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Jerusha Klemperer:

So many home cooking food hacks start with a cheap rotisserie chicken.

Speaker 2:

Perfectly golden, juicy rotisserie chicken.

Jerusha Klemperer:

You know the one.

Speaker 3:

Famous Costco rotisserie chicken.

Jerusha Klemperer:

4.99 from Costco or Kroger. It seems like a brilliant and cost saving move.

Speaker 4:

It's simple. It's a quick meal. Leftovers have so many possibilities.

Speaker 5:

We make a lot of recipes with the rotisserie chicken.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Costco alone sold more than 64 million rotisserie chickens in 2018 in the US.

Speaker 6:

Now you always see people grabbing the rotisserie chickens.

Jerusha Klemperer:

But why is that chicken so cheap?

Speaker 7:

This is the best deal on the market. Hands down.

Jerusha Klemperer:

How is it raised? And what's even in it?

Speaker 8:

I get hints of celery salt seasoning in this.

Jerusha Klemperer:

What would it look like for farms to raise a chicken you could feel good about?

Speaker 9:

Rotisserie chickens are next to God, as far as I'm concerned.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Then how much would it cost? What would it taste like? Where can you find one of those chickens?

Speaker 10:

Are all rotisserie chickens created equal?

Jerusha Klemperer:

In this episode, we talked to experts about the real cost of a cheap chicken, and who pays that cost. Covering the problems with animal welfare, environmental impact, and human health.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Then we introduce you to alternatives. How chickens could be and are raised in a better way.

Speaker 7:

I feel like there's so much more to say about rotisserie chickens.

Jerusha Klemperer:

I'm Jerusha Klemperer, and this is What You're Eating, a project of foodprint.org. We aim to help you understand how your food gets to your plate and to see the full impact of the food system on animals, planet, and people.

Jerusha Klemperer:

We uncover the problems with the industrial food system and offer examples of more sustainable practices. As well as practical advice for how you can help support a better system through the food that you buy and the system changes you push for.

Jerusha Klemperer:

King Phojanakong, chef owner of Kuma Inn on New York City's Lower East Side, remembers that rotisserie chicken was an imperative whenever his family shopped at Costco growing up. Now he goes with his kids. "I cook a pot of rice, there's salad, and that's dinner." He says. "The next day, we make fried rice and everybody loves it."

Cathy Erway:

For Moonlynn Tsai, co-owner of Kopitiam, a Malaysian restaurant on the edge of New York's Chinatown in Manhattan, rotisserie chicken from Costco was also on rotation in her household growing up in California. She describes it as, "A multipurpose meal." Her mother would serve her and her brother the drumsticks on the first night for dinner, then pull the meat off and save it for later, and finally turn the carcass into a stock that would be used for soup.

Cathy Erway:

"What I do is pull the meat off, put it in a pot and make stock and cook a lot of beans," says Tyler Kord, chef owner of Number Seven in Fort Green.

Jerusha Klemperer:

That's Cathy Erway reading from her piece about rotisserie chicken for the online magazine, Taste.

Cathy Erway:

My name is Cathy Erway and I'm a food writer. I'm the author of the cookbook, Sheet Pan Chicken, The Food of Taiwan, and the memoir, The Art of Eating In.

Cathy Erway:

Well, I was just so blown away by the responses I got from chefs because you'd think that chefs would be really proud of their own roast chicken or really particular about cooking in general. So many of them had such strong feelings about rotisserie chicken, often Costco rotisserie chicken.

Cathy Erway:

I think the plus for them was that they had the roasty toasty bones already ready to go to make stock or something delicious with and they love that stock. I think that a lot of the chefs said that their parents, they had this nostalgia from their parents buying a rotisserie bird.

Cathy Erway:

In the case of Moonlynn Tsai from Kopitiam she recalls her mom just being really resourceful and using every part of that chicken in various different meals. Now it's a point of pride for her to carry on that torch.

Cathy Erway:

I think there's just something that is almost ironically funny about the price tag of that chicken.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Yeah, let's talk about the price for a second. At Costco, Kroger, Meijer, and all the others, a rotisserie chicken, a whole fully prepared, ready to go chicken costs 4.99. That's really cheap as Cathy explains...

Cathy Erway:

Going out of one's way to roast a chicken at home seems futile when there is a hot, glistening, extremely delicious roasted bird a few aisles away priced as low as a bag of chips and an entire generation has been raised with them around.

Cathy Erway:

In the United States, rotisserie chickens are available for an ever deeper, even artificial, bargain compared to the price of a whole uncooked chicken at the same store. While a home roasted chicken represents an idealized American dinner, the rise of the ubiquitous takeout rotisserie chicken is an extreme microcosm of the commodification and exploitation of that vision.

Jerusha Klemperer:

It's truly remarkable that you can buy an entire cooked chicken for 4.99. A chicken so delicious and versatile that renowned chefs cherish them, cook with them, and enjoy them. A chicken that could

provide several meals to several people and be used in various creative ways. If that price tag sounds impossible, it's because it basically is.

Jerusha Klemperer:

It's not just the artificially low price Costco chicken, which is their loss leader that brings people into the store to spend money on other things. All chicken is pretty cheap when it comes to buying animal protein. Let's dig into why.

Jerusha Klemperer:

It starts with how the chickens are raised. On a farm, right? By farmers? In order to understand how most chickens spend their days and how chicken companies can make it so affordable, the economics of chicken, I talk to Patty Lovera.

