



PHOTO: DEBORAH R. HUSO

The Many Faces OF SUCCESS

Joel Salatin has succeeded beyond his wildest expectations. Here's how he turned a \$300-a-month subsistence farm into a \$2-million-a-year organic business.

BY DEBORAH R. HUSO

The first time I interviewed Joel Salatin was about a decade ago. He had already earned a reputation as a controversial farmer, author and speaker, advocating for turning pastures into “salad bars” for livestock and avoiding chemicals and growth-enhancing hormones to produce good food. Still farming in Swoope, Va., on land his father purchased in 1961, Salatin and his family have come a long way in the past 10 years.

Back then, he farmed 500 owned and leased acres. Salatin was proud of making the equivalent of about \$40 per hour. Today, he manages a 2,000-acre organic farm that grosses \$2 million a year. It supports 20 full-time salaries and offers a paying internship program for young, would-be producers.

Thirty years ago, when Salatin and his wife, Theresa, started out, they were convinced of certain failure. “We really thought we wouldn’t be able to make it,” the former newspaper journalist says.

But in 1982, the couple leaped into full-time farming with enough money squirreled away to live on for a year. Living in Salatin’s parents’ attic, driving a \$50 car and growing as much of their own food as they could, the young Salatins subsisted on \$300 per month.

TURN OFF NETFLIX. His advice to beginning farmers isn’t surprising, given those experiences. Tipping his wide-brimmed hat farther down over his brow and looking at me closely through horn-rimmed glasses, he advises: “Get a nest egg. Don’t jump foolishly. Turn off Netflix. Don’t go out to dinner, and sell your second car. Establish self-reliance first,” he adds.

The Salatins began their farm with 10 beef cattle, which they direct-marketed to friends and neighbors. They sold six the first year as freezer beef in quarters, halves and wholes. They grossed \$20,000.

The next year, they added chickens to the operation and came up with the idea of building portable chicken

shelters they could move from field to field. Again, they marketed to neighbors and local restaurants. “If you grow chicken for Tyson, you need a \$400,000 chicken house,” Salatin says. “We had 280 chickens and a \$100 portable shelter.”

Even though Salatin’s Polyface Farms earns the majority of its income from beef and pork today, chicken remains its signature piece. Sit down at a farm-to-table restaurant in Virginia’s Shenandoah Valley or even Washington, D.C., and you’ll find references to organic chicken from Polyface. (The name Polyface has interesting roots. The Salatins call their operation “the farm of many faces” because of all the products they produce—thus, Polyface Farms.)

SOMETHING DIFFERENT. “Chicken was easy to sell because it was so much better than what was in grocery stores,” Salatin explains, “and you could sell it small.” Chicken was something no one else was doing at a time when everybody was doing freezer beef and pork.

Salatin credits Polyface Farms’

poultry with setting his agricultural operation apart from others.

“Do something different,” he advises. “Diversify and direct-market.” And, he adds, set realistic goals. “Don’t say ‘I’m going to have 100 customers,’” he advises. “Focus on getting one. If you can get one, you can get two.”

Product differentiation, identifying opportunities in the market and a direct-marketing plan that builds customer loyalty have all been important during the years to the Salatin family’s success.

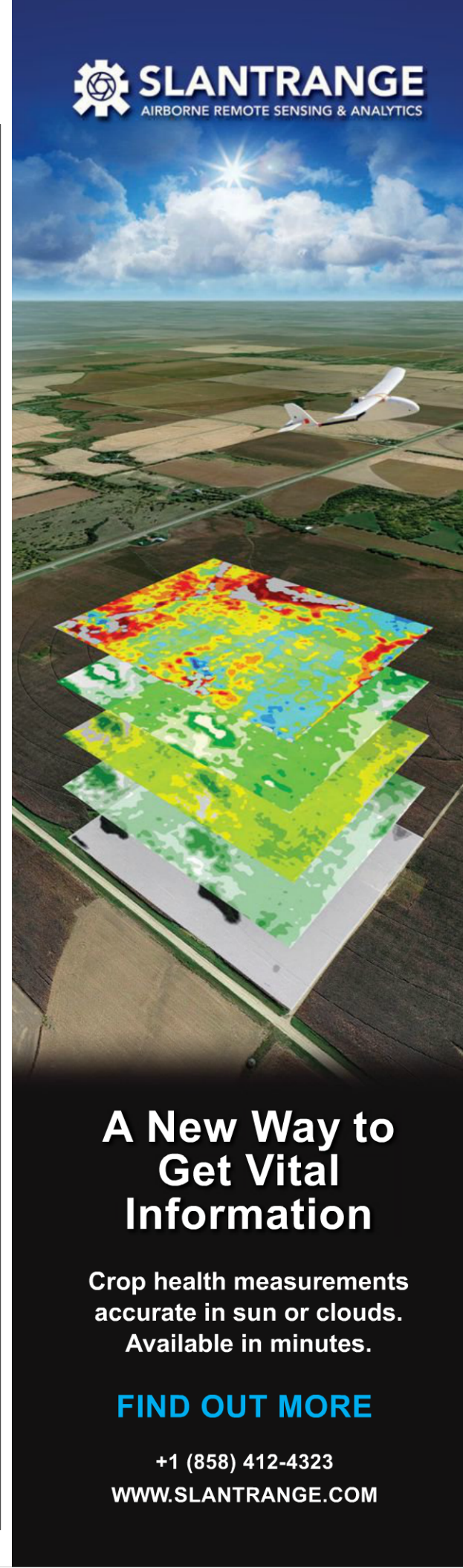
Salatin earns 40% of his revenue from direct sales to restaurants. He sells to about 50 restaurants. “That started with one restaurant in town,” he marvels. Another 40% comes from his metropolitan buying club. The buying club delivers products from Polyface Farms to off-farm customers. Metro club members place orders direct with Polyface by way of an online shopping portal. Orders are filled at the farm and delivered to host homes or drop-off locations, where customers pick up their ▶

