



A VIEW TO A KILL

Americans eat almost 9 billion chickens a year, which requires megafarms and giant processing plants. Is there a better way for the birds to meet their end? BY DANIEL ZWERDLING

THE EXECUTIVES WHO RUN America's chicken industry might not want you to read this article. Spokesmen at the five biggest companies refused to show me the farms where their suppliers raise the chickens you eat, so that I could see firsthand how they treat them. They refused to show me the slaughterhouses, so I could see how the companies dispatch them. Executives even refused to talk to me about how they raise and kill chickens.

Maybe it's because they realize that the entire food industry is being kicked and shoved toward transforming the way it treats animals—and chicken executives are making a last-ditch effort to resist.

Consider: In the first year of the millennium, McDonald's ordered the huge beef slaughterhouses that supply its Big Maes to revamp their methods, after investigative reports revealed that many cattle become frantic during their final minutes, and that workers were even hacking up some animals that were still alive. Today, the chain's cattle have to be calm as they march to their deaths; if they moo too much, the slaughterhouse could lose McDonald's business.

Last November, while the rest of the nation was voting to change the face of Congress, citizens in Arizona were casting their ballots to help pigs. By an overwhelming margin, they passed the Humane Treatment of Farm Animals

Act—which prohibits local growers from using the standard industry practice of raising sows in confinement pens so tiny that the animals can't even turn around.

In January, executives at America's top hog producer, Smithfield Foods, stunned competitors by vowing to phase out all their confinement pens across the country. Their sows can now amble around. And in March, Burger King promised to buy as many pigs as possible from farms that don't confine them and as many eggs as possible produced by cage-free hens.

These are astonishing developments—especially when you consider that only ten years ago, industry leaders shrugged off the animal-welfare movement as the province of kooks. “The Smithfield announcement is huge,” says Joy Mench, who runs the Center for Animal Welfare at the University of California at Davis. But Mench says these steps are still just a beginning. The new policies don't even touch the species that suffers most on our culinary behalf. The food industry slaughtered roughly 30 million cattle last year, according to the USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service. And 100 million hogs. But people in this country also ate nearly 9 billion chickens.

Which is why People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) decided, four years ago, to inaugurate an international campaign against fast-food giant KFC. They've been chanting and picketing outside KFCs from Manhattan to Missouri, and as far away as Malaysia, ever since. Of course, KFC and its parent company, Yum! Brands, didn't invent the factory methods that treat most meat chickens like parts on an assembly line—that started more than half a century ago. But KFC buys a reported 850 million chickens per year (a number the company will not confirm), so PETA argues that if the giant would order its suppliers to treat the animals better, the other megacorporations would be obliged to follow suit.

KFC's executives aren't budging. They insist they're already “committed to the well-being and humane treatment of chickens”—and the company's president, Gregg Dedrick, has denounced PETA's campaign as “nothing short of corporate terrorism.” True, the Norfolk, Virginia-based PETA, which was founded in 1980 to “establish and defend the rights of animals,” has become infamous for outrageous stunts such as giving children plastic farm animals drenched with fake blood. But when it comes to meat chickens, called “broilers,” some of the world's most respected animal scientists agree that the industry doesn't have to treat the birds as harshly as it does. They say it could switch to more humane methods, almost immediately—and the changes might not even make chicken dinners more expensive.

To understand what kind of changes are possible, we need to see how the typical chicken gets treated now. Be forewarned: The story of an industrial chicken's life that follows, based on interviews with leading scientists and industry sources, is not for the faint of heart.

THE SCENE BEGINS as a semi pulls onto a “grow-out farm” in a leading poultry state like Georgia or Arkansas and unloads 20,000 chicks into a shed the length of a football field and the width of a suburban home. The chicks are no more than a day old. Contrary to popular belief, they do have room enough to strut and flex their wings—but not much. Thanks to decades of targeted breeding and new-fangled feed, today's chickens gain as many pounds in their roughly six-week life as their ancestors did in four months in the 1950s.

