Interview With Joel Salatin, Polyface Farms

Joel Salatin is an American farmer and author. He owns Polyface Farms, which is known for its small scale unconventional farming methods. Months ago I heard Joel on a Joe Rogan podcast and was immediately blown away. It's not very often that we hear people discuss the gut microbiome on one of the most popular podcasts in the country.

Here's that podcast. I highly recommend listening to it if you have the time.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4-703f0XXKo&t=1389s
Along with discussing the gut microbiome, Joel talked about his farm, Polyface Farms. Polyface Farms is located in Virginia, and they do things a little differently than most. The land that is now Polyface farms was purchased by Joel's parents in 1961. They're all about regenerative farming through sustainable practices, like pasture-raised meat, carbon sequestration, and working in a seasonal cycle.

In short, it's a dream come true for someone like myself who is all about organic eco-friendly agriculture, so naturally, I had to ask Joel a couple of questions.

The older generation is a big fan of talking about life when they were young. My grandfather loves to talk about the fact that he was raised on cow's milk, and he turned out "just fine." The difference, of course, is that the milk he was raised on was unpasteurized small scale cows milk. What encouraged you to get into small scale sustainable farming? Does it relate back to how you were raised or did you have some sort of revelation in life? Feel free to comment on how things have changed if you have any thoughts on that.

My paternal grandfather was a charter subscriber to Rodale's

Organic Gardening and Farming Magazine when it came out in the late 1940s. He always wanted to farm but never did. He had a very large garden, though, and sold extra produce to neighbors and corner grocers. My dad received his no-chemical indoctrination, then, from Grandpa, so I'm the third generation in the compost tradition. My Dad was a financial wizard and did accounting work all his life. After flying Navy bombers in WWII, he went to Indiana University on the GI bill and then headed off to Venezuela, South America as a bilingual accountant with Texas Oil Company. His long-range goal was a farm in a developing country and Venezuela seemed as good as any. After about 7 years he'd saved up enough to buy 1,000 acres in the highlands of Venezuela and began farming. The goal was dairy and broilers. My older brother and I were born during that time, and things looked bright. But then came a junta and the ouster of Peres Jimenez and animosity toward anything American; we fled the back door as the machine guns came in the front door; lost everything and after exhausting all attempts at protection, (we) came back to the U.S. Easter Sunday 1961, landing in Philadelphia. Mom grew up in Ohio and Texas and all their family was in Ohio and Indiana, but Dad's heart was still in Venezuela and he hoped after the political turmoil settled to be able to return to our farm.

With that in mind, he wanted to be within a day's drive of Washington D.C. so he could get to the Venezuelan Embassy quickly and easily to do paperwork and return. That never happened, but it's why we ended up in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley. When I hit 41, I remember thinking: "If I lost it all, would I start over?" That's what Dad and Mom did in 1961. I was 4. Dad did his accounting work, and Mom was a high school health and physical ed teacher; that off-farm income paid the mortgage and within 10 years the land was paid off. Dad combined his ecology with his economic understanding to create some broad principles: animals move; mobile infrastructure; direct marketing; carbon-driven fertility. I

had my first flock of laying hens when I was 10 years old and then added a garden. By 14 years old, I was our main salesman at the local Curb Market, a Depression-era hold-over that foreshadowed today's farmers' markets. With only 3 vendors, it struggled but after a couple of years, we had a growing and steady clientele for our pastured meats, poultry, eggs, produce, and dairy products (yogurt, butter, cottage cheese). We closed it down when I went off to college and the other two elderly matrons at the market quite as well so by the time I came home, that market and all of its wonderful grandfathered food safety exemptions were gone forever.

I've always said we were about 20 years ahead of our time. Operating that market during my teen years of early 1970s as the nascent back-to-the-land hippie movement germinated was not easy, but the lessons were invaluable when I returned to the farm and started building a clientele on my own in 1980, long before modern farmers' markets. Teresa and I married in 1980, remodeled the attic of the farmhouse, and lived there for 7 years until Mom and Dad moved out from downstairs to a mobile home parked outside the yard. My Mom's mother had lived there for 10 years and passed away, making that spot available. As an investigative reporter at the local daily newspaper, I realized every business was desperate for people who would show up on time, put in a full days' work without whining, and actually creatively think through better ways of doing things all made me highly employable. Living on $300 a month, driving a $50 car, growing all of our own, cutting our own firewood for winter warmth, not having a TV—all these things enabled us even without a high salary to squirrel away half the paycheck. Within a couple of years we had saved enough to live on for a year. I walked out of that office Sept. 24, 1982, with a one-year cash nest egg and the jeering of every person I knew" "He's throwing his life away." "All that talent and he's going to waste it on a farm." "Don't you know you can't make any money farming?"

We succeeded.

While we were watching the podcast you did with Joe Rogan, my dad and I had several "Wow!" moments listening to you. One of us would be in the kitchen, and we would run into the living room where the podcast was playing, and share a look of absolute awe. "This guy is talking about the stuff that we talk about! And he's on Joe Rogan!" We don't know many people who talk about gut health the way we do. How did you learn about the importance of the body's microbiome? Is there a correlation between your knowledge of the microbiome and how you run your farm?

Perhaps the most profound truth in life is that everything we see floats in an ocean of invisible beings. With electronic microscopes, we can now see many of these things, but because we can't see them with the naked eye, they are not in our momentary conscience. It's hard to forget the microbes floating in the air, on our skin, in our eyes, nostrils, and intestines. Our farm's wellness philosophy stems from Antoine Béchamp, the French contemporary and nemesis of Louis Pasteur. While Pasteur promoted the germ theory and busied himself destroying and sterilizing, Beauchamp advanced the terrain theory and encouraged people to think about basic immunity. Rather than sterilization, he encouraged sanitation. He encouraged folks to get more sleep, drink more and better water (much of the water at that time was putrid) and eat better food. Along came Sir Albert Howard half a century later adding the soil dimension to this basic wellness premise.

