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The Lunatic Farmer

Internationally known for his agricultural practices in Virginia, Joel Salatin calls it like he sees it—and there's a lot he's calling out.

By Chris Cooper

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All Photos: Chris Cooper

Joel Salatin is possibly the most influential farmer in America.

He doesn't work for the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Calling himself a "lunatic," he's most famous for his central roles in *Food, Inc.* and *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, as well as several speeches on the TED stage. Salatin abhors many commercial farming practices, concerns himself with "the pigness of the pig" and says the "organic" label is a scam.

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He calls his methods, among other things, “exercising ecology.”

“Isn’t it incredible,” he asks, “that the people who put Froot Loops and Pop-Tarts at the base of the food pyramid, who tell us that feces in our food is OK as long as it’s irradiated, that GMO food is safe but raw milk isn’t—these are the people in charge of our food?”

They’re also the people in charge of food labeling, and according to Salatin, the “organic” label just ain’t what it used to be.

Welcome to Polyface

Salatin’s farm—Polyface, or the farm of many faces—rests in Virginia’s Shenandoah Valley. Three generations of Salatins live here, and neighboring farms are tended by relatives and former interns. Tours cost \$30, are limited to 100 people per day and are sold out for the next three months.

A typical tour—two hours of hayrack riding with some lecture time—will host folks from all over North America. Farmers, apartment dwellers and folks who want to buy their first chicken are there; signed photos from visiting musicians and politicians dot the walls.

**“I’m just a Christian-
libertarian-environmentalist-
capitalist-lunatic farmer.”**

—Joel Salatin



On Salatin’s farm, chickens have far more room than in concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs).

Even on a rainy day in June, Polyface doesn't stink. Because animals are moved daily, manure doesn't accumulate in any single area. This is one small—but pungent—difference between Salatin's methods and big agro.

Salatin's methods are both revolutionary and remnant. His cows are tightly penned with electric fencing to minimize trampling of their pastoral "salad bar," and they are moved daily. Chickens follow the cows a day later. Rabbits sleep in cages hung above the heads of turkeys; their poop contains an amino acid that turkeys crave. His business model is wide open: if interns have an idea for a new service, Salatin lets them try it on his farm. He uses constantly varied functional movement of crops and animals to produce a system more closely aligned with the natural history of his turf. Sound familiar?

His idea of "chicken tractors"—portable chicken houses that move every day—has been copied thousands of times by farmers around the world. He boasts that his methods are intelligence-centric, not infrastructure-centric. He has no secrets; there is nowhere at Polyface that a camera isn't allowed.

The Salatin family settled in Virginia when Joel was 4 after a political coup in Peru "repatriated" its farm and forced the family to return to the United States. As Salatin has written in several of his books, the family took over 550 acres of pasture that had been over-farmed. The soil was depleted from too many sequential harvests of annual crops; the forest was wild. His parents were considered crazy for purchasing the farm.

**A proud libertarian, Salatin
dislikes government
over-regulation.**



"Chicken tractors" that move every day are a stark contrast to the high-density cages of industrial chicken farming.



Visitors from all over the world come to Polyface to hear Salatin speak and learn about his methods.

Fifty years later, Salatin claims to have built several inches of soil, re-fertilized the land and created a sustainable form of agriculture that can support several generations' nutritional and financial needs.

A proud libertarian, Salatin dislikes government over-regulation. He believes the "organic" label is hurting the small farmer, aiding in the dangerous centralization of our food supply and making us less healthy.

At precisely 10 a.m., four hayracks are loaded behind two tractors to carry the farm tourists. Salatin, wearing his trademark floppy white hat, steps out to address the crowd. His Virginia accent charms his visitors, and his voice drops an octave while he mixes down-home country talk with high science.

"You're going to see things today that will look old-fashioned. We get accused of being anti-science," Salatin says. "But science is not objective. It's limited by its own paradigm: how we set up the experiments. What's the essence of a cow? It's not eating dead cow.

We didn't buy into this idea of feeding dead cows to living cows. Not because we're anti-USDA or anti-science; there's just no template in creation in which herbivores eat carrion. Now we have bovine spongiform encephalopathy, and this worldwide collective 'maybe we shouldna-oughta-dun-that!'"

Many on the wagon have heard this speech before. Like a true media personality, Salatin frequently reverts to well-worn sound bites.

"I'm just a Christian-libertarian-environmentalist-capitalist-lunatic farmer" is his usual self-introduction. On the hayrack, some passengers even mouth the words as he's saying them. The man dubbed "the high priest of the pasture" by *The New York Times* is leading his flock.

Earning the Organic Label

Because all living things are, by definition, "organic," the USDA labeling of "organic" food carries weight primarily as a marketing tool. It might not be a reliable way to predict food quality, Salatin says.

