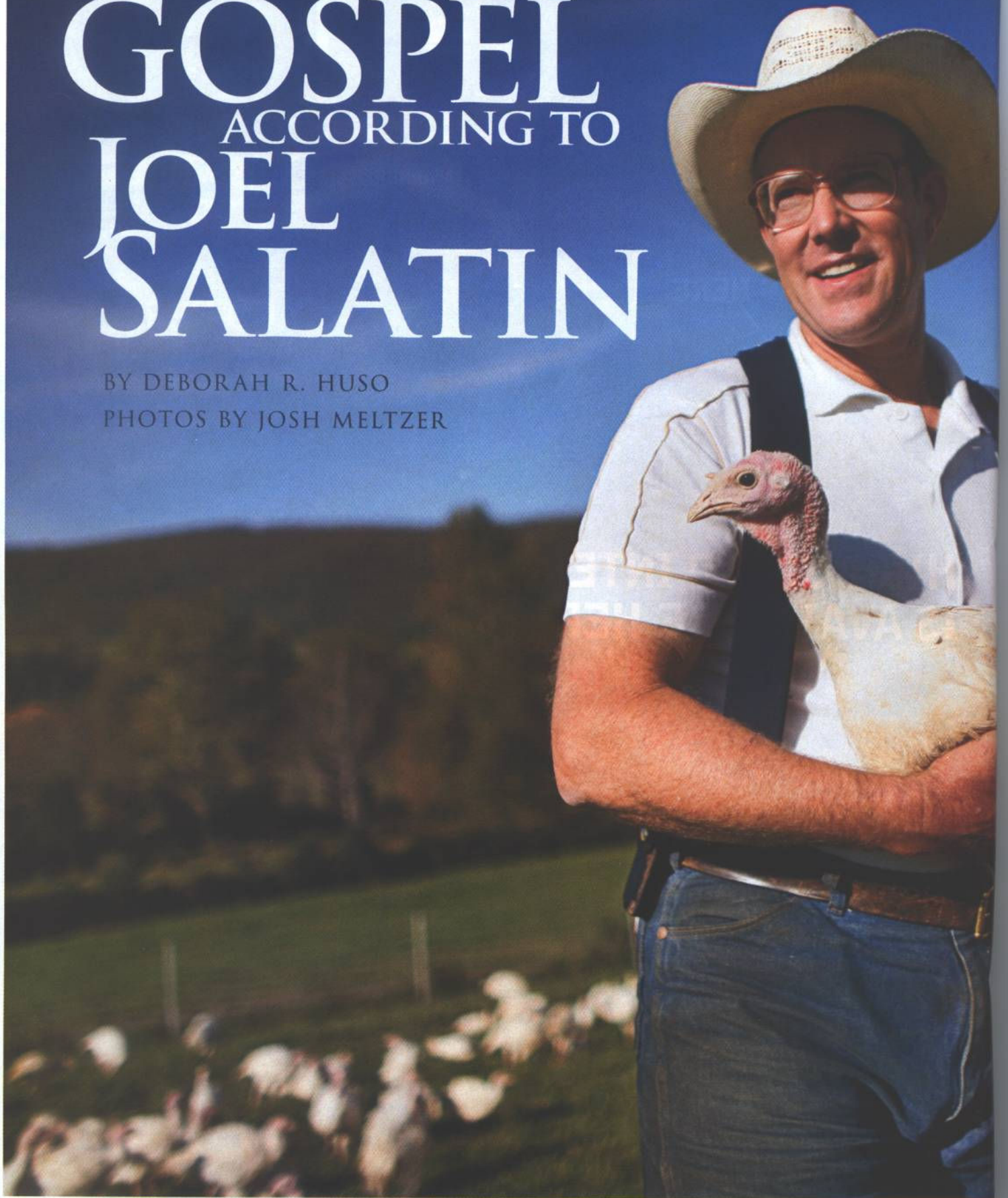