Patty Lovera:

My name is Patty Lovera and I work on food and agriculture policy. I've done it for 20-ish years or so and a lot of that time I have been really focused on how we raise animals for food. It really doesn't look like the picture on the package.

Patty Lovera:

The business model of the chicken industry is way more industrial than people realize. This industry has grown up in a way that changed chicken from being something that was relatively precious. A hundred years ago, it was a bigger deal to eat a chicken. The chicken industry has built a very industrial system where they are producing a commodity, and they are really good at it, and they crank it out.

Patty Lovera:

When you have a system that pushes that hard to produce a commodity in that way, what else happens? I mean, there's a lot of costs along that supply chain, but they don't necessarily show up in what you pay at the grocery store and that's not by accident. That's our agriculture policy. It's a lot of our economic policy. It's corporate control of that supply chain.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Corporate control of the supply chain means that a few powerful companies own everything. From the chicks, to the feed, to the drugs the chickens are given. All the way to the slaughter houses, where the chickens end their lives.

Dr. Urvashi Rangan:

There is a reason why chicken is so cheap in this country and it's largely because it is concentrated in the hands of very few companies. There's about four major brands that run 90% of the chicken production in this country. They have implemented what's called an efficiency into the system.

Dr. Urvashi Rangan:

Efficiency sounds good. Everybody wants to be more efficient, but the way you increase efficiency in an animal production system in the industrial complex that we have is actually through inputs, through chemical management, or drug management, rather than keeping the house clean let's say.

Jerusha Klemperer:

That was Dr. Urvashi Rangan, chief science advisor for FoodPrint and a toxicologist and public health scientist with 20 years of experience studying the food system.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Back to that efficiency. In the world of chicken, efficiency means thousands of birds crammed together in what's called a CAFO, a concentrated animal feeding operation. Up to 25,000 birds in a building and maybe a bunch of those buildings right next to each other.

Patty Lovera:

You'll hear this phrase CAFO, but to regular people yeah, it's a farm because you're raising animals there, but it looks a lot more like a factory.

Dr. Urvashi Rangan:

They've really drilled down to one type of bird that they have optimized and bred to be very breast heavy. Can't really walk a lot. That allows them to raise thousands and thousands of them if they want to in one house where they're really crammed together.

Dr. Urvashi Rangan:

Each bird is mandatorily allowed one sheet of paper of space. They don't have a lot of room. There's the ammonia levels in the houses that get very, very high because there's so much urine going into the ground basically where they are and they're crammed together.

Patty Lovera:

When you have a lot of animals in one place, you have a lot of poop in one place. That's part of the deal. That's one of the big environmental aspects to this that has to be managed. Especially if you live near one, you're well aware of how much poop is created in one of these facilities.

Patty Lovera:

There is not free flowing... The chickens can't come and go inside and outside, they're inside. They don't see a field outside. They don't get fresh air because there's a lot of concern about disease. It's really kind of locked down. They don't want the outside world in these buildings because you have 25,000 genetically identical animals in there. You don't want a disease to get in because when it gets in, it's going to be trouble.

Patty Lovera:

There's also just a lot of stress. This is not the easiest environment to grow bigger and that's the goal when you're raising animals for food. You want them to grow quickly. One of the tools that was kind of part of the package was giving them antibiotics. Sometimes it was to treat a disease. If a disease gets in there and you have 25,000 chickens, you're not pulling out the three that looks sick, you're treating all of them.

Patty Lovera:

We heard a lot about sub-therapeutic levels. The gold standard in a lot of animal agriculture was to give a lower amount than that because the belief was it made them grow a little bit faster. Just saved a little bit of money, but if you talk to a microbiologist who thinks about antibiotics, it makes them insane to use antibiotics that way.

Patty Lovera:

Using them for decades in animal agriculture at these sub-therapeutic levels is the exact wrong thing to do if you're worried about antibiotic resistance. If you're worried about creating bacteria that can survive antibiotics, which we hear about all the time. MRSA and all of these things.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Urvashi called this drug management a quick fix to the problem of too many birds crammed into too small a space.

Dr. Urvashi Rangan:

It likely costs more to actually physically keep a house clean, or have enough employees, or to give birds enough space. All those things require money as well. The industrial really meat side of things makes a lot of hay out of concentrating and consolidating as something that is a good thing. In fact, what it ends up doing is costing us in public health to treat diseases then food safety issues that come from say salmon, in chicken, or campylobacter diseases where the CDC tracks all of these.

Dr. Urvashi Rangan:

We have outbreaks constantly in the chicken industry and those costs are not born by the chicken industry. Those costs are essentially externalized to the public and they're not counted in the cost of the chicken when we go to the supermarket to buy it.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Yeah, let's talk about that public health cost because I think most consumers are just pretty excited about the price tag that they see at the supermarket. It's like, "Well, if someone else is paying those costs, that's fine." I guess what I hear you saying is, well, you are paying those costs.

Dr. Urvashi Rangan:

The public health costs of chicken production are not integrated into the price tag of the chicken and those costs are not theoretical. For example, 1.2 million Americans are sickened every year just from salmonella. While chicken isn't the only source of salmonella in food, it's a major source of salmonella in food. With that 1.2 million being sick and those are just the ones that CDC records. That is likely to be a gross underestimate.

