

Pasture-peckin' chickens



**HAPPIER CHICKENS
TASTE BETTER.**
*Pasture-raised chickens
lead happy, healthy lives
in a controlled but
natural environment.*

• A BETTER WAY OF LIVING •

by Bill Lubing



Some people seem obsessed with the classic question, “What came first, the chicken or the egg?” To me there’s a more pressing question: Does a pasture-pecking chicken taste better and is it more healthful for you?

That was the question playing on my mind on a recent sunny Sunday afternoon. I was throttling up and over and around the glorious hills and valleys of the New Glarus/Argyle area of Wisconsin. If you’re calmed and comforted among rolling green hills in a checkerboard of woods, fields, and pasture, I heartily recommend you visit the area.

As beautiful as it was, I was not in the area for the scenery but making my way to Jordandal Farm, owned by Carrie and Eric Johnson. Nestled among the hills, Jordandal Farm produces some excellent-tasting chicken. The question is: Why?



As we all sat at a picnic table outside the barn, enjoying the sun, breeze, and the couple’s two dogs, Eric and Carrie educated me on pasture-raised chickens.

“I think nutrient density and flavor can go hand in hand,” says Eric, an upbeat redhead. “If something tastes really good and it’s not processed, it’s probably good for you.”

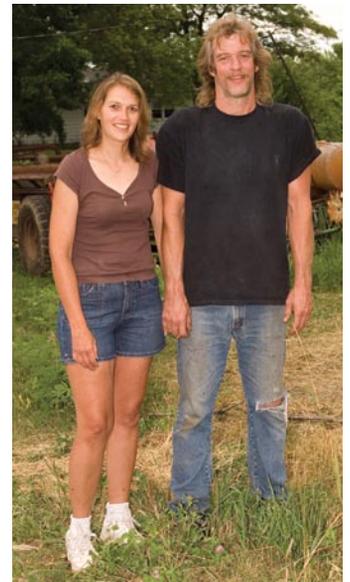
According to eatwild.com, a website that promotes grass-fed products, and pasture-raised animals, “Meat from grass-fed animals has two to four times more omega-3 fatty acids than meat from grain-fed animals. Of all the fats, they are the most heart-friendly.”

Most abundant in seafood and certain nuts and seeds, omega-3s are also found in animals raised on pasture. The reason is simple. omega-3s are formed in the chloroplasts of green leaves and algae. Sixty percent of the fatty acids in grass are omega-3s.

PERFECT PASTURE. Eric and Carrie Johnson of Jordandal Farm have been perfecting their pasture-raising methods for years. Meat from animals raised foraging fresh greens is higher in healthful omega-3s than those that are not.



The couple originally started out using a “chicken tractor,” sometimes called a Salatín Pen for its inventor. This is an open-bottomed pen that is moved daily to fresh pasture. While the chickens are technically in a pen, they are also able to forage.



So, does pasture-raised mean, like cattle, the chickens are free to roam the pasture, hemmed in only by a perimeter barbed wire fence? Hardly.

Pastured poultry refers to any one of a number of systems in which the chickens are allowed access to green, growing forage and insects. Eric says they also receive “a corn and soy blend with an organic premix.” He says the premix contains “all the good stuff” including kelp. And the Johnsons use no synthetic hormones or antibiotics in feed.

“We started with a chicken tractor then we went to a skid house,” Eric explains. “It had chicken wire sides and open doors.” A 160-foot long electrified net was spread and placed around the perimeter of the skid house. “So they used the skid house for shelter.” The reason for using an electric fence was not so much to keep the birds in but to keep predators out.

“Now we basically use the same principle but use really light canopies,” says Eric.

The vast majority of chickens on the market are a breed called a Cornish Rock Cross. Bred for faster growth and a large breast, most of them are between eight and ten weeks old when sent to market. While the Johnsons began with this breed, they are at the point now where they are differentiating their product with a couple of heritage breeds.

A heritage bird exhibits the traits of an older line—less breast meat, slower growth, and a greater propensity to forage and scratch.

The Gourmet Blacks raised by the Johnsons take a few weeks longer than the Cornish Rock to ready for market. Their Bronze heritage will grow slower than the Cornish Rock but faster than the Blacks.

Eric notes that “The slower growth usually means better flavor. But there’s a line, though, because you can get to a point where it means toughness.” When you’re talking tough, you’re talking a stewing chicken.

