

Pigasso Farms

Heather & Rob Kitchen - Journey into Farming

COPAKE



Farming Journey

Originally from:

Rob: Greenwich, CT

Heather: White Plains, NY

Type of Training: On-farm employment

Land Search Length: 8 months

Land Source: Purchased and leased land

Pigasso Farms

First Year: 2004

Location: Copake, NY

Land Base: 41 acres (some owned and some leased)

Markets: Farmers' markets (Hudson and The Red Barn Roadside Market), farm stand, restaurants, local retail outlets, and wholesale

Products: Chicken, eggs, pork, lamb, and beef

Relationship to the Land



Rob: "We have almost 20 acres, and by the end of summer hopefully we'll have another 20 acres that we lease from people... We love our property, and we want it to be as productive as it can."



Rob as a child (top), and Rob's childhood drawings of his dream farm (below). He knew from age 6 that he wanted to be a farmer.

EARLY INFLUENCES

Rob: "I was obsessed with animals from a young age, and my mom used to babysit me by putting corn out on the backyard and I'd watch the geese for hours. I was fascinated with farm animals, and my grandfather grew up on a farm in Pennsylvania, and his stories got me intrigued. I met a farmer when I was five years old, and saw my first calf born when I was like six years old, and I knew I wanted to be a farmer from that time on. When I was 11 I [started working] at Scoland Farm [in the] summers, and whenever I could in the winter, until I was 22."

Heather: "I'm from White Plains, NY. Just down the road from where I lived was one of the last existing farms in White Plains. My friend and I used to run through the barns [on the farm], whether we were supposed to or not. Back in those days, stuff was just starting to build up in White Plains. My parents had a house in Sherman, CT, where we would come up to the country every weekend, or we'd go up to Vermont skiing, so we would see farms, and we got a lot of country exposure... I've always liked animals, and I had one experience when I was very young, in the 70s, back when people were trying to do their own sustainable living. We had friends who had horses and chickens and goats, and they lived off the land, and I was amazed by their chickens, and I brought home my own little egg. I thought I could have my own little baby chicken. It's just something that imprints on you as a young child, and it always stayed with me... I knew I definitely didn't fit into city life at all."

THE BEGINNINGS OF A FARM

Heather: "I had pet chickens for a couple of years, they lived with me in the house. So I was the one that liked chickens, and then Rob kind of went nuts with it, and this is what we have now... After I had my pet chickens, we got laying hens, and then we got some meat birds, and then he started to raise pigs. For two or three years we raised pigs [on other people's properties], and then I was like, 'We keep raising all these animals - if you really want to keep doing this, we need to move.' And so we started looking for different properties, and he found this property. Whatever pigs we had down in Millerton we ended up bringing with us, and we just started growing from there. He had this plan in his head all along, I think. It's his passion. And it's really just taken off and done really well. Sometimes I have to slow him down."

EXPANDING THE FARM

Rob: "My goal was either to do an on-farm store here, or a meat CSA. I didn't think it would snowball as fast as it did. The first three years I think we did 25 pigs a year, and now we're at a point where we're doing 117 to 120 freezer pigs a year. The broilers, we started with around 100 to see how they would sell, a test run. They sold pretty well, and so the next year we went from 100 to 2,500. And we started with like 15 lambs, and now we're doing 40-60 lambs."

Heather: "And the laying hens were the first thing we ever had."

Rob: "We had 50 to 60 laying hens, and now we have about 220... I was a little crazy when we went to 2,500 [broilers] in one year, but you know, we sold them. The next part is doing UPS shipping - I've got a lot of people who find us on Local Harvest, but it doesn't say that we ship, and they'll call from Long Island and say, 'I want 10 lbs. of bacon.'"

Heather: And this is where I come in to slow him down, because he says, 'This would be great,' and I am like, 'We do not produce food that fast. There are so many people looking for something like that. We would be out of a product...'"



Pastured pigs at Pigasso Farms.

BALANCING FARMING AND OFF-FARM WORK

Heather: "[We were] just two people, and both of us working full-time somewhere else. That's how we started out."

Rob: "Last January, I gave up my full-time job and started to farm full-time, because I realized that to get to the next level, I had to be here more. When I had my full-time job, I had to have my litters [of piglets] born in September and April, because those were the times I wasn't busy at work. Last spring we had like 75 piglets running around here at one time, and it was just way too much. We stressed the property out a lot, so that's why this year I started my sows where every two months I'm having a litter, so it's a whole lot more spread out. Now we're going to have a steady supply of our inventory year-round... We're at the point where I need a full-time employee."

Heather: "I'm going to eventually be here four days, and I'll work my other job three days."

Rob: "I can maintain everything, but I can't do anything else that I need to get done. Between doing deliveries and feeding animals, in the summer my days are consumed. My nephew, who's going to be 15, he's going to be here five days a week in the summer, so that helps. This summer, he was here three days a week, and the days he was here he saved me three hours a day in chore time, because he would take care of the chickens and I would do the pigs."

LEARNING AND GROWING

Rob: "I guess the biggest challenge was learning by error. Trial and error. Try this, it didn't work, don't do it again."

Heather: "Every year, [there is] something that we want to change about a certain way we've done something."

Rob: "Every year we're trying to give [all the animals] a different improvement. Just minor improvements to make animal traffic and lifestyle better, give them a little more open space..."

Heather: "We've done everything little by little, just to try and get it done."

Rob: "We're going to hopefully be inspected by the state so we can process our own birds...a meat CSA would be our next step, with monthly pickups, and I was hoping to tie it in with a vegetable CSA."

WHY FARMING?

Heather: "It's nice to walk out your back door and walk over to your farm, and just realize that we're doing all this. That whole process is kind of rewarding, actually. This was all in his head and I just can't believe it's all come to fruition. It's nice to see that it all did really fall into place."

Rob: "I enjoy it, even though I go out there every day of the week. And I enjoy working for myself. I've already seen, since I've given up my full-time job, my [health has improved]. My doctor was like, 'What did you do?' This was two months after I gave up my full-time job, he was like, 'What did you change in your life?' Your blood pressure is just outrageous. I've never seen it so low."



Farm Store: Rob and Heather opened their on-farm store in April 2011. They sell their meat and eggs, and are open every Friday through Sunday.



New Barn (right): This new barn to house animals was just put up this year. Like many new farmers, Rob and Heather have slowly built up their farm's infrastructure as their farm has grown.

Pigasso Farms



Rob and Heather produce pasture-raised livestock and feed locally-produced and milled grain. **Rob:** "Our animals are happy, they're having a good life."