



Link'd Hearts Ranch

2018 Newsletter



"I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work." – Thomas Edison

When I look back, I will forever associate Mr. Edison's words with this past year. Beginning to end, it felt like every day we faced new challenges and charted unknown territories of farming. Everything I thought I knew was turned upside down. While I don't wish to rehash every issue in this newsletter, in the end, I am incredibly thankful for the friends who let me cry on their shoulder, the customers who offered words of encouragement and to my parents who in autumn made a sizeable financial contribution that saved our 2017 season. The only way I could navigate picking up the pieces was to examine everything and learn as many lessons as I could absorb. Here are a few of my take away lessons from 2017:

- 1.) The wettest, coldest, driest, and hottest records do not happen individually, they can happen all in the same farming year! And I must prepare to weather them all.
- 2.) Constant assessment and adjustments to these changing situations are not a sign of failure, but instead it is the job description of a good farmer. Mother Nature is like the wind and we are the ship at sea, to get where we want, we must adjust our sails to each change.
- 3.) I will never be ashamed to cry at a loss. It hurts because it's my passion and it matters to me. Tough experiences do not need to build calluses on my heart and in the end, I will be a better farmer for the vulnerability.
- 4.) When I do not know the direction to go, it is good to go back to the beginning and ask – why did I do this? The answer will usually involve my family, and that's the best compass.

The year 2018 will mark our 10th anniversary here on the farm! There is nothing quite so humbling as having a decade of experience and realizing how much I still do not know yet. Truthfully, 2017 brought me to my knees and was the first time in a decade I questioned whether I wanted to continue as a farmer. It was quietly going back to our beginning and asking myself 'why am I here?' that allowed me to adjust my focus and carry on. We built this farm 10 years ago not as a business but as a home for our family. The bounty and blessings of our farm were to nourish our family body and soul.

Our oldest child, Joe will be 16 this spring. Last season, Joe stepped up in a huge way here on the farm when Richard was injured in early February. Joe continued to help me all summer when Rich was Farmers Market Manager in Pullman in addition to his full-time job at WSU and unable to spend as much time on farm work as in years past. Joe is a hardworking, smart kid with a bright future ahead of him. If you ask Joe about Robotics you will see him light up with enthusiasm and he will tell you tales of his team competitions. Our family whole heartedly supports Joe's Robotics team schedule and will adjust our spring farm season to accommodate his passion. I am coming to terms that Joe's leaving home for college is fast on the horizon. I want to spend more time as a family before these precious years are behind us. No matter what happens, farm work will always be constant, so family time must be made a higher priority for us in 2018.

If our farm is to be viewed as our home first and a business second, then supporting our kids' hobbies and passions are just as allowable uses of our land as growing food. This priority shift has manifested itself in Andy's pursuit of building a rabbitry of fluffy, adorable pet and show quality Lionhead rabbits. This Christmas we saw the addition of every little girls' dream come true- a horse for Coraline.

Going back to the beginning, with all the options on the table at the end of 2017, allowed me to come to grips with several major changes that needed to happen for us to continue our farm business in a meaningful way. As you look at our order form for 2018, the biggest change you will notice is that we will go from 7 batches of chickens, down to 3 batches. While each chicken batch will be larger in number, overall we will have fewer chickens for sale. On the bright side, this new schedule will give us the time flexibility we need to adjust to whatever crazy weather Mother Nature throws at us, while allowing us enough time to grow the desired heavier, meatier chicken. These larger batches will force us to adjust our processing and pick-up schedule for the first time ever. Our new pick up schedule for each batch will be a 5-7pm pick up on the farm on Thursday and Friday evening, and to make sure we comply with Washington State requirements, a final pick up time will be Saturday morning from 10am to Noon. This new schedule will require all pick up times to be confirmed via email prior to processing and unconfirmed orders will go to the extras list at the beginning of Thursday's pick up. As always, we will not be able to hold any chickens beyond the last pick up time, now on Saturday at noon. We appreciate everyone's flexibility in working with us to make sure we always comply with our state regulations so that we can continue to stay in business and provide quality, pasture raised local chicken. The fewer batches I am hoping will facilitate extra needed family time for us, while providing you, our local customers, with quality, meaty chickens. If you need any help reassessing your total yearly order, please do not hesitate to contact us, we are happy to look up your 2017 order and answer any questions.

The second major change for 2018 regarding turkeys was the hardest decision for me to finalize. After several seasons of learning to raise turkeys, the reality is pasture raised turkeys are incredibly expensive to raise as well as more difficult to manage than chickens. The model for chickens cannot simply be transferred directly to turkeys. To allow us to continue to offer pasture raised turkeys we are forced to change our price to \$5.50 per pound. This is our first poultry price increase in 5 years, yet is still competitive with other similar raised turkeys in Washington that were being sold for \$6-7 per pound on average last season. Our previous price had us operating at a financial loss and it is simply not sustainable for us to continue in that way. We will continue to keep the non-refundable deposit at \$30 per turkey and deposits will be deducted off the final price in the fall. We heavily debated the need to raise chicken prices as well due to increased chick prices in recent years and additional feed requirements during longer growing times. In the end, our adjustment to the 2018 schedule to raise a heavier, meatier chicken we hope will offset these costs. We will know for sure after this season. For 2018 we will hold the price for chicken at \$4/ pound and we will reassess for 2019.

My final change for 2018 brings me great joy! Our U-pick CSA has had a huge learning curve but has seen steady improvements over the years. One of my biggest hurdles to overcome is over-abundance and waste. While the simple answer would seem to be to sell more shares – it simply wasn't my heart to expand. Instead, I spoke with our local Backyard Harvest group at length and have decided to turn a problem into a blessing. I have decided to run the garden for the first time on a weekly schedule that allows extra food to be harvested for local families in need. I believe healthy food should be accessible to all people and this opportunity allows us to give back to the local community. This new U-pick CSA model will also ensure more frequent crop succession and in turn should create higher quality produce for everyone. I will also be starting a Facebook group for our CSA members so that I can increase timely communication and even add video messages about harvesting or crop utilization. I will also be scheduling myself to spend weekly garden 'office' hours to foster more personal interaction with members and guests. More than anything else, I want our garden to be a positive experience for our family and CSA members alike.

Thank you so much for supporting our farm and living this dream with us. More than ever, I want our customers to feel like welcomed friends when they visit the farm, an extension of our home. We look forward to seeing you all soon and to the many blessings of 2018.

Happy Spring,
AlyssaMarie