months old before they are ready for slaughter — about 6 to 8 months longer than other breeds. However, that results in succulent meat. After all, fat is where the flavor is.

“You do have to be aware of the fat,” Scudamore said. “The KuneKune, historically, is a lard pig. The Maori used the lard to preserve food.”

While they may be slow-growers, she said, KuneKunes, which are natural grazers, don't require the generous amount of inputs that commercial hogs do. “You don't have to stuff them with a lot of food,” she said.

Although they are low-maintenance compared to some other breeds, they do require care, attention and well-designed diets, Scudamore said.

NUTRITIONAL NEEDS

The KuneKune is prized, in part, for its ability to graze and forage for its food. They can thrive on grass, vegetables and fruit. Compared to other breeds, their nutritional requirements are modest: two cups of a pelletized grain mixture, twice a

day, per pig — maybe more in the winter. That will get them through cold and wet winter months when grazing alone won't meet their needs. In general, KuneKunes need about 16 percent protein.

“It's important that they are reared on pig rations,” Scudamore said of piglets, which she allowed to nurse for 8 weeks before weaning. “They need that to develop their bones. Once they've had a good start, you can cut them back to a very low ration.”

Excessive nourishment can also have a detrimental effect, Scudamore said.

“They don't want to be overfed,” she said. “I'd rather see a lean, active pigs. Keep them a little bit hungry. Keep them up and roaming and foraging. I don't like to see a pig lying around and waiting for someone to bring it dinner.”

Burton said it's important to understand the basic nutritional availability on your landscape. Back in Mississippi, the fields were lush and the pigs did quite well on their own. He mainly provided rations for nursing sows and piglets.

The carrying capacity of your land is also an important consideration. According to Scudamore, an acre of healthy pasture can support about 12 pigs if you're raising them for meat — perhaps half that if you're running a breeding operation and will have them on the farm longer than a year or so.

If the pasture is lush and rich, experts recommend five to six pigs per acre.

Although KuneKunes are champion foragers, that doesn't mean they can eat just anything. Experts warn against feeding "waste food," which includes "meat, bones, blood, offal or other part of the carcass of any livestock or of any poultry, or product derived therefrom or hatchery waste."

That also includes kitchen scraps that may have had contact with the items listed above.

WORTH THE EFFORT

Because the U.S. and U.K. markets are now well-stocked with breeders, breeding stock doesn't fetch the high price they might have 10 years ago. That's one reason why Scudamore decided to end her KuneKune breeding businesses.

"The market is totally swamped with them now," Scudamore said.

Additionally, Scudamore said she's not

convinced they could make for a viable large-scale meat venture. As previously mentioned, they take significantly longer than most breeds to reach their full size and then don't yield as much meat.

However, if you have a small amount of land, don't want to cause much damage and want to produce delicious meat for your friends and family, they might be an ideal option, she said.

For the most part, the KuneKune's niche has been with homesteaders and small farmers. And that's where they shine, said Scudamore.

Others, like Kathy Petersen and Matt Burton, believe that the breed has great potential as a meat pig if the emphasis is on quality over quantity.

According to Petersen — who until recently ran a KuneKune breeding operation in Virginia and was also a founding member of the American KuneKune Pig Society — the breed makes a lot of sense as a meat pig if you consider the overall return on investment. A KuneKune requires much less food than a voracious commercial hog. KuneKunes are also gentler on the land and fences, which can be costly to repair, because they don't aggressively root like some breeds.

"You might not get hundreds and hundreds of pounds of meat from a

KuneKune, but what you do get is a dark, rich, marbled meat that a commercial hog can't hold a candle to," she said.

Although she doesn't eat much meat these days, Scudamore agreed. "Everybody will tell you that they make fabulous sausages."

Petersen suggested that farmers or homesteaders might be wise to try a hybrid approach — raising for meat, but also covering expenses with a breeding enterprise on the side.

"If you're homesteading and you want to produce pork, buy the best pig you can, because you don't know when your plans might change," she said. "You could sell piglets to cover costs like vaccinations, grain, water hoses, huts, fencing. Use it to support the meat production. You want the pigs to support themselves and cover their own costs."

Burton pointed to the KuneKunes unparalleled versatility.

"The great thing is they have so many purposes," he said. "Each breeder can choose their niche. They're great pets, great meat pigs, great for petting zoos, great therapy animals — great breeding stock."

"There are so many different things you can do with them," he said. "You can focus on one of these things or all of them." •

ABOUT AKKPS

The American KuneKune Pig Society was founded by Matt Burton, Christopher Rowley, Kathy Petersen and Lisa Helfer in 2013. Their aim was to provide a continuously updated record of registrations and pedigrees of purebred KuneKune pigs; a comprehensive source for information on all phases of KuneKune care; a quarterly e-newsletter, including articles contributed by members; and a current and comprehensive list of all registered breeders who are actively breeding & registering with AKKPS.

The American KuneKune Pig Society is an official breed registry of purebred KuneKunes. The AKKPS is the first KuneKune organization structured as a non profit in the USA & Canada, and is member governed. We are committed to the preservation and promotion of purebred, pedigreed, and DNA verified KuneKunes. The AKKPS promotes this delightful breed of heritage, grazing swine for all their many purposes.

It is the mission of the AKKPS to encourage a spirit of collaboration amongst breeders, to promote and improve the KuneKune breed of swine through ownership, breeding, exhibition and education, and to protect and preserve the breed and the breed standard by maintaining a permanent and ongoing record of their lineage. americankunekunepigsociety.com

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