

A Sense of Place - Chaffin Family Orchards - Winter

Winter is the most restful of our seasons on the farm. The weather moves us inside and the lack of daylight helps to insure shorter days in the field. Our days still begin in the half light, mostly because all want to be finished when their little ones get off the school bus. Sorting and sacking oranges in the lighted fruit shed is good pre dawn work. The sounds are unmistakable, the lugs of oranges being emptied onto the sorter and rolling down it's bars. Some especially odd shaped ones being added to the annual collection of artsy oranges on top of the scale. A discussion of the work to be undertaken for the day begins. How many boxes of citrus to pick, how many bales of hay to feed where, which animals need to be moved to fresh pasture? It is also a time of catching up. "How many days left to finish pruning the orchards?" "Who has heard what regarding the weather?" "How is your daughter's 4-H calf doing?" "Did you hear the coyotes last night?" "The dogs were sure busy, heard them barking from 2 am on." These conversations help to ground us as well as organize our days. About the time the school bus goes by it is light enough to head for the fields and the day's work.

The work of winter is often "weather permitting". Trees are pruned on dry days as this work just needs to be done before winter's chill leaves. Oranges are picked daily as cold storage to us means how many are left on the tree. Animals are moved to pasture as needed but more slowly as the grass is mostly dormant and so they are eating grass left as residual from last spring. Goats browse in areas where brush is choking out the pasture now that the grass is short. By doing so they make more sheep and cattle pasture for next year. Breeding seasons end and we begin to prepare for lambing and kidding. Goats and Sheep receive their annual vaccinations and hoof trimming. The shearer visits to get the ewes trimmed up for lambing, dirty wool around the udder and birth canal are not good for baby lambs. This is the season of hardest work for the guardian dogs. Predators are at their hungriest and the dogs are busy patrolling the fences during the longer evening and night hours. Guardian dogs eat almost double in winter what they eat in summer. Even in the midst of the heaviest rains, the dogs choose to leave their beds and go out on patrol. When the kids and lambs are born, one dog will be designated the baby sitter and will stay with the little ones while the mothers are hard at work eating.

On rainy days, winter is a time of planning. There are many educational meetings to attend, sparking lots of new ideas and plans. Budgets are reworked and pricing determined for the coming year. Dates for purchase and harvest of meat chickens are planned and poultry catalogs perused. Content for the website and brochure is written. New insurance contracts and other agreements are negotiated. The dreaded office work is caught up on. We try not to think about the reports waiting for taxes.

The children are busy with plans as well. 14 year old TJ's horseshow schedule for next year has been carefully written out and attached to the refrigerator after making sure Mom has all the dates in her calendar. 5 year old Joshua wakes up each morning with information quoted from his poultry books on his breath. He sprawls on the kitchen floor with his Murray McMurray Poultry Hatchery catalog readjusting and changing the post-its over and over as he compiles his spring order of birds. One minute he wants more of the fancy ones and the next minute it is all about egg laying ability.

This day, being a bit cloudy, has room in it for outdoor work. The orange sacking for the day's orders and on farm sales finished, some head out to prune the apricot trees and others to move the goats and hay the cattle. The cattle listen for the truck horn and

wait in their special spots for their morning feed of hay before moving off to graze and later to rest and ruminate. Half grown calves follow their mothers and the bulls keep a look out for work to be done. Cattle feeding finished, the goats are let into a new area. At the call of “goats, goats, goats”, they scurry through the opening and head for fresh brush. Their love of black berry bushes is evident as they start on them first. The work then begins of setting up the next pasture. We have learned the hard way to always have the next goat pen ready as they often need it in hurry. Much of this work of building a new goat pasture involves thinking like a goat so they will not end up outside the pasture. It is the opposite of building sheep and cattle pasture, fencing in the brushy shrubs, allowing for the animals to browse up a hill, and allowing for a safe “camping spot” at the highest point in the pasture. Then working at getting the electric netting to meet in the correct space and ground just right. Any of this not done right will mean herding goats at the most inopportune times.

