

farm to table



GROWN HAPPY

Skagit River Ranch's pastured turkeys

BY LAUREL MILLER
PHOTO BY LARA FERRONI

"Turkeys are not as dumb as people think," says George Vojkovich. "They retain the characteristics of a bird, and have the need to develop their natural instincts. Raising any animal penned shoulder to shoulder doesn't permit that."

George's pasture-raised birds respond to his voice, and remember the location of hidey-holes that protect them from the elements and predators. "They do not," says George, "drown by looking up at rain falling from the sky."

While George's mission in life is not to debunk avian myth, he does love his flock of 150 Broad-Breasted Whites, which he raises with his wife, Eiko, and daughter, Nicole, 15, on their 120-acre certified organic Skagit River Ranch in Sedro Woolley.

Popular market vendors in the Puget Sound region, the Vojkovichs are primarily known for their excellent organic, 100% grass-fed beef and pasture-raised pork, chickens, and eggs. Turkeys, however, have been a seasonal staple of the ranch for ten years. As early as March, there is a Thanksgiving waiting list (when turkey production ends). "They taste the way turkey should taste," says George.

Growing up the son of a second generation rancher and fisherman on Catalina Island, off the Southern California coast, George and his family raised and slaughtered their own turkeys and other livestock.

That George got into ranching at all was the result of a heart condition he was diagnosed with in 1998. "As a kid," he laughs, "I didn't want any cow poop on me; I wanted to be a fisherman!" That is what he did for

twenty years in Alaska and South America, during which time he met the Japanese-born-and-raised Eiko, then a sales executive for a commercial fishing company for which George also worked. The couple married, and relocated to Sedro Woolley.

Working on fishing vessels for so many years, George's diet consisted of "anything that had a long shelf life." Frozen and highly processed foods were the mainstays, and once off the boat, he began to notice that additives such as MSG as well as pre-packaged and fast foods were having a disturbing side effect. "I developed auricular fibrillation," he says. "I had an arrhythmia that caused an irregular, rapid heartbeat," a condition his doctor said was caused by chemicals, present either in his food or the environment.

An innate scientist, George realized that when he ate whole, unprocessed, sustainably-grown foods, he felt better, and he has been in good health for ten years. This revelation is what brought him back to his agricultural roots. "We're only as healthy as the soil our food comes from, and the same goes for our livestock," he explains, which is why he and Eiko transitioned to organic farming, achieving certification in 1999.

They purchased the ranch in 1995 (they also farm an additional 580 acres in the region, which provide grazing land, rotational pasture, and hay for their 400 head of cattle) with the goal of producing, says Eiko, "healthy meat, raised humanely, organically, and sustainably." Nicole has also been a large part of why the couple has dedicated their lives to this cause. "We don't sell our customers anything we wouldn't feed our daughter," says George.

The Vojkovichs purchase day-old, mail-ordered poults from a hatchery, and keep them in a brooder, a small, heated enclosure, until they have enough feathers and are big enough to go into the field at approximately eight weeks of age. (Smaller than that, and the young birds can die of exposure or predation from coyotes.) Once turned out into pasture, the birds roam free during the day, and at night return to roost in George's hand-built, 20 x 50-foot aluminum-sided turkey house, which is built on skids so it can be towed with a tractor for rotational grazing.

The birds' diet is a combination of foraged bugs and decaying plant matter, native grasses such as clovers, fescue, and rye, and a supplementation of organic grains like camelina (an ancient Egyptian grain high in Omega-3's) as well as spelt, emmer, and wheat, all milled on the ranch. "Turkeys eat up to 30 percent of their diet in foraged vegetation," says George, "But all birds like compost—the rotting leaves and vegetation often found beneath trees."

Because birds are unable to sweat (a process that helps to expel biological toxins and waste product from their bodies), they forage on carbonous matter, which runs through their gastrointestinal tract, acting, says George, "like one of those Brita carbon water filters."

Turkeys raised under intensive farming conditions are administered prophylactic antibiotics because disease is rampant in such crowded, stressful living conditions. This inability to build up immunity is, George believes, why 2007's avian flu outbreak in the U.K. affected turkeys kept under such conditions.

His philosophy is to skip routine antibiotic use, and instead supplement his bird feed with minerals lacking in the Skagit Valley's sandy soil: selenium and iodine, as well as phosphorous and calcium. The results are robust birds with strong immune systems. "We know that people living

in the Pacific Northwest are often vitamin D deficient," he explains. "But animals also have dietary needs."

