



Local Chicks

Farm-to-table for healthy meat

By Ephraim Payne

Photos By Trask Bedortha

Clad in a worn tan Carhartt jacket and rubber boots as insurance against the rain threatened by a slate-gray, wind-wiped spring afternoon, Derek Brandow is in his element — multiple elements, really. Today, the former elementary school teacher's classroom is a field of knee-high grass, his young student a potential customer for the community-supported agriculture (CSA) subscriptions that Our Family Farm, his poultry operation, is selling. After raising backyard laying hens for two years and learning about the horrors of factory-scale poultry farms, that customer-to-be, a precocious preteen girl, is determined not to eat chicken unless she can inspect the farm herself and see that the flock is raised under humane conditions and allowed to express their avian nature, their very chicken-ness.

That makes her the perfect customer for Brandow, a part-time poultry grower and local standard-bearer for the farm-to-table movement. A bearded, genial bear of a man, with an ever-present grin crinkling his hazel eyes, Brandow squats beside the slim, bleached blond pre-teen next to a mobile pen, getting on her level and addressing her questions and concerns directly and seriously. He shows no hint of the abruptness or condescension that could be expected of a busy farmer pestered by the questions of a child prying into his world. He explains how he pasture-raises his birds, moving their protective pens about the field daily so that they have fresh grass to crop and bugs to scratch for and how he supplements their diet with locally processed chicken feeds. He gently catches a white-feathered, red-wattled pullet from the flock, bunched close together for warmth and companionship on this blustery day, in order to give the young lady he is clearly charming an up-close introduction.

Later, he'll blog triumphantly about winning her "seal of approval." That's how Brandow likes to work, building his customer base and growing the farm-to-table movement through face-to-face interactions, by sharing stories and by building a community of like-minded people dedicated to good food, responsible animal husbandry and stewardship of the land. The farm-to-table movement (or field-to-plate as it is alternatively called) is one face of the slow food movement: the push for sustainable agriculture, regional and seasonal-based diets and support for smaller farmers in the face of an increasingly mechanized, globalized, corporatized, chemically dependant agricultural system. A handful of dominant corporations control more than 80 percent of the beef industry; more than 60 percent of pork production and over half of the poultry are grown nationally, squeezing small to mid-sized farmers out of local markets. To counter this trend, advocates of the farm-to-table movement strive to produce two things: food grown in the healthiest, most sustainable way possible and a customer base aware of the linkage between farmers, farm communities, time-honored food production practices and the way our food affects our health and our culture. A key part of countering the trend is coming to the Willamette Valley: mobile slaughter.

Portrait of a modern farmer

In his mud-caked rubber boots, jeans and camouflage baseball cap, Brandow, 38, certainly looks like a born farmer. The full-time manager of a local outlet for telephone giant AT&T, he spends much more of his time in an immaculately pressed suite and tie. Brandow follows a state trend: While the average farmer is in his mid-sixties and on the verge of retirement, those newly joining the profession tend to be in their middle years with outside jobs.

A native of Portland, Brandow received an undergraduate degree from the University of Oregon, where he planted a huge garden in the off-campus house he shared with friends, growing "so many tomatoes I didn't know what to do with them," he says. After earning a master's in education from Pacific University, Brandow taught first grade in Springfield before spending two years in New York City, where he taught fourth graders in Harlem and business courses for the fashion house Estée Lauder.

Returning to the Willamette Valley, Brandow read environmental journalist and food activist-cum-philosopher Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, a polemic on America's abysmal dietary habits. Inspired by Pollan's quest to discover a balanced, sustainable, place-based dietary ethic, Brandow began to immerse himself in the literature of sustainable agriculture. From Pollan, Brandow learned of Joel Salatin, the Virginia-based farmer/iconoclast well known in farm-to-table circles for his strident defense of small, pasture-based meat production.

According to Salatin's theories, sustainable farming starts with caring for the soil, which Salatin accomplishes by mimicking nature. Wild birds flock behind grazing herds to pick through manure, feasting on nutrient-rich grubs and insects while spreading the natural fertilizer that grows the grass so high. Instead of raising fryers in massive warehouses and sending young steers to be force-fed in confined feeding operations, Salatin and his followers practice a careful rotation on their pastures, moving cattle, sheep or other grazers from plot to plot, with their chickens bringing up the rear in mobile pens to massage the waiting manure into the soil beneath their scratching feet.