After the animals are settled, it is on to firewood. This is a regular job with six families to keep in wood. There are also orders for customers to fill. In the late afternoon the chipper arrives to spread the brush pruned from the peach trees. This brush, left behind in the orchards from pruning the trees has been piled carefully into rows. The chipper runs up and down the rows and shreds the brush into a fine mulch which as it breaks down will nourish the trees. The chipper does some damage to the clover we plant in the orchards as a cover crop to feed the trees but it will come back with spring rains and warm weather. In the old days all of this brush was burned but we have since learned the value of this mulch in the orchards.

As is usual for this time of year, dusk comes early and we hurry to complete evening chores and gather inside. There is time for a board game or two as Mom works on dinner.

The Meal

Being in the kitchen earlier allows time for a bit more preparation to the meal. Falls store of winter squash are still holding out in the cold room so meals that make use of it are important. Equally important are creative ways to use up ground beef which is always the last thing left from last summer’s beef. Three months post calving, our cow is producing well, so there is plenty of milk for puddings. One of the blessings of our mild climate is greens year around, fresh spinach with slices of orange makes for a hearty salad.

The Menu

Mock Tamale Pie with Grass Fed Ground Beef and Spaghetti Squash
Quick Quesadillas
Orange Spinach Salad
Milk and Egg Pudding

The Strategy

For the Mock Tamale Pie - Heat oven to 400 degrees. Cut a medium to large spaghetti squash in half lengthwise and scoop out the seeds. Place squash halves in a pan with 1 inch of water, cut side down. Bake for 1 hour or until squash is easily pierced with a knife and strings are soft. (while the squash is baking, make the pudding, see below) Remove from oven and allow to cool until easy to handle (about 30 minutes). Scrape squash out of the shell and into a large bowl, separating strings with a fork. Discard shell or save for the chickens. Bring oven down to 350 degrees. In a 12” sauté pan brown 2

lbs of grass fed ground beef. Remove from pan with a slotted spoon and place in bowl on top of squash. Leave drippings in pan. With pan on medium high, cook 2 medium sized, chopped bell peppers until just tender. Add 1 jar (or can) diced tomatoes (not drained), 1 small can of diced green chilies (drained) and 1 envelope of taco seasoning (we use simply organic). Cook and stir just until boiling and all ingredients are combined. Pour veggie seasoning mixture on top of meat in bowl. Stir meat, squash, veggie, mixture with a fork until all combined. Grease a large casserole dish with olive oil. Layer 1/3rd of the veggie meat mixture and cover with 1 1/3rd cup of shredded cheese. Repeat until you have 3 layers, the last covered in cheese. Place in oven at 350 degrees and cook for 30 minutes until bubbly. Let stand 10 minutes and serve garnished with sour cream.

For The Pudding - Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Beat 3 pasture raised fresh eggs until light and fluffy, add 2 cups fresh whole milk, 3 Tbsp pure maple syrup and a sprinkle or two of nutmeg. Combine and pour into individual buttered custard cups. Place in a baking pan and pour water into the pan until half way up the sides of the cups. Bake for 40 minutes or until a knife in the center comes out clean. Set aside to serve slightly warm at dinner.

While the squash dish is finishing in the oven, make a spinach salad using freshly washed spinach, 1 peeled orange, separated into segments and each segment chopped into thirds, and a handful of sliced almonds, lightly toasted in a pan over medium heat. Make a simple dressing in a canning jar with 1/2 cup olive oil, 1/4 cup mild rice vinegar, some salt and pepper and 1/4 cup of freshly squeezed orange juice. Taste, and add either stevia powder or mustard to meet your taste requirements.

For the Quesadilla- With your pan on medium, lay down a wheat tortilla and cover with shredded cheese about 1/4 inch thick, add another tortilla on top, sandwich style, allow bottom tortilla to brown and then flip so top side will lightly brown. Remove from the pan and slice into wedges to serve beside the casserole.

The Experience - The shorter days of winter mean we often eat earlier and linger longer since there are no after dinner chores calling for us. The comfort of a simple casserole makes the house seem warmer while utilizing our stores of preserved and saved foods. Easy foods also keep our minds clear for all of our winter plans and strategy sessions prior to next year's growing season. We enjoy having the focus on each other and our lives together.