Dr. Urvashi Rangan:

We also know 23,000 about every year people are hospitalized for salmonella infections and 450 people die. With that number of deaths per year, that number of hospitalizations just on salmonella alone, those are quite big costs and they don't get integrated into the price tag. Those costs are born by consumers, by insurance companies, by hospitals for people who are not insured.

Jerusha Klemperer:

When we talk about salmonella, about getting very sick from eating bad chicken, this is a processing problem. A slaughterhouse problem. Chickens are killed on a processing line and companies work really hard to keep those lines moving very fast. That includes petitioning the federal government to allow them to keep increasing the speeds.

Jerusha Klemperer:

During the Trump administration, some chicken companies were granted waivers to increase their speeds. In late 2020, in the middle of the coronavirus pandemic, the administration proposed a rule that would increase the maximum speed for all poultry plants. Thankfully, this rule was revoked in January 2021.

Dr. Urvashi Rangan:

Line speeds in the processing house are another factor in worker safety, but also in terms of the final safety of the birds. About 140 birds per minute are processed. That is the sort of legal allowance for chickens, which is a crazy amount.

Jerusha Klemperer:

The speed of those processing lines means that workers are jammed very close together, on their feet, prone to repetitive stress injuries or worse. They're working with knives remember. These are very rough jobs. Even before COVID tore through processing plants across the country.

Patty Lovera:

Sometimes you get people concerned about a chicken processing plant as some kind of magnet for immigration. There's a reason for that because if people have other options, they're not going to work in these plants because they are rough jobs. If people have other options, they would probably take them. That's yet another way this industry is cutting a corner.

Jerusha Klemperer:

The workers are imperiled by these line speeds and so is the public. This is where we end up with food safety issues.

Dr. Urvashi Rangan:

When you nick the gut that is when you start to get pathogenic or bacterial contamination on meat. As birds are hanging and moving through at 140 a minute, you've got processors who are trimming, cutting, doing everything they can to get a bird processed in a minute like that or 140 processed. You can imagine how many nicks go on in the gut that would then potentially contaminate the birds. These line speeds are simply crazy when it comes to thinking about hygiene, cleanliness, safety for the workers, safety on that bird.

Jerusha Klemperer:

We have the public health problems from chicken's gut bacteria ending up on the meat, but we also have the public health problems from all that chicken litter. There's a tremendous amount of it and it's filled with ammonia, nitrogen, and antibiotics. Where does it all go?

Jerusha Klemperer:

This is the problem for all factory farms for CAFOs, whether it's pigs, cows, or chickens. The question of where to put the poop?

Patty Lovera:

All of agriculture needs fertilizer. Anybody who has a garden knows you have to do something to feed the plants in some way. That's kind of what agriculture is. That's how humans embedded staying put and doing agriculture. There was a role for animal waste, but what we're talking about with these systems is that it's out of whack.

Dr. Urvashi Rangan:

When you have that many birds, there's no nature to compost it directly into the ground as there might be in pasture. Manure is collected, it's piled, and when you start to do that, you actually create a public health hazard.

Patty Lovera:

The nitrogen, the phosphorus that's food for the plants. When you apply either cow manure or chicken litter to a field, it's all right there because you haven't really treated it. Yes it'll feed the corn plant or the soybean plant that's there, but there's probably going to be extra. That eventually either works its way down into groundwater or if it doesn't get that far, it runs off into surface water. In somewhere like Maryland, that's the Chesapeake Bay.

Patty Lovera:

The scientific term for it eutrophication. It's too much nutrition for the plants in the water. It's too much nutrition for the algae. You have algal blooms and they crowd out everything else in the water and screw up the Chesapeake Bay. It's too much in one place. It's over applied.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Those are the impacts downstream. For neighbors living right next to a chicken CAFO life is at best extremely unpleasant and at worst dangerously unsafe.

Patty Lovera:

For chicken in particular, all of the animals have slightly different issues with their poop, but for chicken it's really dry. You hear a lot about dust. You're dealing with fans that are kicking out dust, odors, just really unpleasant odors, ammonia. We hear a lot about respiratory complaints, the horrible odors, flies, truck traffic.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Where these CAFOs are situated is no accident. The broiler belt stretches from Delaware to Texas with the CAFOs and processing facilities generally located in low income communities. Often communities of color. Something that's true for all factory farms, not just for chickens.

Jerusha Klemperer:

This system for producing chickens efficiently, cheaply it's starting to sound pretty bad for nearly everyone. You might be thinking that perhaps the farmers are coming out okay.

Patty Lovera:

The business model of the chicken industry is pretty brutal to people in the system, including farmers. They don't even call them farmers, they call them contract growers.

Patty Lovera:

Mostly what we see in most parts of the country for most chicken is kind of the economic term for this industry that it's vertically integrated, which means the Tyson or the Purdue. The company owns that chicken from the minute it's born until it is nuggets in the freezer aisle of your supermarket. They own that commodity of the chicken, but they contract a lot of the pieces of its journey. They contract those pieces out.

Patty Lovera:

The farmer, the person who's going to raise that chicken, actually doesn't own it. They are providing a service to Tyson or Purdue on contract and they're terrible contracts as it turns out.

Jerusha Klemperer:

The contracts are extremely predatory. Contract growers borrow a huge amount of money to build chicken barns to the company specs. They are the ones taking all the financial risk and the big companies like Purdue or Pilgrim's Pride get to make all of the decisions about how the chickens are fed and raised.

