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Jonesborough market hatches flock of healthy eggs

By LISE CUTSHAW
Special to the Press

Tabitha names each chicken and spoils her flock with sour cream sundaes. José is an expert chicken catcher when they “range” a bit too far. At Stoney Slope Farm, Patrick is the Pied Piper of chickens. Diane moved from Pennsylvania to raise chickens like her grandmother did.

They each and all have their different connections with their “girls,” but the Jonesborough Farmers Market has an abundance of farm-fresh, truly freerange eggs, as a result of the varied relationships of these local farmers with their fine, feathered flocks.

This spring and summer, the market has seven regular egg vendors and one new farm that just started selling eggs in August. All these local farmers allow their hens free range of their farms — and none of the farmers go home with any eggs when the market’s town crier closes JFM each Saturday at noon.

“A lot of people are just hooked on our eggs,” says JFM co-manager Heidi Ehle. “Once you eat the eggs we sell here and try to go back to store-bought eggs, you don’t like them. A lot of it is the way the hens are treated and it’s also partly the freshness factor. You’ve got to get here early, though. They sell out every week.”

Reminiscent of Easter, there is a rainbow of colors to delight the eye as well as the palate — chocolate brown, shades of tan and pale green. Not only do these freerange eggs taste fresher and better, but eggs from hens raised on pasture also are more nutritious than eggs from confined hens in factory farms, says Mother Earth News. A Mother Earth study reported that eggs from hens raised on pasture show four to six times as much vitamin D as typical supermarket eggs, one-third less cholesterol, one-fourth less saturated fat, two-thirds more vitamin A, two times more omega-3 fatty acids, three times more vitamin E and seven times more beta carotene.

A dozen nutrition-packed eggs at the JFM can cost from \$3 to \$6, depending on whether the farms from which they come are certified organic. “They are all naturally free-range chickens but not all certified organic,” Ehle says, “so you can kind of pick your price range and how particular you want to be about that.”

HAPPENING ORGANICALLY

Chris Wilson with Clover Creek Farm feeds organically and is animal welfare approved, and JEM Farm eggs are certified organic and free range. Wilson has 50 laying hens sharing her 50-acre farm with about 200 sheep near Jonesborough, while Elizabeth Malayter at JEM has 150 mature birds on her Rogersville land, as well as turkeys, pigs, goats, geese, guineas, ducks and dogs.

A number of the other market vendors feed their chickens all organic materials. Tanya Franklin King of ArkAngel Farms in Jonesborough is one of them, and she is proud of being the Jonesborough market's first egg vendor.

"That was about six years ago, and at the time, all I had was eggs," says King, a Florida horse-farming transplant who now raises heirloom vegetables and lettuces, as well as swans, horses, exotic chickens to produce "hatching eggs," and 60 laying "girls." "I parked my truck and had my little table and I was sold out in 20 minutes. I came with 20 dozen. Since then, there's never a market that I go home with eggs."

King specializes in heritage and rare breeds of chickens, such as Japanese Silkies, Black Copper Marans and Dominiques or "Dominickers" — and she raises her own chicks from her parent stock, allowing them to roam her 22-acre farm and supplementing with USDA layer mash.

Wilson, on the other hand, always had chickens, growing up in nearby Scott County, Va. "When I started farming here, I wanted eggs," Wilson says. "There's just something about chickens I like and they were a natural fit, because I have the sheep and guardian dogs. The dogs will protect the chickens as well as my sheep, so I don't have to worry about locking them up at night or keeping them in a fence to protect them from predators."

Protecting their fowl from coyotes and birds of prey is an issue for the market farmers, because they all give their girls (and roosters) free range of all or part of their land. This freedom enables the chickens to forage on bugs, grasses, grains, berries and completely natural materials, with some supplementing during winter.

THE MISSING INGREDIENT

In contrast, chickens raised in the commercial egg industry may never see the sun and their feet may never touch the ground, the market farmers say.

"The eggs you get in the grocery store, those chickens are kept under lights 24 hours a day," Wilson says. "They never know if it's daylight or dark, whether it's warm or cold. It's all climate controlled ... and those chickens are cross-bred to do nothing but lay eggs ..."

