



## Unique 2 Eat Farm

544 N. Jacksonburg Road,  
Cambridge City, (765) 541-1403

Speckled quail eggs. **TOP:** Becca Selkirk's goat eats a limb from a sassafras tree, one of their favorite treats. **RIGHT:** Selkirk holds one of her meat rabbits.



# Heaven on Earth

Becca Selkirk runs her Wayne County farm with gratitude



BY SHAWNDRRA MILLER  
PHOTOS BY JOSH MARSHALL

**B**ecca Selkirk of Unique 2 Eat Farm sits on the wide front porch where, years ago, her grandparents presided. Just a mile south of the town of Jacksonburg in Wayne County is her “little slice of heaven,” as she calls it. The house sits on six acres of the 400 that made up her childhood playground.

She grew up across the road from the home she and her husband, Bill Selkirk, have lived in since 2001 — the place her grandparents owned from 1951 until they died. Here at Unique 2 Eat Farm, where she raises poultry and rabbits and formulates top-quality animal feed, her childhood memories imbue every square foot of the property.

She remembers lighting out after breakfast and playing all day. “I grew up in a different time,” she says. “As a child you left the house at 8 in the morning, and you maybe came back for lunch at noon. ... But look at this — this was all ours.” Across the quiet lane, farmland stretches to the woods in the distance.

Now she gardens where her grandparents gardened and keeps chickens in her grandfather’s coop. With her dog, Tippy, in tow, she roams the adjoining woodlot that has been sacred to her since girlhood. The front porch remains a sanctuary and home base, but it’s just one of several peaceful spots she enjoys.

Out back is a covered deck overlooking a flower garden, one of her favorite retreats for a meal or reading break. (A stack of books about weeds is testament to her primary work as a partner in Sterling Formulations, the soil amendment company she and Bill co-own with Vince Plowman.)

“I love the back garden,” she says. “We dine out here as much as we can, because to me it’s very soothing. It’s kind of like I can look at my mother every day. Those are her flowers.”

She transplanted her late mother’s day lilies, lavender, veronica, Echinacea and Shasta daisies near a rosebush planted by her grandmother way back in 1952. Selkirk’s grand-

children made stepping stones incorporating her mother’s jewelry, and these decorate the flower garden.

In a sunny spot of the backyard is a raised U-shaped bed of strawberries — Selkirk’s own construction. (“I can’t play on the ground the way I used to,” she says.) In its second year, the bed is riotous with strawberry plants. Nearby is a volunteer blackberry bramble, and beyond that, the vegetable garden, in the same spot as her grandparents’, but smaller. This is where she grows corn, peppers, tomatoes and other standards and tests Sterling Formulations’ soil amendments.

As much as she loves green and growing things, though, the animal kingdom has her heart.

“When I was younger,” she says, “I was always bringing critters home.” One Sunday when she was about 8 years old, something caught her eye in the field out front. “I walked out here, and it was a buzzard. And it didn’t fly away. It was hurt, so I picked up that buzzard.”

Though the bird was almost as big as she was, she struggled up to the house where her extended family had assembled for Sunday dinner. She delivered this prize into the hands of the astonished grown-ups. “I said, ‘It’s broke! Something’s broke!’” she says. “We put it in a cage, and Dad took care of it.”

Eventually the buzzard mended and flew away, but Selkirk never lost her love of animals and concern for their care. After years of keeping chickens for her family’s egg and meat needs, in the past few years she’s branched out in a couple of new directions — rabbits and quail.

“We always had the chickens,” she says, “and rabbits were next.” Initially the rabbits were intended to augment the household self-sufficiency. This protein source was a good addition to eggs and the occasional stewing hen. But the experiment went so well that she decided to sell the meat.

So last year she dabbled in selling eggs and rabbit meat. Then her chef daughter, Jessica Selkirk, who worked for Bluebeard in Indianapolis, wanted to add quail eggs to the



restaurant's menu. Quail eggs, growing in popularity for their nutritional qualities and delicate taste, boast 13 percent protein, while chicken eggs are 11 percent protein.

So Becca Selkirk researched quail and eventually started her own flock. She sells their eggs to individual customers as well as Bluebeard.

The meat is also prized as a delicacy, and Selkirk has served it for dinner numerous times. She expects to have fryers on the market once she works out the logistics of processing.

She can't butcher the quail herself for public consumption, and she's had trouble finding a USDA-certified facility that butchers quail year-round. The state-inspected sites she has contacted are all too busy with their own butchering to take on hers in the summertime. "It's hard to build a flock knowing in 10 weeks that you'll need to be butchering, and you don't know where you're going to take them," she says. "So I'm just taking baby steps for now."

As far as their care, her initial plan was to set up a natural quail habitat, but a Department of Natural Resources adviser told her it would be a waste of money. Commercially raised quail lack the survival instinct to hide from predators; in a naturalized setting, they'd be doomed.

So to maintain sanitary conditions and



protect the birds from the elements, she keeps her growing flock of Coturnix and T&M quail in metal tiered cages in the same climate-controlled outbuilding where the breeding rabbits bunk down. Eventually she'd like to have up to 60 females for egg and meat production.

