

Small Farms, Big Impact

Pitman Farms Makes Waves in Poultry World

by LAUREN TURNER

In the rather sleepy town of Sanger, in the central valley of California, a small family-run poultry farm has steadily gained notoriety for their quality products raised using humane and environmentally friendly farming practices. Theirs is a blend of modern technology and old-fashioned values.

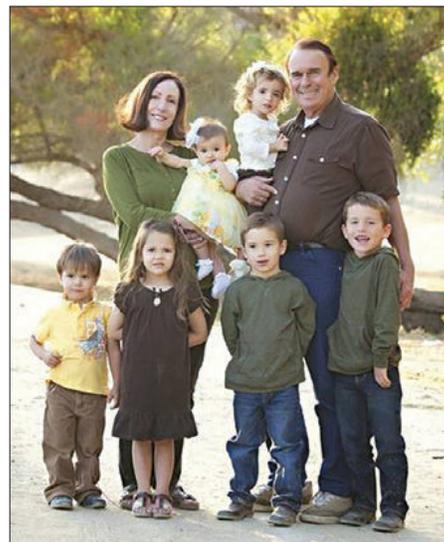
Pitman Farms consists of a composite of six small ranches in close proximity to each other. Rick Pitman's father started the farm in 1954. Rick and Mary Pitman are the second generation to run the family farm. Their sons David and Ben are the third, "working on the fourth," says Mary. David shares farming duties with Rick, while Ben tends to public relations and education. Ben produces all of the farm's brochures and graphics, and he created and manages their multiple websites.



When Pitman Farms started, they raised turkeys under contract to an industrial producer. Back then poultry was raised "free-range" everywhere, before free-range became a modern-day trend.

Following a nationwide shift in farming practices, the company the Pitmans contracted with gradually imposed requirements that forced the farmers to confine the turkeys and to put additives such as antibiotics into their feed. The Pitmans had previously grown their own feed, and they were no longer allowed to do so under their contract.

Concurrently with the changes occurring in how food was grown, Mary Pitman had suffered for years from illness she eventually determined was food-related. She began searching for nutritious and healthy food for her family more than 25 years ago. She studied nutrition for years, and became



Rick and Mary with the fourth Pitman Farms generation.

an avid label reader. She investigated the ingredients of every product she purchased. When she discovered that the meat and eggs of commercially raised turkeys contained antibiotics and other additives, she vowed to create a healthy alternative. She wanted whole foods, not food that had been altered, and the family farm was in a position to provide them.

Rick decided he would raise turkeys independently and create his own label.

He quit contracting with his commercial grower, and in 1998 he raised 5,000 turkeys on his own. He was inspired by Mary's passion for nutritious food, and so the Mary's Free-Range Turkey label was born. It was in fact, Rick's 25th wedding anniversary present to her.

Rick and Mary's son David had been studying agriculture at the California Polytechnic College (Cal Poly) in San Luis Obispo. During that time David had encouraged Rick and Mary to process their own turkeys, and he recommended adding chickens to give them a year-round market. During his college years, he started five chicken farms back home in Sanger. He graduated in 2002, joining Rick in running the farm and expanding their product line.

The Pitman's first turkey customer in 1998 was Natural Grocers/Vitamin Cottage in Colorado. They had 10 stores then, and Mary's Turkeys were



PHOTOS COURTESY OF PITMAN FARMS

A flock of Mary's pastured chickens enjoying lush grass.

the first food item they added to their products. Mary's free-range turkeys were the Pitman's only product at the time. The two companies have grown alongside each other. Today Mary's Free Range poultry products include organic and free-range turkeys, chickens, geese, ducks and Cornish game hens. Natural Grocers has expanded to 85 stores, and they added Mary's non-GMO chicken line to their stores in 2014.

The Pitmans are now leaders in growing food the way it was – "just chicken" in a healthy environment, but their path has not been without challenges.

In 2000, the processor the Pitmans had contracted with for their new label notified them that they would be quitting in 2002. While they were grateful for having two years' notice, the Pitmans were faced with the prospect of going out of business too. When the processing plant door literally closed, another fortuitously opened. Rick began a search to purchase his own processing plant.

Rick located a plant in Los Angeles, about five hours from his farm, that would meet his needs for processing and cold storage for turkeys, that was available to rent. Mary was adamantly opposed to the idea, knowing that a plant that far away combined with what she characterizes as both her and Rick's "workaholic" habits would mean she would never see him. Rick says it was the most seriously she ever "threatened me with divorce," and she told him to look locally.

