

Meat producers feed demand for home deliveries

Buying clubs hungry for convenience and pasture-raised product

By PATTY MAMULA

For the Capital Press

Thursday, July 02, 2009

Although the days of buying meat at the butcher shop are long gone, today's selective shoppers can purchase meat directly from the farmer and pick it up at their neighbor's house.

Two young Northwest farmers sell pasture-raised meat through local buying clubs similar to those developed by Joel Salatin, the well-known sustainability guru of Polyface Farm in Virginia. Salatin coined the name Metropolitan Buying Club to describe his marketing concept of bringing product to consumers in urban area.

Tyler Jones started Afton Field Farm in Corvallis, Ore., about six years ago, after a one-year internship with Salatin. Since then he and his wife, Alicia, with assistance from their families, have slowly built their farm business of raising and selling pasture-based chicken, meat, eggs and honey.

Last November they added 106 acres of pasture to their operation. The cattle, sheep and lambs are 100 percent grass-fed. Thanksgiving turkeys and broiler chickens receive supplemental grain. Pigs are raised in a four-acre wooded area that provides at least half of their diet.

"We're considered a mid-range business with sales of \$100,000 or so a year," Tyler Jones said. "We're small in comparison to most farms today. There aren't that many of us raising and selling livestock this way, but we think it's the direction we have to go to be sustainable."

In addition to the buying club, Jones also sells at the Corvallis farmers' market and to select restaurants, as well as directly from his farm.

"We have two clubs set up in Portland, and we're trying to set up a few more in the southeast area and Tualatin," he said. "We can probably supply five or six this year. If we can't keep them supplied, it will be a good problem."

A buying club is a group of people interested in buying locally raised meat. One member of the group volunteers his or her house as a drop site. Jones takes individual orders, but delivers the group order once a month. Although there is no membership fee required, in order to establish a site the group needs to order

around \$1,000 a month.

"We have some good customers who come out to the farm. We tell them how to get a club started, if they are interested," said Jones. He has also contacted local members of the Slow Food movement and the Westin A. Price Foundation to see if they're interested. For now, the delivery area is within 100 miles of their farm.

"This simple concept allows the farmer to be paid on delivery," he said.

The next project will be a website that allows customer to pre-order and pre-pay, based on a real-time shopping cart that tallies inventory as it's sold.

Teaming up with CSA

About the same time Jones started his operation, Todd Waltermire started a vegetable farm on 16 acres in Shelton, Wash. After struggling financially for several years, he changed to a locally grown, pasture-raised meat operation.

"I ran the numbers, and it was so lucrative, we couldn't afford not to," he said.

Waltermire raises chickens, pork, beef and turkeys on leased acreage. He is in the process of setting up buying clubs in conjunction with a large 600-member CSA called Helsing Junction Farm.

"The beauty of hooking up with an established CSA is that people who host the sites are already accustomed to having people come on their property to pick up food within a six-to-nine-hour time frame," he said.

He will provide a chest freezer for each site. "Before we got the refrigerated truck, I bought up all the chest freezers I could get my hands on. So we have about 15 of the 6-foot-by-3-foot-deep freezers."

Waltermire said, "We'll shoot for each buying club to have \$12,000 in gross sales over the year. That translates to 15 people buying four chickens a month at an average cost of \$20 apiece." He figures that the extra labor needed to operate a buying club is minimal - 10 drop sites require 24 days of labor per year - making it financially irresistible.

His sales at the Olympia market, which operates every week Thursday through Sunday, have been high this season. "They moved us to one of the most prominent spots," he said.

At the market Waltermire has an attractive refrigerated deli display case for fresh meat and frozen chickens. He also rotisseries chickens on-site at the market's commercial kitchen and sells 50 to 60 a week at his booth.

"We're projecting that we will sell six pigs a month at the market. In April, one pig was not enough for one week's demand," he said, noting the buying clubs would require more.

Demand continues to grow, and he recently signed contracts to raise an additional 3,000 broiler chickens for two other farms. "There's very little competition as far as local, pasture-raised meat goes," he said.

Waltermire emphasized the term locally pastured because it's a strong marketing tool. He is not interested in organic certification because he believes in relationship, not label, marketing. "Why do I need a government label when people can reassure themselves by coming out to our farm?" he said.

Furthermore, he said, organic only guarantees that the product was produced without non-approved pesticides. "I don't think that's a great pat on the back," he said. "Organic is not a ceiling, it's a beginning."

The popularity of the Polyface model is reflected in that fact that Waltermire receives calls from people offering their property to lease. For Jones, the popularity is reflected in the e-mails he receives every week from individuals who want to come and work on his farm.