

Red Barn Farm

Our first stop is a free-range chicken farm just outside of George.

A small Jack Russell greets us with a grin, tail wagging, when we arrive at the Red Barn Farm in the afternoon. I'm sure the dog is not a youngster any longer; over the years she has obviously adopted the open-heartedness of her owners. We are welcomed by Lindy Jo Gordon-Brown, owner of the farm. Elegant, articulate and dynamic. Without preamble she starts telling us how the free-range chicken farm had its beginning.

"After my divorce I sat with this farm. It's not a big farm and I racked my brains as to what I could do here to make a living. A free-range chicken farm was perfect for the land that I have. After I studied under Herman Beck-Chenoweth, I started Red Barn Farm four years ago."

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Herman Beck-Chenoweth is a Mormon who employs a variety of free-range methods that are generations old, and he also teaches others. According to his blog (http://free-range-poultry.com/?page_id=13) free-range means the following: It is system where the movement of animals is not confined. A perimeter fence is erected to deter predators. At night, when predators are at their busiest, there is provision for the birds in protected units, or houses, where they can sleep safely. The animals are left through the night to scratch and sit as they wish, but there is protection against the sun and rain. The fact that the animals can freely roam assists in the development of muscle tone. And that's what we eat, after all. The muscles. Free-range meat has very firm but smooth muscles. Second to none.

It is swelteringly hot during our visit to Red Barn and we find the chickens huddled under a shade-tree in the camp. Lindy tells us that she did not sleep a wink the previous night, because there was a badger, lynx or caracal that disturbed the birds. "These animals can destroy 20 of your hens in one night. It's big damage."

Speaking of cats... Much has been written about predator management and how farmers should apply it through responsible management of the environment. To farm is a continual dance with nature. The farmer wants to tame nature, and nature wants to dance her wild dance. According to Lindy they use cat-friendly cages, in other words the cat will not be killed during the process of capture. What to do with the cat then

is something else. She usually takes them to the nearest reserve and releases them. Donkeys are another method that works very well. Red Barn Farm has two donkeys housed in the camp just below the chickens. They are very protective of the chickens, but at times a cat manages to con a donkey, and then you've had it. She has even ordered strong night lights from the US – her neighbours thought she was celebrating Christmas early – but to no avail. "South African cats don't frighten easily," she jokingly says.

It comes down to a process of elimination, literally, until one discovers the right method that works for a specific predator. The last option stands to reason.

Red Barn Farm farms with broiler as well as laying chickens. The laying chicken breed that fits well into the environment and produces excellent edible meat is the indigenous Boschveld breed bred by Mike Bosch in Limpopo. "It is a combination of Ovambo, Venda and Matabele breeds suitable for the South African region," says Lindy. "They are very clever free-range fowls that are not ideal as laying chickens, but are well-adapted to our environment. The chickens lay an egg every three days, less than other breeds, but they keep laying for about three years. Some of my hens are five years old already and still lay eggs. Other breeds do not produce for longer than a year. We also farm with fertilised eggs as a source of extra income."

From time to time the hens go through a phase where they do not want to lay. This can be caused by a variety of reasons. The hen is too old or she may have had a fright. During the winter months the hens lose their feathers and lay 50% less eggs. Usually the first eggs laid after that, are very big. During spring some of the hens become broody and do not want to leave the nest. Their rears are then dipped in cold water, which gets them going again.

The broiler chicks are completely free-range bred. Their feet never touch concrete. Epol mixes a special feed for the chickens and they use natural herbs instead of antibiotics. According to Lindy marjoram and aloes are especially suitable for this purpose.

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The way in which the chickens are slaughtered makes a massive difference to the taste of the end-product. "These chickens supply us with a living, and we owe it to them to slaughter them as stress-free as possible. I believe that any animal that is transported to the abattoir on a truck is well



| Houses are moved regularly



| Now that's a free range chicken!



| Houses are specifically designed for the chickens



| Not even a chicken can stand this heat



| The Red Barn Farm

aware of the fact. The hormones released during this 'death trip' definitely affects the taste. Our chickens are slaughtered nearby, so it has no effect on them. Those that are slaughtered here, are shocked into unconsciousness, and they are blissfully unaware of the rest. They are then bled and processed," Lindy explains.

I can personally vouch for the fact that all these methods improve the taste of the chicken after we grilled one in the oven for Sunday lunch. It was heavenly.

Lindy also has a very different approach when it comes to marketing and sales. None of their products are supplied to chain stores. She uses the Internet to supply to the public, chefs and selected butcheries: "People form so-called chicken clubs. They chat to each other and place a combined order. We freeze the fresh meat and it is delivered to their door the following day. We supply throughout the Western and Eastern Cape." Literally from the farm to your plate. They produce more than 40 different products and use every part of the animal. Dog food is produced from the chicken bones, livers and hearts and the fat is cooked away to produce a wonderful 'schmaltz'. Even the chicken manure is sold as Kuku Poo Poo to gardeners as fertiliser.

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Lindy mentions other products available to clients along with the chickens: "There are a few artisan farmers who supply to us. One farmer supplies beef, and another pork. We make sausage and minced meat which we sell with the chicken. All our products come from the smaller, specialised farms."

What makes this farm even more interesting is that mostly women are used to do the work. According to Lindy women have a more natural feel for animals and are quicker to sense if there are any problems with the birds.

Birds of another feather

Speaking of bird health... On Saturday morning we hit the road to De Rust where the Delports of Middelplaas farm ostriches, amongst others. It is a dreary day and a welcome relief after yesterday's heat. I am looking forward to see how the ostrich industry growth compares to that of free-range chickens.

In the past the Little Karoo was a