When the chickens weigh four to seven pounds, a team of

“catchers” wades into the flock and rounds them up. A typical catcher nabs up to five squawking birds at a time in each hand, by grabbing their legs and yanking them upside down, and then stuffs them into crates and loads them onto a truck. When the truck arrives at the slaughterhouse, forklifts transfer the crates to a conveyor belt, which dumps the chickens out of their cages so they fall as far as several feet onto an assembly line. Again, workers grab the birds by their legs, flip them upside down, and jam their feet into metal shackles.

Next, the automated line dips the chickens' heads into an electrified bath meant to render them unconscious. Then the shackles carry them, still upside down, to a whirling blade designed to slice their necks. The birds bleed to death (at least in theory) as they move to a scalding water bath, which loosens their feathers, and workers begin to disembowel them.

Common sense suggests that the typical broiler might not choose this kind of life (or death). But the poultry industry has long maintained, justifiably, that humans should not presume to know how animals feel. So animal behavior scientists in the U.S. and Europe have devised studies to gauge pain from a bird's point of view. The research has found, for instance, that, starting in the sheds, the chickens balloon in weight so fast that their baby skeletons can't support it well: among other problems, their tendons slip and their leg bones twist, making a large proportion of commercial broilers partially or completely lame.

But is a limping chicken necessarily in pain? Back in the late 1990s, Claire Weeks and her colleagues at England's University of Bristol divided 120 broilers into two groups—those that were lame and those that walked normally. They then offered both groups two kinds of food—regular feed, and the same feed spiked with an anti-inflammatory painkiller known as carprofen. The lame birds ate up to 50 percent more drugged feed than did the normal ones. And the more drugged feed they ate, says Weeks, the better they walked. “That suggests,” she says, “that the lame birds were self-medicating because they were in pain.”

But do chickens mind when the catchers grab them and stuff them into crates? Ian Duncan, a pioneering researcher in animal behavior at Canada's University of Guelph, analyzed the seemingly frantic way that most chickens flap their wings during the roundup. “They flap the same way chickens do when they're trying to escape from predators,” says Duncan. “That tells us they're very frightened.”

At this stage in the process, the industry's own documents

FOR THE BIRDS

Number of broiler chickens produced in this country in 1955:

1.1 billion.

Number of broiler chickens produced in this country in 2005:

9 billion

Number of weeks it took for a broiler to reach market weight (around six pounds) in the 1950s: **17**

Number of weeks it took for a broiler to reach that same market weight in 2006: **6**

Estimated number of pounds of chicken consumed per American in 1975: **39**

Estimated number of pounds of chicken consumed per American in 2006: **88**

Approximate number of chickens processed per hour in the nation's largest slaughterhouses: **25,000**

POLITICS OF THE PLATE

reveal the possible magnitude of the birds' suffering. The National Chicken Council, which represents the firms that produce 95 percent of America's meat chickens, has published Animal Welfare Guidelines "to assure" that its members treat broilers humanely. The guidelines show that the brief journey to the slaughterhouse often kills chickens before they arrive: It's acceptable if no more than 0.6 percent of the broilers die on the trucks—usually from being jammed together and heated to death in summer or frozen to death in winter. "That doesn't sound like much," says Joy Mench. "But multiply that percentage by the billions of broilers that we produce each year, and we're talking about a lot of birds dying." It translates to as many as 54 million birds that perish each year on the way to the processing plant.

The industry's guidelines also state that by the time the rest of the birds arrive inside the plant and are hung from shackles, squawking and flapping along the way, up to 10 percent may have had a wing dislocated, fractured, or broken from the way they've been handled. That amounts to as many as 900 million wounded chickens a year. Richard L. Lobb, the spokesperson for the National Chicken Council, explains the figure this way: "The birds are so young that their bones haven't hardened yet," he says, "so dislocating their wing or fracturing it is not hard to do."

Worst of all, researchers have found that some birds don't get zapped enough by the electric bath to be rendered uncon-

scious, so they're awake as the blade cuts their throat. Others twist and wriggle so much that they miss the blade altogether, and they get poached alive instead. The Chicken Council allows a rate of up to 2 percent for such incidents—which means that up to 180 million chickens each year suffer through a botched death in the slaughterhouse. Lobb sounds impatient when I ask if these numbers trouble him. "This process is over in a matter of minutes," he sighs, "if not in seconds."

