

FARM TO TABLE

POULETIER

BY CANDICE WOO

I will begin by admitting that until very recently, chicken was never high on my preferred eating list. Chicken breast was always too dry to even consider, and when I'd have the occasional chicken leg or thigh, I'd doctor it up with seasonings and sauces to provide much-needed flavor. Growing up, I thought the phrase *tastes like chicken* meant the same as tasting bad and bland. And now, as I'm trying to make more thoughtful choices in my consumption habits, I'm finding that most standard supermarket chickens—bred in factory farms to grow faster and fatter using artificial methods under deplorable conditions—are just not much worth eating.

Everything changed when I met Curtis Womach. A beer brewer by trade, Curtis was considering a move to Colorado, where he hoped to buy a piece of land on which to live with his wife and two young sons. He signed up for a course in holistic range management, based on research and applied practices developed by biologist Allan Savory, hoping to learn about sustainable methods that could help him raise animals on his property in both environmentally and economically beneficial ways. The move never materialized but a career change did, and Curtis began his new life as a chicken rancher on a portion of grassy hillside in Descanso, about an hour from San Diego, where he would pasture his first group of Cornish Cross chickens, a breed cultivated for meat production.

Though he hopes to one day also be a pastured poultry source for local restaurants, he currently only sells direct to consumers, which he has done almost every Sunday since late 2008 at both the Hillcrest and Solana Beach farmers' markets.

A soft-spoken, amiable guy, Curtis patiently explains how he raises and feeds his birds. His chickens share very few common experiences with those on large-scale commodity farms and even differ from others labeled with vague and sometimes misleading terms such as *free-range* and *natural*. Though the USDA does require that chickens have some access to the outdoors in order to be certified as "free-range," the amount and conditions of this outdoor time is not heavily regulated. In contrast, Womach chickens spend all of their lives outside, on grass, save for a brief period in a brooder when they first arrive as day-old chicks. And though "natural" chickens cannot have artificial or synthetic additives, the designation does not prohibit treatment processes such as enhancing the meat with salt water or broth for tenderness and taste. The poultry on Curtis' farm eats fresh grass and whatever bugs and worms they find in their outdoor ecosystem, only supplemented

by a bit of organic, completely vegetarian feed from Modesto, California.

This dedication and commitment to a thoughtfully raised animal requires more time; Curtis currently works on the farm single-handedly, every day. It also costs more money; his chickens run \$4 to \$5

Photograph: Doug Gates



Curtis Womach

a pound, about \$20 for each whole bird. I took one home to test if I could taste the difference.

Sensing that I didn't need to go through all my usual machinations with this higher-quality bird, I prepped it simply, rubbing just a little herb compound butter onto the meat. To ensure crisp skin, I butterflied the chicken for maximum meat-to-heat exposure and laid it on a broiling pan, which I set atop a baking dish of sliced potatoes and onions. As the chicken roasted, its juices seasoned and basted the vegetables below. The result was, hands-down, the best chicken I have ever eaten. A table full of friends all agreed. And as much as I'd have liked to chalk it up to my cooking skills, I know that what the chicken was fed and how it was raised had everything to do with how it tasted and that I would rather eat one fantastic chicken for the price of four mediocre ones.

In January, Curtis moved his growing chicken business onto a former apple orchard in Julian whose owner, Albert Lewis, lives with his wife on the property and follows a similar Permaculture system as he rears a herd of goats. Taking inspiration from Joel Salatin, a farmer and author featured prominently in Michael Pollan's *Omnivore's Dilemma*, who has been very successful with this method of pasture-raised poultry, Curtis built a homemade, mobile chicken coop, which allows the chickens to forage and peck freely on the grass yet still be protected from predators by the roof and sides of the shelter and an electric fence which borders their surrounding one-acre pasture. The portable nature of the coop ensures that the grazing area gets rotated daily, enabling each square to refresh and renew, cleaned of pests by the chickens and enriched by the organic fertilizer they provide. In this environment, chickens come to processing size in about eight weeks; in factory farms, where they are overcrowded in cages and pumped with hormones, the chicken come up to size much more quickly.

Some friends and I visited the farm on one sunny Saturday, the day when Curtis preps the chickens for the next day's markets. This was by design, though it was not exactly a pleasant prospect. But I had the opportunity to experience the process and felt compelled to do so because I've made the personal choice to eat meat. And I do feel strongly about the manner in which an animal is treated and the way it is killed.

After we arrive, Curtis gets to work in his home-built processing trailer. The trailer holds some mechanical equipment to help with the de-feathering, but most of the process, from start to finish, is done by hand. He asks me and a friend if we are ready—or willing—to participate and I first spend some time in the back of the trailer, cleaning some fresh chickens to prepare them for packaging before our moment arrives. I am briefly overwhelmed, concerned with understanding Curtis' exact instructions in order to make the movement as stress-free and humane as possible. The act itself is quick and thorough; nothing goes to waste. The feathers and other trimmings are composted and returned to the soil, the giblets are saved and the chicken feet are used for making chicken stock.

