
OH GIVE ME A HOME WHERE THE ARAUCANAS ROAM

It's called Soul Food Farm

BY BONNIE AZAB POWELL
PHOTOS BY BART NAGEL



Only 10 years ago, Alexis Koefoed was living in Vallejo with her husband, Eric, and their three young children, working for a winery in Yountville, and dreaming of someday having a farm.

A bit later, when 55 acres of prime pasture and farmland in Vacaville came on the market, owned by the same family since the 1880s but untended for 60 years, they took a deep, soul-searching breath and bought the parcel. A few years later they sold their Vallejo house and moved onto the land; or rather, into a “temporary” cabin they placed on a wooden deck. Those 400 square feet, with a camp stove for a kitchen, was home to the entire family for four years while they built their house.

“It was definitely cramped, but somehow it was fun,” says Koefoed, a kinetic, birdlike woman with cropped hair that accentuates her striking cheekbones and determined jaw. “I’ve wanted to be a farmer my whole life. I grew up on land like this, in Danville, so it was like coming home for me.”

But four years into owning the property, there was still no farm.

“One night I waited at the kitchen table with a bottle of wine for Eric to come home, and I just told him, ‘I’ve quit my job,’” she recounts. “I knew it wouldn’t happen unless I got up my nerve and jumped.”

SOUL PROPRIETOR

Koefoed planted 250 olive trees, rows of lavender, and a kitchen garden with a shady sitting area. It was surrounded by a fence to keep out four-legged salad bandits and “to give me just one place I could feel was orderly and contained,” she explains. She befriended local herb and vegetable farmers, and thought about what she wanted to grow. Whatever it ended up being, she knew she wanted to farm organically and sustainably, in a way that would feed the land as well as the human body and soul—thus, Soul Food Farm.

She settled on eggs. “We always had chickens on the farm, and their eggs were so good. This was the idea that took,” she explains. “Eventually I just said OK, let’s do it, and ordered hundreds of birds, because that’s what Eric said we’d need to be viable.”

Given how hard most small farmers struggle to get started, Koefoed should by rights be crowing about how her gamble has paid off. After a heartbreaking false start, when her entire flock

fell sick after she introduced new birds, she took a break and then tried again successfully. Soul Food Farm now houses 500 laying hens, with another 900 close to maturity. They’re free to roam in and out of their laying house and around several enclosed fields, happily pecking at bugs, pebbles, and grass in addition to the custom mixture of organic grains they eat.

The flock is a mix of several American Conservancy breeds, including Leghorns with proud red cocks and paper-white bodies, and Araucanas, brown with yellow-flecked heads. Koefoed tells how the Araucanas get no respect from the other chickens. “There really is a pecking order,” she says. However they lay a bluish-green jewel of an egg that consumers love.

The 210 dozen pastured eggs, with their firm, bright-orange yolks, that her chickens lay every week are highly sought after by top East Bay chefs: Chez Panisse takes the rooster’s share, followed by Ici, Eccolo, Café Rouge, and Lalimes.

Ici owner Mary Canales says that they buy eggs from several farms to make their organic ice cream, but “we can tell which are hers. The Soul Food eggs are so rich and sort of dense, with such a deep color for the yolks,” she marvels, adding that Ici tries to reserve Koefoed’s eggs for the lemon ice cream, for example, because they stand up well to the lemon juice, rather than have them overwhelm already rich flavors such as hazelnut or coconut.

TASTES LIKE REAL CHICKEN

Earlier this year Chez Panisse chef Cal Peternell was looking for a new chicken supplier, preferably an organic one. The few small farmers in the area raising chickens could barely keep up with demand, and he didn’t want to resort to Petaluma Poultry’s Rosie, which is a “pretty commercial, factory product,” he explains. He suggested to Koefoed that she branch out into broiler (or “meat”) chickens.