Patty Lovera:

When I talk to growers, they always make a really good point, which is they've taken the valuable stuff. If you make a chart of who owns what the company owns the bird. That's the thing with value. What does the grower have?

Patty Lovera:

The grower has a mortgage for a building that's hard to turn into anything else. This chicken building has a big old mortgage on it. If any birds die, you, the grower have that responsibility. You have to deal with disposing of them and there's rules about how you dispose of them. You are stuck with that litter, that poultry litter.

Patty Lovera:

If you're in a state that's actually starting to regulate eventually slowly and there's more cost to it, that's a cost the grower's going to have to deal with not the one who owned the chicken that produced the poop, but the growers left with the poop. It's really an unfair splits of the good stuff and the bad stuff in the economic proposition of raising these chickens.

Patty Lovera:

It really is the basis of their business model and it's part of why it's cheaper. Is they're getting away with kind of putting all those costs on somebody else in that supply chain. Kind of at every step these companies are quite good at making somebody else clean up their mess.

Jerusha Klemperer:

That pushing of cost onto other entities is called externalization. The big chicken companies are not paying the true cost and you, the shopper, are not paying the true cost. The true cost is born by the farmers or contract growers, by the workers on the line, by the neighbors of the chicken facilities, by local municipalities who have to clean up the waterways, and also buy our public health system.

Jerusha Klemperer:

There's got to be a better way to do this. What is that better way? What's a good life for a chicken? What's the aspiration that we should all have for how all of our chicken is raised?

Dr. Urvashi Rangan:

There are definitely better ways that we can be raising our chicken and in many ways you have to look to natural systems to get a sense of what is the right thing. There's a stark difference between chickens that are raised conventionally and say pasture raised chickens that come from breeds that can be outside, that can walk, and actually be animals, and exhibit natural behaviors, and dust, and feather, and preen, and not be so confined that they actually want to attack each other.

Patty Lovera:

There are folks who raise free range chickens that are pretty happy, and have a good life, and are outside, and scratching around in the dirt, and eating bugs, and doing all these chicken things.

Dom Palumbo:

There's so much happening on the farm now. It's great to see the animals on green grass and you have to wait till the grass grows up before you can put them out so that there's enough grass for them to eat.

Dom Palumbo:

We're raising on the farm Heritage breed chicks as we have done for a number of years. We're conserving the breed called, New Hampshire. They're a dual purpose breed that we raise for both eggs and meat. We've been raising our own here on the farm.

Jerusha Klemperer:

That's Dom Palumbo who runs Moon in the Pond Farm in Western Massachusetts. He raises vegetables and a variety of animals, including chickens. It's May, when I speak to him and he's got 300 newly hatched chicks out on grass.

Dom Palumbo:

If you came to the farm, you would see what most people imagine a farm to look like. An old barn, a lot of green pastures, and lots of animals out of doors on those pastures.

Dom Palumbo:

When I found myself living in rural New England, I thought, "This is my opportunity to raise my own food." The more that I did that, the more I realized that there's a lot more at stake. It's not just what I'm eating, it's the environmental impacts. It's the health impacts in an enormous system that feeds all of us.

Dom Palumbo:

It's a moral issue in terms of what we're doing to the environment, what we're doing to the animals, and what we're doing to ourselves in the process of raising food.

Jerusha Klemperer:

I asked Dom to describe for us what life is like for his chickens and as you'll hear, it's quite different from how chickens are raised in CAFOs.

Dom Palumbo:

Most people are quite surprised to learn that most poultry eat massive amounts of vegetation. They actually eat grass. That's a huge percentage of their natural diet, which is why we want to have the poultry out on grass and why we in fact, move them on the pasture. We give them a certain section of pasture, which they literally graze and then we move them onto a new section of pasture.

Dom Palumbo:

There's all sorts of things that the chickens are eating, which means that they're getting a very diverse diet with lots of nutrients. Of course that makes them healthy. In turn, we get the benefit of that increased health. We're also supplementing their diet of grass with grain. We buy grain from a farm not too far away from here that produces organic corn, soybeans, wheat, oats, rye, and so forth.

Jerusha Klemperer:

This kind of process is obviously much more labor intensive and more costly to the farmer than the industrial massively scaled system. The smaller scale also means that the poultry litter problems that CAFOs have are not an issue here.

Dom Palumbo:

When you raise animals on a small scale and you care about the land and you care about the animals, animal manure is fertilizer. It's a very high value and it's incorporated in the environment in a very natural way.

Dom Palumbo:

When you raise hundreds of thousands of chickens in one location, which is how most chickens are raised that you see on a supermarket shelf, then the waste from that operation becomes toxic waste. It becomes a huge liability instead of an incredible positive impact on the environment and on the ability to produce well.

Dom Palumbo:

One of the first things that I learned was that the ultimate farm is a closed loop. What you are constantly trying to do is to maintain these recycling processes that enrich the farm while allowing you to export some of the produce. Essentially what we're looking at is trying to have the farm replicate the cyclical nature of nature itself that is constantly recycling resources.

Dom Palumbo:

The analogy that I like to use is it's like a bank account. If you keep taking out of the bank account, which is the farm, you end up with a depleted account. It's important to reinvest in the farm. The manure on

our farm is essential to putting fertility back into the land. Our animals are on pasture, which means that they're distributing the manure little by little throughout their lives.

