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PHOTOS COURTESY OF SKAGIT RIVER RANCH



George and Eiko Vojkovich

Skagit River Ranch Raises Organic, Pastured Livestock

by LAUREN TURNER

Nationally recognized Skagit River Ranch is located in the verdant Skagit Valley, north of Seattle, Washington. The 600-acre farm produces organic, grass-fed beef, pastured pork, poultry and eggs. George and Eiko Vojkovich are guided by three main principles: humane treatment of their animals, sustainability and organic production.

George began farming about 20 years ago, following 30 years as a fisherman. When he fell ill due to chemical exposure, he switched to organic methods. The farm has been certified organic by the State of Washington since 1998 and meets standards for biodynamic farming, though George and Eiko have not sought formal certification.

They switched to grass-fed and finished beef when they learned it was better for the animals and the environment. They started sustainable practices to maintain the health

and productivity of their land over time, for their daughter to inherit and be able to keep farming in the future.

Animals intermingle, grazing over picturesque meadows near the river. Cattle are the mainstay of the operation. The farm raises about 200 head of Wagyu-Angus cross cattle each year. Wagyu is a particularly tender and sweet-flavored beef, originally developed in Japan.

Cattle are rotated frequently among multiple pastures at Skagit River Ranch. Permanent fencing bounds the perimeter, with portable fencing used to section off interior fields

What is Wagyu?

According to the American Wagyu Association (wagyu.org), wagyu, a Japanese cattle breed, derive from native Asian cattle. Wagyu refers to all Japanese beef cattle, where “Wa” means Japanese and “gyu” means cow. Wagyu were originally draft animals selected for their physical endurance, which favored animals with more intra-muscular fat cells. They are a horned breed and black or red in color.



Skagit River Ranch has received awards for soil, water and woodland conservation.

for rotation. During spring and summer, animals are moved to fresh pasture almost daily. Rotational grazing is a lot of work, but George asserts that it is worth it because it helps break up the parasite cycle in the soil while allowing the animals to graze the most nutritious parts of the plants.

Pigs are farrowed by a partner farmer in eastern Washington, and then finished at Skagit River Ranch, where they freely roam the large fields for about six months until they mature.

The Skagit River occasionally floods, which ensures the pastures have a continuous supply of natural minerals. It also adds an element of complexity to managing the animals. With one or two days advance notice of flooding, cattle are moved to higher ground. Eiko, however, said, "It is a fairly easy process to move the cattle, because they come when they are called."

The couple raises Rhode Islands, ISA Brown and Plymouth Rocks in moveable pens, allowing 600-800 laying hens to truly free-range outdoors,

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Skagit River Ranch Wagyu-Angus on grass. The ranch raises about 200 head annually.

grazing on grass and gleaned insects. The pens are placed near shelters that house nest boxes where their eggs are laid and gathered. Their eggs have earned the Cornucopia Institute's highest ranking for organic eggs, and are so popular that customers line up half an hour before opening time at farmers' markets to buy them because the eggs quickly sell out.

The action of the animals on the pastures, their manure and the flooding that periodically deposits minerals contributes to rich soils. George has taught himself soil science by reading books and by consulting with Dr. Phil Wheeler, of CSI, Inc. He and Eiko work with Dr. Wheeler to ensure optimal conditions for pasture growth. They test the soils every few years for

A Washington USDA certified mobile unit designed for poultry processing is used to process chickens and turkeys. The birds are slaughtered and processed on the same day on the farm and then frozen at the farm.

minerals, and if something is needed, they add organic amendments.

George and Eiko have received awards for soil, water and woodland conservation from the Skagit Conservation District, which recognizes outstanding stewardship and protection



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of natural resources. They implemented the district's conservation resource enhancement program, and they follow agricultural best management practices (BMPs). They have planted indigenous trees and shrubs to create a buffer zone along all the ditches on the farm, buffering the farm from the river, and have altered drainage patterns to prevent water run-off mixing with manure and draining into streams.

