

# He is the Eggman

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## In a chicken-filled pasture in Sparks, David Smith is reviving a dying breed: the family farm.

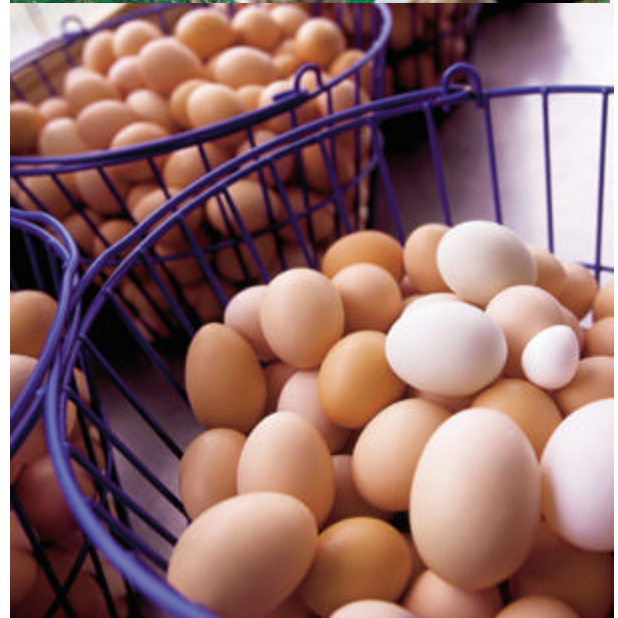
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Above: David Smith and his family at Springfield Farm. Right: Smith prepares the chickens for feeding time.





Above: Catherine Webb, the Smiths' eldest daughter, feeds her flock. Below: Lilly Smith cleans the farm's eggs.



Which came first, the chicken or the egg? Here, at least, standing in the softly lit interior of a turquoise trailer at Springfield Farm in northern Baltimore County, the answer is clear: the chicken.

"The chicks come by mail," says David Smith, who owns this pastured poultry farm—a small but growing trend among Maryland farmers—with his wife, Lilly. The chicks arrive by post in lots of 300 from mid-March through August, carefully packed in containers for the two-day trip from Pennsylvania and neighboring states. A total of 4,000 of these particular chickens—broilers, in farm parlance—will make their home this summer in the grassy fields of Springfield Farm. But if their origin is clear, so is their destiny. "They'll all be off the ground and ready for the table by October," says Smith.

He moves among the chicks slowly, talking gently as the fuzzy yellow balls peep softly and swirl around his ankles on tiny clawed feet. Just two weeks old, they are the first shipment of broilers to come, grow, and go before the season is over. The various flocks of egg-layers, about 1,600 hens in all, will have a longer stay of two years, laying a total

of 420,000 eggs each year before meeting the table as stewing hens.

On this crisp spring morning, the next stop is Smith's "fancy flock," in which can be seen all the varieties of poultry that inhabit the farm. Smith shows off the various birds—egg-laying quails, ducks and geese for meat and eggs, riotously colored chickens that lay eggs in colors ranging from pure white to brown to soft tints of green and blue, and guinea hens with bony white heads outlined in black. Missing are examples of the turkeys, including old-fashioned heritage breeds, that will arrive in July to be plumped for Thanksgiving delivery.

Smith stops in to see the rabbits—the farm will raise 50 to 75 this year—then sets off toward the flocks of laying hens in a far field. Hiking up a rutted lane, past a tall stand of trees and over to a series of coops with fenced-in pastures, he talks about the difference between organic and natural poultry, and the meaning of the word "free-range."

While Smith's land—65 rolling acres in Sparks that have been in his family since at least 1850—is certified organic, his poultry is considered "natural" and "free-range." It is raised on pastures, which allows the birds to graze freely amid grass and other plants, foraging for greenery and insects. This diet is supplemented with a natural feed composed of corn, soy, barley, vitamins, and minerals. Smith uses no antibiotics, and illnesses in the flock are treated homeopathically. The chickens rotate among pastures every seven days, giving the land a chance to regenerate grass and make use of the natural fertilizer the chickens leave behind in their manure.

The birds are considered “natural” rather than “organic” because the feed Smith uses is not certified organic. For one thing, he says, organic feed is expensive and difficult to get, and the paperwork and costs of maintaining USDA Organic Program Standards are spiraling upwards, forcing many small farmers to abandon the effort.

But, like any good businessman, Smith surveyed his market before deciding whether to abandon a strictly organic code. “It turned out that my customers want natural foods,” he says. “Mostly, they want to feel a connection with where their food comes from and how it is grown.” That the animals are raised humanely and without additives proved most important.

It is Smith’s market-driven approach that has enabled him to jump into farming relatively late in life and make a go of it. An ex-Army man, he is compact, square-shouldered, and impressively fit for his 60 years. He and Lilly, his wife of 40 years, spent their married life on the move—“35 moves in 35 years,” they like to say—in Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and the United States. Smith then spent a few years in international marketing, still traveling, while working for a company that is now part of Raytheon, and also for Cockeysville defense contractor AAI Corporation.



**Webb finds a new use for golf carts: collecting eggs from the farm’s free-range chickens.**

But once they had grandchildren, says Lilly Smith over a cup of coffee at the kitchen table, it became harder to live overseas. And so, in 1995, they moved to Springfield Farm. “The first few chickens were just to entertain the grandkids,” she says in the soft accent of her native France. But one egg followed another, and soon the Smiths put a modest sign out front advertising farm-fresh eggs. Then came a visitor.

