

CAVENDISH GAME BIRDS

By Marcia Passos Duffy

The story of Cavendish Game Birds begins not in Vermont, where the farm is based, but in suburban New Jersey where Rick and Bill Thompson grew up. As a kid, Rick Thompson liked to raise pheasants as a hobby.

His brother, Bill, handy in the kitchen, eyed Rick's pheasants as a potential savory meal. The story goes that Rick set the flock free before his brother could even get out his chopping block.

But these days, Rick wouldn't dream of setting a flock loose. He and his brother, Bill, are partners in a flourishing game bird farm with its pricey 7 ounce "jumbo" quail gracing the tables of upscale restaurants and hotels around the country that sell them from \$20 to \$30 a plate.

The farm, which has been featured in Gourmet magazine, raises and sells 350,000 quail a year. Its dressed Japanese quail, *Coturnix japonica*, end up in places like Bellagio Casino and Hotel in Las Vegas, The Weston Copley Place in Boston, The Balsams in New Hampshire, and under the able hands of famous chef, Wolfgang Puck, among others.

A PLAN IS HATCHED

But getting from suburban New Jersey to Vermont has been a circuitous route in which the brothers were not quite sure how it would all turn out, says Bill Thompson. Bill came to Vermont in 1984 to get away from suburban life.

"One day I was fighting for parking space when I said to my wife, 'let's get out of here.'" says Bill, who was working as a chef. So, within the year, he and his wife and children moved to Vermont, where Bill got a job as a chef at the Inn at Weathersfield.

While working there, Bill struggled to find a source of fresh pheasant in the region to put on the menu. In 1988 he

started to raise a few himself on his half-acre of land.

"I started with a Garden Way book on how to raise game birds, talked to a pheasant farmer I knew in New Jersey," says Bill. A flock of 12 birds soon turned into a flock of 100, then 500. Word got out he was raising pheasants and soon he was traveling all over Vermont with a pickup truck and a bucket of ice to deliver the birds.

"It was a mess...crazy," recalled Bill who called on his brother Rick – the original pheasant-raiser in his family who was then working in food service marketing and sales in New Jersey – for help and advice. His brother not only helped, but also – tempted by the idea of raising birds again – moved his family to Vermont in 1991.

Soon, the brothers rented a farm where they were producing 8,000 pheasants, 6,000 partridge and 3,000 quail a year. "It was a nightmare," says Bill, who says both he and his brother were holding down full-time jobs along with running the growing farm. "We were working 24/7 with no rest," says Bill.

They began to rethink their operation and decided that raising pheasants year-round in Vermont was not the way to go. They farmed out the pheasant operation to another Vermont farmer who had a hunting preserve as well – who sells them back 10,000 pheasants a year, and decided to focus exclusively on quail – which can be raised indoors in a very short period of time, with little to no diseases.

The average quail sold is about 4 to 5 ounces. And as a chef, Bill had frequently used quail on his menu, but felt the





small size could be improved upon. The brothers found a breeder in Georgia producing larger quail and purchased some eggs. "We just wanted to see if they were really bigger," says Bill. They were, and with these new chicks the brothers hatched their quail business.

JUMBO QUAIL

The quail on Cavendish Game Birds Farm are 25 percent larger than the average quail – about 7 to 8 ounces dressed (boneless). "These are jumbo quail," says Bill. The quail are not given any growth stimulants and antibiotics are used sparingly on chicks in their early days to prevent coccidiosis. "Quails are very hardy birds," says Bill. They are fully raised in 6 weeks; by 7 weeks they are laying eggs.

The quail are raised in the barn the entire 6 weeks. "In their nature to be in a covey – they live in groups," says Bill. The brothers raise 2 birds per square foot, which gives the quail plenty of room to sleep, eat and grow.

The quail start and finish growing in the same room, and have room to fly around the barn if they want, although most spend their lives on the floor eating. "If quails are under any kind of stress, they won't grow and stop eating."

Diseases are few: "We haven't medicated our birds since I can remember. As long as we keep on top of sanitation and if they don't get stressed, they are fine," says Bill.

The birds are raised on the 75 acre farm that Rick and his family initially rented – and eventually purchased -- along with the elder Thompsons (who also moved up from New Jersey), as well as Rick's wife's parents, who all built their own houses on the land. "We have quite a clan at the farm," says Bill. "It is a real family operation...I'm thinking of building a house there myself," he says.

