



# SURVIVAL SMARTS

Whatever the size, specialty meat businesses work—  
and they can use our help

BY ALICIA SPRINGER • PHOTOS BY CHRIS THOMAS

In the corny old cartoons, a klutzy farmer chases squawking chickens round the ol' barnyard with a hatchet, all antic chaos and flying feathers. In real life, harvest on a small but well-managed chicken ranch is a calm, orderly, and tidy process, with no wasted motions or frantic birds. Harvest days at Wookey Ranch start before dawn, when roosting chickens are gathered into crates and brought, still quiet and drowsy, to the Chico ranch's processing shed. There, a day's batch, about eighty, of the six- to seven-week-old Cornish Cross birds will be killed, cleaned, and chilled in a morning's work prior to that day's full summer heat. From the moment when Wookey's Baji Hantelman gathers a chicken from the crate, settles it into a cone-shaped holder, and swiftly dispatches it, fewer than fifteen seconds of ruffled feathers have elapsed.

## WOOKEY SIZE: MICRO

Hantelman and her partner, Richard Coon, have established their team workflow over many such harvest days: Baji manages the killing, scalding, and defeathering, Richard the cleaning and chilling. If one work station lags a bit, there's

good-natured needling to catch up. Work surfaces, tools, and plastic tubs are frequently disinfected, hands obsessively washed. Unlike some factory-scale chicken processing, the meat itself is never dunked in a chlorinated bath or exposed to ammonia off-flavors. Later, the batch will be sorted into birds to be sold whole or cut up into parts; vacuum-sealed; labeled per USDA regulations; frozen; and readied for direct sale to shoppers at the Chico Farmers' Market, where Wookey Ranch markets its chicken, turkey, and lamb seasonally.

At about \$5.25 a pound, the Wookey chickens are expensive, especially compared to as little as 99 cents a pound at the supermarket. But the flavor and texture of Wookey chickens and the assurance that the birds have been humanely pasture-raised and gently processed make this a false comparison. The organic feed alone is a major investment; Wookey considers the feed's quality worth the price for the final product they can market as "pasture-raised, organic-fed, all natural." As for the ranch's profit on those expensive chickens: "Every little incremental cost adds up," says Baji. "If we're not careful to keep costs down and work efficiently, we won't even make minimum wage."

*Left: At Big Bluff Ranch, chicks find relief from the summer sun.*

The Wookey operation is at the cottage-industry end of the meat-business spectrum, supporting its two-person workforce through tireless labor and scrappy resourcefulness: Richard delights in an army-navy surplus bargain or a going-out-of-business sale, and they've assembled the high-quality specialized components in their processing shed on the cheap to grow their capacity. "The walk-in freezer came from a Coldstone Creamery; the stainless-steel tanks from an olive processor in Orland; the vacuum-pack machine came from a Winco—a new one could cost \$22,000!" he enthuses. His favorite scores are his two ice machines, "one from a bar in Paradise and the other from a Vietnamese restaurant—buying ice instead of making our own would be a huge expense."

They are currently operating under the annual 1,000 bird "poultry exemption" (see sidebar, p. 24). They also have an operational but not-quite finished processing shed, and when it gets the California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA) stamp of approval, they'll be equipped to legally process up to 20,000 birds annually on the ranch; to process for other growers, if they choose that expansion route; and to sell those birds to wholesalers, restaurants, or groceries. Even at 20,000 birds a year, they would still be a micro operation and able to maintain what Baji likes about their size: "We work for ourselves and do things the way we think they should be done. We're holding our own in the farmers' market niche." Besides, adds Richard with a wicked grin, "Do we want the only thriving industry around here to be cannabis?"

