

FOOD

Chicken, from pasture to pot

BY ALI BERLOW

PHOTOGRAPHS BY KATHRYN OSGOOD

Under the supervision of Rigel Byrum-Ridge of the FARM Institute, children in the Poultry Project feed chickens destined for the kitchens of Island restaurants. The program is one of many at the Katama agricultural center where youngsters learn about the traditions of Vineyard farming.

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At the FARM Institute in Katama, the Poultry Project teaches children that things happen before meat shows up at the supermarket, boneless and skinless on Styrofoam platters, with recipes conveniently attached.

Aaron Wilson, a ten-year-old from Oak Bluffs, steps away for a moment from the outdoor abattoir to look at the sky, the dirt, anything but the scalding, the de-featherer, the sharp knives, the drying blood that looks like paint. He lets out a quiet, squirming “Yewwhhh,” watching and yet un-watching, as his co-campers and staff from the FARM Institute at Katama deal with the freshly killed birds. He chooses to study the diagram of chicken anatomy rather than the real thing. Aaron is articulate and philosophical. “I figure this is a good experience for me. If I ever want to be a farmer, I got to face *this* part of it,” he says, nodding toward the stainless-steel table where the still-warm chickens are being processed. “But I hate the guts part.”

Meat is a messy business, especially when you experience first-hand what it really means to go from a bird in the pasture to bones in the pot.



In a mobile, sheltered coop, chickens at the FARM Institute are moved collectively around the farm each day to help fertilize the soil. Right: The FARM Institute took over the historic Katama Farm, established during World War I, in the spring of 2005.



Wes Wood moves a chicken from truck to slaughterhouse.

Founded in 2000, the FARM Institute, a nonprofit group, teaches children about agriculture and the traditions of Island farming at Katama Farm, a working farm in Edgartown. The boys and girls who take the elective called the Poultry Project are nine to twelve years old. They come from the Island and the mainland, from cities, towns, and the countryside. With their parents' permission, the children learn that meat doesn't just appear the way most of us buy it in the grocery store: in those neat, little, shrink-wrapped cuts. Things happen before it shows up boneless and skinless, laid out all clean and free of blood on Styrofoam platters, with recipes conveniently attached.

On the Monday of the three-day Poultry Project session, the chores include washing down and bleaching the outdoor abattoir that's discreetly located on the side of a back barn. Tuesday is devoted to slaughtering and butchering. And on Wednesday, the kids deliver the three-and-a-half to four-pound birds, which are pre-sold to Lure and the Coach House, restaurants in nearby Edgartown. Any birds left over – demand is high, often exceeding the supply – are

sold to the campers' families.

“Chickens are a great teaching tool,” says Matthew Goldfarb, executive director of the FARM Institute. “Not only can they teach some of the basic fundamentals of small-scale farming, such as fertility management, life cycles, genetics, humane livestock practices, sustainability, and taking the birds through the slaughter and processing: The kids are also exposed to marketing and cooking a fresh farm product, as well as value-added food processing, like making chicken-liver pâté, and what it means to eat locally.”

The campers learn that here on Martha's Vineyard, meat animals are being raised just down the road in Katama, and on many other Island farms. That open landscape they pass by on their way to South Beach is fertile, productive land supporting meat chickens, as well as egg-laying hens, and cows, sheep, goats, and pigs.

The FARM Institute keeps a flock of about ninety meat birds, a breed known as Rock Cornish hens. The birds come to the Island, via UPS, from a mainland commercial hatchery. They are one to three days old when they arrive. They spend the first few weeks of their lives in the barn, secluded, warm, and comfortable in a brooding box with sawdust, fresh water, and a heat lamp. They've room enough to spread their budding wings, and the kids love taking care of the yellow, downy chicks. In these early stages, the birds are fed an all-purpose grower's mix of corn, oats, wheat, and bone meal (chickens are omnivores). Though it's not a certified-organic feed, it contains no growth hormones or antibiotics, and it's supplemented with probiotics, such as acidophilus, to help the chicks handle stress, and kelp for extra minerals.