“Stew chickens come from the laying hens,” says Carrie. “You need to cook them much longer. I’ve had customers tell me they’ve cooked a bird for two hours and it’s still tough. I tell them they need to cook them for eight hours. We cook ours for 24 hours.”

The Monday after my visit with the Johnsons found me pulling into the drive at JRS Country Acres in Lake Mills, Wisconsin. While primarily marketing eggs, Judy and Randy Tholen have been selling free-range chicken off the farm for the past three years.

Like the Johnsons, the Tholens are often asked, “Do you use any chemicals or antibiotics,” says Judy. “No, we don’t.”

Randy notes, “More and more people want to know where their food

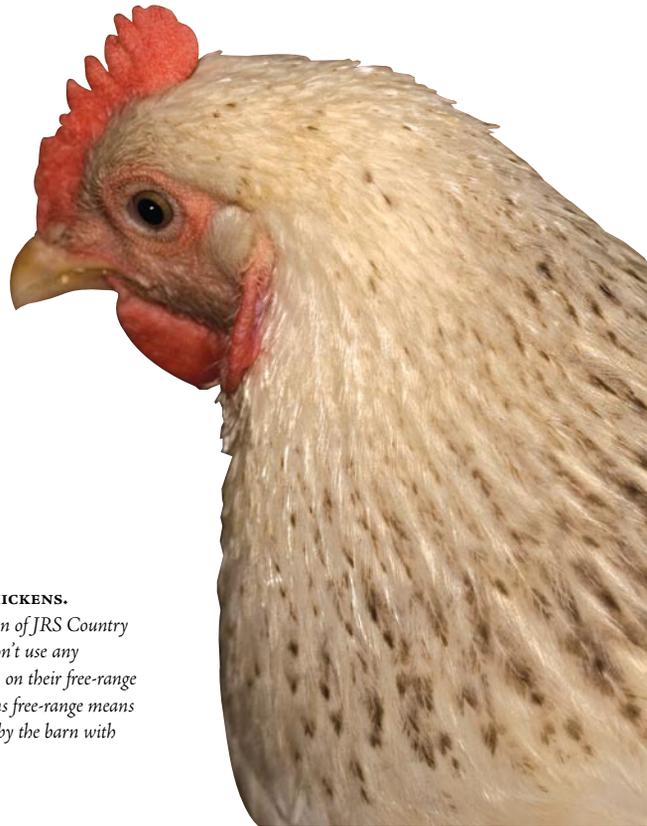


FREE RANGE INDOORS? (Far left) A portable canopy allows chickens to forage in the pasture while protected from the elements at Jordandal Farm. The canopy is constantly moved so the chickens are always exposed to greener pastures. (Near left) Chicks are kept indoors until they're old enough to be pastured.



CHEMICAL-FREE CHICKENS.

Judy and Randy Tholen of JRS Country Acres in Lake Mills don't use any antibiotics or chemicals on their free-range chickens. At JRS Farms free-range means being able to hang out by the barn with the cows.



comes from as opposed to "is it actually certified organic?" While not certified, "We don't believe in chemical hormones, pesticides, or herbicides. We bring in (to the feed mill) our own corn and have them grind that into our recipe."

JRS Country Acres raises Cornish Rock Cross birds for meat. They mature within the requisite eight or nine weeks, which "is quickly," says Randy. "Mainly because of our feed. We don't use the chemicals to get them to maturity more quickly."

For those trying a free-range or pastured chicken for the first time, Judy cautions against overcooking them. "They cook up differently than you might be used to," she says. "They cook more quickly. I think it's because they're less fatty."

Her surefire way to cook a chicken? "You need a 325-degree oven," she begins. "I take the chicken right out of the freezer and put it in a roasting pan, whole. Put a little bit of chicken broth on the bottom and then sprinkle in seasoning over the top. It's done in about two-and-a-half or three hours. It's simple and doesn't dry out." Randy enthusiastically nods his agreement.

As the sun sets over the grassy fields adjoining JRS Country Acres, I slowly tool home with a craving for, you guessed it, a good farm-raised chicken.

• IF YOU GO •

Jordandal Farm
Carrie and Eric Johnson
W7977 Sunset Road
Argyle, WI 53504
Phone: (608) 328-1052
Email: jordandal@tds.net
www.jordandalfarm.com

JRS Country Acres
Randy and Judy Tholen
N7597 Rock Lake Road
Lake Mills, WI 53551
920-648-3450 or
920-648-5329
jrscountryacres@yahoo.com
www.jrscountryacres.com

www.eatwild.com