

## **Introduction to Bird Mail - Tuesday, August 20th 2019**

It is with great excitement that I introduce to you my first farming endeavor: pastured poultry! The years I've spent working at Verdant View Farm and hearing farming stories from my dad have cultivated a desire to know more about good animal husbandry and to be more involved in food production. I've chosen to raise and sell Cornish Cross chickens as a way to learn more about growing and managing my own livestock.

I've purchased the chicks from a hatchery and will be picking them up this Friday! They will spend the first 2 weeks in our garage under a heat lamp. Once they have acclimated to room temperature, they will enjoy their next 7-8 weeks outside on pasture in a mobile chicken coop (which I am in the process of designing and building). A mixture of chicken feed and bugs/worms/grass from the pasture the coop is on will constitute their diet. My friend's grandparents live about a mile from my house and have generously agreed to let me raise the chickens in their grass pasture. Each day I will move the coop to fresh grass and replenish their feed and water. Around 7-8 weeks old they are full grown. They are specifically bred to put on weight quickly. With the help of a friend who has considerable experience with butchering and packaging chickens, we will process them as whole chickens and will deliver each order right to your home. The finishing weight will be between 4-5 lbs and go for \$3.50 per pound. I can accept cash, check, or Venmo on delivery of the order.

Besides caring for the chickens well, one of the most important parts of this project is the educational aspect. For myself and anyone interested my goal is for all of us to learn something. If you would like to see the chicks at my house and/or later out on pasture, I would gladly show them off. Weekly emails will include updates on how the chickens are doing and other tidbits of information about raising them. Together we can learn more about the life and nature of chickens, the industry surrounding meat production, and much more.

The next step, if you're still interested, is to respond to this email or text/call me with how many whole chickens you would like (there is absolutely no pressure to buy any or even more than one). They would be available the end of October. I have 15 chickens available so they will go on a first come, first serve basis. Of course feel free to talk to me in person/email/call with any questions or express any concerns that you may have about any part of this project.

## **Week 1 - Friday, August 30th 2019**

Hello!!

This bird mail delivery is hot off the brooder and boy is it exciting. Since their arrival, these chicks are fuzzy, eating like crazy, and constantly chirping. All good signs of healthy, happy birds.

Here is what has happened in the chicks' lives so far:

After 21 days of incubation, the chicks hatched and we picked them up as only one day old chicks (a great display of embryonic development here). I got a straight run, which means they are not sexed, instead it's a random mix of males (cockerels) and females (pullets). The Ohio Brooder my dad and I built has pine shavings on the ground and lets them stay warm inside the box (90 degrees at day 1) but an area outside of it lets them escape if they are too warm. They are eating starter chick feed (non-GMO) and grit. According to Joel Salatin (whose book *Pastured Poultry Profits* is my bible right now), mixing grit right away with their feed aids the gizzards. A chicken's gizzard is an organ connected to the 'true stomach' that essentially chews the food for the bird as it does not have teeth to chew food the way other mammals do.

Over the next week the birds will be shedding their downy feathers and grow real feathers. I will keep decreasing the temperature in their brooder as they tolerate.

Once again, feel free to stop by and see these little ones...they only stay cute for a bit :)

## **Week 2 - Friday, September 6th 2019**

Hello!

Another week in the books for our little flock. There have been some ups and downs. Three chicks did not make it, however this was to be expected so I had bought more than I predicted to make it. I've heard to expect anywhere from 3%-10% loss during the beginning due to underlying genetic issues, having caught something in the hatchery, or just due to how young and fragile they are to start out. On the upside, the rest are growing strong. Check out the new white feathers they are sporting!