When the birds are ready to be pro-

cessed they are trucked a few miles away to nearby Springfield, VT, where the family recently converted a former restaurant into a high-tech processing plant. There, workers process the birds using specialty cut called a "sleeve bone," which chefs prefer: "We take out all the rib bones, backs, thigh bones. This cut is labor intensive, but we can do one bird per minute...this allows chefs to grill, fry it, and the only bones in the bird are the lower leg bones and wings."

The quail are sold wholesale for \$2.50 for a "sleeve bone" cut; a full-bone bird sells for \$2 per quail. "Our quail the most expensive quail on the market," says Bill.

The concentration on quail proved to

be a good, solid, business move. And as each year goes by, the farm produces more quail that it sells to markets in New York, Boston and the West Coast through several wholesalers.

Paul Maxwell of Dole & Bailey (www.doleandbailey.com) wholesalers based in Woburn, Mass., says the competitive advantage comes from the Cavendish Game Birds being a local product: "They are an all natural product from Vermont. The Vermont name sells," says Maxwell, who added that most of the quail he buys from Cavendish end up in higher end restaurants and hotels in the Northeast.

Golden Gate Meat Co. (www.goldengatemeatcompany.com) sells the Cavendish quail both in its retail store and its wholesale operations. "Summer is a big time for quail, people like to barbeque them," says Justin Offenbach, sales manager at the San Francisco-based company. "We have the (wholesale) quail going to higher end restaurants in the Bay area and Marin County. We go through 300 a week. Game birds in general are becoming more popular...it is something that stands out on a menu."

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COMPETITION, DIVERSIFICATION

While Cavendish Game Birds farm is growing, it pales in comparison with big quail farms in the South – particularly in South Carolina – where some farms produce 10 million birds a year. These southern quail are generally smaller than those that sell in supermarkets and delis in the South, where quail is more commonly purchased. “Right now if we’re a half percent of the total market, that’s a lot...there’s a ton of potential,” says Bill Thompson.

With the new processing plant the farm could easily double its production, says Bill, who says they employ 14 people at the plant. The goal, Bill says, is to reach 1 million birds per year. “I don’t want to produce 10 million.”

But they do plan on diversifying to increase revenue. One area, they just happened to fall into recently has been the raw dog food market. The farm produces 500 pounds of bones each week – and even more pounds of hearts, liver and gizzards. The recent movement to feed cats and dogs raw food has given the farm a new market. The farm sells these byproducts to a Connecticut raw dog food company, Bravo (www.bravorawdiet.com).

“(Bravo) takes the quail (bones) grinds them up, mixes rice into them, and sells it online,” explained Bill. Individuals also come to the Cavendish farm to buy 2-3 pound containers of the raw innards. “We feed our own dogs that too,” noted Bill.

While initially the farm was selling these byproducts at \$1 a pound, the demand has been so high they have bumped the price up to \$2 a pound. “This is a great side-business... we used to have to pay to have this stuff hauled away.... I see this (raw dog food) online for \$3-4 a pound. We may even develop our own line of dog food products and sell directly to the customer,” says Bill.

Another side business that may prove to be lucrative is the

chicken and turkey processing market – which would fill a niche in Vermont, which currently does not have a commercial processing plant for poultry farmers. While quail – and all other game birds -- are exempt from USDA inspection, the brand new Cavendish processing plant has been built up to USDA standards. “Once we are USDA inspected we can do custom processing,” says Bill. “We’re already getting calls from people who want to raise 1000 chickens and sell it at a farmers market.”

When the Thompson brothers look at they have created, they are often surprised at how far they have come from their unlikely beginnings in suburban New Jersey. “When we got here nobody was raising game birds and the farmers around here thought we were crazy because they didn’t have a clue what we were doing...and neither did we,” says Bill. His motivation was to get out of the restaurants business and its crazy hours. “As in any new business, we spent a lot of time living on peanut butter and jelly sandwiches to pay for our folly,” laughed Bill, who now has 5 children ranging in ages from 10 to 27.

“We never thought we’d be doing something like this...but here we are. Rick is living on a beautiful farm, we’re able to support our families and our workers,” says Bill. As for cooking, Bill still is a chef – but only for his family. “Yes, of course I cook quail! The kids love it...but I’d much rather cook at home than at a restaurant.”

To visit Cavendish Game Bird Website: www.vermontquail.com

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