Rick was within one day of having to decide whether to sign the contract for the facility in Los Angeles when he woke up with a terrible toothache. Mary had a dentist appointment already scheduled for that day, and Rick was able to take that appointment. After the appointment, Rick stopped to see an old banker friend that was in the same office complex. Rick told the banker about the problems he had faced in searching for a local turkey processing plant and his dilemma over what looked like his only option of signing a contract for the plant in Los Angeles. The banker told Rick that he had heard of an old fruit processing plant that had just come on the mar-

ket in Sanger. Rick saw the plant on Thursday and bought it on Monday. He says he bought it all because of a toothache, and to this day he believes it was divine intervention that saved his marriage and his business.

Rick hired eight employees to convert the facility to a poultry processing plant that meets USDA processing requirements. When he opened the doors, he hired 50 more employees. Without advertising or formally announcing the jobs, he received 1,500 applications for the 50 jobs he had to fill. Today he and Mary are grateful to be able to employ hundreds.

"Our main goals are products and people – servicing customers and providing local jobs," said Mary.

HERITAGE GOBBLERS

Also in 2002, Slow Foods USA approached the Pitmans and asked them to raise 200 heritage turkeys. Heritage turkeys take more than twice as long to grow as conventional broad breasted turkeys, and the Pitmans were afraid that after they incurred the expense the turkeys wouldn't sell. Even so, they took a huge risk and raised 1,000 heritage turkeys in 2003 rather than the 200 that Slow Foods had requested. Slow Foods was only responsible to sell 200 of the turkeys, leaving the Pitmans on their own to sell the other 800 birds. All 1,000 of the heritage turkeys sold within two hours of going on the market. After that the Pitmans raised heritage turkeys as part of their regular product line. That has proven to be a wise decision as the market for heritage turkeys has grown progressively over the past several years.

The majority of turkeys sold commercially are broad-breasted whites, a hybrid bred over the past 65 years for its large breast and small legs. The birds are so top-heavy and are not able to reproduce naturally. Broad-breasted whites are typically raised in close confinement, crowded with thousands of birds, and are given antibiotics to prevent disease that is prevalent in such crowded conditions.

In contrast, heritage turkeys descend from the original wild turkey that is native to the United States. It takes twice as long to raise a heritage turkey to maturity. They range free

and forage in lots of open space. They can fly, and they breed naturally. Proponents of heritage turkeys claim that they are much more flavorful than commercial turkeys.

A major turning point for Pitman Farms came in 2005 when they signed with Whole Foods to sell their free-range and organic turkeys and free-range chickens. Organic chickens were added next, then heritage turkeys in 2008. Whole Foods provides a huge market for the quality, healthy poultry that Pitman Farms grows. They now carry all of the Pitmans' products. All of the fresh chicken behind Whole Foods counters in their southern and northern regions is Mary's non-GMO chicken, both organic and non-organic. All of the chicken in their prepared products, including rotisserie chicken, is Mary's chicken.

Pitman Farms has gone from going out of business in 2000 to being a leading producer of chicken in 2011. In 2014 Pitman Farms was awarded the number one vendor out of 80,000 vendors nationally by Whole Foods.

Today, in order to grow enough of their popular chickens to meet their customers' needs, Mary's chickens are raised on numerous small farms. Turkeys, geese, ducks and Cornish game

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hens are still raised on the Pitman farm.

Contracting the chickens helps local farmers stay in business. All of the contractors are small family-owned farms within the Sanger area. The Pitmans believe the birds need to be farmed on a small scale to do it right and to be healthy.

PREMIUM POULTRY PROCESSING

The Pitmans are devoted to raising and processing their animals humanely. Whole Foods gives Pitman Farms' chicken operation the highest animal welfare rating in the nation, and their chicken processing plant is one of only two plants in the nation backed by PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals). Working with PETA, they traveled all over Europe conducting an exhaustive study of various similar systems. They purchased the system that they and PETA determined to be the most humane. They hope to be able to purchase a similar processing plant for their turkeys in the future. All birds are processed in their plant in Sanger, California. Size and methods for chicken and turkey processing are different, so they are processed in different rooms within the plant.

The Pitmans save thousands of gallons of water by air chilling their chickens – over 30,000 gallons per day. They use an air chill process developed in Canada to individually air cool chickens and heritage turkeys, rather than another common process of dipping them collectively in cold water. This also prevents bacteria, such as salmonella, which can develop in community vats of birds. Larger turkeys and other birds require different equipment for air chilling than chickens and the smaller heritage turkeys. The Pitmans are currently saving for an air-chilled system for the larger birds.