Dom Palumbo:

We're moving them around so that there's not an overload of resources because when there's an overload of manure in particular, it becomes toxic.

Jerusha Klemperer:

It's worth pointing out that when I asked Urvashi Rangan to describe how you would raise chickens in the best possible way? She pretty much described Dom's farm. Birds on pasture, eating a diverse diet, given plenty of space to be their chicken selves. You might be wondering at this point, how much these chickens cost?

Jerusha Klemperer:

At \$10 a pound, that's \$30 for a three pound bird, they don't live in the same economic universe as a Costco rotisserie chicken, but here are the externalized costs that are missing. There's no poultry litter polluting nearby air and waterways. There was no pesticide or fertilizer runoff from the growing of industrial feed crops.

Jerusha Klemperer:

The animals live a happy and comfortable life and the meat is healthier for you to eat and less likely to be contaminated with antibiotic resistant bacteria. His farm is not participating in the economies of scale that a massive poultry operation in South Carolina is.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Dom went on to explain how in the United States, thanks to our highly subsidized food system that externalizes many of its costs, we've grown accustomed to food being cheap. We spend an average of 10% of our disposable income on food, which is way less than what our grandparents did, which was more in the ballpark of 17% before 1960.

Jerusha Klemperer:

It's also about half of what our counterparts in other countries spend, but understanding why a chicken like this costs more doesn't make it affordable for most shoppers. Nor is it necessarily accessible. Dom's neighbors and farmers market customers are incredibly lucky to know where to find such a bird if they can afford it or decide to make it a financial priority.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Even if you decide you want a chicken and can afford a chicken that was made in a better way, whether for your personal health or because of animal welfare concerns or environmental concerns, you might feel overwhelmed by the prospect of what to look for or where. One way we can figure out how our chicken was raised is to look at the labels.

Jerusha Klemperer:

One common label is no antibiotics. We spoke earlier about the dangers of over administering antibiotics to chickens and the way it covers up a host of bad practices. Should you look for the no antibiotics label? Urvashi says it's a starting point.

Dr. Urvashi Rangan:

The most common label you probably see out there is no antibiotics and I'll just say that is halfway up the first step of conventional. It's something, but if you don't change welfare practices, you don't give space to birds, what you do is you create conditions that basically create many more sick birds that then have to be treated and taken out of that kind of system and can't be labeled as that.

Dr. Urvashi Rangan:

That label, while it seems good and there is some value to it, is not enough for what we need to do to really get there. If you're really interested in supporting better chicken farming, I would say go higher. If you're in a supermarket where that's your only choice over a conventional choice, then you should choose that because it is better to have a chicken produced without the daily drugs.

Jerusha Klemperer:

That means sometimes looking for more than one label and if you can find an organic chicken, it's going to be raised without antibiotics because antibiotics are not allowed as part of that certification. Certified organic is one of the most common labels you can find in the grocery store. How good is that label and what else does it tell you when it comes to chickens?

Jerusha Klemperer:

Keeping in mind, the organic label is used to certify everything from carrots, to cookies, to chickens, and the specs are different for different products.

Dr. Urvashi Rangan:

Organic chicken is another popular option out there and it comes with a whole host of standards behind that. Especially compared to the natural label, which has no standards behind it. People really shouldn't confuse those two labels out in the market.

Dr. Urvashi Rangan:

While organic isn't everything that it can be, it's far more than natural is and there are a set of standards that have to be verified in order for poultry to be labeled as such. The feed that the animals get has to be produced organically. Animals are allowed to eat corn it does have to be organic.

Dr. Urvashi Rangan:

In livestock production in organic animals are required to have access to pasture. They did not make that the case for poultry unfortunately. The requirement for poultry in organic is that they are required to have access to the outdoors and in some cases that definition itself is a hair a split in that some companies provide screened in porches, and that can be adequate for meeting the outdoor access requirement.

Patty Lovera:

Organic is not as good as it should be. It is not the gold standard that everybody in organic wants it to be when it comes to chicken. It could get there. Having said that the difference with organic and conventional chicken is what they eat and organic chicken is going to eat organic feed and that's better for the environment. It wasn't produced with synthetic pesticides and fertilizers and that stuff. They are never going to be given an antibiotic. That's not allowed.

Patty Lovera:

The other kind of thing people need to know and this is across the food industry, this is not just in chicken. We have a lot of creativity that's allowed in food labels is the most polite way to put it. People really have to kind of arm themselves and become their most persnickety, fussy personality, and parse through what they're actually telling you and any meat label this is true.

Patty Lovera:

I think it's true in chickens. Seeing cage free on chicken might be technically true, but doesn't tell you a damn thing because the caged chickens are for eggs and that's a different industry than the chicken meat you're going to eat, but you will see people be like, "It's cage free." It's like. No one is caging a boiler chicken. It doesn't happen. Yes, that is technically accurate if they say cage free, but it's not meaningful.

Dr. Urvashi Rangan:

When it comes to animal welfare, organic has done some work towards space requirements for livestock and even for chickens. There's something more in there than the conventional baseline. Really for true animal welfare, for better animal welfare in chicken production labels like certified humane, and even better, animal welfare approved are labels that really get down to space requirements, hygiene for the animals, making sure that physical alterations are not made unless they're absolutely necessary, and ensuring that animals can live a much more natural life than they otherwise would have.