She was game, delivering the first batch to the restaurant in May. Peternell had suggested she just try 50 and see whether they met the restaurant’s exacting standards. “She said, ‘But Cal, how could they not be great? They’re eating bugs and salad and organic grains,’” he laughs. “And she was right, they’ve been great.”

As seems typical for her, Koefoed has leapt feet-first into the new venture, and already has 1,600 meat birds in various stages

of development. She's following the "salad bar" model espoused by Joel Salatin, the Polyface farmer lionized in Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma*. The day-old chicks, currently Red Broilers, arrive by mail and start out in incubator pens. At about one month, they're transferred to "chicken tractors," low-slung, roofed enclosures on wheels that can be moved daily to fresh grass and dirt, spreading all-natural, nitrogen-rich fertilizer as they go. At 10 weeks, when they're hardier and a less-tempting snack for predators, Koefoed lets them roam freely. The birds are slaughtered by a small Sacramento processing house at around 12 weeks—in contrast to the industrial poultry industry, which has selectively bred Cornish Cross chickens that can balloon to market weight in just eight weeks in confinement.

The Soul Food chickens are different in other ways. "They're certainly more flavorful, no question of that, and it's a more distinctive flavor and texture than a factory chicken," says Peternell. "They seem very—I don't know how else to put this—*real*. They taste like what they are: birds that walk around, that aren't just in a cage."

Currently, the Soul Food chickens are available only in restaurants or to members of the Bay Area Meat CSA. (Disclosure: this writer founded BAMCSA, and although it is now a project of Slow Food Berkeley, she is still actively involved.) However, soon you'll be able to buy the chickens at Prather Ranch's store in the Ferry Building. The eggs can be found at the Napa farmers' market on Tuesday, the Capay Valley Farm Shop in Vacaville, Cafe Rouge butcher shop in Berkeley, and through BAMCSA.

SOWING INSPIRATION

Don't even try to tell Koefoed where else she could or should distribute—she has more demand than she can handle. Her husband kept his day job, and she typically works 13-hour days. Until recently, she only had one part-time employee, a friend who helped collect and wash the day's 30 dozen eggs *by hand*. (The egg-washing machine Koefoed covets costs \$7,000.) Recently, she hired two men to assist her three days a week with the hardest chores.

"This is backbreaking work," she says. "I do it because I love it. This is not a profession to get rich in."

Not long ago, Koefoed and her husband took the family to eat at Chez Panisse, where the restaurant was serving a soft-boiled Soul Food Farm egg cradled on a bed of tender lettuces. Something clicked for her two teenage daughters and son, and they "finally realized this is why Mom works so hard; this is where her food ends up."

She pauses for a minute to savor the memory of that moment—or maybe just the meal.

"You know, I could tell my kids a lot of things, but they needed to see their parents living their dreams," she muses. "I want them to remember that we followed our passion." ♡

Bay Area freelance writer Bonnie Azab Powell cofounded the food-politics blog the Ethicurean and started the Bay Area Meat CSA, now a project of Slow Food Berkeley with over 200 members. She is enjoying her transition from technology geek to farm groupie.



A pastured bird has such great flavor that it's a shame to overwhelm it with sauce or anything else.

SIMPLE ROAST CHICKEN

Set oven to 375°.

Cut off feet at knee joint as well as head, if applicable. Trim and discard any extra fat from around cavity entrance and neck. Rinse and pat chicken dry.

Season well inside and out with salt and pepper, and stuff cavity with half a lemon and whole sprigs of herbs such as sage, thyme, and/or rosemary.

Truss the bird's feet together with butcher twine.

Heat a heavy, oven-safe roasting pan and add 2 tablespoons olive or peanut oil. Brown the chicken on medium heat on all sides. Turn breast-side up, and place pan in oven; Roast for 20 minutes. Add 2 tablespoons butter to pan and baste regularly over the next 30 minutes or so, until the meat measures 165° at the thigh. Remove from oven. Let rest for 10 minutes or so. Remove citrus and seasoning from cavity. Carve and serve. Use carcass for stock along with feet and head.