

A Different Route To The Dinner Table

By Steven Slosberg

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Day-old chicks, some 150 of them, are due from Iowa today at Footsteps Farm atop Quoketaug Hill in Stonington.

They are the first to arrive. Together with what ultimately will be a brood of 800 chicks, they will grow to maturity, as broilers, not layers, and, destined for the dinner table, their lives will culminate at Footsteps in what is known as humane slaughter.

If death can be considered part of the nurturing of meat breeds, then Craig Floyd has to be a master humanitarian.

Floyd, the friendly postal clerk in charge of the West Mystic Post Office for the last 20 years, owns Footsteps Farm with his wife, Sheryl. Farming, he says, has been in his family since 1712. But it is the way he kills, as well as the way he nourishes, that distinguishes Footsteps. It is the first and only farm, among 4,200 in Connecticut, certified humane for the way it raises and handles chickens and turkeys. So says the nonprofit organization doing the certifying, Humane Farm Animal Care of Herndon, Va.

Floyd produces a chicken even a vegetarian could love. They are pasture-raised — some 20 percent of their intake is grass, says Floyd — and have 21 percent less fat and 28 percent fewer calories than factory-farmed broilers.

I heard about Floyd's ways from Jan MacGregor of Mystic, whose daughter, a vegetarian, wanted to add protein, in the form of organic meat, to her diet and found her way to Footsteps Farm.

For Floyd, 60, it borders on the spiritual. When the time comes, from June through October, to kill and dress the poultry, Floyd and those who work with him routinely offer prayers as part of the cycle. "We give thanks to the Lord for giving us the chickens," he says, "and we give thanks to the chickens for giving their lives for us."

The chickens — the Cornish Cross breed takes 10 to 12 weeks to reach market weight, and the Delawares, up to three months — are culled two at a time. Care is taken even at the outset of the slaughter. "We have a contest, me, my son, and my nieces and nephews who help me," says Floyd. "We go into the trailer and we see who can be the quietest."

The chickens are then placed, upside down, in a cone, roomy enough for them to move but not injure themselves. The blade is applied, cutting away from the neck bone. "We don't cut the windpipe. The chicken wouldn't be able to breathe," says Floyd. "We cut the jugular, the left, and the right, and we hold the chicken as it bleeds out, until it is dead, until the rectum stops moving."

“I developed this method on my own,” Floyd says. “People think chickens are stupid. I’m not a chicken so I don’t know, but it is one of God’s creatures. When you’re young and you get hurt, the best thing is for your mother to hold your hand. So we hold the chicken.”

The process, obviously, is painstaking, and over a weekend, the farm will kill and dress 20 to 40 chickens. Customers pay a premium for the care and feeding. Floyd gets \$3.75 a pound for chicken. For his turkeys he raises 75 Bourbon Reds, Narragansetts and Blue Slaters each year the price is \$6 a pound. This year’s flock of turkeys is already sold. He’s taking orders for 2008.

Floyd limits the number of chickens to under a thousand, and has devised portable bottomless trailers more like hoop houses to move the chickens several times a day around pasture on the 15-acre farm.

He says people are welcome to come and watch a chicken being readied for the table, but he asks that they call in advance.

Witnessing that stage of the process likely is not a must for everyone. But, as they prepare to savor what’s set before them, they can be reassured that the meat they eat could not have come to a better end.

This is the opinion of Steven Slosberg.

Regional