## THE BIGGEST LITTLE CHICKEN RANCH AROUND, STILL MINISCULE

Micro doesn't work for everybody. Big Bluff Ranch, 4,000 acres in the rugged Coast Range an hour west of Red Bluff, now produces 1,500 chickens a week compared to Wookey's 1,000 a year. Still tiny in the big scheme of poultry production, the multi-generational ranch, started by Tyler Dawley's grandparents in 1960, has become one of the biggest pastured chicken operations in northern California. Over



*During chicken harvest, Baji scalds the chickens to prepare them for defeathering.*

the years, the ranch has run cattle, sheep, goats, and pigs (not to mention eco-tourists, hunters, and fishermen) and was an early adopter of holistic management, a ranching strategy that nurtures the range's environmental health while improving grazing and farming. They still raise cattle, but in this long season of drought, they've reduced the herd because there is less forage on their dryland pastures.

"Our ranch was a little too small to make a full-time living on cattle. We have to produce enough volume to make this a viable business," says Tyler, explaining the switch to chicken farming. "We realized we weren't farmers' market warriors. We couldn't sell enough beef and lamb in the north state markets, and we're too far from the more lucrative markets in the Bay Area." The turning point came in 2009, when Tyler met David Evans from Marin Sun Farms at the EcoFarm Conference in Pacific Grove. "David said, 'I can sell so many more chickens than I can grow' and I said, 'I can grow so many more chickens than I can sell.'" Big Bluff transitioned away from direct marketing to become a co-producer for Marin Sun, another pastured-meat operation that started small and has now grown to become a major distributor of many producers' beef, pork, poultry, lamb, goat, and eggs throughout California.

Following the protocols set by Marin Sun, a three-man workforce consisting of Tyler, his father Frank, and one employee raises about 12,000 chickens on the ranch at



*From top: Big Bluff Ranch repurposes billboard signs on their hoop house frames; a young chick balances on Tyler Dawley's shoulder; chickens prefer familiar surroundings, so placing the age-appropriate hoop houses on a single large pasture comforts them.*

one time, cycling through their eight weeks to market. The ranch's Goldilocks climate—not too hot, not too cold—enables them to keep up production fifty-two weeks a year.

“The week's 1,500 chicks are hatched in Dinuba [Tulare County] on Monday morning, put in the mail, and we pick them up in Red Bluff by Tuesday afternoon. Our five-year-old daughter knows that Tuesdays are all about fluffy new babies,” says Tyler. They don't raise their own chicks or process on-site—both very specialized operations. Their specialty, rather, is keeping lots of chickens healthy and growing on their broad central pasture, where large open hoop houses—simple tarp-covered metal frames—shade and protect the flock yet also allow pasture access. As they grow and develop, the chickens, mostly Cornish Crosses, the commercial breed known for large breasts and fast time-to-harvest, are moved around the same pasture, in the company of a sweet-natured guard dog and the occasional family of wild ducks. Electric fencing thwarts most predators, but the few resident winged interlopers are tolerated. “If you have a hundred chickens and a hawk nails a couple, that's a noticeable loss, but with thousands out there, we can share a few.”

The day-olds start in a climate-protected brood hoop, then move to a more open hoop at a week old and on to bigger hoops with bigger feeders and access to the same comfortably familiar pasture. Some of the hoops are surprisingly elegant, using surplus billboard tarps as translucent coverings. Tyler laments that the drought-stricken pasture is brown, not green, but the chickens bustle comfortably about their feeders and chill out in the trickle of a hose or the shade of an oak. “We're coping with the drought, and they're doing fine. Stressed chickens die. These guys are thriving. I think pastured chicken tastes better because they move around and work a little harder at life—it gives the flesh some character.”

Finally, before light every Thursday morning, the current batch of eight-week olds is calmly settled into crates and trucked down to Modesto for slaughter. “Our processor does a great, careful

job,” says Tyler, “But they don’t want to touch fewer than 1,000 birds at a time. I probably provide forty-five minutes to an hour of work a week for their line, that’s how small I am—but even to be miniscule, you need to achieve some level of scale.” From there, the carcasses truck to Marin Sun.

