



Notes From the Pea Patch

Foxtail Community Farm ~ Vol. 11, No. 3 ~ January 10, 2016

Farmer's Notebook

It's chicken day, and since in December I wrote about the stew hens you received in last month's share, I thought it would be fitting to provide some education about the broiler/roaster meat birds in this month's shares. While they may look about the same in their neat plastic bagging, they are truly birds of a different feather from the laying hens we enjoyed in last month's stew pot.

Chickens raised for meat have different ideal characteristics than those raised for eggs. Good laying hens grow slowly and have small bodies, putting less energy into developing and maintaining muscle mass, but also converting feed to weight gain somewhat inefficiently. Meat birds grow quickly, convert feed to muscle mass very efficiently and generally have broader (meatier) breasts. Then there's the good old-fashioned dual purpose birds - hardy breeds that fall between the two, providing decent egg production with enough meat on their bones to allow some birds (usually roosters or retired laying hens) to be culled for meat. (As a side note, all our laying hens are actually classified as dual-purpose birds, since the commercial laying breeds in our opinion have been over-bred and are not well-suited to life foraging on pasture).

When it comes to meat birds, farmers have a decision to make. Virtually all farms (and even most backyard chicken raisers) opt for the Cornish Cross (CX), a hybrid breed selected for extremely fast growth, extremely efficient feed-to-weight conversion and easily-plucked white feathers that dominates both the commercial and small farm market. A CX reaches butchering size (~4# dressed weight) by 6 weeks of age! The problem with this breed, in addition to its lackluster taste and texture, is that its massive growth comes at the expense of compromised hardiness in most other aspects - weak skeletal, cardiac and

~ continued on reverse ~

This Week's Harvest

our best guess for what will be in this week's share boxes - subject to change at packing time:



blue potatoes - blue potatoes? You bet! This fun Adirondack Blue variety has a nutty flavor, firm waxy texture and distinctive purplish-blue color

that will be retained when baked, roasted or fried (boiling will fade the color). We often roast them in a mix with bright orange carrots, they are also fun for making homemade potato chips. These are from our own fields. Store in a cool, dark area or in the refrigerator.

butternut squash~ Rachel's favorite vegetable! Rich and nutty flavor. Can be easily roasted whole or halved, or peeled and diced for a wide range of preparations. Store in a cool, dry place (a cupboard with good air circulation works well).



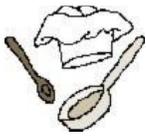
rutabaga - maybe nobody's favorite vegetable, but it really is good when you get to know it - and since our fall root crops were less prolific this year than previous seasons, we should savor what we have. Rutabaga are bigger, denser, yellower and sweeter than their turnip cousins. Store in fridge. To prepare, wash and trim the top and bottom, peel if desired. Use as you would other root vegetables - boiled, roasted, mashed, braised or in soups, stews or gratins.

Also...

carrots ~ garlic ~

lettuce ~ onions ~ spinach

see the winter crop guide included with the December 12 2015 (Vol 11, No 1) newsletter for additional descriptions of winter crops.



Recipe of the Week: Roasted Rutabaga with Guinness Glaze

I can't wait to try this recipe, from the fabulous Beekman Boys out in Sharon Springs. Josh notes, "Guinness gives the already slightly peppery rutabaga a mildly bitter edge that's tamed by the addition of brown sugar."

- 1 1/3 cups Guinness stout
- 1/3 cup extra virgin olive oil
- 3 1/2 tbs packed brown sugar
- 1 tsp kosher salt
- 1/2 tsp freshly ground black pepper
- 3 1/2 pounds small rutabagas, peeled and cut into 1" chunks



Photo credit
beekman802.com

Preheat the oven to 400°F. In a large bowl, whisk together the Guinness, oil, brown sugar, salt, and pepper. Add the rutabagas and toss to coat. Transfer to a roasting pan and roast for 50 minutes, tossing occasionally, until tender. As the Guinness evaporates, the oil should give the rutabagas a glossy finish. Serve warm.

One More: Popcorn Potatoes

I'm indebted to our friends and fellow farmers Chris & Samantha Kemnah for suggesting the novel combination for this fun & tasty snack. Extra fun with blue potatoes!

Scrub and trim a bunch of potatoes (leave peels on). Depending on size, cut potatoes into quarters, halves or leave whole to make generous bite-sized pieces – try to make the sizes relatively uniform to promote even roasting.

Heat oven to 400°F. Put a few spoonfuls of coconut oil (solid at room temperature) in a baking dish or rimmed pan and place dish in oven to melt the oil. Remove pan from oven, add potatoes and toss to coat with oil. Sprinkle generously with coarse salt and fennel seeds. Return to oven and roast for ~20+ minutes until brown and slightly crispy, stirring every 10 minutes or so. Gobble up.

~ Farmer's Notebook, continued from front ~

immune systems, poor foraging instincts and extreme stupidity. In typical commercial confinement operations, these birds require lots of antibiotics to keep them alive to butchering age, and are plagued with broken legs and tendons that simply buckle under their rapidly growing, top-heavy bodies. From what we've read and observed, they can do better on smaller farms when raised on pasture without growth hormones and antibiotics, but still have high mortality and leg problems.

Despite these many negatives, nearly all farms that raise chickens for meat – even small organic farms – go with the CX. The profit margin on raising meat birds is extremely thin, and the extra cost to feed birds that take longer to reach marketable size, coupled with less efficient feed to weight conversion, makes it hard to justify choosing anything else.

But as we've often noted about ourselves, we like to do things the hard way. So we have chosen to raise a different meat bird breed with the cool name "Freedom Ranger". Developed from European breeding stock, FRs grow slower than CX (ours take about 9-10 weeks to reach butchering size), with a narrower breast more proportionate to their leg size, a little more fat and notably better flavor and texture. They also have more natural chicken foraging behavior – they go crazy chasing bugs, digging up grubs and pulling up weeds when we move their large open-bottomed hoop-coops to fresh pasture each day.

We've now raised more than a dozen broods of FRs with minimal mortality or other issues – the birds appear to enjoy their chicken life. We would probably make more money raising CX, but the FRs are a better fit for our farming values and they produce much better meat. The whole frozen chickens delivered in this month's chicken shares were raised on the farm last summer and fall. They are outstanding roasted whole, or can be cut up to fry, broil, braise or grill for any of your favorite chicken dishes. Enjoy!

~ Rachel