Before we continue along in this adventure, my mom would want us all to take a look at the history of chickens. Chickens used for meat were initially just young male chickens that farmers wanted to get rid of due to their aggressive behavior. Broilers (any chicken that is bred for meat production) were introduced with the attempt of a crossbreed in the 1930s that then became dominant in the 1960s. The crossbreed was produced from a male of a naturally double-breasted Cornish strain, and a female of a tall, large-boned strain of white Plymouth Rocks. This cross is where the breed's name "Cornish Cross" comes from. The original crossbreed was plagued by problems of low fertility, slow growth and disease susceptibility. But as more and more work was done to select for certain traits, broilers grew in size and quality to produce what we have now. While Cornish Crosses constitute the majority of broilers, other breeds are used to produce eggs. Because Cornish Crosses are bred to put energy into their weight, they would not produce good eggs, if any. If you have 5 minutes this TED video is an interesting retelling of chicken history.

While Cornish Cross broilers have not been genetically modified, nature has been tampered with significantly and there are always consequences for manipulating God's creation to "better suit" our desires. If allowed to live past their full weight at 8 weeks, their bodies would quickly be

unable to support themselves. Its legs would break and other organs would not be able to sustain it for long.

So there was your crash course on chicken history. Tune in next week to see how their big move out to pasture goes!

### **Week 3 - Sunday, September 15th 2019**

Evening y'all!

Last week came and went without an chicken update but here it is now. The chicks have successfully made the move to their paradisaical pasture at Verdant View Farm. But not without a struggle. Several days before the move, two birds were barely able to walk and one other my dad found dead while I was at work. What I've read and heard is that mineral deficiencies can result in paralysis and a host of other problems. I was not proactively supplying them with minerals which was a mistake on my part but I've since added minerals (manganese, calcium, cobalt, zinc, etc. ) and vitamins (vitamin B, D, E, etc.) to their diet. The two birds are still struggling to walk but they have been getting minerals and on pasture now...we'll see they can improve.

Scouring Giant isles at midnight to buy beef liver (it's packed with nutrients) and getting up throughout the night to hand-feed it to the chicks in an attempt to heal their paralysis had me asking myself "Is this really worth it?". My mind went back to reading a little side-by-side comparison from Salatin's Pastured Poultry Profits summarizing the prominent differences between pastured chickens and conventional chickens. Each point has more information behind it but the values upheld by this alternative method are significant and to me, convincing enough to lose sleep over.

#### Pastured Poultry

- Full beak (no cannibalism)
- Composting litter in brooder (sanitized through decomposition)
- No hormones or appetite stimulants
- Clean air and sunshine
- Fresh daily salad bar
- No injections when processed
- Carefully hand eviscerated
- Decentralized food system
- Manure adds nitrogen to pastures which enhances forage available for grazing beef cattle at Verdant View Farm

#### Conventional

- De-beaked (cannibalism)

- Sterilized litter (sanitized through toxic fumigants and sprays)
- Routine hormone and appetite stimulant administration
- Air hazy with fecal particulate
- No green material or bugs
- Mechanically eviscerated (prone to spilling feces over carcass)
- Routine injections (tenderizers or dyes typically)
- Centralized food system
- Tyson does not help Verdant View beef cattle at all

The list goes on....but you get the point.

But fresh air isn't just for the chicks so if you would like to, come out to see these chicks! Just text, call, email me and I'd be happy to spend time with you.

#### **Week 4 - Saturday, September 21st 2019**

Hey y'all!

These birds look good on grass. Each morning their little white bodies are moving around in the sunrise intently pecking at the ground.

The two who were struggling to walk did not improve on grass and so I put them to peace. I will spare you the details of that here but it was a learning experience.

