

Branching Out

Coyote Creek Offers Organic Poultry Feed to Expanding Market



Photo by Sarah Beal

From left, Cameron Molberg, Jeremiah Cunningham and Emily Erickson.

by Tracy Sutton Schorn

Jeremiah Cunningham thought he was retiring to a simpler life when he purchased Coyote Creek ranch in 1997. Getting “back to his roots” farming, Cunningham grows most of all of his own food in a giant vegetable garden

and raises chickens, sheep, cattle, and a llama. Speaking of his decision to take up ranching in retirement, he says, “I wanted a life of elegant simplicity.”

His vision for Coyote Creek was an organic oasis in the scrubby farmland east of Austin, Texas. A voracious reader, Cunningham read all of the organic

farming canon, Albert Howard, William Albrecht, and J.I. Rodale and put their precepts into practice, which culminated in the decision to have the land organically certified in 2001.

“I’m a cancer survivor,” said Cunningham. “In my opinion, GMOs are slowly but surely making our nation sick.”

Passionate about soil fertility and its link to human health, Cunningham feels part of the mission of Coyote Creek is “telling truth to power — without healthy soil, you cannot have healthy people.”

And he might have remained a retired gentleman going about his way, experimenting with soil fertility, reading books and quietly raising chickens, had it not been for an old friend from Austin who dragged him out of retirement — John Mackey, CEO of Whole Foods.

Mackey and Cunningham go way back and shared an interest in philosophy and natural foods. Their friendship dates to the 1970s when Cunningham first moved to Austin and Mackey started Whole Foods, what was then a local, hippy, natural foods co-op. Over the years, Cunningham worked as a schoolteacher and a basketball coach. Mackey meanwhile built a grocery empire.

In 2005, Mackey approached Cunningham and asked him if he would raise more chickens at Coyote Creek in order to produce a new category of eggs for Whole Foods — “pastured organic.” Cunningham agreed and got into the commercial egg business with the grandiosely titled “Jeremiah Cunningham’s World’s Best Eggs.”

“Business really took off,” said Cunningham about the eggs, which retail for \$5.99/dozen at Whole Foods and other outlets.

Cunningham claims he is not boasting to say his eggs are the “world’s best,” because “it’s not a brag — it’s a category.”

His website explains:

“Some of your grandparents or great-grandparents also produced eggs that were in a class of World’s Best Eggs because [the chickens] lived outside and had non-chemically produced food.”

Cunningham attributes the success of his eggs to the fertility of his soil, and the unique compost tea he treats his organic pastures with four times a year.

“After application of the compost tea, this micro-herd aggregates the soil, allowing the roots to go down deep into the earth and bring up abundant micronutrients and fully usable minerals that are essential to vibrant health. This is another reason that we feel okay about putting our eggs in the World’s Best Eggs category.”

Today Jeremiah Cunningham’s World’s Best Eggs sells 2.1 million eggs per year and has six full-time employees.



ORGANIC POULTRY FEED

That probably would have been enough entrepreneurial adventure for one retiree, but Cunningham grew frustrated with sourcing organic chicken feed. “It was challenging to find organic feed. I was getting it from out of state in Pennsylvania. But that was getting too expensive.” So Cunningham considered getting into the organic feed business — a field that was wide open in Texas. Encouraged by a visit to Mount Tabor Feed Mill in Kendall, Wisconsin, he was mentored by Gordon Johnson who introduced him to Keith Simcox, a millwright. “We had a good rapport.” Inspired by the idea of building his own organic granary, he got financial backing from Mackey, and went into business in





2007. Simcox and his crew came to Coyote Creek and custom built a small mill.

"We began with four modest bins and a mixer, but now it's a million-plus dollar operation. Eggs are only one part of the business today," said Cunningham.

Coyote Creek Organic Feed Mill is the first commercial organic feed mill in the state of Texas and the only source of organic feed between Texas and North Carolina. Cunningham soon found there was an eager, untapped market that was experiencing the same frustrations he was trying to get custom organic feed in the South. "Sales exceeded my expectations," said Cunningham. To give an idea of the demand, Coyote Creek ships 70,000 pounds of grain a month to the state of Georgia alone. They hope to expand their operation further in the near future.

Today, Coyote Creek currently has 3,000 acres in cultivation with another 5,000 fallow. But starting in 2014, all 8,000 acres will be in rotational production.

A lot of Coyote Creek's business is custom feeds. "We do custom mixes for layers, broilers, show birds, turkeys, quail, duck, geese, guinea fowl," said Emily Erickson, Customer Relations Manager.

For balancing feeds, they purchase from Fertrell in Pennsylvania, figuring



out what micronutrients and vitamins are needed in the mix. They then work to devise a formula and follow state chemists' regulations. The USDA certified organic feed is milled fresh daily, and orders are turned around within 24 to 48 hours.

Having an organic feed mill on site makes raising organic chickens that much easier. "We raise our own chickens [on our feed]," explained general manager Cameron Molberg. "We get them as day-old chicks. Raising them here we get the best lay rate. There's no stress of moving them around and we know what they're eating."

"We move the houses once a week to ensure they get sun, fresh air, and new grass," said Molberg. The chickens fertil-

ize the land, which then improves soil quality. All the farming practices at Coyote Creek are done with an eye toward sustainability.

"If we're not reducing our carbon footprint, it's not sustainable," said Cunningham.

But Cunningham has ambitions beyond the carbon footprint on his own farm. What gives him the greatest sense of purpose, he says, is supporting middle-class family farmers and improving regional farming economic opportunities.

"At 76 years old, I don't have a lot left to prove," said Cunningham. "I gravitate toward what I can do to improve my society." When Coyote Creek began, it found a rather lonesome community

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of organic grain growers in West Texas around Lubbock to buy from and supported those producers. Now the circle is growing and opportunities are expanding.

“My passion is to restore middle-class family farming,” said Cunningham. The world has changed since he was a child growing up in rural Texas. “When I grew up on a farm, I ate extremely healthy. My generation had these little farms. Now it is ‘get big or get out,’ and the new generation doesn’t

have this,” referring to those small, vibrant farming communities.

“I converted local farmers to grow wheat for us. Now we have 2,000 acres in cultivation.” That translates into economic opportunity for small farmers. “We support 200 farm families in our region — giving them a market to grow products organically.”

“By allowing those 200 farm families to do this, and when people buy those products, we move the marker little by little,” said Cunningham. “Did you ever read *Gulliver’s Travels*? The Lilliputians tied Gulliver down! That’s what we’re going to do to Big Ag.”

Every converted farmer is a milestone. Every new economic opportunity is a step forward. Every pasture that goes organic and saves its topsoil is a triumph to Cunningham. And every family that can keep farming delights him.

“I’m doing my part,” said the very much unretired Cunningham. “Because we are here, we can support them. [This business is] helping people to send their kids to college and still live on the farm.”

Now that’s something to brag about.

For more information about Coyote Creek Farm visit coyotecreekfarm.org.

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