



with the ODA, the three took their time to design a compact, highly functional MPPU. “It’s taken about a year and a half to go from the thought process to a rig driving down the road,” Schack says.

“They didn’t chintz on things,” Postlewait says, adding that while various people have discussed constructing a MPPU for about a decade, the Willamette Valley partners are first to build one. “They’ve got a lot of money in it; they’ve spent a lot of time.”

After gaining experience in running the MPPU and determining operational and transportation costs, the three partners plan to make the unit available to other small farmers. Postlewait says the plan may benefit small producers because it would be more economical to rent the MPPU than build an expensive facility to process a few hundred to a few thousand birds a year, while using the licensed mobile unit would allow farmers currently limited to on-premise sales by the 1,000-bird exemption to sell at farmers markets.

But success is not assured. Gwin points out that in addition to arranging logistical issues such as scheduling and crews to run the unit, the partners will have to calculate a rental fee that will recoup their investment while remaining low enough to attract poultry farmers working with slim profit margins. She says that it is common for the perceived demand for processing plants to be higher than the actual demand once a unit is built. “They have the potential to support farmers, but the farmers have to support them,” Gwin says.

Outreach

In the growing darkness of a late summer afternoon, Brandow is busily feeding chicks and remodeling the new brooding pens in an old barn on a grassy 38-acre plot on the outskirts of Thurston. Brandow’s Our Family Farm has just taken up residence here alongside Jeremy Sherer’s fledgling Havarah Farm. Before buying this property, Sherer’s sum total experience with farming was sharing a single-acre garden and orchard in town. He talks excitedly about his plan to graze cattle and other livestock on lush grass watered by a meandering tributary of the McKenzie River, taking full advantage of Brandow’s experience with pasturing animals in the Salatin model. “We believe in a lot of the same things about farming and our food,” Sherer says, adding that “havarah” is Hebrew for fellowship. “Not just making food, but inviting community participation.”

Helping novice farmers get their hands dirty is just another side of Brandow’s commitment to the farm-to-table movement. In addition to building Our Family Farm’s customer base through his CSA program, Brandow provides the kind of help and mentorship he once received to other small-scale farmers. Trace Thaxton, who works at PeaceHealth, was pasturing horses on 80 acres in Marcola with his partner, Marie Connolly, when they met Brandow, who convinced them that the property was perfect for raising chickens. “He recruited us,” says Thaxton, who comes from a family farming background. “He turned us on

to Joel Salatin. Pretty much the whole operation is a carbon copy of what Salatin is doing.”

After reading Salatin’s books, Thaxton learned firsthand about the infrastructure and processes necessary to raise food sustainably from Brandow, who provided Thaxton’s new Whiskey Creek Farm with its first batch of chicks. Right now the operation is a hobby farm, Thaxton says. “If we get profitable we’ll take it more seriously. Right now we’re trying to make good-quality food we want to eat,” he says. “I don’t think we’d be doing what we’re doing if Derek hadn’t convinced us that this facility would make it easier.”

“He’s got the gift of gab and really believes in his product,” says Eugene Country Club Executive Chef Lee Jennings, who now tends his own small flock of pastured hens for personal consumption. “He inspired me to raise them myself. I don’t think I will buy another store-bought bird if I can help it.”

Though Brandow’s product commands a premium compared to factory farm fryers, Jennings raves about the Our Family Farm chickens he reserves for special menus and lunch and dinner specials. The grass-based diet of the pampered birds, Jennings says, gives them an exceptional texture and flavor. “It’s one of those things you got to taste for yourself,” he says.

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For more on Our Family Farm, its CSA and its chickens go to ourfamilyfarm.wordpress.com and you can follow Derek Brandow on Twitter at twitter.com/rfamilyfarm

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