Jerusha Klemperer:

I decided to talk to Emily Moose, executive director of A Greener World. The organization that provides the animal welfare approved certification that Urvashi mentioned.

Emily Moose:

I am a huge fan of transparency in the food system, and meaningful, and transparent food labels, and sustainable farming. We are a nonprofit and we certify farms. We have a growing family of food labels, including animal welfare approved.

Emily Moose:

What we do is we identify, audit, certify, and promote practical, sustainable farming systems. The way that we do this is by supporting farmers and ranchers in informing consumers. We actually visit each farm in the program every year and we audit that farm to our published standards. It's a really good way for consumers to have confidence that the claims being made on the package, by the producer, by the company are actually being reflected on the farm.

Emily Moose:

I think in the food system, as it is now, there's a big disconnect between what people expect in terms of how animals are raised and how most animals actually are raised. Our standards in the certified animal welfare approved program are built around the principle of high welfare, pasture based management, which is really what a lot of people expect. If people are interested in choosing products from systems that match their expectations, they need a way to do that. They need trustworthy labels that are backed up by real standards.

Jerusha Klemperer:

The animal welfare approved label is a third party certification, which serves as a guarantee that the chicken was raised in a certain way. A Greener World currently works with about 6,000 farms around the world.

Jerusha Klemperer:

FoodPrint has a food label guide and unsurprisingly, we tell you in that guide that Animal Welfare Approved is a really good, rigorous, and trustworthy label. We also definitely recommend picking a product that has multiple labels if you can find it. Picking a chicken that's both certified humane and also USDA Organic is a way to make sure that your organic chicken also has animal welfare standards. Then of course there's chickens like Dom Palumbo's with no certification at all, but with a conversation between farmer, and customer, and an open gate policy at the farm.

Jerusha Klemperer:

These chickens we're describing will all cost more than the 4.99 rotisserie chicken. I asked Cathy Erway, who wrote about people's love for rotisserie chickens, to explain how she shops for and cooks chicken.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Her first book was all about cooking for one's self with cost in mind, and her latest cookbook was all about chicken. She's a chicken pro and she's accustomed to looking at price tags when she shops.

Cathy Erway:

I will go to the farmer's market if I have the opportunity to on a Saturday. I often do just as part of a morning walk with my dog. If I feel like having a chicken in the next week, I will get it there. I just think that it's great to be able to talk to the farmer and support them. Often their chicken is just so great and so special. That would be the number one gold standard of buying chicken for me.

Cathy Erway:

Then if I don't make it or if I want chicken in the middle of the week I go to my grocery store and I'll look at the whole chickens. There's there's usually a few brands Bell and Evans, D'Artagnan actually has really good chicken. I don't have a nice sort of butcher shop in my neighborhood so that's kind of out of the question, but I know that some people might. That would be really great because often they will air dry the chicken. Air drying that chicken makes the skin crisp up better.

Jerusha Klemperer:

She also talked about how to stretch that one chicken to make it go far, which is interestingly something all those chefs spoke about loving about a rotisserie chicken. Making the most of the whole bird.

Cathy Erway:

I used to teach a cooking class that was centered around one whole chicken. It was a bunch of carrots, head of broccoli, or cabbage, something brassica, and some potatoes. You make several different meals throughout the week with this.

Cathy Erway:

One of the dishes was a chicken salad after you roasted the chicken and then a soup. The idea was all these meals out of just these four or five different ingredients, which happen to be very cheap. If you get all these things that are really good value, you can get that organic chicken and buying a whole chicken to boot that will really save you a lot.

Cathy Erway:

Getting a whole chicken might be intimidating to some folks, but once you see how much value you're getting out of it, and chicken stock, and everything you're going to get out of it's so much better value than getting boneless, skinless breasts.

Jerusha Klemperer:

As food writer, Laurie Colwin, once wrote, "There's nothing like roast chicken. It's helpful and agreeable. The perfect dish no matter what the circumstances. Elegant or homey, a dish for a dinner party or a family supper. It will not let you down." Which is part of why it ends up on so many restaurant menus.

Jerusha Klemperer:

I wanted to hear from chefs who specialize in roast chicken and are known for it. What might they have to teach us about how we can roast a delicious chicken at home and how are they sourcing those chickens?

Erika Lesser:

My name is Erika Lesser. I'm the chef and co-owner of King Mother, which is a natural wine bar and restaurant in Ditmas Park, Brooklyn. We run a very small kitchen that puts out small plates and all kinds of delicious food alongside natural, organic, and biodynamic wine.

Erika Lesser:

We have so many regulars. People who live in the neighborhood and come once, twice, even three times a week. I feel like sometimes King Mother is an extension of their dining room or living room. They come back for the same things over and over again. One of those things is the roast chicken.

Erika Lesser:

We didn't have it on the menu when I first opened, but over the course of the pandemic, we closed briefly last March, and then reopened in May. At that time, no one was able to do any kind of dining indoor or out. Our menu was very limited to sandwiches and things that were easy to take to go.

Erika Lesser:

It wasn't until the summer that we were able to start offering a more robust meal as part of your experience. As it started to get cold and was worried that our dining audience was going to dry up. I

thought, "What is the one thing that I even as an avid home cook and my husband and I, we rarely order out. What is the one thing that we love we could get that would be a shortcut to dinner and still have other homemade things on the table?"

