



Red Star hens forage on winter pasture (above). Fickle Creek Farm has chosen this breed because of its continuous and high level of laying. A Delaware rooster forages on winter pasture (left) as Delaware and Ameraucana hens forage behind him.

Hens on Pasture

Creating
a Holistic,
Community-
Based Farm

by
**Rocky
Womack**

Giving up a university job for one that pays much less to raise farm animals grazing on free-range pastures might sound to the average American like the actions of a person who has lost his mind. Farm owners Ben Bergmann and Noah Ranells of Efland, North Carolina, don't see it that way. They have an environmental and socioeconomic long-term plan.

"Both Noah and I believe really strongly in leaving a minimal footprint behind," Bergmann says. "We want to live sustainably ourselves, but also produce products in a sustainable way for our local community."

For Ranells, producing eggs from hens on pasture was a unique marketing niche and a way to remember his past. "As a kid, my four older sisters all had their 4-H calves, and when I said that I wanted something to show we went out and got my first chickens," he says.

Before they ventured into farming, Ranells served as an Extension associate in the Crop Science Department at North Carolina State University (NCSU) in Raleigh, and Bergmann was a NCSU associate professor of forestry. He also worked at Duke University.

THE BIG STEP

As graduate students, Bergmann and Ranells purchased 61 acres of land in Orange County, North Carolina. In 1999, the two men decided they wanted to “do,” not just teach, so they built and moved into a passive solar home on their land near Efland. The next year, they purchased their first chickens and began raising them in open pastures. By the following year, they had started selling eggs.

“We feel that we have been somewhat successful given that after only six years, Fickle Creek Farm is known in our community as a farm that is trying to do things right,” Ranells says.

Bergmann says he is convinced they are farming the right way in terms of treating the farm animals humanely, in terms of doing what is right for the environment, and in terms of providing healthy food for his community. For him, this life is highly rewarding, perhaps more so than a prestigious university job.

The two men didn’t give up their day jobs in the beginning. They worked at nearby universities full time for about the first 3.5 years. Later, Bergmann accepted a job closer to Efland and started working part time and farming part time. Eventually, he went to full-time farming.

Since then, Bergmann has taught classes at NCSU, Central Carolina Community College in Sanford, North Carolina, and continuing education classes at local universities, and he has conducted workshops for the North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service.

He recently finished teaching a class called, “Sustainable Livestock Production in a Farmer-to-Farmer Mentoring Program,” offered through North Carolina A&T University in Greensboro and through NCSU.

After working full time, Ranells accepted a part-time position as agriculture economic development coordinator for Orange County in Hillsborough and farms part time.

On the farm, Bergmann does daily chores during the week, and Ranells accepts chore duties on weekends. Also on weekends, both split up and attend nearby Hillsborough Farmers Market and Durham Farmers’ Market.

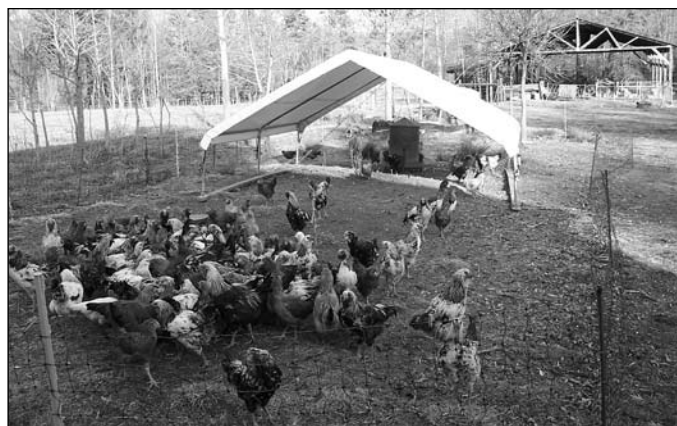
PLAYING A PART

Lots of pictures in the farm puzzle fit together and interact with each other. “For me, what’s important is how the poultry fits into a holistic farm,” Bergmann says.

For instance, when clearing a pasture, all the animals perform a service. Goats will stay on a brushy and woody pasture for four years to eat back the debris. Broiler and layer chickens then roam the pasture searching out and eating insects, weeds and other types of natural foods. In turn, they fertilize the soil.



Ben Bergmann waters the chickens in a timely manner, as they require a constant supply of clean, cool drinking water. During the summers, Fickle Creek Farm uses automatic waterers, but since they freeze in the winter Bergmann and his business partner, Noah Ranells, use long, black troughs that they fill twice daily after they break the ice.



This flock of straight-run Ameraucanas is ready to be moved to a new, grassy area. The cockerels will be harvested as broilers at about 18 weeks, and the pullets will serve as laying hens for approximately 2.5 years.



Bergmann reaches for eggs in the eggmobile. The doors allow for easy access and acts as a shelter from rain when gathering eggs.