ALMOST 4,000 MILES AWAY from East Coast slaughterhouses, down a country road in Norway, a man who has killed millions of chickens says the U.S. could easily send its own birds to a kinder, gentler death. In fact, Vermund Lyngstad persuaded his company to rip out the kind of system that American corporations use, in part because he couldn't bear to watch chickens suffer.

Until Lyngstad retired a few years ago, he ran the biggest slaughterhouse owned by Prior Norway Ltd. (now Nortura BA, Rakkestad), one of the largest chicken producers in Scandinavia. He tells me that as he walked through his plant and watched the chickens being tossed around like inanimate objects, he felt he searches for the words—"not nice. I mean, imagine yourself going through that, hanging upside down from metal chains," Lyngstad says. "That's the place in our plant that I didn't want to show other people [or] allow television cameras. Because I didn't really like it myself." So when he learned that British

researchers had developed a more humane system, Lyngstad persuaded Prior's management to spend \$850,000 to install it.

One morning, to see the new system at work, I visited the sprawling slaughterhouse about 50 miles south of Oslo. As Prior's current plant manager, Helge Rognerud, led me through the facility, it felt encouraging—and creepy. The machinery of death there was so... quiet. I saw the first sign that this facility is different after a semi eased into the warehouse, and a forklift unloaded crates of chickens and set them gently on a conveyor. The workers don't dump out the chickens and yank them upside down and jam them into metal shackles. Instead, Rognerud and I watched these chickens glide along the conveyor, still nestled in their crates, toward a metal tunnel. No squawking and flapping, like in America. I could hardly hear a peep.

But then the creepy part began. The chickens moved along in their crates, still looking calm, through a pair of metal doors—and died inside a gas chamber. This method is known as Controlled Atmosphere Killing. Scientists say this method is one of the main reasons why Prior's slaughterhouse is so humane.

Over the past 20 years, Mohan Raj and other veterinary scientists at the University of Bristol have discovered that when you suck oxygen out of the air and replace it with gases like argon or nitrogen, the chickens go unconscious, painlessly—and then expire. Admittedly, as Rognerud and I peered into the tun-

nel through a window, it wasn't a pleasant sight: The chickens were jerking and bucking in their crates. But Raj and other researchers conclude that's a good sign. "This signifies that the chickens have gone unconscious and can't sense pain anymore," Raj says. "They jerk because they are experiencing an epileptic-type seizure—but they are not aware."

Rognerud says the new gas system is good for business, partly because it requires fewer workers, improves meat quality, and produces a higher yield. Prior will have recouped the money the system cost to install in barely three years. But the man who ushered in the new age, Vermund Lyngstad, says the system is also good for the human spirit. "We take care of the animals now and we are proud to show it," he says. "There should be no closed doors in a slaughterhouse. Only open ones, everywhere."

Leading animal researchers agree. In fact, Ian Duncan, Claire Weeks, and Temple Grandin, a legendary scientist who helped develop McDonald's animal welfare policies, wrote a joint letter to KFC hailing the gas system as "the most stress-free, humane method of killing poultry yet developed." The scientists say the industry needs to fine-tune it, but the method already treats chickens so much better than the conventional one that the industry should start phasing it in—immediately. KFC executives, however, chose not to adopt the recommendations.

But another corporate giant, Burger King, apparently listened: Its new policy says it will (Continued on page 168)

favor suppliers who use the controlled atmosphere method. Even PETA's leaders are so impressed with the gas system that they've promised to call off what they call their "Kentucky Fried Cruelty" campaign if the multinational company orders major suppliers to adopt it, along with the other recommendations of its animal welfare panel. (At least one American company, Nebraska's MBA Poultry, has embraced the system, but it sells organic chickens at premium prices, so it's not likely to affect the mass market.)

PETA's vice president, Bruce Friedrich, cheerfully admits that he and his colleagues ultimately want the world to swear off meat. "But we're realistic," he says. "Nobody thinks we're going to have animal liberation tomorrow. So it's all about the Golden Rule: If I were in the chickens' place, what would I want? The gas system is the only nonawful method of chicken slaughter that exists. If KFC and the rest of the industry would use it, they would alleviate chickens' suffering on a massive scale." Of course, then it would be time for the next chapter—prodding industry to improve the rest of our chickens' brief lives. 