Animals are kept healthy without the use of antibiotics. Besides the highly nutritious grasses and herbs in the pastures, cattle receive a mineral mix of sea salt and kelp that was custom-formulated by a local veterinarian to keep their immune systems strong. The mix is distributed in mineral/salt feeders in the field that the cattle lick as needed. Likewise, the chickens are fed organic grains mixed with sea kelp and flax from large, sheltered outdoor feeders. Pigs receive a mix of organic grains, flax, corn and wheat at feeding stations in the fields. Organic grain is delivered by local farmers and milled and mixed on-site.



Eiko's handiwork.

The majority of the beef is butchered from April through December when pasture grasses are at optimum nutritional levels. Cattle that are too small for fall butchering are kept and finished on the spring grass.

When it comes to the "one bad day" in the animals' lives, slaughter is accomplished as humanely as possible. Skagit River Ranch beef is certified humanely raised and handled by the Certified Humane Program created by the international non-profit Humane Farm Animal Care.

A USDA certified mobile processing unit harvests the large animals on the farm. Transporting them off-site can distress the animals, producing stress hormones, which can negatively affect the quality of the meat. Following slaughter, carcasses are taken to a processing facility where they hang for a minimum of two weeks and are then cut, vacuum-sealed and quick-frozen. Meat is kept in commercial cold storage.

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Mobile slaughter units for both red meat animals and poultry are becoming increasingly popular, but only a small number are scattered in various states across the country. USDA now offers advice to farmers on building and operating USDA-inspected mobile slaughter units, including webinars offered online. The unit used at Skagit River Ranch was the first one built in the nation operated by

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farmers, and is used as an example by USDA to illustrate issues and how they can be solved.

George and Eiko sell Skagit River Ranch products at a variety of markets and restaurants along the Interstate 5 corridor, ranging as far as 27 miles to the north and 107 miles to the south of their farm. They sell year-round at two Seattle farmers' markets, one on Saturdays, the other on Sundays. Their certified organic turkeys are sold mostly at the farmers' markets. They raise about 300 Broad-Breasted White turkeys per year, and customers start signing up in June to make sure they get one for Thanksgiving. They deliver once per month to drop points at two buyer's clubs; one in Anacortes, Washington,

22 miles west; and one in Bellevue, Washington, 73 miles south.

Additionally, customers can order bulk beef and family packs of beef or pork online and pick it up at designated stations on specified dates. Bulk orders are for a quarter or a half beef. Beef family packs may be 31 pounds of assorted cuts or 36 pounds of hamburger. Pork family packs are 30 pounds of assorted cuts, including Skagit River Ranch's fabulous Italian, hot Italian, Andouille and Polish sausages, breakfast sausage patties and links and bacon.

They sell their eggs, whole chicken and individual cuts of beef and pork, including sausage, ham and bacon from their on-site store year-round on Saturdays. The homey shop space is

packed with their wonderful organic products and information, plus gifts and souvenirs.

Running their diverse operation is demanding work. George and a crew of three do the main farming tasks, with help from Eiko as needed. Eiko oversees marketing, sales and the financial end of things with a staff of two. Their daughter, Nicole, graduated college and then decided she was interested in farming. She now works full-time at the farm, handling tasks such as keeping inventory and marketing.

Eiko said, "George and I are very grateful for her competent help." Nicole is also considering getting an additional degree in nutritional health, which seems like a natural extension of the farming way of life enjoyed by the family.

Eiko's love of that life is implicit in her choice of other pursuits, tending her family garden and preserving its bounty, solely for her family and friends' consumption. She grows a variety of crops and trades some of her produce for fish and other produce at farmers' markets. She does her own canning and freezing, which feeds the family throughout the year. She has about 250 quarts of tomatoes, tomato sauce, applesauce, beets, green beans, pickled beets, sweet and butter pickles, canned stews, pickled Jalapenos and canned tuna stocked in her garage. She also makes her own chicken and beef broth and freezes it along with 30-50 pounds of berries, home made jams and tomato paste.

By simply living their values, the family is demonstrably practicing their stated principles of humane treatment of their animals, sustainability and chemical-free, organic production.

Lauren Turner is a freelance writer, specializing in agricultural, environmental and community topics. She retired from a 30-year career with the U.S. Forest Service where she worked as a wildlife biologist, ecosystem manager and District Ranger. An avid organic gardener, she lives in Sequim, Washington, with her husband and their three cats.

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