



# Primary Plus

A SECTION TARGETTED AT FARMER-DIRECTED PROCESSING, RETAILING AND PRODUCT PROMOTION

## Building a market around chicken choice

It's no long just about kitchen preparation. For the Maders, it is about selling the raising.

There has always been many ways to prepare chicken meat: roasted, broasted, pan-fried, stir-fried, deep-fried, barbecued or stewed with dumplings – just to name a few.

Now consumers have far more options in how their chicken is raised.

Nick Ahren at Yorkshire Valley Farms said his family and the Ambler family, both from the Peterborough area, may be Canada's largest suppliers of organic chicken. Together with other farm families, they're marketing from 16,000 to 19,000 birds per week – much of that to the Greater Toronto Area.

There was a significant investment to launch the business back in the fall of 2010 and considerable risk. Ahrens said there's ample room for other farmers to get into the business.

"I think collectively we're all growing the market. I think that's great. It means more people are eating healthier chicken," he said.

Many involved are producing chickens in small numbers – fewer than 300 a year – outside of the marketing board system.

That's where Don and Linda Mader fit. They're looking to produce two 150-bird batches this year, along with some turkeys, using the pastured system popularized by Joel Salatin at Polyface Farm in Virginia.

Don Mader isn't new to



Moved outdoors at two-weeks-olds, it didn't take long for the Mader chickens to adjust to their outdoor environment.

poultry. The bantam birds that have the run of the farmstead at the Mader farm near Innerkip in Oxford County are descended from bantams he kept as a boy near Breslau.

He said the pastured poultry sideline may be small but it's a step to making a small farm pay.

Don and Linda have 120 acres and have been fully certified as organic producers since 2012.

Don son's Bruce bought a second small farm a few miles away.

"My boy wanted to farm and we had to look at value-added. Organic is extra work and extra

management," Don said.

"If chickens do not work we won't be out much. Our capital costs were just \$120 for some lumber."

Linda helped promote chicken sales by arranging for a Facebook page that features a draw for a free chicken. Bruce pre-sold some of the chickens to fellow employees at the factory where he works.

They're to be processed at Gorrie. Don said Ontario prices range from around \$4 to \$8 per pound. He's aiming at the midway point.

The chickens were started inside the family's bank barn and placed outside at two weeks of age into enclosed field shelters that are moved daily across a small pasture. There are 75 birds per shelter to start with. These will be split into groups of 75 and then split again.

The Maders expect they'll finish in eight or nine weeks at four or five pounds dressed weight.

While they may mix their own feed in the future, the Maders are buying organic feed



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from Jones Feed Mill. Don understands the broilers can pick up about 15 per cent of their nutritional needs from the pasture while with turkeys it can be as high as 40 per cent.

"Even if it's cold, they seem to like it better outside," he said.

The couple has yet to taste a pastured chicken. They're planning a family cook-off to make a comparison with conventional.

Back at Yorkshire Valley Farms Nick Ahren said there is a difference between their organic chicken and the conventionally raised type.

"From the feedback we get from customers and my opinion, the taste is the biggest seller."

Yorkshire Valley chickens have close to double the space as compared to those in conventional operations. The feed, primarily corn and soybeans, is organically certified and no antibiotics are used.

The birds have natural light inside and outdoor access to a paddock area, weather permitting.

While retail prices vary, they're often about double compared to conventional.

Ahrens said his father, Thomas, and Tony Ambler were instrumental in founding the business.

Thomas had been farming organically. Tony had experience as a broiler producer. They saw there were organic milk, eggs and other products on the market and decided, after taking a close look at the US industry, that organic chicken production held promise.

The choices do not end there.

Chicken Farmers of Canada lists many different terms used to describe production, everything from free run and free range to raised without antibiotics and raised without animal byproducts.

Interested Ontario consumers can look for alternatives with an internet search. Trying plugging in the words "organic chicken, Ontario" or "pastured chicken, Ontario" or "free range chicken, Ontario" into your search engine and you'll get many hits.



The Maders have been refining the design of their chicken shelters to make them easier to move.