Erika Lesser:

That would be a rotisserie chicken from whatever, but it's all shit. Every rotisserie chicken that exists in this neighborhood and the immediate surroundings, no bueno. I thought, "Well, maybe we could offer a roast chicken that could compete with that and just be a better alternative for people that want to take it home and eat at home." Roast chicken became an indispensable part of our menu.

Jerusha Klemperer:

How does King Mother make their chicken so good?

Erika Lesser:

Well, I mean, I guess this is where I'm supposed to toot my own horn because it's really good. It's not mediocre restaurant chicken. It's not overcooked. It's not dry. Even if you get the breast and the way that we roast it is it's spatchcocked, which does a fantastic job of slowing down the cooking of the breast meat so that the thigh and leg actually get cooked faster than the breast. It's amazing. Everybody should spatchcock their chickens all the time. Every time.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Spatchcocking at chicken means breaking the backbone and flattening it. You can watch a YouTube video. It's a surprisingly easy thing to do.

Erika Lesser:

It comes out just right and I think people really appreciate that because it tastes like something homemade. It's not fancy. It's just really simple food, but that's done carefully and that is served in a way that I think is friendly, accessible, but a little more effort than I think a lot of people are willing or able to make at home.

Jerusha Klemperer:

There's how you cook the bird, but obviously I was wondering if Erika pays attention to where she gets the chickens and how they were raised?

Erika Lesser:

I put a lot of thought into everything that I source on the menu at King Mother and the chicken is part of that. What's also part of it is a kind of awakening that I experienced becoming a restaurateur and a commercial food buyer, not a home cook, and not a sustainable food advocate per se, but realizing what can I buy? Can I afford it? Do I have the space to store it? Will I be able to use it before it spoils?

Erika Lesser:

These are all the primary questions that I never had to deal with before opening a restaurant. Another question, which I think is really challenging for any small restaurant like ours is can you meet the minimum for delivery from your supplier? That one kills me every time and actually almost every supplier that I buy from has increased their minimum for delivery since the start of the pandemic. One

of them doubled it last week. I started buying instead from a local butcher, they're able to sell me four chickens a week fresh.

Erika Lesser:

What they have is a no hormones, no antibiotics product, but is it the great Amish pastured bird that I was buying before? It's not. It was a major compromise. It's one that I'm not happy with and I'm not looking to just keep it that way in the future, but that's what I did to fit the size and the capacity of the restaurant as it is today.

Erika Lesser:

Right now, if you come and you order the big green salad, it's organic gem lettuce that comes from Lancaster County, Pennsylvania because it's in season and it's great. In the winter, the gem lettuce comes from California and it might be organic.

Jerusha Klemperer:

This piece was especially interesting to me because I think that this kind of calculus is extremely relevant for a home cook as well. A home cook who cares about eating sustainably, about buying chickens that were raised in a better way. Asking yourself these questions, what is in season? What can I afford? What is accessible to me? Can I buy it locally and support my local economy?

Erika Lesser:

There's always a balance between what you want, and what you believe in, and what your audience is going to accept. Whether that audience is yourself, or your family, or a paying customer. It makes me appreciate much more now that I am a restaurateur how hard it is to change buying and consumption practices when the system is not set up to allow you to do that.

Jerusha Klemperer:

The chicken at King Mother, by the way, cost \$21. I asked Erika to explain the differences between her roast chicken and the chicken at say Costco or Kroger?

Erika Lesser:

Well, there's the difference between the chickens themselves, how they're raised, and where they come from. Perhaps the breed and certainly how it was fed and how long it lived until it was slaughtered and sent to market. Those are important differences.

Erika Lesser:

I think that the product that I get is not the \$5 chicken from Kroger. We're sourcing a different product, but someone who's going to buy it to go is going to compare it with a to go price from a supermarket and that's a fair comparison.

Erika Lesser:

The difference here is that we are preparing it and serving it totally from scratch and in house. I need to pay a good wage to my cooks and good tips to the servers so that they have jobs that they come back to every day.

Jerusha Klemperer:

The restaurateur butts into the limitations of the system and the scale of the system that we have. It doesn't work for everyone. It's not working for most chicken farmers, contract growers, and it's not working for slaughter house workers. It's definitely not working for all of the communities who live around chicken CAFOs. It is working for the supermarkets. Even as they price the chicken artificially low, they make up that money elsewhere.

Patty Lovera:

Grocery stores have always done that. They've treated certain products of like, "It's worth it to lose money on this product because it brings us foot traffic. People come into the store to buy it, and while they're there, they buy their things." They're willing to price that particular item very, very low. It's not a new concept, but then we have to ask the question of who actually eats that loss?

Patty Lovera:

Is it Costco that's taking the loss on those chickens because they're priced below what they cost to produce or are they pushing that loss out by paying contract growers less? If it's Costco's decision to take a loss on that product because they price it artificially low, that's your decision, but what is our policy response? What are the rules to prevent them from pushing that loss back up the supply chain to their workers, in their slaughterhouse, or to the contract growers who grow it?

Patty Lovera:

That's where we start to get into is this a fair market? Is the power balance right or is one player in that relationship so dominant they can push that loss back in an inappropriate way? That's what we see in lots of parts of our food supply, including chicken.

Jerusha Klemperer:

What are the ways to remedy this? Is there any way to calculate the true cost of a chicken in this industrial system and then figure out who pays for it? That's where something called True Cost Accounting comes in.

