

Meat the Future

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“Where Does Our Food Come From?”

Are you familiar with where your food comes from? Anymore, it's hard not to notice the interest consumers have in their food. Although there are less people directly involved in production agriculture, consumers are questioning the safety of their food, the source of their food, and how it was produced now more than ever. A poll in 2011 by the National Grocers Association showed that 85 percent of consumers prioritized grocery stores that stocked food from area producers. (Michigan State University Extension, 2014)

As I was growing up, it was always difficult to understand how my classmates could be so unsure of where the food on their tables had sourced from. I grew up on my family's farrow-to-finish hog operation in Southwest Missouri. My grandmother had started the operation as a 4-H project for my uncle, years before my mother was born. The family farm also consisted of wheat, corn and soybean production, as well as a cow-calf operation which was taken on by my uncle. As I was nearing 4-H age, my parents joined in partnership with my uncle in the swine operation.

From a very young age, I learned first-hand the labor involved in running a sixty sow farrow-finish operation. I helped grind feed, check sows for heat cycles, vaccinate, farrow, fix water leaks, clean pens . . . you name it, I was involved. And, because of my involvement in the operation, I was able to show pigs through 4-H. Showing livestock brought me a whole new level of appreciation for the industry, and a passion that would continue to develop as I aged. I quickly began to enjoy learning about different breeds, studying genetics, and learning the importance of proper feeding. By the time I was in high school, there was no doubt in my mind that I wanted to obtain a career in agriculture.

After graduating high school, I attended Fort Scott Community College on a Meat Judging Team Scholarship. It was during this time that I not only learned how to determine the quality of meat, but how important a high quality of meat could be to both consumers and producers.

After reading about my background, it's not difficult to understand where and how I developed my knowledge and passion for the agriculture industry. I learned about my food source through everyday life, through college education, through my own determination to research and study a field that intrigued me. However, that is not a common background for a majority of youth in today's society.

I recently read an internet blog that did a great job of describing what I see in today's youth. In this blog, Jane Powell says, “There is something inherently democratic about food. We are all equal in our need for it. Sitting around the table for a meal reminds us that we all deserve to eat, and that we have an obligation to ensure that others can too. Studying the food chain cuts through the notion that we are self-made individuals, and reminds us of our interdependence.” Powell goes on to talk about how we, as a nation, rely on a world full of farmers, ranchers, supermarket employees, cooks, veterinarians, scientists and even transportation employees. Often times we forget that ultimately alike we depend upon a healthy soil, weather, pollination, and the rest of the biosphere to keep everything working correctly. (Powell, 2017)

Powell states, “On a farm visit, children encounter the natural world, appreciating the compromise between human needs, animal welfare and wildlife. When they make the connection between farm animals and the food chain, or see the uncultivated margin around a cereal field where wildflowers and insects flourish, or learn how drought and flooding can destroy crops, they see the tough decisions that need to be made if we are to feed ourselves. Back in school, following crops such as broad beans and potatoes from seed to plate, they gain skills and confidence as they learn to partner with the rhythms of the seasons. The enthusiasm and earnestness with which some children will plant, weed and dig in the school garden suggests they are gaining something more necessary to them than exam results.”

So, how do we as a community (and as a nation) ensure that our children understand the importance of production agriculture? How do we ensure that our children have the knowledge necessary to provide themselves with a safe and healthy food source? It is in our hands to provide our youth with the education that often times isn’t offered in their existing everyday life. Teaching our children that milk comes from cows, not a grocery store. Teaching them that farrowing crates in a swine operation save piglets and gives them the opportunity to grow a healthy food source for our people. Teaching children how to grow a tomato plant from seed to harvest. These are all ways that we restore a knowledge base among agriculture and safe, healthy food systems.

There are many opportunities for your local extension office to help our youth understand where their food comes from. Community and home gardens are an excellent way for kids to watch the entire process of vegetable production. Extension offers several different resources to start and maintain your garden. Local youth programs, such as 4-H, offers children the opportunity to not only develop social and leadership skills – but, project areas such as foods, horticulture, and livestock allow them to learn and practice production of many sorts. Local extension units and Farm Bureau Associations are always looking for opportunities to engage with students within and outside of the classroom to teach them about where their food comes from.

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