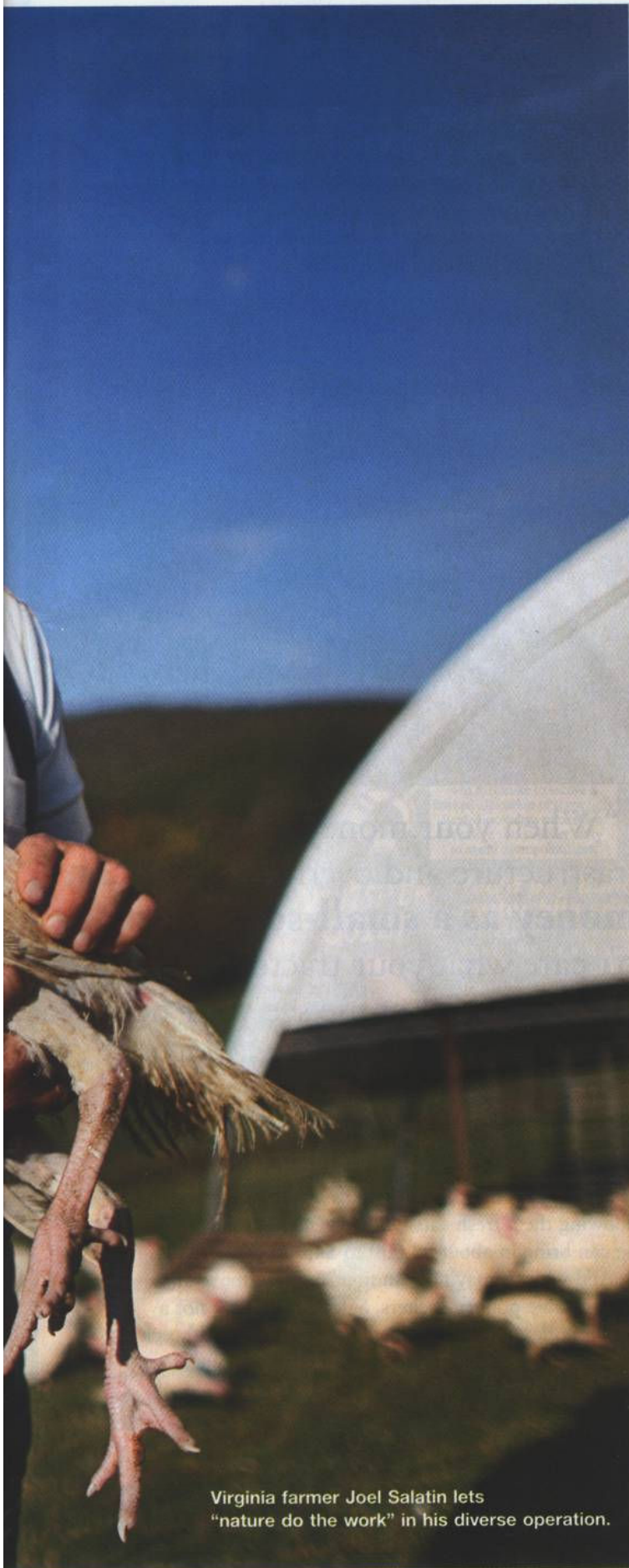


THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JOEL SALATIN

BY DEBORAH R. HUSO
PHOTOS BY JOSH MELTZER





Virginia farmer Joel Salatin lets "nature do the work" in his diverse operation.

His standard sermon is that **farming**, pushed to become industrial, has **lost its way**. That's why farmers have lost touch with their biggest ally: **Mother Nature**.

On first glance, Polyface Farms near Swoope, Va., looks like any other family farm. There is the unassuming white farmhouse, a few barns and outbuildings, rolling green pasture beneath the blue haze of distant mountains. But then one realizes the pasture isn't just green—it's lush and thriving and inviting.

It's what Polyface owner Joel Salatin likes to refer to as a "salad bar" for livestock. There are no bare spots, no trampled grasses, not even any thistles. It's quite beautiful.

Then there is Joel Salatin, simple and straightforward-looking in a straw hat and rubber boots, shining eyes that reveal a great eagerness to start the day.

Well known and respected in organic farming circles, Salatin is not always so admired by other farmers. It is not so much his revolutionary farming practices that take advantage of the natural order of things. It is perhaps more his approach to working the land—an approach and attitude that can rub some longtime farmers the wrong way.

Salatin doesn't believe in poultry houses or hog barns. He doesn't believe in fattening up cattle in feedlots. And he doesn't believe in federal subsidies of any kind.

And even though his 550-acre farm only has about 100 acres in pasture—plus the 360 acres he rents from neighbors—and minimal labor-saving equipment and machinery, Salatin says his earnings as a farmer amount to about \$40 per hour.

For Salatin, the secret to making a good living off the land is in minimizing overhead by letting nature do the work. "When your money isn't tied up in infrastructure and overhead, you can make money as a small-scale farmer," Salatin says. "I don't care what your tractor looks like. Let me see your fields."

Salatin admits that as a young man he certainly had his doubts about ever being able to work full time on the family farm his dad purchased in 1961. "I always wanted to be a farmer," he says, "but I assumed I would have to go off and become ►

independently wealthy and then come back to the farm.”

In the early 1980s, Salatin and his new wife, Teresa, decided to take a risk and give full-time farming a go. They saved enough money to live on for one year.

“I fully expected in a year to run through the savings and have to go back to working for somebody else,” Salatin notes. He was wrong. “I retired at 24,” he jokes.

Salatin says his success came in part from living frugally, but it mostly came from using old-time farming practices that he and his dad used to read about in J.I. Rodale’s *Organic Farming & Gardening* magazine.

“In the 1950s, it wasn’t unusual for people to farm naturally and use manure as an asset,” Salatin says.

He tries to take the same advantage of everything nature provides and uses no chemicals to do it. His pastures are lush by nature, and that’s because he treats herbivores as herbivores. “In nature, grazing animals are always moving and mobbed up for predator protection, and they don’t eat silage or grain,” he explains.

Salatin’s cattle, for example, are held in small pastures of 1 or 2 acres for a day or so, and then get moved to a new stretch of grass. This keeps the cattle eating while also allowing the grass to regenerate. Salatin measures his progress with “cow days per acre.” He takes the number of cows, multiplies it by days on pasture, then divides that number by pasture acreage.

Salatin gets 400 cow days per acre per year rather than the usual 100 cow days. He admits that some people may think moving cows every day or two is a lot of work.

“When you say ‘move cows,’ to most people that means a big operation,” he admits. But when cattle know they’re moving to greener pastures, Salatin says they close right in when he opens the gate. “There’s a new salad bar waiting,” he quips, “and they know it.”

But cattle are only a small part of Salatin’s operation. His “mother ship,” as he calls it, is poultry. “We control the poultry from production to plate,” he says, raising some 12,000 broilers a year and 500 turkeys.

The poultry live in a symbiotic relationship with the cattle. After the cattle have grazed a plot of earth,

Salatin brings in the chickens or turkeys behind them in makeshift portable shelters on skids. This both protects the birds from predators and makes them easily movable. The poultry—including both broilers and laying hens—scratch through manure and dirt looking for bugs and worms and aerate the soil.

“The secret to everything is in the grass. The



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poultry get a new spot every couple of days right behind the cattle,” he says. “It’s the secret to nutrition and taste. There has to be new pasture. That’s why all of our infrastructure here is portable. That’s one of our fortes.”

Salatin says that since he keeps his animals moving, allowing them fresh eats while regenerating the grass, he can bring in about \$3,000 to \$4,000 per acre.

And while it may take an hour or so to move all the portable poultry shelters, Salatin says, “It’s not a lot of work compared to the labor of dealing with sick and diseased animals.” He also moves his laying hens around the pasture in his “Egg Mobile.”

Salatin says his hens lay about 40,000 dozen eggs every year, providing a healthy supplemental income to the farm’s poultry operation.

Salatin also processes his own chickens, slaughtering them and packing them every fall. “Marketing, production and processing is the

three-legged stool," he explains, "and we get paid by all three of those components."

The Salatins have three major sets of customers for the eggs and meat (which includes chicken, turkey, beef, pork and rabbit) they produce. They currently sell products to 20 to 25 restaurants looking for organically produced food.

Restaurants are their most reliable customers. They provide a solid weekly income with good exposure for Salatin's farm since many chefs include the names of the farms where they get their produce on the restaurant menus.

He also sells his meat and eggs to about 400 local families who come directly to his farm. "We send them a newsletter every year, and they order for the season in the spring," Salatin explains. "We get a few drop-ins too."

