

out. Even if town isn't all that far away, what if you wake up to two feet of snow, or your car won't start?

Chapter 14

Domestic Animals

Anyone who tries to tell you that evolution is not real needs to study selective breeding. Over centuries, humans have accelerated natural selection by exploiting favorable characteristics in animals and minimizing unfavorable ones to serve our dietary needs. Which is how you get Angus cows, brawny creatures that are dumb as posts. Or fryer chickens, which are grown for their meat, and layer chickens, which are grown for their egg-laying. Or turkeys with breasts so large they can hardly walk.

This legacy of domestication is tricky. Domesticated animal breeds are dependent on us for life, yet most die at our hands. Vegetarians are able to avoid the issue by virtue of non-participation, but the fact remains that if the entire planet decided to stop eating meat and turn the domestic animals loose, most of them wouldn't go anywhere. Not that sheep or cows have this sort of complex thought process, but: If you had to choose between being shot in the head one day, and running in terror from a coyote or a cougar, being caught, having your stomach eaten from your body while you were still alive and then slowly dying while your blood drained into a field, which would you pick? Domestic animals are hard-wired, because of us, to rely on us for food and protection from animal predators. It's a predicament.

Which is where terms like "free-range" and "naturally nested" come in. Compassionate carnivores do not endorse the corn-glutted meat factories set up in the Midwestern states, but do like to eat animal protein. Their compromise is to pay twice or three times the market value of mass-produced meat in order to support a small-scale operation that treats animals with respect and dignity, and butchers them humanely.

There is more than one way to skin a cat, and to kill a chicken. Old-world farmer ladies would march into the hen house, grab a chicken by its head and unceremoniously whip it around in a circle, snapping its neck. There is the familiar hatchet-and-chopping-block. Cattle, goats and hogs are shot. If you butcher a rabbit, which provides a white meat that can be made into delicious sausage, prepare yourself mentally for the task; rabbits often scream when they're killed. They are usually hit sharply on the back of the head with a mallet or club.

Hiring a Butcher

So. After you've bought another farmer's meat and fallen in love with the flavor of respectfully raised and slaughtered animals, but before you get into butchering yourself, there is some middle ground, namely a professional butcher. There are two ways to put the responsibility of killing your livestock on someone else's shoulders—take your livestock to a slaughterhouse or hire an on-site butcher to come to your farm. Either way, you want to ask around for the person's reputation for quick dispatch and sanitary processing practices.

The advantage of using a slaughterhouse is the no-mess factor of it—you drop off your animal and come back a few days later to pick up a parcel of wrapped cuts, labeled and ready for your freezer. The advantage of bringing in the mobile slaughter truck is you don't have to transport your animal.

Most animals that are raised for slaughter have pretty short lives, the shortest being fryer chickens—killed at ten weeks of age! Farmers and ranchers try to balance raising the biggest animal possible without compromising its tenderness. One autumn evening, we were planning to butcher a rooster and ended up taking a three-and-a-half-year-old hen as well, because she hadn't laid an egg since she was a pullet and while we were making a mess we might as well get it over with. The four-month-old rooster was svelte but delicious, baked in the oven with vegetables. The hen, on the other hand, was so old and tough that even being cooked in a soup for hours did nothing to tenderize her. She made flavorful stock, but we had to eat around the rubbery nuggets of meat.

Butchering

Once you decide to cross the line into killing and “dressing” (a euphemism for removing the organs and cutting the carcass into pieces) livestock yourself, I recommend starting with chickens. They're small and relatively easy to manage.

If you're growing chickens for meat with the intention of butchering a lot of them at once, you'll probably want to skip the chopping block and invest in a killing cone and a sharp knife. This handy device serves the dual purpose of holding the chicken still and holding it upside-down, which facilitates the bleeding-out. If you will only occasionally be killing a chicken to cull non-layers or take care of errant roosters in your flock, you can either cut the corner from an old pillowcase and shove the chicken into it, or simply hold it with your (gloved) hands while someone else kills it.

It's less mess later if you keep a doomed chicken from eating for at least a few hours before slaughter, so nothing is in the upper portion of its intestinal tract. Chickens are easier to manage if you pull them at night from the roost; they are very

docile when they're sleeping. Even if you choose to butcher during the day, turning a chicken upside-down calms it; make sure you keep the wings from flapping.