The next couple weeks we'll look at several points from last week's comparison list in more details. Soil, chickens, cattle, and consumers all reap benefits from the pastured way. This week, soil is our focus. As a rule of thumb, chickens can help soil if managed properly, but how? German scientist Justus Von Liebig is credited for the theory that nitrogen, phosphorous, and potassium levels are the basis for determining healthy plant growth. Industrial engines took this finding to mechanize soil health by simply dumping these three ingredients, known by their periodic table symbols N-P-K, onto crops. But Sir Albert Howard argued that "Artificial manures lead inevitably to artificial nutrition, artificial food, artificial animals and finally to artificial men and women." Howard and many others push for the farm to imitate nature. In nature, chickens (omnivores) follow cattle/goats/sheep (herbivores). After cattle have sheared clumps of grass, several events occur. "To offset the loss of leaves, plants will discard root mass. Then the soil's population of bacteria, fungi, and earthworms will get to work breaking down the root into rich brown humus...The root runs then become channels that worms, air, and rainwater move through the earth building new topsoil." Pollan, Michael. Now chickens enter the dance. Their manure is high in nitrogen which powers this regeneration of grass. The birds pick out insect larvae and parasites out of the herbivores droppings which breaks the disease cycle, keeping the soil healthy for the next time the cattle visit it. The taller grasses having been trimmed by the cattle, reveal shorter grasses for the birds to eat in addition to bugs. Biomass and quality of soil increase as these moving parts layer on top of each other.

Reading about soil has been thrilling for me but I still have lots to learn so I appreciate any feedback, additional resources, or critics about what I'm writing!

### **Week 5 - Sunday, September 29th 2019**

Evening y'all,

This heat has let the chicks bulk up before the cool fall days set in and I've found my first business partner. Yesterday, a little girl on a farm tour at Verdant View asked to see the chicks closer up. So after warning her they might not be as cute as she was expecting, I took her over and she LOVED them. In her yellow dress she stated she'd like some of her own soon.

So what is in it for these chicks anyways? We've seen how they benefit the soil but how's the grass treating their tummies? Forage is primarily beneficial to poultry because of its vitamin, mineral, fiber and protein content. As with humans and all other animals, consuming nutrients in the most natural state possible results in more complete absorption than when they are ingested synthetically. You can't bottle up nature and expect to have the same great content. Vitamins are organic compounds that can lose their potency over time once extracted from the source. Chicks harvesting their own vitamins receive all its potency. Minerals (major: calcium, phosphorus, magnesium, sodium, etc. and trace: copper, cobalt, manganese, zinc, etc.) are inorganic compounds that are also supplied by forage also. Digestible fiber feeds gut bacteria which stimulate gut health and competes against pathogenic bacteria. Indigestible fiber bulks up the food and helping the gut "grip" the feed. For protein, the omnivorous chicken utilizes animal proteins, typically insects, which they can find in the soil or nestled in cow pies :)

My goal is to eat as well as my chickens are. Lofty I know.

### **Week 6 - Monday, October 7th 2019**

Hey y'all!

A couple exciting things happened this week: I witnessed a chicken catch a grasshopper, one chicken with a cut I had separated to heal has been reintroduced to the flock and is holding his own now, and they have handled the rain well!

Now we are on to how the cattle benefit from having the chickens as neighbors. The cattle at VVF are entirely pastured-raised, grass-fed. "Grass-fed" refers to what an animal eats (grass); "pasture-raised" refers to where it eats (on a pasture). Shameless plug, if you haven't had the beef we raise, it's top notch in all aspects so ask me for more info if you're inclined. Animals such as chickens and pigs cannot be 100% grass-fed since they do not get all their nutrition solely from grass but herbivores like cattle, sheep, and goats can be completely grass-fed. The cattle are

moved to new paddocks of pasture every couple days to allow the grasses to grow back. Chickens are the "sanitation crew" (Salatin, Joel) to the cows. Ideally they are put in the paddock 3-4 days after the cows left it. At that point cow pies have larva from parasitic flies that are so bothersome to cows. The chickens gobble those down as well as seeds from what the cow just ate. This helps reduce the spread of weed seeds. Ultimately, the grass grows better due to all the nitrogen from the chickens which benefits the cattle the next time they come through that paddock. With about 25 acres of pasture for the cattle at VVF my chickens certainly are not covering much of it. I've estimated they'll cover 2,688 square feet in the six weeks they'll be on grass which is more than nothing so the cattle will be grateful for the little improvement in their smorgasbord.