“Farmers like to rail against the middle-man,” says Tyler, “But I’m more than happy to sell to Marin Sun and have them deal with the chefs and the grocery chains and the accounts receivable. The trade-off is that Big Bluff Ranch has no market presence; we’re contract growers, so we’ve given up some control.” And the Ranch lacks Wookey’s relationship to the people who eat their birds. Instead, they emphasize raising quality meat while they benefit from large volume. “We’re trading retail margin for volume. But we’re still producing top-quality poultry. It’s an awesome relationship, and we’ve grown together.” That volume has enabled the Dawleys to invest in the kind of scaled-up equipment—silos and feeders, forklift, bigger truck—that can keep the ranch on its upward trajectory. “You don’t want to become Foster Farms,” says Tyler, “but the meat industry is so huge that to be a tiny player you’ve got to be pretty big. And maybe we’ll get into the black, eventually,” he laughs. (Left over from the Ranch’s direct-to-consumer days, Tyler has a complete micro-scale “Cadillac quality” chicken processing set-up for sale, in case any loyal *Edible* readers aspire to get into the chicken biz.)

Tyler and his wife Holly, a water engineer by training, also operate a middle man sideline of sorts themselves; The Foragers ([theforagers.com](http://theforagers.com)) is a “Meat-of-the-Month-Club”-style online farmers’ market, bringing the wares of several small north valley meat producers to CSA subscribers or a la carte buyers. They deliver to ten pick-up spots from Redding to San Jose. “We’re a micro-distributor, helping our producers sell their products, just like Marin Sun is a distributor on a bigger tier helping us sell our products.”

## PANORAMA MEATS: PARTNERSHIP AS ARITHMETIC PROGRESSION

Clearly, collaboration is a winning strategy. One of the biggest success stories in our region, Panorama Meats, is also all about individual family ranches banding together in a collaborative venture. Now among the largest producers of organic grass-fed beef in the nation, Panorama traces its origins back to little Vina. Rancher Darrell Wood and his family struggled to make their Tehama and Lassen County cattle ranches pencil out in the late ‘90s, hard times for beef prices (which are currently at a bubble-like high, partly caused by shortages

from the current drought and also from ranches going belly up in the lean days).

Wood recalls, “My wife and I took our son down to Cal Poly, and he said ‘When I’m done with college, I want to come back home and ranch.’ We had to wonder if there’d be any ranch to come home to. Then another rancher approached me with the idea of trying grass-fed beef, which he was selling at farmers’ markets in the Bay Area. I thought, boy, this could be a niche—we sure can’t compete with the Harris Ranches of the world on grain-finished product.”

That partnership spawned Western Ranchers Beef in 2001. The partners marketed grass-finished beef to Bay Area stores and restaurants. They grew to bring in more partner grower/investors, who would eventually comprise Panorama Meats. Co-founder Wood is now president and board member, as well as one of the fifty-some ranchers throughout California and the Western states who raise the beef that Panorama sells.

“In 2005 we made the decision to go all-organic, which wasn’t too difficult for our own ranch as we were already meeting most of those criteria,” explains Wood. “It took some of our partners time to make the transition, but once we had enough cattle numbers to create volume, we went out and approached supermarket chains, most significantly Whole Foods. They agreed to take us on, and today we’re in 280 stores across the nation, mostly Whole Foods.” Wood’s extended family—his wife, kids, father, brother, and other clan members—operate 40,000 acres of family-owned and leased grasslands in northeastern California, and Wood is a national leader in rangeland preservation and wetlands conservation. A founding member and past president of the California Rangeland Trust, Wood has been awarded numerous honors for both environmental stewardship and leadership in the cattle industry—perspectives sometimes seen as at-cross-purposes.

“I think I’m a pretty typical rancher in a lot of ways—we all have mortgages and we have kids that we want to be able to keep in the business, and we all need to take care of our land if we want to keep it productive. I designed Panorama to work for the ranchers, to take the peaks and valleys out of the cattle market, and to give them a twenty-five to thirty percent premium over the conventional market by taking a different approach to ranching.”