In general, we believe nature's default position is fundamentally wellness and if it's not well, we humans probably did something to mess it up. That's a far cry from assuming wellness is like catching lightning in a bottle, and some sort of sickness fairy hovers over the planet dropping viral stardust willy nilly. Sickness and disease, whether in humans, plants, or animals are not the problem in and of themselves; they simply manifest weaknesses developed in the

unseen world. Every sickness or disease we've ever had on our farm was our fault. We may have selected the wrong seedstock, crowded things, created incubators for pathogens. You can stress things a lot of different ways. But our assumption when confronted with non-wellness is not to assume we missed a vaccine or a pharmaceutical, but rather to ask "what did we do to break down the immunological function of this plant or animal?" That leads to far more profound truth than assuming we didn't select the right connection from the chemistry lab.

The fact that today people actually talk about the microbiome in polite company is a fantastic societal breakthrough. Hopefully, it will continue.

The current "pandemic" resulted in a total collapse of our food chain at big grocery stores. While things have since calmed down and straightened out, many people are now aware of just how weak our food supply chain is. The obvious solution- buy small- scale, buy local. The obvious problem- buying meat the right way, (small scale and local) is expensive. Here where I am in Detroit we've got a great meat guy, but a couple of weeks ago I found myself at the Dekalb farmers market in Atlanta. I spent $9 for one pound of organic, grass-fed ground beef. What are your thoughts for people who are concerned about the costs of shopping ethically? On a broader scale, do you have any solutions to this?

Price; it's one of the biggest and most common questions. So let's tackle it on several fronts.

1. Whenever someone says they can't afford our food, I grab them by the arm and say "take me to your house." Guess what I find there? Take-out, coffee, alcohol, sometimes tobacco, Netflix, People magazine, iPhones, flat-screen TV, tickets to Disney, lottery tickets—you get the drift. Very seldom does "I can't afford it" carry any weight. We buy what we want, and that includes many folks below the poverty line.

2. Buy unprocessed. That $9 ground beef is still less than a fast food meal of equal nutritional value. Domestic culinary

skills are the foundation of integrity food systems, and never have we had more techno-gadgetry to make our kitchens efficient. The average American spends fewer than 15 minutes a day in their kitchen. Nearly 80 percent of Americans have no clue at 4 p.m. what's for dinner. In fact, the new catchphrase for millennials is "what's dinner?" not "what's for dinner?" So cooking from scratch is the number one way to reduce costs. Right now you can buy a whole Polyface pastured broiler, world-class, for less a pound than boneless skinless breast Tyson chicken at Wal-Mart. The most expensive heirloom Peruvian blue potato at New York City green markets is less per pound than Lay's potato chips across the street. It's about the processing.

3. Buy bulk. Get a freeze and buy half a beef or 20 chickens at a time. Buy a bushel of green beans and can them. We buy 10 bushels of apples every fall and spend two days making applesauce; it's cheaper than watery junk at the supermarket and is real food. That's not a waste of time; it's kitchen camaraderie. On our farm, we give big price breaks for volume purchasing because it's simply more efficient to handle a $500 transaction than 25 $20 transactions. This means, of course, that you must have a savings plan. Half of all Americans can't put their hands on $400 in cash. That's not an expensive food problem; that's an endemic and profound failure to plan

Q: Here at OLM we're a big fan of systems. We also have 10,000 square foot urban farm right in our back yard and are getting chickens very soon. Developing a farm feels a bit like an optimal opportunity to create the "perfect" system. I'm curious as to how the farm is systemized to be self-sustainable. I'm wondering if the farm is carbon neutral or carbon negative? Do you let your chickens work on your compost pile? Do you monitor cow grazing for optimum carbon sequestration? What advice do you have for the many people including us, who have just started growing our food after the current crisis?

Perhaps the starting point is to think of integration rather than segregation. How many different species of things can you hook together for symbiosis? So we follow the cows with the laying hens in Eggmobiles to scratch through the cow dung, spread out the manure as fertilizer, and eat the fly larvae out of the cowpats (this mimics the way birds always follow herbivores in nature). We build compost with pigs (we call them pig aerators). We have chickens underneath rabbit cages, generating $10,000 a year in a space the size of a 2-car garage and making the most superb compost in the world. We see trees as carbon sinks to integrate with open land; industrial commercial chippers enable us to chip crooked, diseased, and dying trees for compost carbon. The kitchen and gardening scraps go to the chickens. Hoop houses for rabbits, pigs, and chickens in the winter double up as vegetable production in the spring, summer, and fall, creating pathogen dead-ends for the plants and animals growing there at different times of the year. Integration is everything.

In half a century, we've moved our soil organic matter from 1 percent to 8.2 percent. I don't know if we're overall carbon-neutral, but we've done this without buying an ounce of chemical fertilizer and using 800 percent less depreciable infrastructure per gross income dollar than the average U.S. farm. That creates resilience. Over the years we've installed 8 miles of waterlines from permaculture style high ponds that catch surface run-off and gravity feed to the farmland below. And the rocks and gullies now grow vegetation where none grew before. This is not pride; it's a humble acknowledgment of a Creator's benevolent and abundant design; it's our responsibility to caress this magnificent womb.