With nature as her guide, her goal is to give the animals as healthy and natural a life as she can within the limits of safety and sanitation. Though the quail must live indoors, she moves weaned rabbits to a covered run so they can "get out and be a rabbit."

In a funny parallel to her childhood rescue of the buzzard, her dog once brought her a baby

bunny, a wild cottontail. Surprisingly, it was unharmed by the rambunctious young terrier. "I don't know where she got it," she says. "I put it in the cage with one of mine, and she nursed it." After it was big enough to be viable, Selkirk took it down to the creek and let it go.

She wasn't tempted to add to her bottom line with this freebie, even though she's growing her meat rabbit operation. Her breeding stock of New Zealands, Californian and Rex rabbits has a decidedly heftier profile than the long, lean cottontail. Her goal is to keep six females producing; litters range from four to eight kits. Depending on size, harvest comes

eight to 12 weeks later.

Meanwhile the chicken coop built by her grandfather is home base for both chickens and goats now. Nutmeg and Clove, two female goats, play with everything in the pen, turning old water barrels on their side and tossing buckets about. She raised these two intending to butcher them for household consumption. But then she grew attached to their funny ways, and the jury's still out on whether they'll end up in the freezer.

The Barred Rock, Buff, Americana and Rhode Island Red chickens roost in their coop at night and spend days in the covered run. It's a system that allows them some freedom while also protecting them from hawks, raccoons and other predators.

To make up for the fact that the hens can't forage for insects the way they could if they were totally free-range, Selkirk ensures they get a diet rich in high-end proteins. She favors locally grown golden flax seed to boost omega-3 fatty acids in both quail and hen eggs.

In fact, feed is Selkirk's newest endeavor. She recently began marketing the feed she specially developed for chickens, made from all certified organic grains, seeds and beans — most grown by Fields of Agape in Rush and Henry counties. The ingredients are cleaned, milled and packaged at Carthage Mill, a new cooperative mill developed by Fields of Agape's Anna Welch.

The result is a high-quality feed that's been certified by Ecocert, an organic certifying organization in Johnson County. The layer feed offers 19 percent protein, which is well over



**TOP:** Becca Selkirk tends to her goats. **ABOVE:** Contents of the Unique 2 Eat's blend of feed. **LEFT:** A quail she raises for eggs. **OPPOSITE PAGE:** The sun sets through the trees and behind the rows of corn on a field next to the Selkirks' property.





the industry standard. A second product called Corn Flakes contains freshly milled cracked corn, organic and local.

Twenty-five pound bags of feed are available at Carthage Mill or through Hoosier Harvest Market's online marketplace (as are Unique 2 Eat chicken eggs and quail eggs). Selkirk has been working to get product in stores as well.

Devon Hamilton of Carthage recently switched his layers from mass-produced feed to Unique 2 Eat's blend. A desire to buy local was his prime motivator. "I liked that I knew what was in it," he says. "It's all ground right there. The stuff going into it is either from Anna's (Welch) farm or Becca's corn."

Hamilton was pleased to find a texture that's neither too fine nor too rough, and apparently his birds were also happy with the switch. "They ate it right off the bat," he says. "Usually that's really hard to do, when you have them on one feed for so long and put them on the other one without first weaning them off it. But the feeder was empty when I got back."

He can tell already that the birds are healthier and their egg quality has improved — shells are thicker, and the yolks a richer color. He credits the calcium and protein content of Selkirk's blend. "It's better quality ingredients," he says. "If I had to rate it on a scale of 1 to 10, I'd probably rate it a 12."

Though Unique 2 Eat's price point is slightly higher than what he was feeding, he considers it money well spent, given the results.

Quail feed is next on Selkirk's list. The

growing demand for Sterling Formulations' products has kept her too busy to focus on this task, but she's eager to work out a formula that addresses quail's higher protein needs. Eventually she may branch out to other livestock feed.

Keeping her own animals healthy through a high-quality, locally grown diet fits with her overall emphasis on sustainable and natural methods. She rarely needs to treat a sick animal, but when she does, tea tree oil is her first line of defense in restoring their well-being.

Her deep respect for the animals also informs her last moments with them. Making sure they are processed humanely is a high priority. As an animal lover, she doesn't take their sacrifice lightly, and she works hard to keep them calm on their last day. "They're all creatures I respect and am thankful for," she says. "That's what I tell them when I take them to the butcher — 'thank you.' I do."

That gratitude infuses every part of her life on this beloved homestead, where she picks berries to sweeten breakfast and snips herbs to season dinner. She cherishes memories of sitting on the porch in midsummer, listening to the wind and watching it stir the field next to the front yard. Where corn now grows was once a rippling field of bluegrass, mown for hay. The young nature-loving Selkirk delighted in its sight and sound.

"Once that bluegrass got to a certain height," she says, "(I'd) listen when the wind rolled across that bluegrass. It was like an ocean, you know — just waves." \*FI

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