

How a Mexican Slow Food Farmer Is Reinventing Poultry Farming

Eggs, meat, beer and more: he is not just getting his ducks in a row – by Marianne Landzettel



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A mecameca is a city of about 50,000 inhabitants, some 60km southeast of Mexico City, and a tourist destination. The beautiful cathedral at the centre of town is well worth seeing and colourful stalls around the huge market square stock everything, from fresh produce to clothes. If the weather is right you have an excellent view not just of Popcatépetl, or 'El Popo' as the iconic volcano is often referred to, but the equally impressive Iztaccíhuatl,

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too.

On the outskirts of Amecameca to the south a dirt road leads to a walled compound with a huge wooden gate and a welcoming sign that tells you that you've arrived at Rancho El Castillo, run by Eduardo Robles Belmont and his mother, Maria de los Dolores. Belmont has a degree in engineering, a PhD in sociology and a research job at UNAM, the renowned National Autonomous University of Mexico, and it's that job that gave him the confidence and security to branch out into farming. He started out with a garden, planting fruit trees and growing vegetables, but soon decided that he wanted to keep poultry.



Marianne Landzettel is a British journalist who writes and blogs about food, farming, and agricultural policies in the UK, the rest of the EU, the US, and South Asia. For us, she has written this reportage from Mexico featuring the

Rancho El Castillo Slow Food Farm. (<https://>

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www.slowfood.com/slow-food-farms/

All the pictures @Martin Kunz

Chicken paradise

The chickens, 220 egg laying hens, 150 young hens and a few cockerels, are housed in a low, airy building, clucking contently. During daylight hours they have access to a large fenced outside space shaded by trees. The chickens are mostly Sussex and Rhode Island which can be raised for egg laying or for meat. They are fed a diet of organic sorghum and maize. In addition, various natural supplements are given to support their health and wellbeing. Depending on weather and time of year Belmont adds garlic to the drinking water to strengthen their immune system, a thyme infusion helps the birds' respiratory tract, and during the rainy season yoghurt is added as a probiotic to improve their gut flora.

The barns are meticulously cleaned at least once a month (and every fortnight during the rainy season). Everywhere on the farm lavender and mint can be found. Belmont adds the extract of both herbs to the cleaning water, a method proven to help control bacteria growth and prevent some virus infections. During the rainy season he also adds vinegar which modifies the pH level of the soil and helps against the spread of fungi.

Next door is the realm of some 150 to 200 turkeys, some

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young and quite small, others older and heavier. Belmont raises them year-round and in November and December a large whole turkey can sell for as much as 150–200 US\$.

On the pond near the farmhouse paddles a single duck, the lone survivor of a vicious attack by a honey badger. He entered the enclosure one summer night and killed all ducks and geese. But Belmont is building a more secure enclosure and hopes to restock this autumn.



Farm to table

Belmont is trained to slaughter poultry, but as his day job at the university involves quite a bit of travel he employs two men who come once a week to slaughter and prep 12 to 15 chickens and four to five turkeys. The tiled and sparkling clean room in one of the barns is well equipped, including several refrigerators. By Saturday

evening dressed birds, turkey and chicken breasts, thighs, legs, ground meat, hamburger patties and 600 eggs have to be ready to be loaded onto a pick up early on Sunday morning, when Belmont, his mother and two staff drive to Mexico City where they will supply stands on three farmers markets. Customers know the quality of their produce and are willing to pay for it, the eggs cost roughly twice as much as those in a supermarket but everything sells out fast, ordering in advance is a good idea. The farm is at 50% capacity, and turn-over is US\$ 7,000 per months with a 30% margin.



Being a Slow Food Farm

For several years Belmont worked in southern France and that's where he learned about the Slow Food movement.

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He liked Carlo Petrini's ideas and the Slow Food concept. El Castillo was registered as an organic farm in 2013. To become a Slow Food farm Belmont had to fill in a huge questionnaire, do a workshop and the farm had to pass the Slow Food assessment – which it did with flying colours, no changes had to be made. But the way the system is set up in Mexico, the Slow Food logo cannot be displayed on the produce. Belmont doesn't mind, he simply wants to be part of the worldwide movement.

The sky's the limit...

Belmont and his mum may have started out with poultry, but by now there are also three sheep and a ram on the farm and each year, the meat of six to nine lambs can be sold. The flock can't be expanded, there is just not enough space on the farm. On his one hectare arable land Belmont grows heritage blue corn. The most recent venture is a small brewery where he produces around 600 bottles of beer per month which he delivers to restaurants and some shops in Amecameca. The harvest from two old heritage water pear trees is enough to make 300 bottles of cider a year. And of course, to him, organic and local has to go together with sustainability: water is collected from the roof of the barns and collected in the water storage pond which will become the new home for the geese and ducks. When she's not

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collecting eggs or preparing for the market, 72-year old Maria de los Dolores runs an Air B&B, at the time of our visit occupied by two volcanologist doing research at El Popo.

Tempted to see Rancho El Castillo yourself? Visitors and WOOFERs are welcome.



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