His third customer group is metropolitan consumers—about 500 families in northern Virginia and eastern Maryland who place orders by e-mail. Salatin fulfills the orders and drops them off for customers about every six weeks at 12 drop-off locations around the D.C. metro area. The drop-off business has been growing steadily.

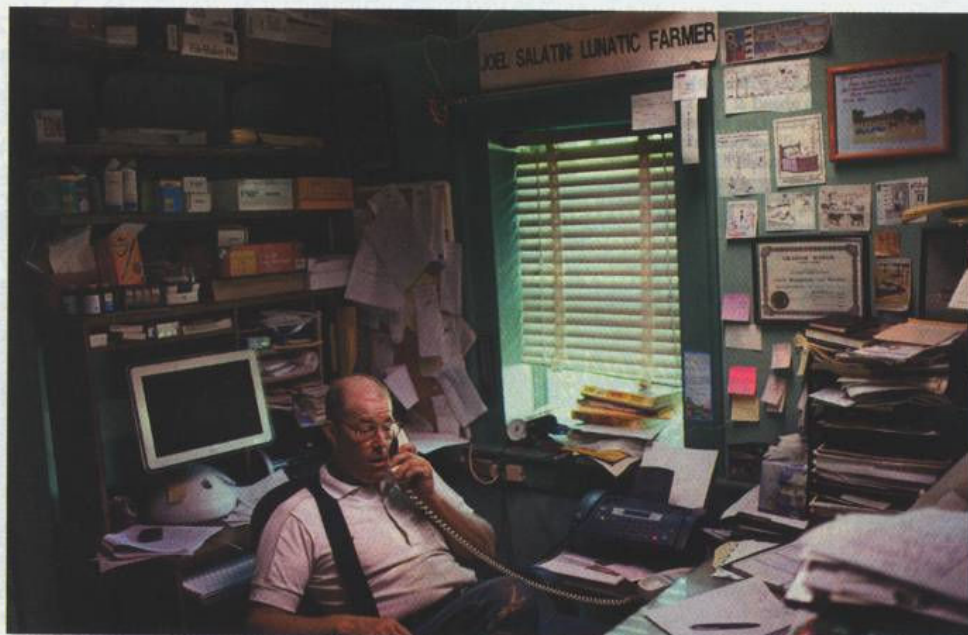
But Salatin worries about increasing government regulation. Already government regulation prevents him from being able to slaughter his own cattle and hogs. "Regulation is our No. 1 concern," he says. "We don't want anything from the government. We just want them out of the way."

"I would be happy if there was no USDA," he adds. "There shouldn't be farm subsidies. We haven't had a free market in agriculture in a long time."

Salatin believes the regulatory climate is hampering free enterprise and keeping farmers like him from earning the living they could. "Our customers span the political and social gamut," he says. "They're people who are disgusted with industrial food and looking for better nutrition or taste."

And, they're willing to pay a higher price for it. But Salatin admits that's not what the average food consumer wants. "We use the phrase 'you get what you pay for,' and that's supposed to apply to everything except food," he explains with some chagrin. "There's more nutrition in an egg than a can of soda, but people would rather spend money on recreation than good food."

Salatin believes that farmers suffer from the national desire for cheap food. He says that desire "disrespects and dishonors our producers and the landscape." He believes most people don't think farmers deserve to earn a white-collar salary and that farmers themselves have fallen into the same kind of thinking.



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"The clean, organic food movement isn't being led by multigenerational farmers," he points out, "but by professionals coming back to the land."

Salatin actually spends about half his time on the road lecturing to other would-be food producers and writing books about what he has learned and how others can put his practices into use.

He believes in the family farm, but says, "If you want your kids to carry it on, you have to have something viable for them to do."

That often means learning to direct-market, as Salatin does. "You don't get people's money without talking to them."

He thinks fear keeps a lot of farmers from trying out a system like his that takes advantage of the natural symbiotic relationships between animals and landscape. "For a lot of people, this just isn't their paradigm," he says. "Grandma didn't do it that way."

But according to Salatin, maybe she should have. 

Visit Joel Salatin on the web at www.polyfacefarms.com.