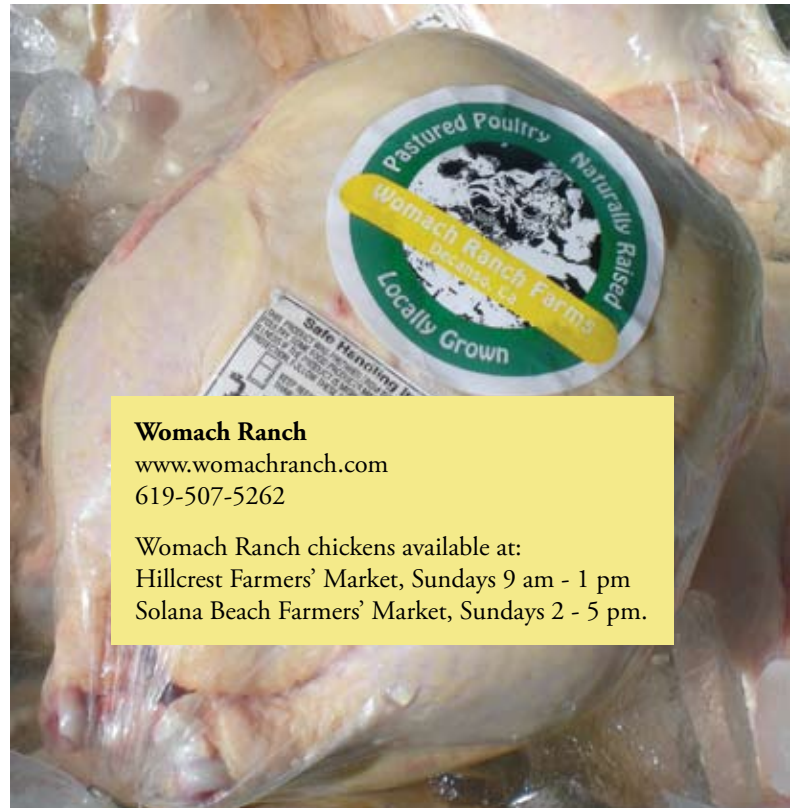
Albert, Curtis' young landlord, comes up from his house trailed by his friendly dog, Hawk, to take us down a short path to where their jointly owned pastured goats graze and his obvious enthusiasm for sustainable ranching and farm living is wonderful to hear and see. He was once based in Little Italy, where he operated his hemp products company before he moved to the country, first to Descanso and now onto these 17 acres in Julian. He provides hemp napkins to local restaurants, including The Linkery and Sea Rocket Bistro, and

is planning to expand his relationship with The Linkery by raising goats to add to the restaurant's pastured meat options. He leads us into the forage area, a large space surrounded by agricultural fence where 20 various-sized Boer goats, dappled brown and white, rest and eat. Some stand on their hind legs to reach the delicious leaves of old apple trees while others sit on their bellies and munch on the grass.

Like Curtis' chickens, the goats' grazing space is rotated frequently to provide them with fresh food and allow the ground to replenish itself. When the goats are ready, Albert and Curtis hope to supply other area restaurants with locally pastured meat and possibly form a meat Community Supported Agriculture Subscription CSA. The men aspire to make their small foodshed the source of many local products; there is already a lilac grove and Albert plans to plant grapevines. Curtis is starting to raise hens for pastured eggs and will soon start with turkeys. He's even considering getting back to his brewer's roots with a brewery in a row of shops that line the north end of the property.

It seemed important, and appropriate, that I take my own chicken home and so I did. I cooked it, again very simply, and determined that the first time was not a fluke, but that it was truly the best I've ever had. I had an especially acute feeling of not wanting to waste even a little bit of this well-tended bird, so I sautéed the giblets as a snack, spreading the creamy chicken livers on grilled bread from a nearby bakery, and used the leftover chicken carcass to make a rich, flavorful soup with farmers' market vegetables, feeling incredibly grateful to be able to eat local and eat so well.

Candice Woo is a local freelance food writer who has a weekly restaurant review column in San Diego CityBeat and is a regular contributor to Edible San Diego. She also serves on the board of Slow Food Urban San Diego, nonprofit group that supports local farmers, growers and food artisans and works to provide access to good, clean and fair food for all.



Womach Ranch

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Womach Ranch chickens available at:
Hillcrest Farmers' Market, Sundays 9 am - 1 pm
Solana Beach Farmers' Market, Sundays 2 - 5 pm.