That's all from me....have a happy Monday!

### **Week 7 - Wednesday, October 16th 2019**

Evening y'all!

The flock is enjoying peaceful nights and pleasant days. No fox has dared venture near the coop thus far. Two have a leg that is wonky...most likely they broke under their weight gain which is typical. But alas, only seven more days for these chickens out on pasture.

Oddly enough, this mail is about the nutritional value of a pastured chicken for the consumer (you and I in this case). The nutritional value of meat is a hot topic these days and by no means will this address all aspects. But let's start off with fats. Very briefly, there are bad, in-between, and good fats. Bad fats are artificial trans fats (fats that have been altered by shoving a hydrogen atom into a bent chain of molecules to make it straight and therefore behave differently). In between fats are saturated fats (SFAs) and its recommended to not have too many in your daily life. The good fats are divided into monounsaturated fatty acids (MUFAs) and polyunsaturated fatty acids (PUFAs). PUFAs contain Omega 3 and Omega 6 fatty acids. The ratio of these Omega fatty acids is what counts. You want more of Omega 3 than Omega 6. Pastured poultry tends to be higher in Omega 3. Besides containing better fats, pastured poultry has higher levels of vitamin A and D, and iron.

I'd like to update the old saying to state "you are what what the food you are eating, ate". The chickens diet plays a huge role in how the meat develops and the intake of fibrous materials and natural proteins are some of the reasons their meat develops better.

Once again, to those who are getting a chicken let me know if I can drop it off at your house on October 22nd!

### **Final Bird Mail - Tuesday, November 5th 2019**

Dear friends and family,

With deep gratitude I send out this final bird mail. Exactly two weeks ago 20 birds were processed by a great team of family and friends. The average weight was 7.1 lbs, with the heavy weight champion being a 9 lb bird! I apologize if the larger size made cooking with them more difficult...I too was shocked by their size.

I'll share of how I've been reflecting on the chicken adventure and would love to hear of your own reflections as well. My primary thoughts during the processing day were along the lines of "I can't believe this kind of worked". But more deeply, like many, my prideful heart does not like asking for help or relying on others. Without a doubt, the Lord used this whole journey to chip away at that pride by revealing the beauties of community. Whether you've given me advice, lent a hand, asked me about the chickens, or simply laughed at my terrible chicken puns, you all have shown me how much better it is to draw close to one another. Killing the chickens that I tended to day and night for 8 weeks hurt a bit. But the miracle of life and death is that it's a cycle in which life can be found in death. It brought life as relationships grew. It brought life to my days as I spent some beautiful mornings in the pasture with them. It brought life to see many of you while delivering the birds. All of this was made possible by the lives of the chickens and by the support of this community. I am beyond grateful for both.

As my family ate the 9 lb chicken together, Wendell Berry's words about eating were very present in my mind. "The pleasure of eating should be an extensive pleasure, not that of the mere gourmet. The thought of the good pasture and of the (chicken) contentedly grazing flavors the (meat). Some, I know, will think of it as bloodthirsty or worse to eat a fellow creature you have known all its life. On the contrary, I think it means that you eat with understanding and with gratitude. A significant part of the pleasure of eating is in one's accurate consciousness of the lives and the world from which food comes...Eating with the fullest pleasure — pleasure, that is, that does not depend on ignorance — is perhaps the profoundest enactment of our connection with the world. In this pleasure we experience and celebrate our dependence and our gratitude, for we are living from mystery, from creatures we did not make and powers we cannot comprehend." He is able to express more eloquently than I how it was pleasurable to eat what I had killed. .

To all who asked if I will do this again, we will see. It is too cold to do another batch this year and I am unsure of my plans for next year. But if I do the chickens again, you can be sure I will share that with you all again.