Air chilling is a slower, and therefore more expensive process, but it results in a better quality of meat that is moister and more flavorful than water-chilled. The birds also stay fresh longer. The demand for organic, air-chilled poultry is growing as more consumers learn about its better flavor and the environmental benefits.

The operation saves fuel because all their poultry is raised within 60 miles of their processing plant. Orders are taken each morning, and that night the birds are taken off the farms and brought to the plant to process the next day. Then they are shipped out to the stores or distributors the same night. Mary's products are fresher and taste better, with the side benefit that Pitman Farms does not need to maintain expensive storage facilities.

ROOM TO ROAM & HIGH-QUALITY FEED

All of their birds also have room to roam – four times more than conventional birds. The birds are not confined, but allowed to roam freely between covered shelter and outdoor areas.

The farm does not have the typical poultry manure smell about it. It is an ultra-clean environment. Six to 8-inch tall rice hull pads are used to absorb waste in the sheltered areas. They keep well and are changed frequently. Fans circulate air in the covered areas. The pH of the padded areas is monitored three times per day and kept within a healthy range.

The Pitmans add new products each year – they are constantly adding, reinventing themselves. In 2014 they started their own line of organic pet food.

The Pitmans strive to keep their operation contained within a small geographic area. They are not so interested in getting big as in “doing it right.” They built their own hatchery three years ago. They grow a small amount of their own corn and purchase other grain locally as much as possible. They once milled their own feed at Western Grain and Milling built by Rick's father in 1948 in nearby Madera, California. They have since closed that mill and recently purchased a larger, more modern mill in Hanford, California, where they mill all of their feed. While their end products are widely distributed, such actions as building a hatchery, purchasing and milling local grains and adding jobs demonstrate the Pitman Farms' belief in supporting local.

Years ago they stopped using Styrofoam packaging for tray packs in favor



One of Mary's turkeys in full regalia.

of a formed, filled and sealed biodegradable plastic wrap. For shipping, David spent three years designing a packing box that is biodegradable but can withstand the stress of being stacked. The boxes are 100 percent recyclable and are made from 80 percent recycled cardboard.

They sell their manure to Earthbound Farms, where it is composted and applied to organic lettuce crops. The feathers are sold to a company that produces and sells compost to local farmers for use on their fields.

COMMITMENT TO NON-GMO

Pitman Farm's non-GMO Project verification designation is part of protecting the environment as well as providing healthy feed to their poultry. Every incoming load of corn and soybeans to be used in the feed of their non-GMO project verified product line is tested for GMOs before unloading it at their mill and is only used when it meets non-GMO Project Verified strict standards.

All of Mary's poultry receives the highest quality feed available, and all is antibiotic- and preservative-free. About two-thirds of their products are non-GMO and account for the larger part of their sales. Their long-term goal is for all their feed to be non-GMO. Non-GMO feed is more expensive to produce and drought for the past few years has negatively affected the availability of non-GMO corn and soybeans. In order to increase availability of non-GMO feed, more farmers need to convert.

Mary's was the first in the nation to carry the non-GMO verified label for non-organic and organic chicken. The Pitmans' son Ben worked with USDA

to develop and write the specifications for non-GMO project verified status. He also designed the label. Mary's turkey, chicken and duck websites have a page devoted to educating consumers about GMOs. Ben has produced a Power Point presentation that includes a slide with lots of information about GMOs. The Power Point is shown to buyers and is used to train and educate meat managers and meat department employees in stores. Rick believes that education is the key to increasing consumers' desire for non-GMO products.

Living their values, the Pitmans have enjoyed tremendous success. The family's collective energy is invested in a livelihood that includes caring for their animals, land, neighbors and each other.

Nearly bankrupt a mere 15 years ago; they are now leaders among small poultry producers. About 150,000 Mary's turkeys graced tables across the United States during the 2014 holiday season.

The Pitmans attribute their success to running a clean operation,

providing quality food, reinvesting in their business, willingness to constantly change and listening to their customers and delivering what they want. They are a small company not afraid to take big risks for their beliefs.

Lauren Turner is a freelance writer specializing in agricultural, environmental and community topics. She retired from a 30-year career with the U.S. Forest Service, where she worked as a wildlife biologist, ecosystem manager and district ranger. An avid organic gardener, she lives in Sequim, Washington, with her husband and their three cats.