

JUST DOWN THE ROAD

THE STORY OF A MEAL

BY LAUREN DUFFY

This is a story about a meal. It is a meal that exists because of relationships, but also one that is dependent on things outside our control. It is a meal that is quintessentially San Diego, and also one that, because we are located in San Diego, we stand to lose. It is a meal that we have to work at if we want it to appear on our plates, but if we succeed it will be ultimately rewarding.

This story starts with something much more basic than the meal: beer. Well, a lot of beer, actually, about 6,200 gallons of beer a week. That's the average made at the Green Flash Brewery in Vista, where brewmaster Chuck Silva oversees anywhere from eight to 14 25-barrel batches weekly.

If you think the amount of beer is a lot, think about the amount of ingredients that go into it. Brewing beer is a lot like steeping tea—solids are submerged in hot water, to infuse the liquid with flavors, aromas and nutrients. Once these solids impart their qualities, it is the infused water that proceeds through the rest of the brewing process; the solids, like tea leaves, are discarded.

In the case of beer, the main solid ingredient is barley (the other basic ingredients are hops, yeast and water). Barley provides the sugars that feed the yeast and, in the process, are converted into alcohol. In order to get the sugars out of the barley and into the liquid that will become the beer, the first step in the brewing process is to steep the barley in a controlled bath of hot water. Once the sugars are extracted, the brewer removes the grain from the liquid and moves on with the brewing process.

In this story, however, the used grain isn't simply discarded. "We need to get rid of it," Chuck explains. But "it has a lot of value as feed." So Green Flash recycles the grain, donating it to a nearby farmer who can put it to good use.

Enter RC Livestock. Ron and Cheryl Lange (the R and C) raise sheep and goats on their 53-acre property in Fallbrook. The couple—an ex-firefighter and real estate agent—moved to Fallbrook to escape



Ron Lange

the hustle and bustle of Los Angeles nearly 30 years ago. They started with a pair of pigs that they bought to let their children raise, then acquired a steer, and a lamb, and the process spiraled from there.

"We have hundreds. There were triplets born this morning," Cheryl says of their herd of Boer goats. In addition to Boer goats and Katahdin sheep (both breeds raised for meat), they also raise miniature Herefords and used to raise pigs, although they have since sold all of their pigs and are selling the rest of their cattle.

Cheryl remembers about four or five years ago, when "a friend saw the ad that the brewery placed. They needed someone to take the spent barley. So Ron went down." Cost was certainly a factor. "The price of hay skyrocketed," Cheryl says. "It was \$65 to \$70 a ton when we started. Now it's \$195 a ton. We spend \$6,000 a load, and that only lasts a few months." They would be

spending even more if they didn't have the Green Flash's barley as a major source of feed.

Chuck estimates the brewery goes through about 2,000 tons of barley a week, and that's "dry weight." The steeping process adds about 30 percent to the weight, Chuck estimates. "Ron will come and get five to six bins a week," Chuck says. Each bin is the width of a truck bed, and equally tall and long.

Picking up grain from Green Flash has completely changed the way the Langes feed their animals. "The animals love it," Cheryl says. "They scream for it." She drives me by a flock of sheep, and indeed, the animals come running over. "Pigs don't care for it, but sheep, goats and cattle all get fed it."

They used to raise their animals on a mixture of corn, hay and grain. But over the past four or five years, they've converted their animals' diets to all grass and barley. The arrangement is as popular with the Langes' customers as it is with the animals. "We used to do corn, but people love this," Cheryl says of the new grass-fed meat. "It makes a bet-

ter product.” Of a family that just purchased their grass-fed beef, she says, “they tried it and everyone thought it was the best they’d ever had.”

The Langes mostly sell their animals to individuals, although recently their barley-fed animals attracted the attention of a local restaurateur. Jay Porter, who owns The Linkery in North Park, happened to be planning a beer dinner with Green Flash when he asked Chuck what happened to the spent grain. Chuck told him about RC Livestock, and Jay, who had been looking for local sources of pastured meat, wasted no time getting in touch. “Jay called us up, and started with goats,” Cheryl recalls.



Ron and Cheryl Lange



Only, things weren’t as straightforward as you’d assume. In order to serve the Langes’ meat in his restaurant, Jay has to take the animals to a USDA-inspected meat processing facility. Federal and California law requires this of all meat to be sold or distributed commercially in the state. So while Jay’s North Park restaurant is only 30 miles from the Langes’ Fallbrook ranch, there was a bit more of a journey involved.