"Intuitively, people understand that the historical use of the word 'organic' identified an idea and a paradigm rather than a visceral list of do's and don'ts. And now that the high prices have attracted unscrupulous growers who enter the movement for the money, people realize that no system can regulate integrity," Salatin says.

What is regulated? According to the [USDA](#), several different levels of "organic" food qualifications exist:

1. 100 Percent Organic: All ingredients are certified organic. So-called processing aids must be organic. Product labels must state the name of the certifying agent on the information panel.
2. Organic: All agricultural ingredients must be certified organic, except for those nonorganic ingredients specified on the National Exclusions List. Salt and water are allowed without limitation.
3. "Made With" Organic: Seventy percent of the product must be certified organic ingredients excluding salt and water. Nonagricultural products must be on the National Exclusions List.
4. Specific Organic Ingredients: May only list certified organic ingredients as organic in the ingredient list and the percentage of organic ingredients. Remaining ingredients are not required to follow the USDA organic regulations.

The aforementioned [National Exclusions List](#) allows food producers to include nonorganic ingredients when an organic equivalent isn't available, up to a percentage of total product mass.

Chicken packagers, for example, can claim their birds are "raised without antibiotics" if the drugs were injected before the animals were hatched.

Ethanol, newspaper, PVC, pheromones, aspirin, potassium bicarbonate, tetracycline, vaccines, iodine and glucose are on the National Exclusions list. And producers can petition the USDA for exclusions.



The old adage "don't panic, it's organic" might be a thing of the past, with many organic farms taking advantage of government loopholes and exclusions.

For example, Anheuser-Busch petitioned the Agriculture Department for permission to use nonorganic hops in two beers: Organic Wild Hop Lager and Organic Stone Mill Pale Ale, [The New York Times](#) reported.

Even these loopholes aren't enough for some.

Chicken packagers, for example, can claim their birds are "raised without antibiotics" if the drugs were injected before the animals were hatched. Similarly, raising the total mass of a chicken breast by injecting salt and water can allow for a higher quantity of nonorganic materials.

Earning an organic label can be prohibitively expensive to a small-scale farmer. Salatin believes this contributes to the centralization of the U.S. food supply.

"More and more people are aware of the compromise and adulteration within the government-sanctioned organic-certified community. They're wary of 6,000-hen confinement laying houses with a three-foot dirt strip



According to Salatin, the “organic” label is little more than a marketing ploy.

being labelled ‘certified organic.’ So patrons latch onto the ‘beyond organic’ idea. It resonates with their disappointment over the government program,” Salatin says.

Although he’s not against buying food labeled as organic, Salatin believes the label has become the marketing foil of the same players responsible for confinement houses, antibiotic overdosing and bovine encephalopathy. He believes there’s a better way.

Common-Sense Farming

The tour stops at the foot of a path leading into the forest. Salatin leads his flock toward a wooden gate: the only solid piece in his fencing system. The rest is a single strand of white electrified wire—highly portable, very effective and cheap.

With rain smacking the broad leaves of black walnut trees, Salatin beckons the masses close but not too close.

“This is a question for the kids,” he yells over the rain. “What does ‘herbivore’ mean?”

Mostly prompted by their parents, a smattering of small voices answers, “Plant eaters.”

“Good. What’s ‘carnivore’ mean?” Salatin bellows.

“Meat eaters,” responds the congregation in unison.

“Good. Go to the head of the class,” Salatin jokes. “Now, what’s ‘omnivore’ mean?”

“Go get raw foods, whole foods.”

—Joel Salatin

Out of unison, the crowd responds, “Eats both meat and plants.”

“Right.”

He nods, then looks down at a little girl resting her hands on the fence.

“Watch your fingers, there, honey. Pigs are omnivores, and you’re made of meat.”

For the next 30 minutes, Salatin explains the historical role and habits of pigs. He talks about “the pigness of the pig,” his methods and his rationale. He answers questions about how frequently they’re moved to a new area of forest, how they’re bred and why he calls them “pigaerators.”

Through the Virginia winter, cows like to stay close together. Salatin places the cows in open-sided pole barns, where they can herd up like buffalo for warmth, eat hay and “do cow stuff.” Like cows everywhere, they tramp straw down for bedding and then drop urine and manure all over it. More straw is added every week, creating what Salatin calls “a carbonaceous diaper.” And ears of corn are pushed down into the straw at the same time. In the spring, the corn ferments, releasing a scent that’s irresistible to pigs. They dig down into the straw, aerating the manure and creating a highly usable fertilizer. Thus, “pigaerators.”

Through the spring, summer and fall, cows are moved daily in portable pens. They’re placed on grass that reaches their knees, which they mow down to the 3-inch level. The

next day, they’re moved and the egg mobiles arrive on the same turf. Chickens claw apart the cow patties searching for grubs and bugs, which pushes the poop into the soil. Within two days, the chickens are moved into the next area of cow-trimmed pasture to follow the cows.