Jerusha Klemperer:

It attempts to calculate the real cost of say a rotisserie supermarket chicken without the offloading of costs onto the public. It's a framework to holistically evaluate the impacts of food production systems and this movement it's gaining traction among global nonprofits, academics, and forward thinking businesses.

Dr. Urvashi Rangan:

True Cost Accounting is a very bland term that describes something that is incredibly important. In the case of food, we've got a social capital, we have an environmental capital, we have a natural capital. All of these different capital areas have to be considered as you look at a system to measure both the costs of the system and you value the benefits of the system.

Dr. Urvashi Rangan:

Together, if you look at that, you can make an assessment as to what the best solutions are. It tries to put some dollar figures on where it can, but it also includes qualitative assessment as well.

Dr. Urvashi Rangan:

True Cost Accounting is an interesting mechanism for a company that allows them to do a couple of different things. The first is to assess where their risks are. The second though is to assess where the benefits might be and for that, it almost goes to a different department at a company. It might go to their marketing department for example, if they were actually adding a lot of value into the system and then wanting to let consumers know about that.

Dr. Urvashi Rangan:

There are some interesting examples, some interesting labeled chicken out there that really illustrate this. That have looked into applying value that is not generally applied in conventional chicken and it turns out consumers are willing to pay more for that.

Jerusha Klemperer:

We see that on a small scale with Dom Palumbo. He tells the story of his chickens, and how they were raised, and customers understand the value his method of farming brings to the environment, to the community, and to them, the customers. So they pay more for his chicken than they would at Kroger a lot more, but they're not alone in wanting to eat better chicken.

Jerusha Klemperer:

In 2020, in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, the ASPCA surveyed US consumers. They found that the vast majority, 89%, are concerned about industrial animal agriculture. They cited, "Animal welfare, worker safety, or public health risks," as their concern.

Jerusha Klemperer:

72% of those surveyed who had recently heard about these issues, animal welfare, worker safety, or public health issues related to industrial factory farming said, "They're now seeking out alternatives to factory farmed to meat, eggs, and dairy." That means they're either buying more from local farms or shifting to products with more assurance of animal welfare, like an animal welfare approved label, or they're consuming less meat, eggs, or dairy.

Dr. Urvashi Rangan:

I think the other problem in it is that there's been a dark veil between these farms and the public. In part, the farmer is trapped in the middle between the company and the public. It's this company corporate system that the farmer is contracted and obliged to participate in. These are significant problems going on that are really propped up by the corporate dominated poultry system.

Dr. Urvashi Rangan:

Until we start to think a little bit differently about that, we won't be able to dismantle it, but in the meantime, what it is in the power of consumers is to buy differently. As more and more consumers do that, we do shift demand and companies respond to what consumers want.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Consumers have an important role to play, but it's not enough just to say that the customer has to pay more for a better chicken. That cannot be the whole answer because that price tag is not affordable for a lot of people. No matter how much careful shopping or creative cooking they do.

Jerusha Klemperer:

There's some good news in that the current presidential administration signaled really early that they're very interested in antitrust. In breaking up the corporate monopolies that are causing big problems in everything from tech to agriculture.

Jerusha Klemperer:

In July 2021, President Biden issued an executive order that included 72 actions to tackle corporate consolidation across many industries. As of fall 2021, the federal government was pursuing allegations of price fixing by the largest companies that process meat and poultry and reviewing a proposed merger that would further consolidate the chicken industry, and developing new proposed rules to address unfair practices used to pay contract chicken growers.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Then in early 2022, Biden announced a new plan to make meat and poultry processing more competitive by financially supporting smaller processors. While some skeptics point to the Obama Administration's abandonment of similar efforts in the food sector in the late 2000s, there's new fuel for the fire for many reasons. Including COVID shining a light on the frailty and brittleness of an animal agriculture system controlled by so few players.

Patty Lovera:

Lots of people I know including me for decades have been kind of screaming about who controls the food supply, the shape. If you were to make a map of our food supply chain, what the structure of that chain is and there's tremendous concentration in almost every step. For a long time, people thought that was just okay, and it was fine, and it was what a modern economy looks like.

Patty Lovera:

We've known for years that there's a lot of risk in that. There's a lot of chance of disruption in that and then last year in 2020 with the pandemic, it just became very, very obvious some of those risks are unacceptable when you have a system that's shaped the way our system is. We're having a moment where I get to say, I told you so about consolidation, and why it matters, and why it matters who controls the food supply.

Jerusha Klemperer:

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Jerusha Klemperer:

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Jerusha Klemperer:

You can find us online at foodprint.org where we have this podcast as well as articles, reports, a food label guide, and more.

This transcript was exported on May 23, 2022 - view latest version [here](#).

Dr. Urvashi Rangan:

Somebody showed me recently a website that actually sold little red glasses for chickens and it was a chicken industry product. It's so that all the birds are seeing red at all times. That allows them to not differentiate when they see blood from what they're seeing all the time. Once chickens see blood, it starts to stir up the stress, the cannibalistic nature of chickens. Literally there are teeny little red sunglasses. I just can't even imagine.

Dr. Urvashi Rangan:

It's an industry that has really gone far field in terms of mitigating their own problems instead of actually dealing with the root cause of them.

Jerusha Klemperer:

You're saying that tiny red chicken sunglasses are not going to fix this chicken system?

Dr. Urvashi Rangan:

You got it. Tiny little red sunglasses are not going to fix the industrial chicken system.