Take Control of Your Business

“The more income you make that’s insulated from weather, pestilence and disease, the better off you are,” Joel Salatin says. How does a farmer avoid the fickleness of Mother Nature? By earning money from marketing and processing your production, not just from production alone.

Salatin’s advice is to start simple:

- ▶ Raise something you like to eat, and take it to your neighbor. Samples work. Give samples to relatives, friends, neighbors and local clubs.
- ▶ Sell the value of your product. Tell its story. Set aside the farmer’s natural inclination to introversion.
- ▶ Maintain a symbiotic production model, where the land and what you raise on it work in partnership with one another.
- ▶ Build a portable, flexible infrastructure. Permanent shelter represents a huge capital investment.
- ▶ Use what you buy, and borrow/trade what you can. If you buy equipment, make sure you get serious work hours from it. If you can’t, then borrow and trade equipment with a neighbor, or rent it once or twice a year for occasional work, such as haying.



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If you're going to hire interns for your farm, don't take them on as cheap labor. Teach young entrepreneurs some business skills, Joel Salatin says. PHOTO: DEBORAH R. HUSO

The program runs for four months each year, June 1 through September 30. His most recent class of interns numbered 11, and from those interns, Salatin, his wife and son Daniel chose apprentices to spend 12 months on the farm honing their skills and knowledge even further.

It might not be quite as hard to intern at Polyface Farms as it is to get into Harvard or Yale, but it's close. Last winter, Salatin

Interning for the “Lunatic Farmer”

Joel Salatin will tell you that he is known as a “Christian libertarian-environmentalist-capitalist lunatic.” He will point to his farming success. “Our family farm in Virginia’s Shenandoah Valley now has four generations living on it. I’m second generation ... the day-to-day operations are handled by my son.”

So, do you want to learn from a lunatic, second-generation farmer?

Would-be farmers can get hands-on experience with Salatin’s methods for starting and growing successful agricultural operations through his on-site internship program.

had 540 inquiries about the program, 270 applications and selected only 11. He says one’s field of agricultural interest doesn’t matter, as his principles can be applied universally.

“We’re looking for spirit and attitude,” he says. “Anyone can put in a fencepost, but you can’t teach good spirit.”

For more information about internship opportunities with Salatin, visit www.polyfacefarms.com/apprenticeship. Or check out his book “Fields of Farmers.” It discusses getting young people involved in agriculture. Find the book at www.polyfacefarms.com.

meats, eggs and apple juice for the cost of the products, plus a 28-cent-per-pound delivery fee. The remaining 20% of Polyface Farms income comes from direct sales at the farm’s retail store.

TRADE AND BORROW. Controlling debt has been important to Salatin’s success. He has avoided excessive debt by purchasing used equipment, starting new operations on a small scale, keeping infrastructure portable, renting rather than buying land and borrowing money sparingly. Theresa and he borrowed money a few times, but often, it was from customers who believed in what they were doing.

“Customers rallied around us in those early years. I cannot overemphasize the strength of our retail community,” he says.

Even Salatin is a little amazed at how far he has come. When he began raising laying hens, he had one “egg-mobile” that he pushed around on wheels. Now there are 10 egg-mobiles. An egg-mobile follows the cows in rotation. It is a 12- x 20-foot portable henhouse. The laying hens free-range from it, eating bugs and scratching through cattle droppings. There are 100 broiler shelters. These are 10- x 12- x 2-foot-high floorless portable field

shelters, each housing 75 broilers.

And, from that initial beef herd of 10? Now he has 1,000 head of cattle, 800 hogs, 25,000 broilers, 4,000 laying hens and 2,000 turkeys.

Charmed by his outgoing personality and well-spoken manner, I can’t help but ask if Salatin can credit much of his success to his story and the way he tells it. He readily agrees.

“If you can communicate and tell a story, you’ll succeed,” he says. “Anybody can learn how to gut a chicken, but if you can tell your story, and you can sell, that will set you apart.” ●

10 Big Ideas

How do you get the next generation involved in agriculture so everyone benefits? Here are 10 big ideas from Joel Salatin's latest book "Fields of Farmers."