While Panorama may be a giant in the grass-fed organic beef niche, Wood puts things in perspective: “Within the overall beef industry we’re very small.” Its size means that, like many tiny local ranchers, Panorama struggles with the nationwide shortage of meat processing and packing plants—

## BEST PRACTICES ONLY, PLEASE!

Poultry (which in California includes the feather-free rabbit) can be slaughtered and sold under the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Producer/Grower 1,000 bird limit, a.k.a. the “poultry exemption.” A farm may slaughter 1,000 chickens or equivalent ducks, rabbits, geese, or other fowl per year (one turkey equals four chickens, for example, so the turkey limit is 250) without USDA inspection. The animals must have been raised on the farm and must be sold through a CSA, farmers’ market, or by direct sale, within state only. Farmers may *not* sell to restaurants, grocery stores, or wholesalers, and the birds (or bunnies) may not be resold.

The next step up is the federal 20,000 bird per year exemption, which still exempts the farm from bird-by-bird continuous USDA inspection at an outside facility, but requires an onsite facility meeting CDFA and local requirements for higher volume production. At that level, the farm can supply restaurants, grocery markets, and wholesalers.

To educate current and would-be poultry producers on safe handling—and to promote a small but potentially vibrant economic force in the rural region—the Butte County Environmental Health Division recently developed a “best management practices” publication that aims to keep scenarios like those in the corny old cartoons out of our foodshed. The resulting document, “Butte County On-Farm Poultry Slaughter Guidelines,” has been posted on the state CDFA’s website as a model for small poultry flock management ([cdfa.ca.gov/is/pdfs/PoultryGuidelines.pdf](http://cdfa.ca.gov/is/pdfs/PoultryGuidelines.pdf)).

“If we want to make the local food movement work, we’ve got to be a lot more collaborative, and that includes local government,” says Brad Banner, Environmental Health Director in the Butte County Dept. of Public Health. “We had a local food summit, and were jazzed to continue the direction of the California Homemade Food Act,” which permits cottage food operations under local environmental health supervision. “We found a nice set of small poultry flock guidelines from Cornell University as a foundation, and sat down in the state Ag Commissioner’s office with some CDFA folks and some local growers [including Wookey’s Richard Coon and Chaffin Family Farms’ Kurt Albrecht] and put together an effective program.”

“The grassroots local food movement coincides with the recognition that healthy nutrition is essential to our public health and to our region’s economic health,” says Banner. “We need to foster best practices, but you can’t just throw regulations at people. We made partnerships, because a program that doesn’t have the support of the people who are being regulated can’t be an effective program.” The guidelines rely on self-certified, voluntary compliance, but farmers’ market organizers and even savvy consumers themselves could preferentially support growers who advertise their participation.

Many in the four-legged local meat business would like to extend such a program. “I believe there should be an exemption system for red meat as there is for poultry,” says Dave Dewey, butcher and owner of Chico Locker and Sausage. “If you want to process a limited number of animals, you could do it on your ranch under state or even local inspection—let the little guy be inspected on the county level, the medium guy on the state level, and the big producers on the federal level. No laxity—all held to the same food safety standards. It’s all risk-based. The risk is not one-size-fits-all.

“But it’ll never happen,” Dewey sighs. “We’d never get a red meat exemption at the federal level. You’re not going to change federal law. 85% of meat in this country is sold by three packers. They have lobbyists and lawyers on staff. They don’t want change, they don’t want competition. Any competition is a threat.”

Do Tyson, Cargill and JBS really regard mom-and-pop ranchers as competition? “Does Anheuser-Busch consider Sierra Nevada Brewery as competition? They started out small.”

slaughterhouses—that fulfill federal USDA food safety inspection regulations. Panorama doesn’t use the huge plants that are often vertically integrated with big producers’ feedlot operations. Instead, the company looks for small- to medium-sized plants near partner ranches, plants that can customize, for example, to meet the requirements for organic processing, but also, he says, offer “efficiencies so their costs are competitive and we can keep the end-consumer cost down.”

