

From International Banking to Henscratch: Alice Pena Now Raises Organic Layers

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Alice Pena protects the free-ranging chickens from predators with nets over the chicken yard. / photo provided

There are farmers who are born to the land, and those who grow food or raise livestock by default. Alice Pena, of PNS Farm in Miami, is the latter.

“I was an international banker,” she said. “My father started the farm almost 50 years ago, and when he passed away 30 years ago, my mother took over.”

It was established as a vegetable and tropical fruit farm, but on the side were about two dozen hens her mother kept as layers, giving eggs to family and friends.

As her mother grew older, Pena gradually helped out more and more. “I transitioned to full-time farmer about 20 years ago after she passed away. It’s like a different world.”

She began making changes, and now has changed the farm from conventional to organic, and that includes the eggs – which became her primary focus.

“We’re subject to hurricanes and we had a few years of intense activity. We’d replant, then lose more crops,” she said. “After waiting for crops, lost crops – I think eggs are the only thing you don’t have to wait months or years for.”

Once she changed the egg production to organic, using feeds certified organic and methods of growing the hens and keeping them, she received the first 5-star rating for eggs in Florida from the Cornucopia Institute, an organization that goes above and beyond the USDA with checks on ecologically sound farming practices and livestock health. Small farms and small scale food production are their focus.

Top feed is organic – and expensive

She raises Issa hens – red and white birds known as being good layers. “I have a huge barn where they sleep and lay and feed. They have an outside yard where they can run under guava trees, so they have shade. It’s completely fenced and has a special net on the ceiling so predators can’t get in. They’re safe inside and out,” she said.

A huge demand for organic eggs from chefs and others means there’s no waiting for a market as with her tropical fruit crops.

“We are pretty much wholesale only. There’s too much of a demand to do retail – I couldn’t keep up.”

Living Green market in Oakland Park buys from her, as does Michael Schwartz’s restaurant group in Miami, and some organic food clubs.

“It’s my hope I can expand – I have about 1000 people on my waiting list. They want to buy local and fresh. The consumers are so in tune as to what goes into organic, they’re demanding it.”

She admits she’s working for, well, chicken feed. “My (production) cost is high. The feed is very, very expensive – it’s not just a four-grain feed.”

But for her, and her customers, it’s worth it. “I know it’s a high price to pay. But the quality of the egg is superior.”



Chicken farming is 24/7, 365 days a year – but eggs are reliable farm products, Pena says.