1. Find an aspiring farmer hungry for opportunity, and put him or her to work in your operation.
2. Remember college isn't necessarily the answer for your children. And, the debt can be crippling. Keep them on the farm, or send him to do farm- and food-related internships to increase his knowledge of food production and new technologies.
3. If you mentor a young person, don't take him or her on for cheap labor. Interns will make mistakes. You have to want to teach someone else skills and passion in food production.
4. Learn to delegate. Mentoring someone who will eventually learn to do the work as well or better than you frees up your time for other ideas.
5. Make lists of the things young people can do without being supervised. Those with lists get things done.
6. Don't give up on mentoring a young person because of one bad experience. There are thousands of young people out there hungry to learn. Find one.

7. Owning land is a huge hurdle for most beginning farmers. They don't need to own land; they just need to control it.

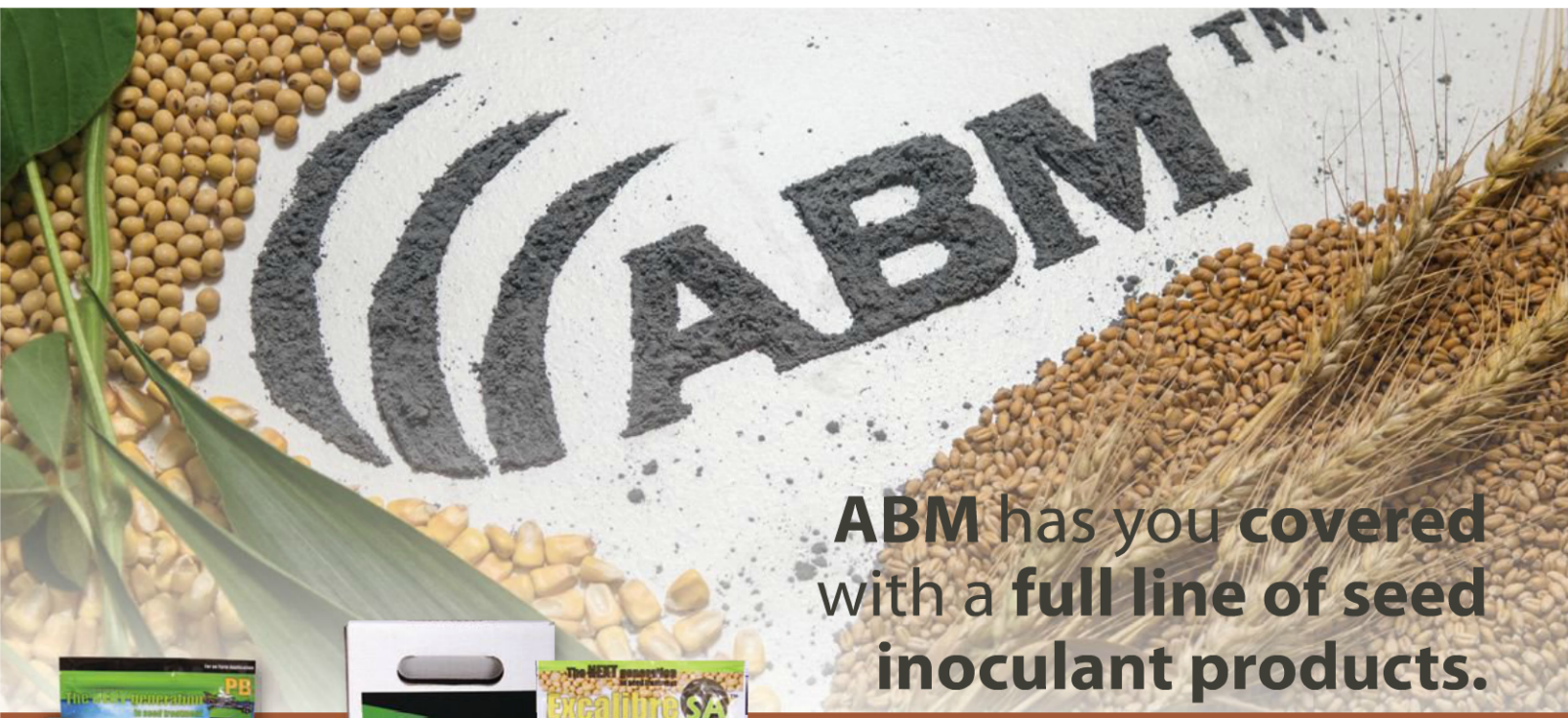
8. If a young mentor shows a knack for some task, give him space to follow his passion. He may develop a new income stream for the farm.

9. Teach young farmers to be people-people. Any farmer has to know how to negotiate with lenders, insurance agents and landowners. You have to win customers and keep them happy. Teach young farmers communications and people skills.

10. No one wants to die alone. Bringing young blood onto the farm will keep you young, involved and connected, and free you from loneliness.



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