



Abra Morawiec and Chris Pinto with Bourbon Red turkeys in 2017.

# Alternative Poultry: Getting Creative

BY TAMARA SCULLY

Plenty of today's small farmers have found productive and profitable means of pasturing chickens and turkeys, but sometimes chicken (or turkey) just isn't enough. Heritage breeds expand a business' poultry selection and increase the diversity of the farm.

"Fowl" refers to both land and water birds. The land birds belong to the order Galliformes, while waterfowl are of the order Anseriformes. Waterfowl include ducks, geese and swans. Land fowl include chicken and turkey, as well as game birds — those traditionally wild species for hunting, although they can also be domestically raised. Partridge, pheasant, squab, quail, grouse, chachalacas, doves, woodcock and guinea fowl are included.

There are other types of birds, some of which are also domesticated for meat. Ostrich, rheas and emus fall into this category. These ratites are large, flightless birds.

"Poultry" typically refers to any domesticated fowl kept for eggs, meat or feathers, but the definition isn't clear-cut for farmers.

The United States Department of Agriculture and the Food and Drug Administration oversee food safety and, depending on classification, livestock slaughter. The USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) has exemptions that allow on-farm poultry slaughter.

The processing of some domesticated non-traditional poultry, however, is regulated differently than that of more mainstream poultry species, including domesticated ducks and geese.

Ratites must be USDA-inspected, despite being a domesticated, farmed bird. And not all game bird species, even when domesticated, are included in the FSIS poultry slaughter regulations. State regulations for poultry processing and sales can vary too. The FDA oversees wild game bird processing.

## FEISTY ACRES

Partners Abra Morawiec and Chris Pinto co-own Feisty Acres, on the North Fork of Long Island, New York. They raise a variety of pasture-raised poultry and game birds for local markets, including New York City. Feisty Acres has rapidly expanded from a first batch of 200 quail in 2015 to approximately 2,000 quail and 750 other meat birds raised, processed and sold in 2018.

Feisty Acres was once certified organic. The farm website explains why they are no longer seeking organic certification: "Our decision to end our organic certification status was not made lightly. For the past two years, we've debated back and forth the pros and cons about being certified organic. ... It's hard to fork over your hard-earned money to a certification, which has become so diluted over the years that barn raised fowl are now equivalent to the robust, pasture raised birds we supply to Long Island and the New York City markets. Because so much of our business is based upon direct relationships with our customers, we are comfortable in relinquishing our certified organic status because our standards now exceed those set forth by the USDA."

Although the business began with Coturnix (Japanese) quail, it now includes French guinea fowl, Chukar partridge, Silkie chickens and heritage breed turkeys. Their first ducks arrived this year, and squab may also be on the horizon.

Feisty Acres processes birds via a mobile processing unit that is owned and licensed by Browder's Birds in nearby Mattituck. Browder's operates under New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets inspection regulations. According to Morawiec, the USDA considers game species of birds to have different inherent biological hazards than traditional poultry. They were required to apply for a waiver to process some of their game birds in the mobile poultry unit.

## BRANCHING OUT

Feisty Acres finished its first year on its current property in 2018. It was a year of learning about the land and the birds' interaction with it. Their 8

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— *Abra Morawiec, Feisty Acres*

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acres, leased from a nature preserve, came with a mix of native vegetation, including dogbane (*Apocynum cannabinum*), which can be toxic (the birds avoid it), plus an unfortunate invader – mugwort. They cut back stands of dogbane before it goes to seed, and the mugwort is mowed down by their Silkies.

“Poison ivy is another plant we have a lot of, but all of our birds love it,” says Morawiec. “Before this year, neither Chris or myself knew that game birds and poultry could eat poison ivy without ill effects, but it turns out that poison ivy is an important food source for many local animals.”

Pasture grasses are primarily native species such as switchgrass (*Panicum virgatum*); *Tridens flavus* – a bunch-type warm-season grass commonly known as purpletop; and deer tongue grass, a clump-forming perennial.

This pasture mix might sound like weeds to some people, but to Feisty Acres fowl it’s the basis of a gourmet diet, as well as for the human eaters who ultimately consume the poultry.

“When the season is coming to a close, Chris and I most likely won’t be seeding the land with an orchestrated pasture. The vegetation that’s here is conducive to the birds we have as they are all well-versed foragers,” says Morawiec. “Our unique pasture also lends our birds a flavor that is unmatched. When your poultry and game birds have access to a wide range of foodstuffs, their meat and eggs are going to be superior.”

### PASTURE-RAISED PROMISE

All of the birds at Feisty Acres are pasture-raised and to varying degrees receive a good portion of their diet from natural foraging. Part of their ability to do so stems from their innate genetic makeup: these birds aren’t selectively bred for confinement production.

The birds at Feisty are “better foragers, have higher disease resistance and are hardier than breeds developed for intensive, indoor production,” says Morawiec. “They take longer to reach market weight but have far less health problems than their industrial counterparts.”

The birds can also breed naturally. Pinto and Morawiec are just beginning a heritage turkey breeding program using Black Spanish and Narragansetts. They also have a breeding flock of about 400 laying quail to supply the eggs they need to meet customer demand. They don’t breed other birds themselves, purchasing day-old chicks and poults from a variety of specialty breeders.



Bird’s-eye view of quail in their open-bottom pen.

“We did our research in finding the best sources for each breed and species. We sought out farms with strong genetic lines with a focus on being compatible with pasture-raised operations,” Morawiec explains. “We source all of our day-old chicks and poults from hatcheries around the United States.”

