

Cape Girardeau Farmers Send Their Animals Back to the Land

by Dayna Conner, features columnist
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In the mid-1960s a movement was started by folks who were disenchanted from the promise of consumerism and what they saw as artificial urban society. They moved mostly from cities into rural areas to establish more self-reliant lives based around practices that included natural food production, home building and alternative energy. Holding true to their convictions of right livelihood, they established all manner of land-based cottage enterprises to sustain themselves and their families.

Fast-forward four decades to a new wave of back-to-the-landers with a similar desire for simplicity and values-based living. Growers throughout the country are taking their animals out of the cement jungle of confinement and off bare, over-grazed earth to place them literally back onto the pasture land. As a result, grass-fed livestock and poultry are taking consumers beyond organic, with documented health benefits for individuals and the environment.

Matt and Rachel Fasnacht at Family Friendly Farm in Cape Girardeau are one smart example of these new pioneers. From the beginning they chose to raise chickens, turkeys and cattle using Management Intensive Grazing, or MIG, a rotational pasturing system that constantly relocates the animals to fresh sections of tender greens. The farm is truly the idyllic pastoral scene painted for us since childhood, with cows freely grazing in the grass and young chicks chomping on insects and scratching at the soil.

Egg-laying hens are moved to new pasture about once a week, while cows, broiler chickens and turkeys are relocated each day. As Matt explains it, the animals desire particular plants and, if allowed, will eat the tastiest ones down to where they struggle to regrow. The less desirable plants that remain, such as broom sedge, eventually go to seed, proliferating on the bare soil left from over-grazing. Using the MIG rotation, the lightly foraged areas are able to regenerate fully before another group of animals is put back on the land.

Rotational pasturing also reduces the need for external resources used to feed farm animals. A good 20% of the diet for chickens and 100% of the food cattle require are grown on-site. The ability to raise most of the animals' feed where they live significantly reduces the use of harvest machinery, warehouse space, and the fuel and vehicles required for transport. The ease of the system also conserves the human time and energy needed to provide these services.

One of the biggest sellers at the farm is meat chickens. A new group is started about once a month during the growing season. "The animals are raised on grass so it limits the time when [we] can actually do it", Matt explained. They plan to raise around 1,600 chickens this year during the warm months.

The growers spend about two and a half hours each day tending the hundreds of chickens, about 350 laying hens, 50 or so hogs and six cows the family raises. All animals are on rotation except for the hogs, which lack sweat glands and naturally prefer to wallow in the cool mud. In addition to the daily tasks, chicken processing is done every few weeks at a station set up behind the farmhouse. “About half the time put into each bird goes into butchering”, Matt said.

Another mainstay for the farm is brown eggs. The growers installed roosting boards and nesting boxes fashioned from recovered 5-gallon buckets inside of a used cotton trailer to accommodate the laying hens. These ladies have full access to pasture whenever they like, and each one can lay as many as 300 eggs per year.

Most broiler chicken sales made at the farm are to folks who pre-order in winter, though people can find poultry, along with plenty of pork, beef and eggs raised here by visiting the farm store located on the downstairs level of the house. Rachel, who considers herself foremost a stay home mother and wife, manages the farm’s business marketing and sales. She said most of the people who venture out to the farm to make their purchases are those who have moved to the area from bigger cities and are accustomed to interfacing with farmers. They prefer direct food connections and like to see where it’s being grown. Some customers place such a high value on this relationship that they will drive out to the farm just to pick up a dozen eggs.

The decision to grow in a manner that prioritizes animal and environmental health comes from the core of Matt and Rachel’s convictions of good land stewardship. They strive for the most humane treatment of animals, and vow to leave the land in better condition than they found it. For them, providing locally grown food is one way to ensure the land and water are protected, the use of non-renewable fuel is reduced, and the true cost of food is paid at the point of sale.

To try Family Friendly Farm’s products and decide for yourself, stop by Grace’s Café in Cape Girardeau or visit the Chaumette Winery in St. Genevieve. Their pastured eggs can be found at the Corner Grocery in Cape and the Neighborhood Co-op Grocery in Carbondale. If you’d like to put a face with your food, look for Matt, Rachel and helper-in-training Darrell at the Cape Girardeau Farmer’s Market on Thursdays from 2-5:00pm. Or, stop in for a farm tour and shop the store on Tuesdays from 3:00-6:00pm and Saturdays from 9:00am-3:00pm. Visit their website at familyfriendlyfarm.com for directions and loads more information.