Here we are again, another year has gone by and we are at the beginning of a new growing season. The winter hasn’t been much to speak of, which on one hand is nice, but on the other hand just doesn’t seem as fulfilling without a couple of snow storms. I often write this annual letter on a sunny day from a pleasant spot on the farm. Some place with an enjoyable view where I can be alone and think. Last year I never thought that day would come, and I was forced to write in a warm pick-up truck, my panoramic view interrupted steadily by the need-to-be-cleaned windshield.

I have been spoiled this year with so many days from which to choose, and ironically as I checked the animals (who spend their winter in our old greenhouse) I found myself enjoying the incredible heat they were generating and a lack of wind. It is a marvelous day outside, but this greenhouse is one of the most wind-protected spots on the farm and since it is quite windy (and I don’t want to face the prospect of fighting the pages flapping in the breeze) I have chosen to settle in near the livestock. So here I sit, atop an upended round bale of hay waiting to make its way into the hogs- first as feed and then bedding material to keep their quarters clean and dry.

It is quite warm in here, not uncomfortably so, just right actually, but the hogs being lazy, have decided for the most part to lie down along the cooler eves on the west side of the walls where it is shadier. Baby pigs contently lay with their mothers, sleeping for now, but waiting for her approving grunts that signal when she is ready to nurse. As I mentioned earlier, our animals are inside for the winter in one of our converted greenhouses. It is not perfect, as far as livestock structures go, but it was the best building we had available at the time we started growing more animals. It also offers one thing that most barns do not, copious quantities of sunlight. During the summer this can be a liability at times, but in the winter it’s a blessing.

Sitting here I am reminded of one of the few colder days we had this winter. It was a sunny day, no wind, but still cold by mid-afternoon. This was always about the time that the greenhouse is at its warmest, and that day it was the perfect place to be after having spent the morning working out in the cold. As soon as I stepped in with the laying hens, they rushed at my boots to peck off the small amounts of snow that were on them. I don’t understand their fascination with snow, but I suspect it may have something to do with minerals that are perhaps crystallized as the snow forms high in the atmosphere…or maybe they just like slushies too. The jury’s still out. Anyway, I loved the feel of their aggressive little beaks on my worn and water-logged leather boots. I began collecting the eggs as usual, softly talking to the hens and reassuring them as I always do when there may be a few still finishing laying in their nest boxes. One of the older hens pecked me lightly on the top of my hand, which happens often, and at that moment my mind raced through the chain of events these eggs will go through from this point on. From my gathering, to washing, to packing, to cold storage, to their sale to a customer, to the journey to your home, to the time spent again in your fridge, to finally the frying pan (or however it is cooked), to the very moment it leaves your fork and enters your mouth. Yes, this whole scene appeared in a moment that may have spanned a few seconds at most. No, I was not under the spell of any prescription or illicit drugs. I suppose the hen’s light peck simply caused me to feel the connection between our actions and choices and how they affect you, our customer.

I truly wish I had a better way with words, a better way to convey this little exchange; but the truth is there is no better way to experience it then to simply experience it. No letter, poem, essay, documentary, youtube video, or even – gulp- farm tour could relate the humbled satisfaction of gathering eggs on a cold day in February, knowing that I am providing a warm, happy, safe place for the hens to lay their eggs that day. From a peck on my hand, to running my fingers down the soft feathers underneath her, to the feel of several warm eggs that have this porcelain sound when they touch each other, to the smell of the damp hay and straw bedding that emits a pleasantly earthy, but yes, slightly poopy smell, to watching other hens as they dig deep into the bedding to give themselves a dust bath which helps to maintain their skin and feather health. The whole scene is just euphoric.

The eggs that have been gathered that day have all been sold, and no doubt most have been eaten, providing nourishment to your family and mine. That same hen has continued to greet me, when I am a bit early, with a peck some days, but I always gently remove the eggs from underneath her with a smile. Without sounding too anthropomorphic, I hope she has the same satisfaction I feel. Probably not, but it doesn’t keep me from treating her with gentleness and respect, as one of God’s creatures that He has entrusted to my care. And perhaps this is the reason I want to remember this little event. In a nation gone crazy with gizmos and gadgets, (I did have an iphone in my pocket while gathering eggs) it becomes ever more important to maintain this connection. The touch, the feel of things not stuck in cyberspace or lost in a wifi signal. This is one of the little things that causes me to really appreciate farming. It is the thought that every egg laid was once a part of that hen and then gathered by my hands. The apples that you eat were all picked by my Dad or I, or Flores, Steve, or Cameron- all men who work for us. Or one of the several folks who came over after church one Sunday last fall, when the weather was calling for sub 20° temperatures that were going to damage the crop, and helped us rescue all the apples we possibly could. Perhaps you even received one of the Northern Spy apples those families picked, maybe one picked by an earnest 8 year old boy, who through trying his hardest was squeezing the apples a little too hard with his small hands. I smile even now, thinking of how hard we all worked that afternoon in the cold and wind to harvest our crop.

