

Emotionally, economically & environmentally enhancing agriculture



TIME Magazine calls him “the world’s most innovative farmer” and The Atlantic newspaper refers to him as “the high priest of grass-farming”; clearly Joel Salatin is someone who has piqued quite a bit of interest. Hidden amongst northern Virginia’s Shenandoah Valley lies Salatin’s chemical-free farm that professes to feed over 6,000 families. As a fourth generation farmer,

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family man Salatin aims to produce high quality, nutritious foods grown to benefit people, livestock and the environment. This has

been achieved through decades of planting trees, building compost, digging ponds and moving livestock regularly through fenced pasture paddocks. The farm boasts 100 acres of pasture and 450 acres of woodland.

Creating values as well as “value”

Pasture-fed poultry, pigs, rabbits and beef are directly marketed to consumers. This allows Salatin to cut out the middle men (such as the processors, retailers and drivers), who can take up to 92 cents of every dollar from the farmer. With Salatin’s system, all the profits go to the farm. Salatin feels that it is essential that consumers know where their food comes from and that they develop a relationship with the farmer.

Polyface conduct livestock management in a way that tries to emulate each species’ natural environment as closely as possible. Salatin is a firm believer that livestock should be able to enjoy their habitat so that they can express their physiological needs. The farm utilises “mob grazing” principles, where a large herd of cattle are moved at high density through a pasture daily. This form of rotational grazing means Salatin can graze four times as many animals than in conventional pasture farms. Cattle are kept in 1-acre electric-fenced paddocks and, once in their new paddock, poultry are released into the recently-grazed pastures to peck around in the fly-egg-laden manure. This not only helps improve their nutrition but also acts to help spread the fertilising manure on the pasture. Each paddock has movable a water supply, mineral lick and shade. The diverse livestock species allow for better usage of the forage.

Poultry are moved through the pastures every four days. The chickens receive 15% of their feed from the pasture, with the rest coming from grain. Salatin uses movable roosting and laying hen houses, which provide shelter from the elements and from predators, whilst allowing the poultry to roam around fenced pastures during the day. The feed consists of corn, soy, oats, kelp, fish meal and a mineral/vitamin powder. The birds are then slaughtered at 8 weeks of age.



During winter months, when the grass becomes less nutritious and does not grow as well, only the best-producing cattle are selected and are fed on stored hay. The remainder of the animals are slaughtered for ground beef or hot dogs.

Farming over space & time

Rabbits are kept on an upper level of the mobile chicken houses and are finished on pasture in portable rabbit runs. Young chicks are kept inside to keep them warm and safe before being released outside when they are older. They are bedded on wood chips and sawdust to lock up the odour. It is then composted to be used as pasture fertiliser.

Pigs are allowed to forage once per year in the woodland, where they eat acorns, bugs and hickory nuts. They act as a “creative disturbance”, rummaging in the undergrowth to aerate the soil, improving its fertility and regeneration. The pigs are regularly moved through 2-ha paddocks in the woodland during this month-long feeding bonanza. The remainder of the year allows the



“ What excites us is to see land heal. All of that hinges on making earthworms, and soil happy and healthy - Joel Salatin ”

woodland to rest and regrow.

When not in the woodland, the pigs are divided into groups of 50 and placed on 0.5 acre of pasture, where they are supplemented with 2 tons of feed. If they weigh 100lbs, they stay for 8 days in each paddock, but if they weigh 200lbs, they only stay 4 days.

Eat your view

Polyface’s laying hens are heritage breeds whereas the broiler meat chickens are Cornish cross. Whilst Salatin tried heritage broiler chicken breeds, he found that the Cornish cross was more economically viable. His egg business is currently more profitable than his chicken meat business, but he is trying to grow the chicken meat business too. Currently he buys broiler chicken eggs from other farms during the winter to meet demand from his customers, but he would like to have his own supply in the future.

When not in the woodland, pigs are used to build compost by rooting around in the cows’ winter bedding area, located in open-air wooden barns. These hay barns are used as cattle feeding and resting areas when the grass has disappeared. The hay has 25-35 pounds of salt added per ton.

When the cows visit, they deposit their manure on the hay bedding but, rather than muck out the barn, this manure is left on the

Show me the money

Polyface has 24,000 broiler chickens, 6,500 hens, 1,000 cattle, 500 turkeys, 250 rabbits and 200 pigs. Through sales to local customers and restaurants, Salatin has grown his business to a point where he now makes over \$2 million a year and employs 22 people. One financial challenge facing the farm has been the rising cost of GM-free grain to feed their poultry. In response, they had to increase their chicken and egg price by 25%.

To improve pig finishing, Salatin fences off 3-5 acres of his woodland, where pigs are allowed to forage on highly nutritious acorns. This reduces the reliance on grain by \$50 per pig, as each woodland acre is worth \$500 in grain. The pigs are released into these finishing pastures for one month a year.

Approximately 30% of Polyface’s sales are from walk-in clients every Saturday; 30% are from selling to 10 local retailers and 25 restaurants and the remainder from 20 regional buying clubs. By 2011, the farm was earning \$2 million – double what it earned 5 years ago. The buyer clubs have 8 drops a year, each with a minimum order of \$3,000. Ordering is done via their online shop and are charged a 28c/lb delivery fee.

bedding, with more woodchip, sawdust and hay put on top. Then, corn is added on top. By using the cows to trample the hay when they walk and sleep in the barn, the corn and bedding ferment anaerobically and produce ideal conditions for compost formation. By March, this compost can be 4 foot high. Then, once the cows return to pasture in spring, pigs move into the barn and turn the compost over when foraging for fermented corn – this process is what Salatin calls the “pig aerators”. This highly rich compost is then used to fertilise the farm to improve the pastures.

Building resilience

As well as selling his produce to local customers, local Chipotle restaurants also buy some of his products. Setting up this deal was not a walk in the park: it took 17 months of negotiations and logistical hurdles, but Chipotle were eager to get their hands on locally-produced, organic, humane pork. Now the local town’s Chipotles in Charlottesville sell only Polyface pork.

As well as animal welfare and environmental sustainability, Salatin is passionate about social sustainability too. Aware of the ever-increasing average age of American farmers, he hosts a number of young adults who complete 4-month internships and 12-month apprenticeships each year. This is to ensure that his methods are taught to future generations. He also rents some of his land to younger farmers, allowing them to create their own farming enterprises.

“ If you smell manure, you are smelling mismanagement: plants and animals should be provided a habitat that allows them to express their physiological distinctiveness. Respecting and honoring the pigness of the pig is a foundation for societal health - Joel Salatin ”

Where quality is as important as quantity

One of the biggest hurdles Salatin faces is government red tape. He also feels that other farmers are reluctant to convert to his methods because of the costs of building the infrastructure. That said, his profits are increasing year-on-year. His enterprise stacking (using the land for more than one product) help keep him in the black. For instance, so much fertile manure, produced by the cows and pigs, is created that the extra is sold. Also, the stacked rabbit hutches on the chicken coups generate \$40,000 a year. This clever farming system is proving that it is not only a media sensation – it is paying off financially too.

The farm is signed up to the Humane Farm Animal Care's Certified Humane Raised and Handled program. For more information, please see www.polyfacefarms.com.

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