The search is not easy. Says Wood, “All over the country, I hear the same discussion and the same ideas, everywhere I go. We need more slaughter capacity. What about processing co-ops? But a processing plant is a business all of its own, and it has to be run that way. Once you spend the money for the infrastructure, then you need to have a constant supply of livestock every day. If Panorama were to build a plant tomorrow, Panorama’s needs wouldn’t be enough to support that entity, so I would have to go out and bring in custom business.”

But wait—aren’t many small ranchers searching for quality processing close to home? Tyler Dawley of Big Bluff Ranch explains the predicament: “Even more than volume, processors need steady, predictable supply. The little local growers can’t get the time of day at a processor. So why not open a processor for them? Because then you’d have all



*Darrell Wood rides at a Leavitt Lake branding. (Photo courtesy of Panorama Meats.)*

those growers who want to process ten or fifty or a couple of hundred head of whatever animal all bringing them in at the same time in the spring and summer, and you'd have no business for the other months of the year.”

A 2012 report by the High Sierra Resource Development and Conservation Council that investigated meat processing capacity and opportunities in the north state seconded the concern about predictable supply, noting that most ranchers have no animals available from January to April. The report also pointed to other perennial obstacles—one is the challenge of marketing. While many ranchers express interest in direct-to-consumer marketing, they too may not be suited as “farmers’ market warriors” or they may face other direct-marketing impediments. Further, according to the report, meat processors have “largely been organized on the factory or manufacturing model,” where processors buy live animals and process them into packaged meat that they market wholesale. Many specialty meat ranchers, in contrast, seek processors to provide a service, where the ranchers maintain ownership of both the live animal and the finished meat products.

A group of growers in Mendocino County won a grant from the USDA for a co-op feasibility study and developed a plan for creating a group-investment processing plant,

thus avoiding the need for a middle-man processor. Progress has stalled for reasons including community resistance. “A slaughterhouse isn’t something people want in their backyard,” says Dave Dewey, owner of Chico Locker and Sausage. “They like meat, but not where it comes from.”

Indeed, stubborn realities in the meat packing industry will always endure: as Darron Rosen, manager of Johansen’s Meats in Orland, states, “It’s not an easy job, it’s not a pretty job, it’s not a sexy job. It’s grind-it-out, manual labor. Nobody’s getting rich doing this.”

## HERE’S WHERE YOU THE CONSUMER COME IN

If those of us who love our access to “know-your-farmer” meat want to keep these ranchers in business with access to quality local processors, we might have to raise some ruckus. State-level legislative change could make sense, when the economic benefits of a thriving statewide meat industry are weighed against a relatively modest cost to the state of California. In a way, we’d be back to the future.

As explained in the report by the High Sierra Resource Development and Conservation Council, forty years ago, local ranchers were able to sell meat to their know-your-

farmer neighbors because many state-inspected facilities operated to serve those ranchers. The state of California paid for the meat inspectors in these facilities. In the budget difficulties of the mid-1970s, then-governor Jerry Brown saw an opportunity to cut state expenses, and so “all inspection responsibilities were given to the USDA”—which meant the feds shouldered the cost.

Dave Dewey advocates reversing the step. “We could return to the ‘state equal to USDA’ system. That’s where the state can manage the inspections and paperwork in lieu of USDA, so the facility just deals with the state, and the state answers to USDA. . . all held to the same requirements and standards.” Dewey sees the economic potential. “This is a growing market—talk about job creation, economic growth. In states with ‘equal to’ programs [such as Oregon, Montana, and Oklahoma, among others], small-scale local meat production and processing is thriving.”