After a couple of weeks, the chickens are moved out to the pasture to live in what are called chicken tractors. These movable pens are bottomless, upside-down chicken coops, twelve feet by twelve feet by three feet, screened in to provide shade from the hot summer sun, as well as protection from weather and predators such as skunks and hawks. So while the birds are not technically “free-range” (an ambiguous,

ubiquitous, misleading term commonly found on the packages of commercially raised chickens), they are given fresh air, fresh water, sun, grass, bugs: “So a chicken can be a chicken,” says Matthew Goldfarb.

Every day the chicken tractors are moved around the field. They're heavy things, so this requires a team effort. The kids line up along the handles. The call is, “One, two, three, heave!” Like a wheelbarrow, one end of the chicken tractor is lifted up, high enough to move, though low enough so no birds escape. When you look over the field, you can see where the chicken tractors have been: The grass is strong and verdant where the flock has donated their own fertilizer for the cause, producing a healthy, nutrient-rich pasture.

At fifty-five days or so, the birds are ready. It takes a couple of hours to process about thirty hens – transforming the squawking, feather-flapping, bug-eating flock from the pasture into cleaned, gutted, fresh poultry, weighed and priced out, twist-tied in a plastic bag, stored in the refrigerator, and ready to be transported to a chef or a cook to turn into a meal.

Bridget Meigs, a farmer and counselor who teaches the Poultry Project, finds that her campers are captivated



Chip Williams prepares a bird while Cyrus Kennedy watches.



In the abattoir at the FARM Institute, farmhand Molly Shuster cleans a chicken with the help of Hudson Klebs and Chip Williams.

with the birds through every part of the process. She encourages them to uphold the sanctity and dignity of life, for the sake of the birds as well as for themselves. Before the chickens are gathered up on the morning of slaughtering day, she and her campers visit the flock in the field one last time “to let them know we appreciate them and their sacrifice for our sustenance.”

Wes Wood, a year-round employee of the FARM Institute who takes the care and custody of animals earnestly, does the actual kill. His goal is to keep the birds calm and to make sure that the cut is quick, concise, and painless. During the actual gutting, Bridget finds that most kids remain steadfast and focused on doing it right so they don't mess up. “The campers don't get freaked out about it or too grossed out by it. No one's ever come back and said that they had nightmares about it, which is what most parents worry about. Kids just don't seem as disconnected from their food as adults are.”

On the last day of the Poultry Project, the campers inventory and pack the

birds in a cooler for transport to the restaurants. After receiving the birds at the loading dock at the Harbor View Hotel's Coach House restaurant in Edgartown, executive chef Joshua Hollinger takes the kids into the restaurant's busy kitchen and cooks up a couple of birds for them on the spot. He makes chicken and dumplings – a dish he says his grandmother made. It was inspired both by the Katama chickens and Joshua's Pennsylvania-Dutch roots, and it's so popular that customers will pre-order it when they make reservations.

“These local birds taste so good because of how they lived,” Joshua tells the kids while he de-bones and splits the breasts. “I like what you guys do.” The chef explains how nothing is wasted in his kitchen, from the wing tips to the feet, which are used for stock, to the gizzards that will be turned into liver pâté. The campers are treated to a special tasting of their own birds at the white-linen restaurant. “I never knew chicken could taste like this,” smiles camper Chip Williams.

“At first, there was a lot of suspi-

cion about the Poultry Project,” says Matthew Goldfarb. “Parents were suspicious of the whole process and what their kids' role in it would be – though afterward, both the adults and kids are so moved by the opportunity and the experience, because it's so different from anything else. These connections, even though they can be uncomfortable emotionally and intellectually, are crucial. It's a profound moment when the connection is made between the animal and what's for lunch.”

The food culture swirling around children today offers mixed and confounding messages. On the one hand, they're supposed to eat right. On the other, schools are filled with vending machines selling junk food and soda. But at the FARM Institute, young people learn first-hand about where good food comes from, and how it is raised, slaughtered, and brought to market. The Poultry Project, among other FARM Institute programs, prepares them to make intelligent, independent, and healthy choices about what they eat in the future.



Coach House executive chef Joshua Hollinger shows campers Cyrus Kennedy, James Szkobel-Wolff, and Chip Williams how to de-bone a chicken.

