



Lake Erie Lifestyle

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the well-fed carnivore

STORY AND PHOTOS BY LISA GENSHEIMER, Erie Times-News



Cattle grazing at Parable Farm

One of the many things I've learned from my grandchildren and their health-conscious mom and dad is "know where your food comes from and how it's produced."

Michael Pollan, author of the "Omnivore's Dilemma," put it this way in his New York Times best-seller, "Food Rules." "Eat mostly plants, especially leaves," and "Eat animals that themselves have eaten well."

The poultry we plucked from the farmers market last summer in Westfield, N.Y., was like nothing we'd ever tasted, especially after it was slow-cooked over hickory chips on Rich's new smoker. Oozing with juices and wood-fired flavor, it was reassuring to know this chicken and many others like it were well cared for at Parable Farms, in South Ripley, N.Y.

Parable Farms is part of a movement away from factory farms and back to natural, pasture-raised livestock. And for good reason.

Today, 80 percent of all antibiotics sold in the United States are sold to factory farms for livestock and feed. And as NPR's Tom Ashbrook reported, we could be consuming a new generation of antibiotic-resistant superbugs that could make us sick.

Couple that fact with what scientists are learning about genetically modified foods (GMOs) and the harmful effects of growth hormones injected into animals, and you can see why consumers are seeking sources of safe and nutritious chicken, beef and pork.

You'll find plenty of local sources on "Eat Wild.com," a website that's searchable by state and county.

For now I point my Prius to Parable Farms just as the last snows are melting. Sarah Hagenbuch Parker is anxious to show me her new brood of chicks. They're huddled near a warmer inside a converted trailer that serves as their temporary home.

Sarah, a registered nurse, and her husband, Rob, took over the 682-acre farm last fall after Sarah's mom, holistic farmer Pat Hagenbuch, died, 14 days after being diagnosed with leukemia.

Pat and her husband Keith Hagenbuch, a retired physics professor from Penn State Behrend, bought Parable Farm back in 1999 when it was a dairy farm. Today the family produces naturally raised, grass-fed beef, free-range chicken, pork and turkey. Right now their herd includes 120 head of cattle and 12 piglets. Last year they sold 1,200 broiler chickens, fresh and frozen.

"This year we're introducing a new heritage Cornish dark breed, which has the same nutritional density as our other chickens, but offers a slightly different taste and consistency," says Sarah, opening the gate so I can get a closer look at the week-old chicks.

They're so cute, it's hard to imagine one on my dinner plate, but by the end of May, after ranging far and wide over pastures in a portable chicken coop called a chicken tractor, they will be full-fledged broilers ready for sale.

We hop into Sarah's pickup and barrel down a steep, slush-covered road to the lower 40 acres so Sarah can show me the breathtaking view of their pasturelands and the place where her mom is buried. I hold on for dear life and wonder how in the world we will get back up the hill, but this woman clearly knows how to drive.

"Mom always said 'don't let the road tell you where you're going,'" she says as she rounds a curve and nearly misses a tree. "You tell the road where you're going."

Sarah has big plans for guided nature walks near the creek that winds through her property, and wants to build a healing hut for meditation. Sarah points out a solar panel in a sunny pasture, and says they hope to go off the grid someday with solar and wind power.

Her dad, Keith, and his dog, Maxwell, run up to greet us as we climb back to the top of the hill and make our way to the farm store. I buy two chickens to take home, grateful that my friend Vicki Stetson told me about this farm in the first place.

"Going to Parable Farm and seeing the clean cattle grazing contentedly in open fields is in sharp contrast to the inhumane treatment of factory farm cattle standing shoulder to shoulder in muddy enclosures encrusted with their own manure," says Vicki, a longtime customer of Parable Farm and an outspoken advocate of local, naturally raised food products. "All the animals at the farm are raised on fresh water with plenty of room to roam. There is no need to pump them full of antibiotics to prevent stress-related disease caused by overcrowding and force-feeding of unnatural foods."

The rise of "super bugs" and the pollution of our waterways by antibiotics pass these dangers on to us in the foods we eat and the water we drink, Stetson points out.

"We rush to save a few cents buying foods full of deadly antibiotics and pollutants, and then spend millions to find cures for the diseases they cause. The few extra dollars we pay for wholesome local food seems to me a real bargain," says Stetson on becoming a locavore.

Stetson is among a growing number of "locavores," people across the nation who seek out products from farm markets within 100 miles of where they live.

Another is innkeeper Peggy Hauser of North East.

As guests step from the comfort of their beds at North East's Grape Arbor Inn, they are greeted with the unmistakable aromas of bacon, blueberry gingerbread coffee cake, and homemade Moravian love buns. When Peggy Hauser promises a local farm-fresh breakfast, she means it.

"I am a CSA member at Parable Farms, and I joined the Post Apples CSA for my local fruits and veggies. As a Parable Farms CSA member, I get not only grass-fed chickens, but nitrate-free bacon and ham, along with other beef and pork products," says Hauser. CSA stands for Community Supported Agriculture. Members buy a share in a farm and receive weekly deliveries of fruits, vegetables, and in some cases, meats.

"I think that it is important for my guests to see (and smell and taste) healthful foods that are available locally, and to know that it is not difficult to get them. For small businesses such as mine to survive and prosper, it is important to know where your food comes from ... and to be familiar with and participate in the local marketplace in every way possible."

The economics of farming are changing. Locally grown food is one of the fastest growing segments in agriculture, and consumer demand in the U.S. has risen from \$4 billion in 2002 to \$7 billion in 2012. Sales of organically produced goods has shown double-digit growth for more than a decade. Organic products are available in nearly 3 of 4 conventional grocery stores, in addition to whole foods markets. Music to our ears

The Great Blue Heron Music Festival brings thousands of visitors to the farm of Steve and Julie Rockcastle in Panama, N.Y., each year. They spread out their blankets and raise their tents to the sounds of Donna the Buffalo, the Tiger Maple String Band and a dozen other bands over the Fourth of July weekend, coming up this year July 5, 6 and 7.

Hundreds more come to these pastures for the Red Devon grass-fed beef, certified organic pasture-raised poultry, and shiitake mushrooms, music to the ears of local chefs and foodies who crave food that's healthful.

The Rockcastles' farm, Green Heron Growers, includes 200 wooded acres on their homestead, 60 acres of pastureland across the road, and a farm store. The Rockcastles practice rotational grazing, treating cows and chickens to a salad bar of naturally growing grasses, legumes, and clovers, which take nitrogen from the air and put it back into the ground.

"The beef industry has gone astray from what is natural," says Steve. "Cows are actually herbivores -- they love grasses. When factory farms feed them corn to fatten them up, they screw up their digestive system. As the corn acidifies, they feed them chemicals to hold down the acid, and the chemicals in turn cause health issues."

At Green Heron Growers, it takes about 22-24 months on average to go from grass to meat that's nicely marbled and tender, says Steve.

Green Heron is a partner in Chautauqua Region Farm to Table, an organization that promotes collaboration among farmers, restaurant owners, grocers and school district personnel. Among the many restaurants Green Heron Growers supplies is the Athenaeum Hotel at Chautauqua Institution. The Rockcastles' farm, like others mentioned in this article, welcomes visitors and small group tours by appointment. LEL