George's fascination with soil has led him to take seminars and courses across the country, and he lectures occasionally at the ranch. He and Eiko routinely have soil samples and turkey livers sent to a lab for testing in order to determine if there are any mineral deficiencies, so they can amend their pastures and supplement feed accordingly.

Although they used to raise heritage breed turkeys—the older, non-hybridized breeds that fell by the wayside once industrialized livestock production became the norm—the Vojkovichs have decided to stick with a variety of Broad-Breasted White (also known as a Giant White). Raising a commercial variety may seem contrary to the philosophy of small-scale family farming and humane livestock management, but it was a compromise that was the result of both practicality and customer demand.

Explains George, "Our heritage birds were delicious, but they're mostly dark meat, which isn't as popular with consumers. Our customers generally want what they're used to eating, but they want it grown happy. The Whites have more breast meat, which is white, and they're easier to pluck, so they make more sense for us to raise, slaughter, and process."

All domesticated turkeys are descended from wild turkeys, which are indigenous to the Americas. According to the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy, turkeys began to be hybridized for larger size and breast width in the 1920s, which led to the development of the Broad-Breasted Bronze in the 1950s.

The Whites—today the most popular commercial variety—were developed in the 1960s to meet customer demand for a similar bird with less visible pinfeathers, for a more attractive final product. Unlike heritage breeds, the commercial birds are genetically unable to mate and require artificial insemination for reproduction.

Although hormone use in the poultry industry has been prohibited by federal law for nearly 40 years, commercial birds are routinely fed growth promotants (usually low levels of antibiotics) to help them reach their slaughter weight more quickly. Arsenic is also a common feed additive, used to produce pinker meat and promote growth as well as for parasite control. During processing, birds are often injected with solutions to plump the meat and make it more flavorful. The National Turkey Federation states that hens are processed at 14 weeks of age and

Eiko's Turkey Brine

For one 12-pound turkey, or two whole chickens
Start to finish: 12 hours brining time

Brining helps the meat retain its moisture during the cooking process, resulting in an exceptionally juicy, flavorful bird.

2 gallons cool water

1 cup kosher salt

1/2 cup brown sugar

1 tablespoon black peppercorns

Combine the ingredients in a stockpot large enough to hold entire turkey, and heat gently until salt and sugar are dissolved. Place whole, washed turkey (remove giblets) in brine until completely submerged. Cover and refrigerate for 12 hours. Rinse turkey well with water, and pat dry. Cook according to your favorite method.

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15 pounds, while toms take 18 weeks to reach their 33 pound processing weight.

The Vojkovichs' Whites are vastly different from the average Butterball. Because they receive no growth stimulants, the birds take six months to grow to their slaughter weight of 12 to 20 pounds. While more slow-growing than commercial birds, the resulting meat is "firm yet tender, rich, juicy, and full-flavored," which Eiko attributes to "being raised on pasture, sunshine, and organic grain."

The Vojkovichs slaughter their birds on their property, which has a WSDA-certified organic processing facility. They are vigilant about sanitation, adding their own strict regulations to the state and federal criteria, to keep their facility as hygienic as possible. The processed birds, which retail for \$5.79 a pound, are then sold at their farm store and brought to farmer's markets. This year, says Eiko, the demand has been so great that they have increased the number of birds they are producing.

That said, the couple didn't get into turkey production—or ranching in general—for the money. "Farming is very low in profit," says George. "If you've got a niche, you can survive. I do this because when I go to the farmer's market and someone looks me in the eye and thanks me, I remember that I'm providing a valuable service to these families."

Adds Eiko, "Although we got into this because we wanted to produce healthy food for the family, now we do it because it's the right thing to do for the environment, people's health, and the animal's welfare. I would probably never have done it had I known how hard it is to make a living farming without government assistance. Do we still love it? Yes, we do." *eS*

Skagit River Ranch

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farm store hours: Saturdays 10am – 6pm year-round

Find Skagit River Ranch at Ballard, Bellevue, Mercer Island and University District farmer's markets.

A selection of meats is available regularly at Central Co-op's Madison Market, Manna Mills, Marlene's Market and Deli, Nature's Market, Skagit Valley Co-op and Terra Organica.

Laurel Miller is a food/travel writer and cooking instructor who recently relocated to Seattle. Despite growing up on a ranch, she had a phobia of turkeys until she did this story. She is also contributing editor of *culture* magazine. For more information on Laurel, go to www.sustainablekitchen.com.

