RAISING QUAIL

Manchester Farms, the country’s largest quail producer, is a steward of the birds.

BY JEFF BOOK
PHOTOGRAPHS BY KEVIN GARRETT
"We’re stewards of the birds—we want their lives to be good."

If you’ve enjoyed quail or a quail egg in a high-end restaurant, chances are it came from Manchester Farms in Columbia, South Carolina. The family-owned operation got its start when Bill Odom changed from one bird to another—not just once, but twice. In the early 1970s, rather than move to New Jersey to run a chicken farm for his employer, Campbell Soup Company, Odom chose to stay in South Carolina and switch to the bird he’d grown up shooting. “We began raising bobwhites for hunters,” he recalls. “I had a poultry science degree from Clemson and I couldn’t keep the birds alive. I knew if I didn’t find another bird I would go out of business.”

So he switched again, to a bird better suited to large-scale production—\textit{Coturnix japonica}, also known as Japanese or Pharaoh quail, which has been cultivated since ancient times. (Fun fact: Japanese quail eggs have orbited the Earth in several Soviet and Russian spacecraft, and in 1990 were successfully incubated and hatched on the Mir space station.) The bobwhite (\textit{Colinus virginianus}) may be a better gamebird, but the Pharaoh quail matures three times as fast, is more disease-resistant, produces more eggs, hatches them sooner, and (Odom insists) is more flavorful. The Asian native migrates widely (which makes it a poor candidate for hunting preserves). Historically, large flocks of \textit{Coturnix} migrated in spring from Africa across the Mediterranean—arriving fatigued and, in the Old Testament, just in time to be served as food for the weary Israelites Moses led out of Egypt.

Heaven-sent \textit{Coturnix} seemed a long shot, so Odom bought his first flock from a Canadian farm. He still shivers at the memory of the wintry night he and his wife, Janet, drove the birds across the border to the promised land. “We had 1,500 chicks in the back of our station wagon,” he says. “They were so quiet we were afraid they’d all die!” But the chicks survived. And what began with a backyard coop and a picnic table processing line is now, four decades later, the country’s largest quail producer.

There have been setbacks along the way, of course—Hurricane Hugo, for example, which in 1989 blew away many of the farm’s buildings and birds. But today Manchester Farms produces more than four million quail and five million quail eggs a year (big numbers, but a fraction of the output of an industrial chicken farm). “Our philosophy is goodness in, goodness out,” explains the Odoms’ daughter, Brittney Miller. “We’re stewards of the birds—we want their lives to be good.” She and her husband, Matt, now run the company. Their approach emphasizes...
working with the nature of the bird rather than tweaking it to maximize production. “We would never use antibiotics, hormones, or genetic engineering,” Brittney says. “I tell people if you want a bigger bird, buy a chicken!” Over the years, they’ve improved the health and weight of their birds in the traditional way, by selecting the most robust specimens for breeding. Manchester Farms is the only SQF Level 2-certified American quail producer (a global standard with stringent requirements established by the Safe Quality Food Institute). The birds receive ideal conditions for each stage of their lives, including precisely controlled temperature and humidity (alarms go off if either varies beyond a safe range). They begin as speckled eggs that foreshadow the adults’ elegant, mottled-brown plumage. In the hatchery at the processing plant, thousands of eggs incubate in racks whose angle changes hourly, simulating the way a hen shifts eggs in the nest. The tiny hatchlings’ high survival rate contrasts with their likely fate in the wild, as downy bon-bons for predators.

Transported in a climate-controlled trailer to a 400-foot-long breeder house, the hatchlings literally hit the ground running. They graduate to different, barnlike rooms as they grow, each lined with sawdust and equipped with automated feeding and watering stations and ventilation. “We go through 100 tons of feed a week,” says Matt Miller. The feed is an all-natural (and proprietary) mix of corn and soy with vitamins, minerals, and probiotics, including the active ingredients found in yogurt. The sight and sound of 80,000

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SPORTING FARMERS
Left: Brittany and Matt Miller on the property of Manchester Farms in South Carolina.
gies to muscle aches to impotence. Not surprisingly, Bill Odom believes quail eggs can alleviate a host of ailments, from cholesterol, B vitamins, iron, potassium, and other nutrients. Some quail will lay one egg every 36 hours, or around 300 a year, "that more than 80 percent of the eggs are fertile. "A Pharoah and sell across the country. Ninety percent of the meat is frozen, making it easier to ship time employees efficiently debone much of the processed quail. Ninety percent of the meat is frozen, making it easier to ship and sell across the country.

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After retiring (he endured a few heart attacks), he began eating free a day: “I got to feel- ing so good it was scary!” he declares. He also started making appealing quail-egg necklaces (speckledeggnecklace.com). The eggs are not the only thing recycled: quail boxes and feathers go into high-quality pet food, while the manure is the basis of a fertilizer the company is marketing as Quail Quap. The Millers also plan to mold quail poop, grass, and compost into clay targets, branded under the name (what else?) Quap Shoot. “We want to put grass seed in the mix, so the target will add ground cover after it’s hit,” Matt says.

Manchester Farms sells its quail meat and eggs directly to consumers, but mostly markets them via distributors to food service and retail outlets. Sales dwindled in the recession (family members took pay cuts to avoid laying off any employees). They’ve rebounded, but in response, the company has diversified into non-quail items. Still, their favorite bird remains their bread and butter.

“Quail is price-sensitive,” Brittney says. “For most people, it’s a novelty, not a necessity. Our sales still peak in the fall, the traditional quail season. But fortunately, quail is so healthy and versatile that chefs are using it year-round. It adds distinction to their menus. For diners, it evokes nostalgic memories of quail shot by their parents or grandparents and served fried or grilled, with grits or wrapped with bacon.”

Thanks in part to Manchester Farms’ outreach to chefs, its quail is name-checked on many fine-dining menus. It helps that for years star chefs such as Mario Batali and Daniel Boulud have championed this Old World favorite in America. Savvy chefs have long used quail eggs as a culinary flourish, from sushi bars to Columbia’s own Terra restaurant, where chef Mike Davis plays on the quichemadame—an egg-topped French ham- and-cheese sandwich, with a “quail madame”—wrapping the ham for duck confit and topping it off with a quail egg. Another local chef, Tim Peters of Motor Supply Bistro, has been known to slow-smoke deboned quail stuffed with diver scallops.

I t doesn’t take a nutritionist to see quail’s big advantages. The low-fat, high-protein bird pairs well with rich ingredients, as in one chef’s quail confit, a divine marriage of quail meat and duck fat. Or a spicy marinade, like the one in which Manchester Farms bastes much of its quail. As the popularity of quail grows, we may begin to see non-farmers raising a bird that quickly grows to market weight and doesn’t wake up the neighbors.

Every year Brittney and Matt Miller hunt bobwhite quail with “Papa Bill” Odom on his 1,200-acre spread on the havana River, near Allendale, South Carolina. He named it Duval, in honor of good times enjoyed on the street of the same name in Key West. After years of put-and-take stocking, Odom spotted “the first wild covey in a long time,” he says. “Maybe because there aren’t as many cattle egrets, the bobwhite seem to be coming back.”

While the family cherishes the bobwhitewhite—stocked—or wild—that rise from Duval’s broad cover, they continue to promote coteaux quail among gastronomes. Whether you choose an elaborate recipe or a Miller favorite that simply toses the quail in salt, pepper, diced garlic, olive oil, lemon zest, and rosemary and calls for roasting them on the grill for four minutes on each side, you can’t go wrong—as long as you respect the bird.