"My eggs are natural eggs. They have a better taste, a better color and are healthier because these chickens are allowed to be natural and are allowed to lay their eggs naturally. They are not in a cage where all they can do is lay an egg and stand up. They eat when they want to. They lay eggs when they want to and they drink when they want to."

The vitamin D from the sun and nutrients from a natural diet make a big difference in the health benefits for egg consumers, says Emily Peters of Stoney Slope Farm. "That's what people are missing from store-bought eggs," Peters says.

Tabitha Dotson of Dotson Farm, who had only eaten store-bought eggs before her introduction to free-range chicken cultivation a couple years ago, was surprised at the difference in taste, as well as nutritional value.

"Industry has gone in and tinkered with the system and turned something that was good for us into something that is not so good for us," Dotson says. "These eggs that my hens lay actually have a taste. I didn't know eggs were supposed to have a taste."

THE HAPPY FACTOR

Just as with humans, a natural diet and active lifestyle can greatly affect the health and happiness of chickens.

Like Wilson, Peters grew up on a farm with cows and chickens, although Peters says Stoney Slope was “more of a hobby farm.” About five years ago, when Peters and agrarian partner Patrick Linkous began reviving her family farm in Gray, a few hens provided food for the farmers themselves. As the flock grew to 28 hens and two roosters, they started selling the additional eggs, as well as their produce, at the Jonesborough Farmers Market.

Now, Peters sells her eight to 10 dozen eggs each week to one egg-loving family that is “real concerned,” she says, “about what we feed the chickens and how they were kept and who asked tons of questions of us about how we raised them and if we feed them organic, which we do.”

At Stoney Slope, like the other market farms, the hens not only get to forage for bugs and grasses, but they also benefit from the scraps from the produce growing nearby and other leftovers. Peters and Linkous want their flock to have as good a life as they can, Peters says. “We both believe that happy chickens produce great eggs,” she says.

Happy chickens also lay more, says Jessica Quiason, who earlier this summer, sold eggs for her father’s Brew & Plow Farm in Limestone. “Our chickens are not only free range but their coop is spacious, where they can have their own space,” she says. “We have seen where they are too close, where they fight or they bully or they stop producing eggs. It’s not only what they eat, but also their lifestyle in general. They are just happier. They walk around and are happy as clams.”

The Malayters of JEM Farm in Rogersville, also devote time and study to developing “a natural environment,” Elizabeth says, for protection and forage for the ducks, guineas, geese, goats, meat birds, pigs and chickens.

JEM at one time had 400 hens, but are back to about 150 mature laying hens of heritage breeds — Silver spangled winedots, Barred Rock, Rhode island reds, Buff orpingtons and Americanas — all raised on non-GMO feed.

“All our animals are raised without confinement and allowed to behave like... umm, animals, meaning they root, scratch, eat grass and swim,” the JEM website says. “We raise them the way nature intended. Our feeling is that healthy, happy animals create a balanced farm and provide the best tasting meat and eggs.”

Happy animals are also Diane Du Pont’s goal. As a girl, Du Pont spent her summers on her grandparents’ and uncles’ farms in Wisconsin. When she retired from a career as a nurse midwife in Pennsylvania to the 44 acres she and her sister, Joan, had bought in Limestone, Du Pont wanted to have chickens like her grandmother.

She brought 26 chicks with her to their Appalachian Journey Farm, while her sister focused on raising alpacas for the fibers. Since then, Du Pont has weathered attacks by raccoons and is back at 27 happy hens pecking around the couple acres nearest their roosts, producing 10-15 dozen eggs a week for market.

“These chickens run wherever they want and play in the dirt all day,” she says. “They’re in chicken heaven here. They can go where they want.”

Rounding out the top three largest egg producers at the Jonesborough market are José Diaz, a lifelong farmer, and Dotson, who has been farming a little over two years.

Dotson, who moved back to the area with her husband, Tom, in 2012, had empty nest syndrome, especially on their 18-acre farm along the Nolichucky River in Washington County. She couldn't resist the peck, peck, peck of little beaks. "I knew I needed something to do," Dotson says. "I kind of have a nurturing nature. I started with 10 chickens. Well, now there are 165."