If this is your first time reading a Newsletter from us, I apologize at this point…I am known to ramble at times. But while seemingly requiring much ink and paper, really there is an incredible value, as one customer told me last year. It takes a bit to get through, but it is the best way we have found to connect with our customer…To humbly attempt to create a connection to your food beyond just a financial transaction. So take heart, I am almost through.

In researching the many options of food delivery systems this winter, trying to create a system that will work for us and our farm, I am struck by how often I see the terms “natural”, “local”, “family-farm”, and “homegrown” etc. used by huge, nation-wide corporations. Even at our local grocery store chain, which I frequent, I am astonished at how they try to push the idea of their products being produced by small farms. In some cases, it is true that they are grown by small, local farmers. I know, because we currently also sell to grocery stores. But the overall image, I’m afraid, is a bit over-the-top.

One picture I remember from the last summer touted the companies “commitment to local farms” and showed some true to life farmers, in nice, clean, lumber-sexual attire, thoughtfully standing in front of a few straw bales. What straw bales- generally used for animal bedding, (think of whatever questionable stuffing is in disposable diapers) had to do with the vegetables they were selling was beyond me. I guess it fits the picture they wanted to convey (and not my understanding of the not-so-glamorous use of straw as a smelly poo-absorbing diaper filling). I can’t be too critical; I too have posed for the silly picture-book photos. It fits the image that the consumer wants to believe. But rather than these depictions, we want you to think of the work that goes into the food you eat. The people’s hands it passes through to get to your house. Not as some, oh-feel-bad-for-farmers idea, but because, at least for me, it gives me pause to think “What in the world am I doing?!”, as both a farmer and a consumer. Sometimes I eat from a fast-food joint. I can never know the farmer who grew the potatoes for the fries or know about his probable several hundred thousand dollar machine used to harvest them. Don’t hear me wrong and think I am saying big is bad. It isn’t inherently bad, and often times small producers, like us, can be just as poor in practice-albeit at a smaller scale- as the big boys. No, size is not the issue. It is the human element or lack-there-of… the connection… the actual physical touch that links each and every one of us daily as we choose what to eat. I know, for me, that one hen’s touch has caused me to think and carefully consider again how we choose our management practices now that we are beginning to produce more than our family can effectively manage alone. As new practices are implemented, and more importantly, more people are included in our growing process, I want them to realize that while farming is a business, it should be treated sensibly and wisely knowing that our products will eventually be eaten providing sustenance and nutrition to our bodies and yours.

**Livestock**

Stepping away from the romantic, philosophic side of farming we must address the practical. For those who are longtime customers and understand our approach to animal husbandry, not much has changed in theory. In practice, the chicken shelters we built last year were a success- showing us how to readily move our chickens over the land; however they will most likely only serve us for one more season as we realized that several structural and size corrections were needed. So, newer, larger structures will take their place shortly. The plan and hope is that these superior structures will allow for less labor, larger flocks, and cooler, shadier conditions.

We will also be adapting these moveable, floorless, hoop structures for hog production. By increasing the size, strength, and weight we will be able to offer our pig herds the same benefits our chickens enjoy…large, fresh daily pasture with respite from the sun.

As for the dogs, which folks always ask about, our 3 young Pyrenees are continuing to mature into great guardian dogs. They are becoming more vigilant and less playful towards the livestock, both good characteristics considering their mission in life. We have been impressed to see how quickly and effectively they respond to ground and aerial predators alike, and look forward to our time training/playing with them daily.

**Apple Orchards**

We had a phenomenal crop in 2015. Nearly every variety was clean, large, and plentiful. We sold more apples last year at auctions and other wholesale outlets than we have the past 5 years combined! An early deep freeze gave us a bit of a scare and did affect the storability of several of the late varieties. But even then all was not lost as we made a record amount of cider from those varieties. We are continuing to improve our low-spray model and hoping to implement some organic pesticides in place of more conventional options this year or next.

**Produce**

We planted a sizeable garlic crop last fall with the hope of having extra to sell wholesale this year. We will also continue with onions, potatoes, cucumbers, squash, tomatoes, asparagus, rhubarb, strawberries, and blueberries while adding lettuces, carrots and a few herbs to the mix! Our goal is to grow these without any pesticides at all, conventional or organic, as most have been planted in our richest soil, built up beautifully through cover crops, animal manures, and minerals.

**Kitchen**

My Mom and the ladies who work the kitchen, continue to turn out new products each year. This year will be no exceptions as we plan to add more preserved fruits and vegetables to our list of homemade products. As we have seen a rising interest in locally grown, healthy produce and have the facility to process it here on the farm, we hope to add more of both frozen and canned options for sale at our Farm Market to satisfy customer needs year round. Traditionally Grandma and Great-Grandma relied heavily on canned foods to supplement their families’ diets throughout the colder months. This was, of course, before California’s Central Valley began producing our nations produce throughout the winter. So, with local, sustainable ideals settling in, we are happy to provide some delicious, nutritious, LOCAL options for our customers to enjoy!

