

The 'free-range' fallacy

By Lindsae Paterson

When you think free-range, you think of chickens running around the barnyard, pecking for grubs and grass with plenty of fresh air, sunshine and space to roam, right? Well think again.

The term 'free-range' simply means that chickens have access to the outdoors, which could be as little as five minutes a day. So-called free-range chickens do not spend their days in a barnyard, nor do they return to a comfortable roost in the coop at night. In most cases, chickens raised for meat are kept in over crowded conditions with limited access to the outdoors.

Consumers looking for healthier protein sources from animals, which have been raised in more humane conditions than industrial poultry factories, are seeking out free-range and paying a premium for it, but are they getting what they are paying for? Unless they are buying from a farm, farmers market or a reliable butcher, they are buying factory-raised chickens simply labeled 'free-range.' In Canada, the labels 'free-range' and 'free-run' aren't regulated at all. Apart from the 'open door,' no other criteria, such as environmental quality, number of birds or space per bird, are included in the term 'free-range.' Birds raised for meat may be sold as free-range if they have access to the outdoors. The door may be open for only five minutes a day and the factory still qualifies as free-range.

Chicken is big business. Canada produced more than 980 million kilograms of chicken in 2013, 99 per cent of it factory raised. 'The first thing one needs to know about labels such as 'free-range' and 'free-run,' is that legally, they mean very little,' Dr. Charles Olentine, editor of Egg Industry magazine, observed. 'There are no laws specifying what these labels constitute, and hence, no third-party certification to ensure that rules are followed. Factories that use the 'free-range' label are simply put on the honour system and expected to regulate themselves.'

Even though free-range breeding is not regulated, small-scale farmers are, in that they are limited to a flock of 300.

As consumers are increasingly demanding locally raised chickens who peck at grass and are reared on sunlight, the country's strict supply management system has made it all but impossible for small-scale farmers to compete with a concentrated number of large-scale chicken producers. If a farmer wants to grow his flock beyond the 300-bird limit, he must purchase a quota; the minimum is 14,000 production units, equivalent to approximately 90,000 chickens per year, at an estimated cost of about \$1.75 million.

'Raising just 300 chickens isn't worth it,' Meaford-area farmer Gerald Te Velde said. 'For small farms to make chicken a viable enterprise, 300 birds aren't going to do a whole lot. It's hardly a hobby and buying the 14,000 minimum quota just isn't an option. Aside from the financial outlay, that's too many birds for my operation.'

Small-scale farmers in Ontario have banded together and formed The Practical Farmers of Ontario. They have launched a campaign to get The Chicken Farmers of Ontario to increase the number of meat chickens farmers can produce annually without quota from 300 to 2,000.

The production limit of 300 birds per year is not economically sustainable for most small, diversified farms. The quota minimum amounting to 90,000-plus birds per year is far beyond what these same farms can afford to purchase or even want to produce. And just how do you go from raising 300 free-range chickens to 90,000 free-range chickens? You don't. So if you want free-range chickens that peck and forage for grass and grubs and are raised in humane conditions, don't pay a premium at the grocery store for so-called free-range chicken, visit a small-scale, local farm.

There are many small-scale, ethical farmers in the Caledon area raising free-range chickens, turkeys, eggs, lamb, beef plus cheese, vegetables and many more products all available for purchase from the farms.

Donnyweir Poultry Farm, Spiritwood Farm, Heatherlea Farm Market and Landman Gardens and Bakery are just a few of the many. The Eat Local Caledon website has a comprehensive list of small-scale, ethical farmers in the Caledon area.

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