Thomas Rudis of Golden West Cafe remembers the day. “Living in the city, I would take drives out to the country with my wife and daughter,” he says. “I stumbled across this sign that said ‘free-range eggs.’ I was all over that.” Rudis asked Smith to supply eggs for his Hampden restaurant.

Smith quickly purchased a flock of 500 egg-layers, christened them Lilly’s Layers, and launched his egg business, still the driving economic force behind the farm. Rudis introduced him to other chefs around town, and before long he had an A-list roster of restaurant clients, including Charleston, The Oregon Grille, Gertrude’s at the BMA, and The Brewer’s Art.

Perhaps it’s impossible for a marketing man not to dream big; soon Smith had a grand plan, with various schemes for farming produce and animals. He talked with neighbors and other small farmers and quickly saw a niche to be filled in the area of naturally grown poultry and meat.

Equally important, Smith wanted to create a farm capable of supporting his daughters and their families in the future. “When we decided to create a viable business, the goal was to entice one or two of our daughters to live here with a business worth moving for.” During May 2000, after the first full year of operation, Smith “took time off,” he says with a laugh, for quintuple heart bypass surgery. That’s when two of his three daughters and their families moved from West Virginia and Maine to take up residence. The farm now shelters three generations of Smith’s family, including four grandchildren.

Considering his family-oriented goals, Smith made the right choice in taking up pastured poultry, says Bruce Mertz, executive director of the nonprofit Future Harvest-CASA (Chesapeake Alliance for Sustainable Agriculture). “Small to medium-size farms are becoming an endangered species,” he says. Pastured poultry, however, makes it possible for small farms to prosper by combining a small investment with direct marketing to customers through farmstands and at farmer’s markets. “In the past,” Mertz says, “it was ‘get big or get out.’ Now it’s ‘farm smarter, not harder.’”

People like the Smiths—educated retirees and second-careerists looking to develop a relationship with the land—are the newest comers to a difficult industry. “I am amazed at the advanced degrees and business experience of people who are now farming,” says Mertz. That doesn’t ensure a venture’s success, of course—just its progressive footing.

Smith takes the long view. “Most farmer’s children don’t want to stay on the farm,” he says, admiring his grandchildren, now gathered in cozy disarray around the kitchen table for breakfast. “We showed them the business plan, and they saw that it could work. Right now, we put all our proceeds back into the business, but in five years we will be quite profitable.”

As granddaughter Rachel Webb displays a photograph of her favorite chicken, her mother Catherine describes the benefits of farm life. “It’s made a big difference not to be eating food with pesticides in it,” she says. “My kids rarely get sick these days. And they all get to take the school bus together.”

But it is a rigorous life, she acknowledges, donning insulated overalls before heading out on this blustery morning to collect the day’s eggs. Daily chores—feeding and watering; moving fences to create new pastures; collecting, washing, and grading the eggs; delivering eggs and meat to restaurants—set a relentless rhythm punctuated by larger endeavors, like building new chicken coops or transferring flocks of broilers to the poultry processor in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

Small farms like Springfield also offer important lifestyle choices to consumers. First and foremost, they provide food that has been raised humanely and without additives like antibiotics. A recent study funded by the USDA’s Sustainable Agriculture and Research Education Program (SARE) also indicates that pasture-raised chickens and their eggs have less total and saturated fat and more vitamins and Omega-3 fatty acids, considered healthful for the heart.

There is also the issue of freshness. Eggs bought from a farm like Springfield are usually just a day old, whereas commercial eggs can be six to nine months old. In addition, Smith’s broilers are slaughtered and cleaned by hand, not machine. The results are pristine.

But the proof is also in the pudding—literally. “The yolks of these eggs are so yellow and the flavor is so rich,” enthuses chef Cindy Wolf of Charleston and Petit Louis restaurants. “We use them in all our pastries and desserts, but with something like creme brûlée, which is nothing but eggs and cream, the eggs make all the difference.” She also buys poultry and rabbits from the farm.

Finally, there is the connection with the land that many of us crave, but are unable to realize for ourselves. To stand in a pasture with Smith, as hens enthusiastically cluck and peck around his ankles, is to understand that livestock can lead sound, healthy lives. As Smith puts it, “happy chickens are healthy chickens.”



Lilly Smith gets her ducklings in a row.

The context of farm life is always changing. Gazing out the kitchen window over poultry yards and rolling hills, Smith talks about the future. “I don’t want to become a big commercial grower,” he says, musing over Springfield Farm’s potential for growth and its effect on family life. He talks about the possibilities in “agritainment,” including a petting zoo and working holidays for paying customers. “That’s big business for farmers across the country,” he says.

Recently, Smith diversified his offerings to capitalize on his growing customer base, offering pastured lamb and veal and natural beef raised by other farmers under conditions similar to those on his own farm. But the trick, he says, is to find the right balance. “We’re wrestling now with how big to grow and at what rate. We are looking at how much stuff we want to produce versus the life we want to lead.”

He is also investigating ways to preserve the farm for his descendants. "It's important to me to get the farm into a preservation program because of the generations of my family who have lived here," he says. Lilly Smith has some ideas of her own. If she has her way, the future will include a breeding program and chickens (the farm has already started one for rabbits). Which means those batches of fuzzy yellow chicks will no longer arrive by mail. And the answer to the age-old chicken and egg question will be: the egg.