

## A local 'local food' enterprise

Agriculture has always been part of the Koerner family operation near Turkey Ridge Creek. This year it's Clara's turn to take on management duties — and that's no small thing.

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 FOR THE COURIER

Farm families who venture into local food production face the challenge of a very labor and management and marketing intensive enterprise. Farm families, like others, also struggle to know how to fund the educational aspirations of their children.

One local family is working toward a single solution to both problems.

Todd and Suzanne Koerner and their family have a fairly conventional family farm a few miles southeast of Freeman along Turkey Ridge Creek. They've always made raising their own food a priority in their home. About eight years ago they were thinking about how to afford sending their children to Freeman Academy. And that's when the family began selling food locally as a family. They've had a consistent booth at the local Farmer's Market every summer overflowing with fresh local produce.

The food produce enterprise has always been a family affair. Older siblings Andrew and Lillie had their turns at participating. Now that Andrew is grown and Lillie is married and out of college, it's daughter Clara's turn. She just completed her freshman year at the University of Sioux Falls aiming toward an elementary education degree.

This summer, Clara is taking over management of the free-range broiler operation from Lillie and her husband, Andre Eisenbeis, who managed the project last year. And she's in her second year of managing the family's Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) enterprise.

As manager of these enterprises, Clara takes the lead in managing

the whole operation — planting and harvesting vegetables, cleaning and packaging and delivering weekly CSA baskets, building the customer base and the marketing procedure, caring for the pasture raised broilers and overseeing the slaughter and packaging and delivery of the chickens. One of the things that

excites her about this work is the opportunity to learn small business and management skills.

In CSA's, the producer and consumer contract for a delivery of a basket of fresh in-season vegetables to be delivered weekly to the consumer. For Clara, this is a 10-week contract beginning sometime in June. Last year, Clara had nine clients. She hopes to expand that to 20-24 this year, including some in Sioux Falls. She loves making the weekly deliveries herself in person and learning to know each of her customers. Clients may order the size of basket that will meet their needs for fresh produce.

This year, some options of drug- and GMO-free beef and pasture-raised chicken and egg orders may also be added. (Younger sister Jada is in charge of the small flock of laying hens, which is in a moveable small barn so the hens can forage on grass.)

Otherwise, vegetables in the basket include fresh greens in spring and then the usual garden produce — early potatoes, carrots, beets, tomatoes, peppers, beans and brassicas, including some more exotic veg-

etables like kohlrabi, okra, kale and groundcherries. Clara also likes to include small packets of herbs, and often when new things are added to the basket, she will share recipes she and her family have tried with those new vegetables in the newsletter she includes in the basket.

The family has several gardens — some close to the house and larger truck gardens further away from the yard where there is space to raise these vegetables. With her student schedule, Clara misses some of the early action in starting the seedlings and the early plantings, although she helps with that some weekends. A special room in the farm's barn has been remodeled as a place to clean and package and prepare the vegetables for the CSA baskets with

a large walk-in cooler just outside the door.

In the broiler operation, the family raises 400 broilers in two earlier and later flocks. The birds are housed in two large pens that provide both sun and shade and are moved daily over fresh grass so the chickens can forage on the ground. The broilers mature in about 8 weeks, and with the first batch purchased in late March, the first group will soon be ready for slaughter. The Koerners inherited the broiler business including some slaughtering equipment from Tim Eisenbeis. The slaughter and packaging facility is on Clara's grandparent's farm, Elroy and Donna Koerner, in the former milking parlor of the farm where Todd grew up. Water and coolers

are there to process the chickens appropriately and safely. Some people pick up their chicken order the same day; other orders are frozen and picked up or delivered later. About a hundred birds are processed on butchering days, with the whole family working together.

When asked why such local food operations are important, Clara spoke about the joy of eating healthy, locally produced food. She talked about the special relationship that exists between those who raise the food and those who eat it, and the joy of "knowing the hands that have grown the food." It is a gift to know what we are eating and to know the land that has produced the food.

Clara noted the contrast between her operation and the way our food is normally produced on large, industrial-scale corporate farms far removed from our community. Operations like hers support local farm families and the local community, and provide employment and business experience in local family farm settings for young people like herself.

If you'd like to learn more about the Koerner local food initiative, go to the Facebook page: Turkey Ridge Creek Farm.

This marks the debut of a monthly feature called Rural Alternatives being facilitated by Rural Revival, a local non-profit organization established to support local agriculture and its role in sustaining rural communities. The author, S. Roy Kaufman, is a member of the group. Learn more at [ruralrevival.org](http://ruralrevival.org).



Clara Koerner, in between years at the University of Sioux Falls, is pictured on her family farm southeast of Freeman near Turkey Ridge Creek. PHOTO BY S. ROY KAUFMAN