Each species has its own foraging requirements, receiving supplemental feed accordingly, and is housed in a manner to suit its innate needs while offering protection from predators. Coyotes are not a problem in the area, but hawks and raccoons can be. Turkeys find their home amongst cedar and aspen groves, where they roost in trees at night and enjoy the shade on hot days. Feisty Acres is designing rolling roost structures on old trailers to provide roosts even if trees aren’t available.

Pinto and Morawiec keep the turkeys in the brooder for four weeks after their April arrival and then clip their wings and move them into a roofed structure with an open bottom for pasture foraging. Turkeys forage the underbrush once they are old enough to do so without escaping through the poultry netting, which establishes the boundaries of their pasture. They learn that the fencing is their boundary line. After clipping the forages down in their half-acre paddock, they are moved throughout the farm until harvest in November.

Guinea fowl, like turkeys, are great foragers. But they are nervous and fly up into trees when excited or frightened. They require a sturdy roof to contain them and to help them feel protected. They can’t be crowded, however, as they also tend to smother one another. Moveable coops,

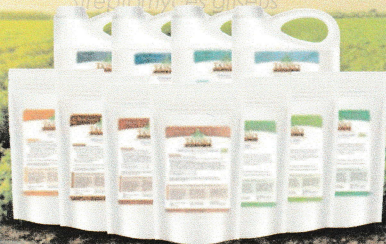
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designed to suit the birds' disposition, allow them to fly without escaping and to roost.

"Guinea fowl are ravenous eaters of pasture grasses and vegetation. Aside from our turkeys, they just might be the best birds for mowing the fields. We move the houses daily to keep up with their rate of consumption," says Morawiec.

The Silkie chickens, partridges and quail all have their own Salatin-style chicken tractors, which can be easily moved across the pasture to provide fresh foraging ground. A high ceiling in the pens allows the quail to express their natural instinct to flush up. The Silkies have tall pens too. Partridge reside in taller and longer pens than those of the quail. These have small roosting areas, as partridge don't nest on the ground like quail. Both quail and partridge prefer low pasture – no more than 4 to 6 inches.

Pens have roll-up sides to increase air circulation and higher ceilings to allow the farmers easy access. Housing is moved depending on manure load and forage availability. Lightweight PVC construction allows two people to easily move the pens, but requires that the houses be tethered down if winds are higher than about 20 mph. The pair lost about 50 percent of their quail the first season due to houses being blown over and the birds being eaten by hawks.

"We better understood why most farmers opt to raise quail in cages or barns," says Morawiec. "Our quail are outside year-round. In the winter, we have our birds close to the barn to provide them with heat and electricity as needed."

Water and feed are transported to the birds from the barn, located a quarter mile away. Five-gallon buckets of water are loaded into the pickup truck and driven out to the pastures every day. Feed for the week is stored in containers on the pasture. Certified organic vegetable scraps, collected from neighboring produce farms or farmers' market vendors, are fed to the birds, in addition to specialty feeds.

"Over the years both Chris and I have observed pasture consumption habits of the different birds and have discovered that their consumption greatly varies based on a multitude of factors. Spring and fall grasses and vegetation are greatly preferred over summer, but in the summer there is a greater number of flowers, seeds and insects," Morawiec explains.

The birds' rations vary between 19 and 26 percent protein, depending on the growth rate and nutritional needs of each species. These high-protein, custom feed mixes are purchased from organic farmer Vernon Burkholder at Panorama Organics in Oley, Pennsylvania.

“We contacted numerous organic grain and feed growers in New York, but we were either quickly dismissed or told that what we were trying to do – raise quail on pasture – was ridiculous,” says Morawiec. “Vernon, on the other hand, was so helpful in telling us what we needed to ensure our birds received maximum nutrition. We highly recommend him.”

### GETTING TO MARKET

The mobile processing unit doesn’t operate in the winter, so Feisty Acres is pursuing a state license that would also allow them to process birds from other producers along with their own. Customer demand continues during the winter months, although the number of birds they raise in winter is smaller than the hundreds they have on pasture during the peak of summer.

“We order quail 500 at a time, using some to refresh the laying flock. Silkies and guineafowl vary from 50 to 100 birds being raised at one time, with batches raised in succession and processed several times each season. Partridge, which breed only in spring, and turkeys are raised in one batch per season, with a fall slaughter. The bulk of our meat sales happen in the fall, though we do a lot of quail meat and quail eggs through the summer months.”

Quail take about 8 to 10 weeks to reach market weight, while the partridge take 16 weeks. Chicken and guinea fowl take 12 to 14 weeks.

Feisty Acres sells meat and quail egg shares via a CSA and at local farmers’ markets. Another popular item is their pickled quail eggs, made in a certified kitchen, along with brine and stock.

“One of the biggest market trends we noticed, as farmers, is that value-added products and convenience products are highly sought after,” says Morawiec. “Seventy-plus jars of pickled quail eggs are usually gone in a week. We haven’t found the cap of our demand for this product yet, much like our meat.”

Feisty Acres serves the New York City market, so farmers in other regions may not have as much access to customers seeking specialty meats. Doing market research is a necessary first step before expanding into other types of poultry.

For farmers seeking to add to their poultry operations – beyond chicken and turkey – Morawiec has some final words of wisdom.

“The behaviors of the birds are going to be different based upon the circumstances in which they are

raised. That is always the best advice we can give when folks ask us about raising different types of birds on pasture. Get to know your land. Get to know your animals. Watch closely how one affects the other.”


#### NEED MORE INFORMATION?

For more information about Feisty Acres, visit [feistyacres.com](http://feistyacres.com).

#### RESOURCES

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