Dotson started her flock with Washington and Unicoi County champions, black Australorps from an extension sale, then she bought 120 chickens from Kany Farms after Jonesborough Farmers Market vendor Karen Heiney died this winter. Most, if not all, have names. Dorothy, P.J. and their feathered friends range through woods and pasture, and by the end of a day, and at two gatherings, Dotson's "girls" have produced 100-140 eggs. Dotson also nurtures about 50 sheep, nine goats and a precocious llama.

At his Ranchita la Chiva, Diaz and partner Donna Organ oversee 80 hens and 50 chicks, as well as about 30 goats and row upon row of vegetables and lettuces in the bottom land of his Washington County farm.

Diaz raises the fowl from chicks, doctors them when they feel poorly and chases them down when they stray too far. "When they hear him, they get excited," Organ says a little jealously. "They love him."

FOR THE LOVE OF IT

With many different backgrounds, chicken-raising styles and size farms, there are two common threads that unite the Jonesborough Farmers Market egg vendors: They love the taste and health benefits of free-range eggs and they all love their chickens.

> Chickens have personality, Wilson says. "I know they have personality I see them interacting with each other," she says. "You've heard that saying about 'two old hens?' They'll be foraging around and you'll see two of them that are older and they'll exchange little words and occasionally they will get into a little fight. The hens that have baby chicks will scratch around and find a patch of grubs or worms and they will start clucking and here come all their little 'diddles,' like 'Come to dinner!'"

Du Pont says she derives so much enjoyment from just watching her flock. "They just make me laugh," she says. "You look out the window and you have chickens all over your yard and in various flower beds and it's just fun to see them. I also like the fact that they give me a product I really enjoy and they are just healthier eggs. To just go down and collect eggs and walk back to the house with two dozen eggs in your bucket is great."

Although he loves his 80 hens, Diaz is more practical in his devotion to his girls. "Some produce and some are just to look at or play with," he says with a smile. "I want some that produce. I want something in the skillet, in the oven ... Raise something that you get something back for your work.

"I like eating the eggs. We like them boiled. We like them fried. We make egg salad. We take them to the market."

There are unexpected side benefits of chicken-raising, as well, Dotson says. “One thing we noticed this spring is we have not seen any ticks,” she says. “When we moved in, you couldn’t walk outside without something crawling on you. I call them my ‘lawn doctor.’ They fertilize it. They also eat all the bugs. You should see them with June bugs. They pick them right out of the air.”

And these chicken farmers might put the local garbage collectors out of business. The happy chickens devour almost all table scraps, fruits, vegetables and especially berries. “My compost pile has really taken a beating because we are giving it to the chickens instead,” Du Pont jokes.

Unlike many of the plentiful summer vegetables and berries, the egg supply doesn’t wither away as summer wanes and the Saturday market season ends in October. In fact, just this month, the market’s newest vendor, White’s Mountain Meadow Farm in Afton, started selling eggs, as well, as their new flock of hens matures.

“Chickens lay year-round, although they do go through periods of rest off and on throughout the year,” Ehle says. “Judging from last winter’s online market supply, we expect to have eggs available all winter in the [new year-round] Boones Street Market.

“None of our vendors use artificial lights with their chickens, so egg production does diminish some as the days get shorter. But laying patterns also have to do with the age of the chickens, the type of chicken, molting and weather conditions. One of the benefits of having so many farmers producing eggs is that someone’s ‘girls’ (as José calls them) are always in a laying mood.”



A gaggle on Dotson Farm



Colorful JEM Farm eggs



Eggs from Appalachian Journey Farm, owned by Diane Du Pont and her sister Joan



Tanya King and Betty the hen at the Jonesborough Farmers Market



A grocery store egg on the left in contrast with the rich orange yolk of a free range egg at right.



Dogs guard the hens and sheep at Wilson's Clover Creek Farm.



Some of the 'girls' at Ranchita la Chiva, owned by José Diaz



Brew & Plow eggs



Tabitha Dotson gathers eggs



Dotson names her flock and feeds them sour cream as a treat.