Problem is, the state of California is in no mood to add new programs. USDA recognizes that the small-scale meat industry faces its own challenges; they offer various leg-up programs for producers and spell out road maps for state-equal-to-USDA programs, mobile slaughter, and interstate commerce. But Sacramento would need a lot of convincing to re-launch its long-dormant CDEA retail inspection program.

“The grass-fed and locally-grown market is huge and growing,” says Dewey. “If people want this meat available,

the industry and consumers need to talk to their state representatives and push the return of the state-equal-to program. That’s the only way I can see small meat plants survive. There are enough farmers’ market customers that they could make a hell of a groundswell and demand changes.”

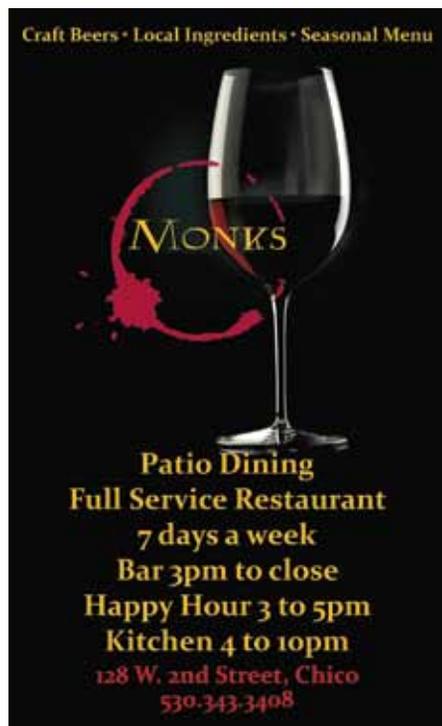
## THE BOTTOM LINE

The theme that emerges is survival by smarts and collaboration. A true go-it-alone indy, Wookey Ranch, forms an ecosystem of farmers’ market customers, feed suppliers, processors for their lamb, custom butchers, and hot tips on used machinery—and they help out others in myriad ways, such as working with Butte County to develop best practices guidelines for small-flock poultry farms (see sidebar p. 24). Big Bluff Ranch, a mid-size family operation, manages with a tiny workforce in a remote location, tapping into a higher-volume, statewide source of reliable demand for their year-round supply and moonlighting to function as micro-distributors for their fellow local producers. The larger collaboration Panorama Meats leverages both the energy of many ranchers and the growing market for organic, grass fed beef, while they justly tout the environmentally sustainable results of their methods.

Small, medium, or large (and they’re still tiny compared to Cargill and Tyson), they’re all practicing survival smarts that keep local ranchers in business and local meat on our tables. Still, local ranchers could use a little help from us voters. 🐾

*Alicia Springer is a writer and editor who appreciates the variety and quality of food available in our region.*

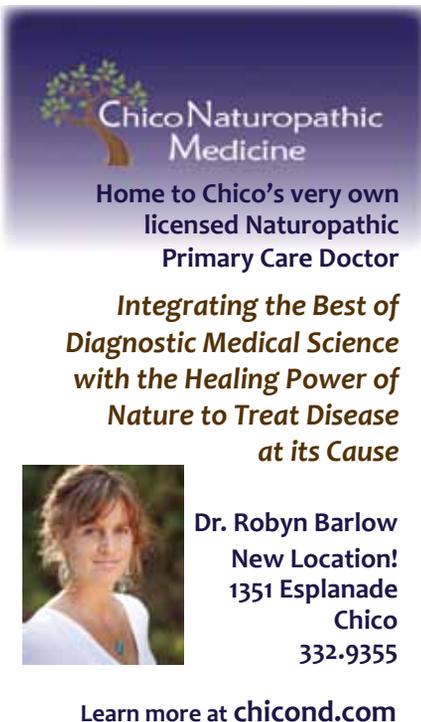
For fascinating reading, check out the full report from the High Sierra Resource Development and Conservation Council at [ucanr.edu/sites/placernevadasmallfarms/files/164099.pdf](http://ucanr.edu/sites/placernevadasmallfarms/files/164099.pdf)



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