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Green Issue

So You Want To Go Local

Pasture Poultry In Georgia

Local Bounty At Lake Rabun Hotel & Restaurant



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Growing the Supply of Pasture Poultry in Georgia

By Michael Wall

The trend of consumer demand for local, sustainably produced food continues to grow in spite of a downturned economy.

"Locally sourced meats" was identified as the No. 1 2012 trend among chefs nationwide, according to the National Restaurant Association.

Consumers and restaurateurs are increasingly looking to connect with the farmers growing their food and to identify authentic food sources that have a face and name beyond a glossy label on the grocery store shelf.

As evidence continues to surface from the medical community and public health advocates linking pesticides, chemicals and antibiotics used to grow food with cancer, consumers are looking to minimize their exposure to harmful environmental toxins.

As a result, the United States has seen direct market-to-consumer sales of food and attention to sustainable and organic food sources increase significantly in recent years.

Growing Demand in Georgia

Since 2005, Georgia has seen a 600 percent increase in farmers markets. Organic food sales have grown at a similar clip, with an average annual growth rate of 19 percent from 1997 to 2008, while the rest of the food industry has stagnated and even shrunk.

Conscientious consumers are looking for poultry raised with the same value-based practices as vegetables and other meat, and restaurateurs, who continue to play a critical role in supporting the locally grown and organic food movement, are also seeking sources for a higher-quality chicken product.

Most importantly, farmers are entering this market, integrating poultry production into diverse farm operations, which can enhance the environmental and economic sustainability of their overall operations.

Some of the restaurants where you can currently buy pastured chicken include Bella Cucina, Cakes & Ale, Empire State South, Farm Burger, Farm 255, Five & Ten, Heirloom Café, Miller Union, The National and Yeah! Burger.

Many distributors carry it as well, including Buckhead Beef, Halpern's, Heritage Farm, Destiny Organics, Prime Meats, SYSCO and Darby Farms.

Moreover, a new group called Georgians for Pastured Poultry – made up of Georgia-based farmers, chefs, animal welfare advocates, environmentalists and health professionals – envision a Georgia that has become the leading state in the production and consumption of pasture-raised poultry, where animal



Michael Wall, Communications Director for Georgia Organics

welfare, human and environmental health, and farmer and worker well-being are as important as economics in the farming of chickens.

Whole Foods Market (WFM) recently became the first grocery retailer in the state to commit to stocking Georgia-raised pastured poultry. It has firmly stated that the higher-welfare poultry will be available on a daily basis, year round.

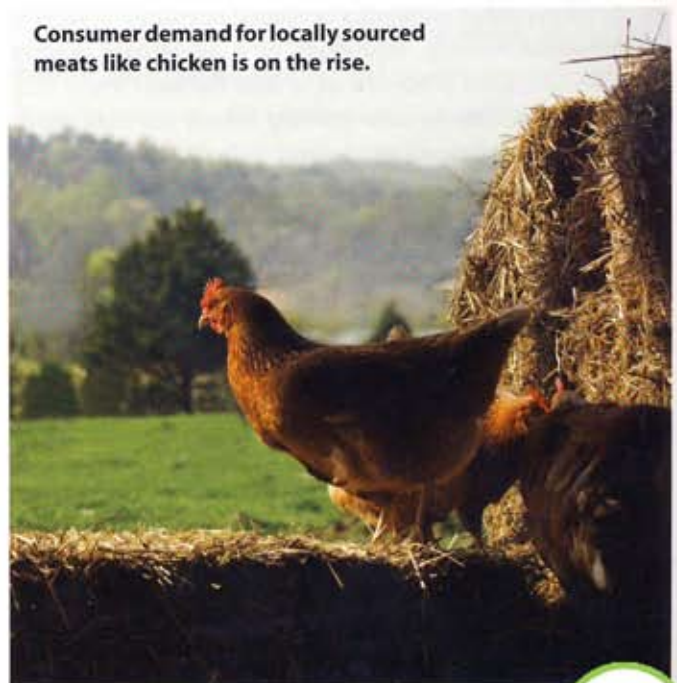
WFM has committed to purchasing at least 22,000 pastured raised birds (both chickens and turkey) in 2012 and making these available on a daily basis, supply permitting, in all of their southeastern stores.

"Whole Foods Market is deeply committed to supporting Georgia farmers who raise pastured poultry and making pastured chicken and turkey available to our customers. We are proud to support Georgians for Pastured Poultry's efforts by making this pledge," says Stephen Corradini, regional vice president of purchasing for WFM's south region.