**Delivery Program**

Some of you are intimately aware of the “new” idea we embarked upon last November, as we have been delivering to your homes each week for nearly 6 months; still many of you have no clue what this venture is all about. Essentially, it is program we created to help generate consistent, predictable sales. We desire to be a farm that is intimately connected with the eaters of our products, and while there are times that being a wholesale producer seems very appealing, we value feeding our local community and providing the nutrition needed to grow healthy families. The biggest hurdle we found over the years with our customers was the ability to shop at our farm market with its limited hours and product availability. So, we decided late last summer that the best way around this problem was to provide you regular delivery of our products and items from other local farms as well. This is a truly new concept for us, and it will honestly take us a while to get all the kinks worked out. Many of you have been kind enough to share your needs and thoughts with Amber and we really appreciate that!!! Moving forward we will continue refining the bundles we offer and the kitchen products as well, ideally making both more affordable and consistent. We will also need to forge more relationship with fellow vegetable growers as this is an area that we cannot focus on growing any larger at the moment. All in all, we have been pleasantly surprised with how well received the Farm-to-home Delivery Program has been and excited about its continued growth.

**Meat Processing**

Those who have been longtime chicken customers know that we process or “dress” our own chickens right here on our farm. That means we harvest, cut, and package all the poultry ourselves. We were excited last November to finally pour concrete for our new poultry processing facility. Finally, we will have a permanent home for this vital part of our production model. We had always dreamed of the day when could process our own pork as well. We even had a few hogs slaughtered several years back and attempted to cut them up and make the sausage ourselves. It was a wonderful experiment, but we just couldn’t afford the equipment to do it all properly. And then we learned of an awesome opportunity just two months ago. A local couple was retiring from processing pork and chicken, and their equipment was for sale! We couldn’t believe it! We, just last week, wrote them a check for the entire operation and just like that…we’re in the pork processing business too! As part of our agreement, they will help to teach us how to process and use all of the equipment, with all the tricks, tips and secrets that go along with 40 years of butchering experience. What a truly amazing opportunity! So a few days ago we scheduled 4 hogs to go to a local USDA inspected facility (required by law). And after they are slaughtered and inspected, we will bring them back to cut, trim, grind, season, and package, finally processing our own pork for sale at the farm. Hooray! This will be a slow process as we are essentially learning an entirely new profession. But we are thrilled to know that we can now customize our pork to meet your needs and have a consistent, delicious, unique product too.

**A Sad Goodbye…**

So this year will be the first growing season without both Grandma and Grandpa here with us. Grandma died just prior to the apple harvest in early September and Grandpa quickly followed in early November. We were sad to see them both leave us, but as Grandpa had told me late last winter, at the age of 90, he “didn’t have many seasons left in him”. It was exciting this past year to see him smile and listen enthusiastically as we told him of the frantic Sunday afternoon when we picked over 400 bushels of apples. He loved driving through the orchard, which was to be his last time doing so, and seeing the largest crop of apples we’ve had in decades. Even up to the end of his life, he was acutely aware of the pain and defeat of a lost harvest and the pure joy and ecstasy that a bumper crop brings to a farmer, which he got to share in one final time.

So as one more generations has passed, spending their lives growing food, and new little ones are learning about and hearing the stories of their Great Grandma (Baba) and Great Grandpa (Dede), about the hard work, dedication and sacrifice that goes into this kind of life, we are encouraged that for 7 generations our family has continued to cultivate its land, its living, from these stony hills. So, while we miss Grandma and Grandpa, we know their love and lessons will be with us and our children and we thank them for teaching us to love and cherish our work here.

**3 Ways to Purchase Products from Miller’s Orchards Farm Market:**

1. **Shopping directly at our Retail Farm Market**

We are open year round, and encourage customers to stop in and shop when they like. This option gives customers the **freedom** to choose whatever they like, whenever they like. There is **no upfront cost**, **no commitment**, and **no deposit**. With this option, there are no discounts available and all meats are only available frozen. Also, if we are ever short on products, they are held for customers who ordered in advance, i.e. options 2 & 3.

1. **Ordering Subscriptions or Bulk Orders**

This option allows our customers to receive **fresh** chicken and produce during our growing season, and the **best discounts** on their bulk orders. They also get to come in whenever the Farm Market is open to pick-up their eggs and produce. We do not determine what produce goes home; customers pick exactly what would like. Subscriptions do require a commitment and deposits for each order. Also, pick-up is a bit more restrictive in that fresh chicken is only available on Saturdays.

1. **Farm-to-Home Delivery Orders**

Our newest option is to deliver a customer’s order directly to their front door every week. This option offers to most **convenience** by far. These customers are able to receive all that we have to offer and many products from other local farmers as well, at a **discounted** price. Also, customers aren’t receiving bulk orders, so there is no need for large freezers or extra storage. There are **no deposits necessary**, but customers do need to commit to their order for at least one quarter or 12 weeks. All meats are only available frozen and produce variety and amounts is determined by the farmer.

This year we are offering **two** *different* **Order Forms**, so read carefully to ensure you are filling out the option you desire. One is for **SUBSCRIPTION ORDERS** and one is for **DELIVERY ORDERS**.

Let us know if you have any questions. We are more than happy to walk through the options and ordering process with you to help you make the best choices for your family!