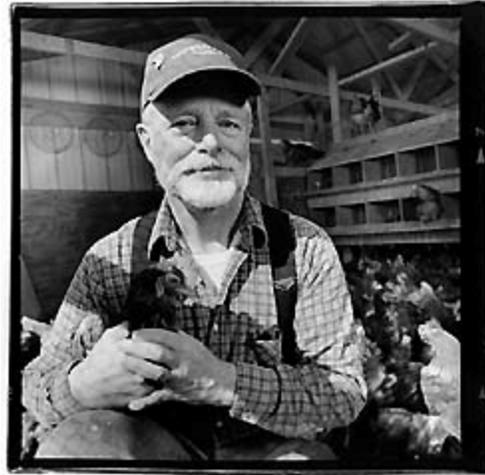


## Chicken Run

By Michael Yockel

**Seated behind the wheel** of his golf cart, whose windshield has been playfully stenciled with the words lilly's layers' limo, David Smith conducts a fact-drenched tour of Springfield Farm, his 67-acre spread in Sparks, where four flocks of egg-laying, free-range chickens now range freely over snow-covered ground. He parks the golf cart, steps over the mildly electrified fence--a deterrent for hungry foxes--that encloses the quarter-acre area that a group of reddish-brown "layers" calls home, strides by several of the oblivious animals standing on one leg, and enters a henhouse, his whys-and-wherefores dissertation of the Springfield operation pouring forth in nonstop *rat-a-tat-tat* style.



Chokin' The Chicken: David Smith raises free-range layers at Springfield Farm.

*Photo By Sam Holden*

"The numbers of eggs a chicken lays--and the rate at which they lay--is determined by heat and light," Smith, 61, explains, as birds peer at him from the ground, from open nesting cubicles, and from perches in the rafters. "Light serves the function of keeping them alert, just as it does us. Keeps them active. The more active they are, the more they eat. The more they eat, the more eggs they produce."

At Springfield that translates to an average of 240 eggs--large and lovely brown eggs that lie scattered hither and yon around the henhouse--per hen annually. In June, when the days are long, one of his hens lays an egg about every 26 hours; this time of year a hen cranks out one every 60 to 70 hours. By contrast, a layer at a commercial operation--confined in what Smith terms a "concentration-camp environment," in which chickens are stressed to produce, produce, produce until they drop--is expected to pop out 300 eggs each year. Utterly sapped, entire flocks of those hens are replaced with fresh recruits, the old hens rendered for use by soup companies.

Smith's hens enjoy a considerably longer, healthier, ambulatory life, laying eggs for two to two-and-one-half seasons. "At the end of a year of laying, they take a paid vacation," he notes, resting for 60 to 90 days at what he terms the farm's "spa." During its second season a Springfield hen will produce only 200 eggs. Retired from service, they are slaughtered and sold as "stewing hens" at \$6.50 each. Local restaurateurs buy them; in fact, one already has reserved Smith's entire flock of "black" chickens.

While alive the chickens are "moved around in a controlled, grazing paddock," Smith continues, participating in what amounts to a game of animal musical chairs. To start, larger, four-legged animals--first, horses or cows, followed by sheep or goats--mow the

pasture. After they've completed their tasks, Smith introduces a flock of layers, who reside on this reservation, of sorts, for two weeks, at which point they proceed to another pre-grazed paddock--or what Smith kiddingly calls "a new salad bar." After four months or so to let the land rest, back come the horses or cows, and the process begins anew.

Aside from the 2,200 layers, Springfield raises about 5,000 nonlaying chickens, 400 turkeys, 100 geese, 250 ducks each year, and four peafowl; in conjunction with other local farmers, who adhere to Springfield's strict growing standards, it also rears 500 rabbits, 100 lambs, three dozen beef cattle, two dozen pigs, and a dozen goats. All naturally. "For us, 'natural' means the animals, to the greatest extent possible, are allowed access to the outside," Smith says. "In fact, their food and water is outside, so they have to go out to get it." As evidence, his layers have worn a path through the snow between their henhouse and their food and water troughs. "We use no chemicals or fertilizers on the ground. No antibiotics or growth stimulants or chemicals of any sort in the animals' feed."

Smith inaugurated the free-range operation in 2000 after a 23-year career in the U.S. Army--he retired with the rank of lieutenant colonel--followed by 10 years in Europe and the Middle East working for a marketing firm. He grew up on the Springfield property, which, he reckons, has been in his family anywhere from 12 to 17 generations. Currently the operation employs only immediate family members: David and his wife, Lilly--that's her name stenciled on the layers' limo--plus their two daughters and *their* four kids, all of whom live on-site.

Springfield makes 35 percent to 40 percent of its egg and meat sales to individuals who buy either directly from the farm, through a Community Supported Agriculture program, or at the weekly May through October Hunt Valley farmers' market. Nineteen local restaurants account for the remainder of the farm's sales, from Common Ground and Golden West Café in Hampden to pricier spots such as Charleston at Inner Harbor East and Gertrude's at the Baltimore Museum of Art.

Smith contends that he keeps egg and meat prices as affordable as possible, comparable to--or lower than--those charged by "upscale supermarkets" such as Eddie's and Graul's. For example, he says he regularly sees "large" natural or organic eggs retail for \$3.50 or \$3.60 per dozen. Springfield charges \$2.75 for its large, free-range natural eggs, with its "jumbos" going for \$3.25. "But when we talk a jumbo," Smith almost exclaims, his demonstrated penchant for well-organized facts and figures overwhelming him, "it's a *humongous* egg. You can't find eggs like that in a grocery store!"