This outside-the-freezer-box approach is so rare that many visitors to Polyface credit Salatin with the concepts. But he demurs, claiming his methods simply follow the natural system established before the arrival of Europeans and their grain-based tillage ideas.

Buffalo once roamed these prairies, followed by wild birds. Grasses were so thick and tall that early settlers worried about losing young children on the prairie. After a herd of thousands of buffalo passed through, smaller animals could forage in the shorter grasses. The pioneer-led shift from perennials (grasses) to annuals (grains) changed that cycle and depleted the soil as years of crops were removed, taking the nutrients and leaving nothing behind, Salatin says.



Salatin says open-air processing introduces less bacteria than the methods used by big agro.



Salatin says chickens produced from his farm actually have less bacteria than those from industrial farms.

Beyond Organic: Finding Your Farmer

Industrial agriculture—which Salatin refers to as “big farma”—often raises animals in “confinement houses,” better known as concentrated animal feeding operations, or CAFOs. Animals are penned tightly together with little room for movement. Often featured in “food horror” films like *Food, Inc.* and *Fresh*, CAFOs provide a perfect storm for disease, infection and contamination. Animals are given antibiotics and steroids, which make their way into the water supply—and our food.

Salatin and regressive progressives like Wendell Berry, author of the 1977 book *The Unsettling of America*, say the only way to avoid the many pitfalls of modern agriculture is to find a local farmer.

“Go get raw foods,” Salatin says. “Whole foods. Get rid of the television and take that time and energy that you’d spend recreating, and go find your food network in your area. Go patronize them. Get it raw, get it cheaper.”

Although the sight of mud, roaming animals and manure around their food can make some purchasers wary, Salatin

says there’s nothing to fear from open-air slaughter or processing.

“Our laws were written primarily for the 1880s, prior to understanding hygiene, bacteria, before we had indoor plumbing, indoor refrigeration. Every time you go to some bureaucrat who wants to license and have multiple gauntlets for every piece of food, they show you these pictures from the 1880s,” Salatin says. “They show you some guy hand-milking a cow in a filthy spot. That’s how they created the current climate. But those laws are outdated because now we can have hot water, soap, stainless steel, all these cool things.”

Conversely, visitors aren’t allowed at confinement houses, ostensibly because of infection risk.

“We had bacteria tests done on our chickens and a supermarket, government-inspected chicken. The government-inspected chicken had 25 times the number of colony-forming bacteria,” Salatin says.

Other studies have found that government-inspected turkeys had irradiated feces mixed into the meat.

According to a June *Consumer Reports* investigation into the poultry-processing industry, "More than half of the packages of raw ground meat and patties tested positive for fecal bacteria."

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—Joel Salatin

A visitor to Polyface can see chickens being processed outside. A small team of six efficiently kills, plucks and washes the birds over stainless steel. A web of PVC pipe overhead delivers flowing water to the processing table through spouts above each bird, cleaning them as they're processed.

"Clearly, we can do this in the sunshine and the open air, but we do it slower. We don't do it every day. We do it carefully. We do it on clean ground every day. We're not bringing manure into the system in the feathers because the feathers are clean. We're not contributing to the pathogenicity of food. To say that inherently you need a \$500,000 processing plant in order to produce a safe chicken is nonsense," Salatin says.

Although critics of his methods argue small-scale farming can't feed enough people and can't provide enough income for a family, Salatin argues his method of farming, which he calls "beyond organic," creates economies of scale.



Salatin describes his farming method as "beyond organic."



Salatin encourages consumers to support local farms—for our health and the health of the planet.

"Just because we farm 'beyond organic' does not mean that we throw out frugality or good business practices," Salatin says. "We don't have to buy fertilizer or medications. We have virtually no vet bills. Sickness and disease and fertility cost a lot of money on the average farm. Since we don't have those costs, we spend more money on management. Our labor cost may be higher, but our overall costs are lower because we're not having to remediate pollution. The taxpayer doesn't have to clean up after us."

The driving force for an improved food supply—and the health of the world—is the consumer, in Salatin's opinion.

"Get in the kitchen. Rediscover the joys of simple eating. You'll cut off at the knees all the patronage of the evil food empire. At the end of the week, ask yourself: which movement have you fed?" he asks.

A Better Way?

On an average Saturday morning, chickens eagerly await rotation into the day's "salad bar." Cows are transferred into fresh, knee-high grass. Pigs trim back the undergrowth beneath black walnut trees and laze in the shade. If a human will ever see a pig smile, it will happen at Polyface.

And Joel Salatin, lunatic farmer, will be the first one to see it.



About the Author

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