I have participated in both knife and hatchet butchering, and think either is efficient. Whichever means you employ, make sure that:

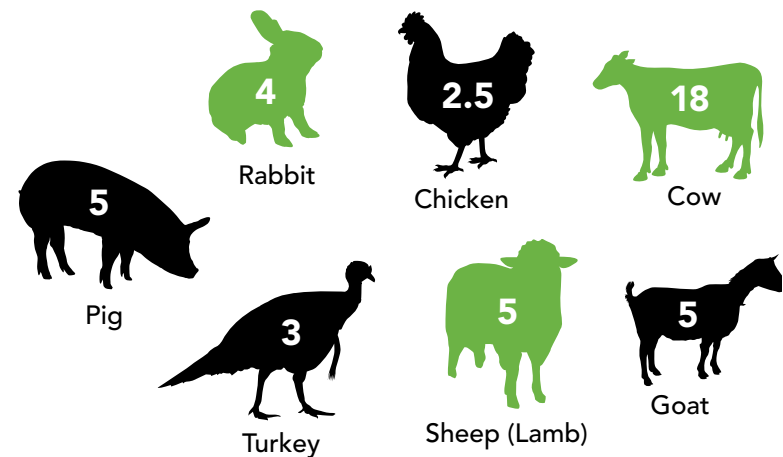
- You have a sharp implement.
- You have a bucket for blood drainage.
- You have a clean bucket for the carcasses.
- You take aim and give it your all—no one wants a half-killed animal.

Using a hatchet is fairly straightforward—stretch the neck out a bit and chop through the center of it. If you use a knife on an upside-down chicken, stick the blade in its throat so that the blade is facing toward the ground, between the neck bone and the cluster of trachea, esophagus and major blood vessels; turn the blade toward this cluster and push the knife through all of it.

Brace yourself; the chicken will flop around a bit. It's nothing more than a burst of synapses firing after the spinal cord is cut, but it can be a bit freaky. If you cut a chicken's head off and put it on the ground it might run, but I don't recommend this because it will get dirty and will splatter blood all over. The severed head's eyes might blink and the mouth move; the wings will definitely flap if they're not restrained; it might make some honking sounds through its severed windpipe. And then it will stop.

Taking a life is a significant thing. Give yourself a little time, maybe not right afterwards, but later in the day maybe, to grieve. This may sound silly, but unless you've grown up killing animals, it can be a little traumatic. You'll get used to it.

Butchering Ages (in months)



Dressing

Again, I'm using a chicken as an example because it's small and easy to work with. There are plenty of step-by-step instructions for dressing an animal in books and on the Internet; I'm providing an overview. The best way to learn this process is to watch someone else do it.

So, you've got your carcass—now what? It should be hanging by its feet—the blood needs to drain from the body. Larger animals stay hanging to be processed but chickens can be handled. After it's bled out, the main things are speed and cleanliness. The sooner you get that meat into the refrigerator the better.

I recommend having an outdoor work area—it's easier to clean up and keeps your house from smelling like guts (an absolutely disgusting aroma). If you plan to keep the chicken in its skin, you need to pluck it. This is accomplished by dunking the chicken in very hot water, swirling it around for a few minutes to get the water up into the feathers. This relaxes the muscles that control the feathers; they should rip out easily. The tricky part is the pinfeathers, little spines that stick out from the skin. You can remove them with a pliers or wax (tedious), or burn them off with a torch (smells bad). If you plan to do this a lot, invest in a rubber-fingered chicken-plucker. Really! It's a machine that rubs your chicken with dozens of rubber appendages, wearing off the pinfeathers in a few seconds. Or, you can buy the plans to build one.

Next, you have to remove the internal organs. If you have a cat or dog, they are probably at your feet by this point, hoping for a treat. The heart and liver are good treats; gizzard and intestines are not. The trick with removing the organs is that the intestine is full of feces. Feces and edible meat do not mix. If you pierce or otherwise break the intestines, you will taint the meat and the whole project will be a loss. So, concentrate.

The intestinal tract is a grand tube that begins with the mouth and ends with the anus. If you control the two ends and keep the rest of the tube intact, it's a closed system. You've already severed the throat; now you need to free the south end. You do this by cutting oh-so-carefully around the anus, disconnecting that tissue from the rest of the body. To make a little more room for the impending entrails exodus, you can cut up toward the thighs as well. Then you reach carefully around the anus and up into the body cavity and try to coax the whole kit and caboodle out the back door. I did this once with a quail, and it was like a gut explosion—How did all that fit in that little quail body? Once the organs are out, get them off the table and into a bucket or other disposal unit. You can pick the edible organs out if you're so inclined.

It might seem to make more sense to pull the guts from the much larger hole at the neck, but doing so would run the risk of releasing fecal matter from the anus on its way through the body cavity.

Get that chicken into ice water as soon as possible to cool the meat, and refrigerate afterwards until the rigor mortis has eased. We didn't know this when we dressed our chickens, and couldn't figure out how to get the legs tucked back into the body! Because they died hanging upside-down, they barely fit in the freezer, and we had to cut the legs off to fit them in a baking dish.