Once a pasture receives the goat and chicken treatment, Bergmann and Ranells sow a cover crop such as winter rye and crimson clover. When the cover crops grow tall enough, goats and steers munch on it for the nutrition. Next, Bergmann and Ranells plant a garden on the spot for about two years. By the time the pasture is ready for proper grazing, Bergmann says they have minimal inputs invested in the property. Lime is a necessary soil amendment to ensure good pasture growth.

Fickle Creek Farm, named for an intermittent stream that runs through the property, relies on eggmobile structures for hens to lay and chickens to roost.

Ranells and Bergmann built the structures from their own design, based, in part, on a few examples they found on the Internet and by visiting other farms.

When the chickens are younger, eggmobiles are moved from one pasture to another and throughout each pasture about every two weeks to take advantage of growing grass and fertilizing all parts of the pasture naturally. After about four weeks and as the chickens age and become larger, the men move the eggmobiles every week.

Ranells and Bergmann raise about 800 broilers each year and maintain about 750 laying hens, including Ameraucanas, Delawares, Barred Plymouth Rocks, Red Stars, Buckeyes, Black Australorps and New Hampshires. About 11 roosters accompany the 750 hens. For temperament, consistent laying and beauty, Bergmann prefers the Barred Plymouth Rocks. They raise a variety of breeds so they can hedge their bets for success, much like a vegetable farmer grows different varieties of tomatoes or potatoes to earn a profit off of one or the other.

Bergmann estimates Fickle Creek Farm spends about \$16,000 on chicken feed per year, about \$5,000 on pig feed, and \$700 on dog food for their five Great Pyrenees livestock dogs that guard the chickens. Other feed costs for goats, sheep and steers are minimal, he says, because they are all grass fed.

On the day *Acres U.S.A.* visited Fickle Creek Farm in December, Bergmann collected 333 different color and size eggs from four eggmobiles.

The four eggmobiles are capable of housing from 130 to 300 chickens each. Bergmann says 333 eggs are fine for the time of year — normally, egg gathering produces from 250 to 450 a day, depending on the weather and breed of chicken. Some will lay in hotter weather, and some will lay in cooler weather. Typically, Bergmann spends about 33 hours a week gathering, weighing, packaging, and marketing eggs.

SURPRISES

Certain aspects and rigors of farming have surprised Bergmann. Each night, he is exhausted. “I think people always recognize it’s physical work, but you know, it’s a lot of mental work as well,” he says.

When first thinking of farming, Bergmann envisioned more reading time and the opportunity to exercise his brain in the evenings after the physical work was done, but instead he found the mental part of farming just as challenging as the physical labor.

A successful farming operation requires solving problems, keeping abreast of new information, recordkeeping, making contacts, being creative to the next level of farming and learning new things. “I will be mentally and physically exhausted,” Bergmann says. “In the evening, I’m so dead tired. You have a 14- to 15-hour day. All you want to do is eat and go to bed.”

He continues, “I knew I couldn’t farm while involved in academia. As it turns out, I can’t be too academic while involved in farming. That’s surprised me.”

Not only did he learn a valuable lesson about farming physically and mentally, Bergmann found out he must farm in a timely manner, because the animals demand so much attention at specific times. “You can’t put it off; you can’t just get to it later,” he says of his chores as he rushes to the next eggmobile.

A few months ago, Bergmann and Ranells hired their first intern, John Hanto, to help out part-time on the farm, a move Bergmann wishes he had made sooner to relieve stress and free him up to do paperwork.

Another thing that has surprised Bergmann has been his customers and their determination to head where today’s society may be going. “I’m really

surprised at the loyalty of our customers, the enthusiasm of our customer base for local, responsibly produced meat, eggs, chickens and vegetables — products that are safe,” Bergmann says. “They know about them; they are seeking them out.”

He believes the reasoning behind the surge in responsible food purchasing by the general public is both altruistic and practical, because they know pasture-raised food that is free of antibiotics, hormones and medicated feed is better for them. Bergmann says produce, for instance, doesn’t get any fresher than pulling it off the vine minutes or a half-hour before heading to the farmers market.

Fickle Creek Farm eggs are never more than three days old for the consumer, Bergmann stresses. What they don’t sell at the farm, they market to the restaurants — the Panciuto in Hillsborough, the Lantern in Chapel Hill, and the Refectory at the Duke University Divinity School cafeteria. Their fresh products go to these restaurants early in the week. By mid-week, their products go to the Weaver Street Market grocery store in nearby Carrboro. They sell their products to the farmers markets on Saturdays.

The customers who buy from Bergmann and Ranells know that these two farmers don’t transport their food hundreds or even thousands of miles. They buy and sell locally. “Why ship stuff all over the place, particularly food stuff that is under refrigeration?” Bergmann asks.

He knows some consumers will buy grass-fed lambs from New Zealand but is highly critical of this practice, since grass-fed lambs are raised locally in Efland. “I think it’s not responsible for the world. I think it’s not responsible to local communities,” Bergmann says.

Fickle Creek’s customers are at most 23 miles from the farm, at the Durham Farmers Market. The restaurants and grocery store are even closer.