“We buy animals live—someone has to take them to the processor,” Jay explains. Cheryl and Ron were willing to transport the animals in their trailer for a fee. The problem is, there is no USDA-inspected slaughterhouse in San Diego.

For the special occasion of the Green Flash dinner, Jay was prepared to bring the animals up to the closest processor he knew of—one located on the Central Coast, “a six- to eight-hour drive”—when Cheryl made a suggestion. “I knew of a slaughter yard in LA that was USDA (inspected) because I bought a cow at the LA county fair,” she explains. Cheryl put Jay in touch with the facility, actually on the campus of California State Polytechnic University in Pomona, and Jay was able to mark “a huge milestone for us both as a restaurant and as a community of eaters—our first offering of fully pastured meat which is completely local—raised in San Diego County and processed in Southern California.”

That milestone was celebrated, appropriately, at The Linkery’s Green Flash beer dinner in August 2007. The main course was a tamale made with slow-braised goat meat, served with pinto beans and five-spice powder. It was paired with the Green Flash’s Hop Head Red. “The goat tamale was amazing,” Chuck recalls. “The dinner came off great.”

“The quality of the meat is so good,” says Michael McGuan, who is in charge of meat procurement. “It’s better in tenderness, flavor, body.” He explains how the meat is “light-bodied but has the same richness” as heavier meats. “We’ve replaced veal (in dishes that call for it) with goat, because it is so tender.”

The Linkery’s customers, too, are receptive to the meat. “It goes really fast at The Linkery,” Cheryl observes of the frequency of Jay’s orders. “People love it. It’s local, there’s a connection

Michael McGuan

to San Diego,” Michael explains.

The excitement that night helped forge a relationship between RC Livestock and The Linkery that provided the Langes with a steady customer and The Linkery with a steady supply of meat for months. It was a win-win-win situation.

I wish the story could end here.

But the situation was dependent on a fourth party—the meat processor. “August (2007) to February (2008), we had local meat,” Jay remembers. However, after February, the processor suddenly closed.

“That leaves Southern California with no place where we can take goats, lamb or pigs,” Jay says. It also leaves the Langes without their steady customer and The Linkery without its supply of local meat. “We’re 30 miles away from them, and we can’t use their meat,” Jay notes, hinting at the frustration of the situation. As of the writing of this article, Jay and Cheryl are working together to figure out the most viable option for resuming their relationship. We’d “love to have an outlet for our goats,” Cheryl says. Jay is looking into several USDA-inspected facilities that he knows currently don’t work with independent animals but that he thinks might be open to the idea. He is also looking into a long-term solution for transporting animals to the now-closest facility that will work with independent organizations—six hours away on the Central Coast.

“Our goal is that every night our menu has the richness and connections that we had with that one meal,” Jay says, referring to the Green Flash dinner, where the restaurant was able to offer local meat raised on spent grain from a local brewery, alongside the beer from that same brewery. “It was a lot of work for one day,” he recalls, but adds that there’s no reason the restaurant shouldn’t be able to do that more often. “That interaction—that can be the engine that drives our menu.”

For now, that interaction is still possible, albeit in the privacy of our own homes. The Langes continue to sell livestock to individuals, and are able to help arrange for a local processor.

Meanwhile, The Linkery and RC Livestock are working to ensure that interaction can again play itself out in a restaurant setting. “You should be able to eat what you want to eat, to have a meal composed of the kind of food you want to eat,” Jay says.

As for a similar meal returning to The Linkery’s menu, the question is not whether but when. Jay is determined: “We’ve decided to. We just haven’t figured out how.”

Lauren Duffy is a San Diego-based writer and editor who has had a passion for food almost as long as she has had a passion for words. She celebrates the pleasures of both on her website, www.shootingstarsoftthought.com.



DETAILS

Green Flash Brewery
1430 Vantage Ct., Vista
760 597-9012
info@greenflash.com

The Linkery
3794 30th St., San Diego
619 255-8778
www.thelinkery.com

RC Livestock

40288 De Luz Murietta Rd., Fallbrook
760 723-9193

RC Livestock raises goats, sheep and cattle on their ranch in Fallbrook. They sell livestock by live weight; they do not sell meat. Restaurants interested in purchasing livestock must make arrangements to transport the livestock to a USDA-inspected slaughter facility. The Langes can help arrange for the processing of livestock for individuals who purchase livestock for personal use.