The Benefits of Sustainable, Pasture-Based Poultry

Sustainable poultry production means reducing costs and maximizing productivity but also attention to myriad other issues. Large-scale production has led to geographical concentration of birds and their waste products, creating environmental concerns in water and air quality. Consumers

Consumer demand for locally sourced meats like chicken is on the rise.





Neal McCarthy, co-owner, left, and Steven Satterfield, executive chef of Miller Union in Atlanta

have increasing concerns about food safety including food borne pathogens, pesticide residues, additives and antibiotic residues. In addition, nutritional value and production process concerns such as animal welfare, genetically modified organisms, environmental impact, worker safety and social justice are raising eyebrows.

Consumption of chicken meat by Americans has risen by 118 percent between 1970 and 2005, faster than pork or beef. Furthermore, the amount of chicken eaten by Americans now rivals that of beef. In particular, chicken has become much more economical over time. Poultry meat has a low retail cost at the grocery store in part because of the production efficiencies of factory farms.

Pasture-based poultry production provides a stark alternative to the chicken houses that cover Georgia's rural landscape. The houses, which, according to a University of Georgia study, can contain more than 30,000 birds at capacity (in a 50' x 500' house), offer little or no access to the outdoors.

In contrast, pastured birds are raised with an all-natural diet, are not administered antibiotics or altered physically to survive the unnatural housing conditions of a traditional poultry house, and are often processed on or near the farm where they are raised. Medium- to slow-growing breeds are used. Birds are raised up to 12 weeks of age, and their slaughter (dressed) weight is 3-4 pounds. In addition, farmers are free to raise and sell their birds independently, without the need for contracts with large poultry operations.

There are numerous farmers in every part of Georgia raising pastured poultry. According to Georgia Organics' database, there are more than 50 pasture poultry farmers of varying size and capacity in the state. Many drive to out-of-state processing facilities that are USDA-inspected to process their birds and return to Georgia to sell. Some process on-farm, even though a confusing regulatory framework arguably prohibits this activity. Recently, Will Harris, a South Georgia farmer and leader in the sustainable farming movement, opened the first USDA-inspected on-farm poultry processing facility in the state of Georgia.

"Chickens were born to scratch and peck. These are natural instinctive animal behaviors," says Harris, White Oak Pastures

owner and founding member of Georgians for Pastured Poultry. "Unfortunately, industrial commodity livestock production removes costs from meat production systems by raising animals in mono-cultural confinement systems that do not allow these instinctive behaviors."

The poultry raised at White Oak Pastures live on USDA Certified Organic pastureland and have constant and total access to the outdoors. They are chemical-free, meaning they are not given growth hormones or synthetic antibiotics.

In addition, grass-based production systems are less reliant on external sources of feed, which can destabilize conventional production systems because of drastic feed price fluctuations.

Because of his effort to create a model of sustainable agriculture, Harris and White Oak Pastures have garnered many certifications and accolades, including the 2011 Georgia Restaurant Association Innovator Award, 2011 Winner of Georgia Small Business Person of the Year, 2011 Recipient of Governor's Environmental Stewardship Award, 2008 Winner of 'Flavor of Georgia' food contest, and 2008 Recipient of University of Georgia Award of Excellence.

As the largest private employer in Early County, Ga., the White Oak Pastures business model shows that pastured production methods can be commercially successful alternatives to industrial feedlots.

Advancing Poultry Policy

For four years, Georgia Organics has been working with growers, policy makers, researchers and business consultants to expand opportunities for producers to raise pastured poultry. The organization remains committed to working with key leaders and agencies to advance pastured poultry policies and solutions.

Current on-farm processing policies are obstacles for family farms, and this hurts the entire state's economy. Restaurants have been some of our strongest allies in bringing more choice to the marketplace to date.

Most other states offer a safe, economically viable option for on-farm processing, and Georgia Organics restaurant members are consistently asking for tips on acquiring pastured poultry from local farms.

Our research has shown that pastured poultry can create jobs and strengthen and rebuild rural communities and economies, uniting, if you will, the two Georgias: rural and urban Georgia.

We're currently advocating for changes in policy to free up the market. We'd need a federal exemption status or new policies from the Georgia Department of Agriculture to provide small farms a safe, economically viable option for on-farm processing.

Perhaps the establishment of a fixed and/or mobile processing facility would fulfill the need. Georgia Organics is currently working on a feasibility study to determine which would be more ideal. ■

The mission of Georgia Organics is to connect organic food from Georgia farms to Georgia families. To learn more, visit www.georgiaorganics.org or call (678) 702-0400.