“When people buy from us, they’re supporting a lot of people in our community, not just us,” Bergmann says.

By buying and selling locally — as did our country’s forefathers — Bergmann notes that more dollars stay in the community. They raise the products so customers can buy them and spend locally. In turn, Bergmann and Ranells

earn a living and spend much of that income locally. While customers may spend some of their dollars with local merchants, Bergmann isn't naïve enough to believe all dollars stay in the community. Sometimes even he must purchase chickens from as far away as 45 miles, process his meat birds in nearby Siler City, or buy his custom feed ration from Southern States, which is 28 miles away in Durham. Some of their feed, however, is mixed just eight miles away at Efland Milling in Efland.

Customers know exactly where their food comes from when Fickle Creek Farm conducts tours, at least once each year in April. They see how the produce is grown and how the animals are raised, fed, and nurtured in a wholesome way. Bergmann and Ranells also offer educational tours from preschoolers to graduate students to senior groups several times a year.

While the awareness of customers has surprised him, Bergmann doesn't believe their knowledge is based on economic class. Not all are wealthy and academically educated, and many lived on a farm growing up and remember how fresh eggs and meats tasted.

"I think it used to be more of an elitist thing," Bergmann says, "but I wouldn't say so anymore."

NUTRIENT MANAGEMENT PROGRAMS

Ranells and Bergmann feed their chickens a custom layer feed. They also give them oyster shells. The chickens receive grit in their young stage of development but are taken off once they mature.

On their pastures, they decided to use some conventional fertilizer. Bergmann says they must lime their pastures to adjust the pH for a balanced nutrient base. Of course, as mentioned before, all the animals play a part in the nutrient management programs. After they eat the feed, they help fertilize the fields.

EXPANSION?

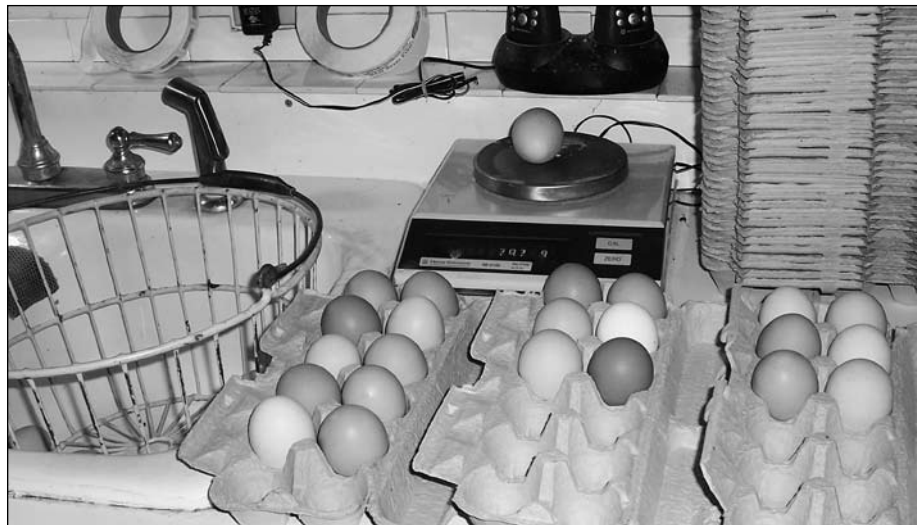
With reluctance, Bergmann says he would consider expanding the farm operation but worries about growing too much, too fast. He doesn't relish the idea of buying a refrigerated truck that

might not be used enough and hiring employees to supervise, which feels like an administrative position.

"To me, one of the beauties of the whole thing is that I know everything that's going on," Bergmann says. "I don't think it's because I'm a control freak. I like knowing. I like doing it, and my days are really variable. Each day is challenging and unique, and if we ended up getting much bigger what I would be

to establish a sustainable pattern, Bergmann stresses. Fickle Creek Farm seems to be doing just that.

Fickle Creek Farm can be contacted at 4122 Buckhorn Road, Efland, North Carolina 27243, phone 919-304-6287, e-mail ficklecreek@mebtel.net, website <http://home.mebtel.net/~ficklecreek>.



Bergmann weighs each egg to determine its size: small, medium, large, extra large, jumbo and extra jumbo. Eggs are sold in cartons to retail customers or wholesale in flats to restaurants as "mixed size" (medium to extra large) and jumbo.

doing is managing people. That's just a whole different job, because the issues of managing people are the same whether it's the farm or anywhere.

"My next thing would be to 'do' for a few years," he says. "Don't try to grow. I don't want to do anything dramatically different at this point but operate the farm — be a farmer. Do it a couple of years and capitalize on all of this investment."

He says the investment costs are about double what he envisioned, partly because of taxes and insurance. At this point in the farm operation, the infrastructure is in place, and Bergmann says they have accomplished that by growing slowly and without going into debt. In 2007, he was confident the self-sustaining farm business would earn a profit above expenses.

The trick to earning above expenses and maintaining success in the future is



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