

Organic Broiler Production at Kingbird Farm

Karma Glos

Kingbird Farm is a small, diverse organic farm started five years ago with visions of an agricultural ecosystem. Over the years we have put our fingers in many pots, seeing what we liked and what worked with our land. Almost immediately we were raising what seemed like a vast array of livestock, vegetables, and herbs. We have since refined our selections, though not always for practical or economic reasons.

After horses, poultry were our most immediate choice; they are small, low-investment livestock with a steady market. Free-range poultry seemed only natural and our neglected pastures craved nitrogen and a good scratch. Wanting to move beyond the classic chicken yard model we were drawn to Joel Salatin's Pastured Poultry system. It allowed a little "free" range and yet evenly distributed that precious nitrogen across our fields. However, within a year we had a row of abandoned pasture pens along our fence. We weren't satisfied with the space they afforded the birds or the constant labor of moving pens. Despite our fellow producers' declaration that Cornish Rock X broilers would not choose to run, jump, flap, and forage if they had the option, we went to a completely (well almost) free-range system.

We currently use two open-sided pasture pens within two 150' electric nets to raise 4 batches of 200 broilers. The Cornish Rock X broiler chicks (straight run) come from Timothy Shell (Pastured Peepers) who is nobly raising the parent stock on pasture to provide producers with a chick more suited for trials of outdoor life. We start batches of 200 in a 12' x 12' brooder with large windows in order to provide protection and natural light. Depending on weather conditions, the chicks are allowed out onto the 10' x 12' net-covered "poultry patio" at seven days. This begins their week or two of "hardening off" when they can experience the perils of weather and learn to forage while still having the safety of the brooder. We believe this simple outdoor access has greatly re-



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duced early mortality and better prepared the chicks for a free-range life.

By three weeks or less the chicks have clearly outgrown the space and are ready to move out. They have had free access to a certified organic 20% ration and chick grit. They have learned to drink from a hanging bell drinker and forage through the hay, weeds, and vegetables we have provided on the patio. They know to seek shelter when it rains and not pile up in the corners when the heat lamps are gone. We load them into crates on a nice day and drive them up to their first paddock.

The paddock is approximately 100' x 50' and enclosed by two Premier electric nets. We retrofitted two old pasture pens for shelters by rolling up the chicken wire sides and adding two Plasson bell drinkers with 5 gallon buckets. These two pens easily offer enough shelter for 200 mature broilers. Metal trough feeders are placed in front of the shelters to encourage the birds to use the paddock. Each day the feeders and shelters are moved down the paddock one length. This more evenly distributes the manure and helps the birds better utilize the space. Contrary to popular opinion, they do not just "belly up to the bar"—they run, they forage, they dust, and sometimes even fly. Since providing this space for our birds we have had no leg problems and we do not run over them with the pens. They thrive in this environment.

At approximately eight weeks we process the broilers on farm. We have a very simple processing setup in an outdoor shed. In the darkness of early morning the birds are loaded into crates and driven down to our processing shed. We butcher each bird by hand to ensure humane handling and high quality from beginning to end. We want to see every step of the process, just as we did raising them. Our scalding and plucker were self-constructed and cost far less than commercial equipment. Our countertops are stainless steel and kept scrupulously clean. After eviscerating and cleaning, the birds are chilled in ice before being bagged. They are weighed and labeled in our sales room. Pre-order custom-



The frozen broiler, ready for market

Kingbird Farm Price Examples

Kingbird Farm Certified Organic Broilers	
Whole Broilers	\$2.50/lb
Whole Breast	\$4.50/lb
Legs & Thighs	\$3.50/lb
Giblets	\$3.00/lb
Soup Backs	\$1.75/lb

Expense Examples

Pastured Peepers chicks	\$.89/each
Brooder lamps	\$3-5.00
Bell drinkers	\$10-30.00
Trough feeders	\$free-30.00
Crates	\$30-60.00
Electric netting	\$150.00
Charger	\$30-50.00
Kill cones	\$20.00
Scalder	\$50-500.00
Plucker	\$50-1,000.00
SS tables	\$150.00
Chill tanks	\$30-100.00
Hoses, nozzles, knives	\$1.50-10.00
Coolers	\$20-50.00
Poultry bags	\$40.00/1000
Cable ties	\$1.50/100
Labels	\$50.00/1000
Ice	.10/lb (4lbs/bird)
Certified Organic feed	.16 /lb (bulk)
Other Misc:	
Grit, wood shavings, supplements, hay	

Infrastructure to consider:

- Land
- Taxes
- Power
- Buildings
- Truck
- Water System
- Feed Storage
- Commercial cooler
- Chest freezer
- Shelters

ers pick them up fresh from our commercial cooler. Those birds not pre-ordered are frozen after 24 hours and sold at farmers market. The whole system is a user-friendly family operation that allows us to control the quality and keep costs down.

The key to this whole operation has been quality. We are providing a still very rare and desirable product raised in a manner that pleases the customer and involves the whole family. We take great pride in our birds and the lengths we go to ensure their quality of life. The result is great product and wonderful customer loyalty. In addition, the birds benefit our farm in many other ways. They have improved our pastures with the application of manure, dethatching, and insect removal. They have added to our farm diversity without taking over and they have provided a reliable income. While still only one part of our farming system, the broilers have proved very worthwhile and enjoyable.

For more information you can contact Karma Glos at Kingbird Farm, 9398 West Creek Road, Berkshire, NY 13736 (607) 657-2860 karma@kingbirdfarm.com Photos supplied by Kingbird Farm.



Broilers on pasture at Kingbird Farm

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