

Palais des Poulets

heritage breeds + plenty of pampering = flavorful eggs

BY JENNIFER CHANDLER
PHOTOS COURTESY OF BENT WILLOW RANCH

If I were a chicken, I'd want to be one of Kristen Keegan's chickens. These fowl live the high life in their *palais des poulets* (poultry palace) grazing on scraps of organic strawberries, shredded cheese, and cracked corn from the Keegan's scenic ranch in peaceful Hardeman County, Tennessee.

THE BEGINNING

"I used to always joke with my husband that if we bought a farm it would need to be a Martha Stewart farm. You know, with lots of flowers, organic produce, and chickens that followed me around and laid Easter eggs," Kristen recounts as she explains to me how a self-professed city girl got into the egg business.

Some things you never outgrow. As a kid, Kristen's husband, Jay, voraciously read his *Foxfire Anthologies*, a popular 1970s set of instructional books about living off the land. He was intrigued by such topics as how to raise crops and how to keep bees. But, as what happens to most of us, the little boy grew up and instead of becoming a farmer, he became a business man.

Jay never stopped dreaming and he was always on the lookout for just the right piece of farmland. In 2007, his dream became a reality when they found a farm for sale just an hour from their home in Memphis.

Soon after their purchase, Kristen got a frantic phone call from the Middleton post office insisting that she immediately come pick up a package that was making strange noises. Intrigued, she hopped in the car.

To her surprise, there were 25 fuzzy, baby chicks inside the box.

"Jay had remembered my dream of having Martha Stewart chickens!" she gushes.

Kristen brought that first clutch of two-day-old chicks back to her home in Memphis. She kept them in her sunroom for several weeks while they built a chicken coop and got ready for the new additions back at the ranch.

And she quickly got a crash course in raising chickens.

"They don't come with an instruction manual and I had never touched a chicken before," Kristen recounts. "Jay had to go find us a book!"

"Did you know that you have to teach a baby chick to drink? You have to dunk its head in water and force it to drink for the first time."

And that is how Kristen Keegan got into the egg business.

BENT WILLOW RANCH'S HERITAGE CHICKENS

Bent Willow Ranch is a working 550-acre farm. With the help of a ranch manager, Jay raises corn and hay for neighbors' cattle, keeps bees, and maintains the ranch's orchard and vineyard. Kristen tends to the vegetable and flower gardens, in addition to raising her chickens.

These are layers, not meat chickens. And Kristen loves her chickens. Like a doting mother, she explains, "Each of our chickens

has a distinctive personality. We could never eat one of them."

With names like Honey Ryder, Poppy, Dominique, and Daisy, Kristen's bevy of chickens sounds like a fun group!

When asked how she decided to name her chickens, Kristen says, "I am a huge believer that if you name a hen after a human, they will take on the characteristics of their namesake. The Buff Orpingtons all are named after people we know because they are so personable. Dabney Hen, our best broody hen, is named after our favorite teacher who has taught third grade boys for more than 20 years. This chicken lives for the little ones like her human namesake. Her life's purpose is raising the little ones and teaching them how to be successful in life."

Kristen names all her Welsummer chickens after Bond girls, since James Bond would only eat the chocolate brown eggs from this heritage breed. "The Welsummer 'Bond girls' are magnificent and know how to strut their stuff just like the gorgeous women in the films," Kristen laughingly interjects into our conversation.

"My Ameraucanas are named for flowers — like Poppy, Daisy, and Marigold — because this breed brings beauty to the egg cartons with their blue, green, and pink eggs, just like flowers bring beauty to our every day life."

She also has a Brown Leghorn appropriately named Tina Turner!

Opposite: Kristen with two of her hens.



Bent Willow Heritage Chicken Breeds — Ameraucana • Black Sexlink
Brown Leghorn • Buff Orpington • Cuckoo Maran • Dominique
Pearl White Leghorn • Plymouth Rock • Rhode Island Red • Welsummer



BENT WILLOW RANCH EGGS

You won't find Bent Willow Ranch eggs at your local market, Kristen sells her eggs the old-fashioned way, mostly to friends who pick them up at Kristen's East Memphis home. She also delivers. Each week she sends out an email to her loyal customers letting them know how many dozen are available. The first to respond gets the eggs — so be sure to respond quickly. They go in minutes!

If you'd like to be added to the Bent Willow Ranch egg list, email Kristen at bentwillow@hotmail.com.

Just as her husband devoured information on farming in his *Foxfire Anthologies* as a child, Kristen has enthusiastically tackled learning about chickens. She has spent countless hours researching heritage breeds.

Her first chicks included a mixture of Rhode Island Reds, Pearl White Leghorns, Dominiques, Cuckoo Marans, and Ameraucanas.

She now has more than 10 heritage breeds in her coop.

“I prefer a nice chicken that produces a beautiful egg over an unfriendly chicken that has high production,” Kristen explains, when asked how she chooses which breeds to buy.

“Some breeds are not nice. Ameraucanas produce beautiful blue eggs, but they are often aloof and skittish. Rhode Island Reds and Buff Orpingtons are my favorites,” Kristen says as she shows me a photo of a chicken sitting on her shoulder. “That Rhodie thought she was a parrot!”

No matter what their personality, all of Kristen’s chickens lay eggs in their signature gorgeous shades. Each carton she sells has a mixture of varying shades of blue, green, chocolate, tan, and white — a virtual crayon box of eggs. “I have played around with how to present my eggs for sale and I think my favorite way is an assortment,” she admits.

Even though Kristen’s chickens only produce about 20 dozen eggs a week, she went through the certification process with the Tennessee Department of Agriculture to become a licensed egg producer. She also does extensive research to ensure Bent Willow Ranch produces not only the tastiest, but the safest eggs.

KRISTEN’S CHICKENS LIVE THE HIGH LIFE

Talk about free-range — The *palais des poulets* sits in a large enclosed yard to which the chickens have 24-hour access. They also have a one and a half acre adjoining vineyard for leisurely strolls and games of hide and seek with all the bugs in the garden.

These chickens eat better than most folks I know! They are fed a diet of premium chicken feed, plus organic vegetables from the farm’s garden, oatmeal and raisins for iron, and cheese and oyster shell for calcium. “What you feed a chicken can affect the taste of the egg,” explains Kristen. “We never feed them onions, broccoli, or cauliflower.”

Kristen loves to spoil her chickens. In the spring, the chickens get sweet treats like organic strawberries from a neighboring farm. In the summer, Kristen feeds them frozen corn on the cob to help keep them cool.

In return, the chickens help with pest control. “Since the chickens eat the bugs and then poop, we don’t have to buy pesticides and fertilizers. It’s the perfect symbiotic relationship,” she says.

The chickens that are lucky enough to roost at Bent Willow Ranch have also enriched the lives of the Keegans.

Kristen’s sons are getting a life lesson lost on many urban kids — learning where and how their food is produced and experiencing the entire process firsthand.

“My boys call themselves chicken wranglers,” Kristen proudly states. “They love to invite their friends to come over to hold and feed the chickens. What a cool experience they are able to share with friends.” eM

Jennifer Chandler is the author of cookbooks *Simply Suppers* and *Simply Salads*. She has been a customer of Kristen’s since she first began selling eggs. Jennifer spends a lot of time negotiating with her girls over who gets the green “Dr. Seuss” eggs and who gets the brown “chocolate” eggs for breakfast.



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