Chicken and dumplings

Joshua Hollinger, executive chef at the Coach House restaurant in Edgartown

Serves 4 to 6

- 2 free-range, organic chickens
- Salt and pepper
- Safflower or olive oil

DUMPLINGS

- 10 russet potatoes
- Zest from 3 lemons
- 1 tablespoon thyme, chopped fine
- 1 tablespoon parsley, chopped fine
- 1 tablespoon chives, sliced thin
- 1 teaspoon sage, chopped fine
- 2 whole eggs
- 4 egg yolks
- 6 cups all-purpose flour, sifted

- 6 quarts chicken stock
- Ice bath (bowl with ice and water)

GRAVY

- White wine
- 1 cup chicken stock
- 1 teaspoon parsley, chopped
- 1 teaspoon thyme, chopped
- 1/2 tablespoon butter, softened

GREENS

- 1/2 tablespoon butter
- 2 to 3 shallots, fine dice
- 1/2 teaspoon garlic, fine slice
- Braising greens, such as collard greens or Swiss chard

1. Prick potatoes with a fork. Place in oven on sheet pan; bake until tender.

2. While potatoes are baking, split each chicken in half and remove the bones. Set aside in refrigerator.

3. Once potatoes are tender, scrape the flesh from the shell, grind through a food mill, and add the lemon zest.

4. Make a well in the potato purée and fill center with fresh herbs, eggs, egg yolks, and salt and pepper to taste.

5. Add a small amount of flour to the well. Knead the mixture, adding a little more flour each time, until the texture is like a wet dough. Be careful not to overwork the dough or add too much flour. The dough should be moist but light.

6. In a heavy pan, boil the chicken stock. Have the ice bath ready. Rub hands with a little oil and pinch off dough in 2-ounce pieces. Drop dumplings into the boiling chicken stock. Once the dumplings float, they are finished. Remove from stock and immediately submerge in ice bath. This will make the dumplings set up properly. When the dumplings have cooled, set aside on a towel.

7. Season chicken with salt and pepper. Lightly oil a large cast-iron pan and place over high heat until smoking hot. Place the chicken skin-side down in the pan and allow to cook for 8 minutes or until skin is golden brown. Flip and cook other side for another 8 minutes or until fully cooked.

8. Leaving pan on high heat, remove the chicken and set aside. De-glaze pan with white wine and reduce by half. Add 1 cup of chicken stock and the dumplings. Remove dumplings after 1 minute. Add parsley, thyme, and butter to the pan gravy. Cook until reduced to a sauce.

9. In a separate pan on medium-high heat, heat 1/2 tablespoon of butter. Add shallots and garlic, and sauté until lightly brown. Add braising greens and sauté until tender. Remove greens and set aside.

Presentation

1. Place dumplings in the center of a plate and top with braising greens.
2. Place a chicken half on top of greens.
3. Spoon a generous amount of gravy over the chicken.



Coach House chicken and dumplings.



Hudson Klebs and Chip Williams enjoy a meal they helped to prepare in many more ways than one.

The FARM Institute's staff-lunch, home-grown roast chicken

Matthew Goldfarb, executive director of the FARM Institute

Serves 2, heartily

- 1 whole bird
- 1 lemon, cut in half
- A few shallots
- Whatever herbs are in the garden
- Liberal amounts of salt and pepper

1. Stuff ingredients into the cavity of the bird.
2. Cook on an iron skillet in the oven at 400 degrees for 20 minutes, breast up. Then turn down temperature to 350 degrees and finish cooking, approximately 20 minutes per pound.

Chicken stock

Ali Berlow

Put the carcass of one roast chicken in a soup pot big enough that the chicken fits comfortably. Add enough cool fresh water that the bones are submerged. Add one or two peeled, chopped onions, some peeled carrots, clean celery stalks, some garlic cloves, and a good amount of whole black peppercorns. Don't add salt.

Keep the pot uncovered while you bring the pot up to a gentle boil. Once it's there, reduce the heat to a simmer and cover the pot askew so some steam escapes. Simmer at least a couple of hours – longer if you want and if it's a cool day.

When it's done (you'll know by the color), put a colander in a large bowl and strain the stock. Then pour the stock into a large mason jar and cool in the refrigerator. All the fat will rise to the top, creating a natural seal. When you're ready to use it – I keep it around one to two weeks – spoon off the hard layer of fat. It should be nice and jelly-like.

Use the stock in soups, stews, or risottos. Or reduce it further, creating a richer, more condensed flavor for sauces. ♦