

Farmer Profile

Abram “Bucky” Ziegler

One Man’s Journey from Conventional to Organic Farming

By Michele Gauger

When I contacted Bucky Ziegler about profiling him in *Passages*, he questioned if readers would want to hear about a ‘local yokel’. After speaking with him, it is clear this local is no yokel and I definitely think his story is worth telling. Over the course of six years he has successfully transitioned his farm from conventional row crop agriculture to a diverse mostly organic operation that includes cover crops, certified organic pastured poultry and his own organic poultry feed. Ziegler’s story is not just inspirational it is a practical guide for others looking to find their niche market.

In 1989, Abram “Bucky” Ziegler, began farming on what was once his parent’s 300 acre property, today known as Paradise Valley Organic Farm. After many summers of drought in the 1990’s he discovered his soil was low in moisture holding organic matter due to use of conventional crop rotation of corn and soybean. To remedy the deficiency, cover crops and sod were incorporated into the continuous row crops. Ziegler participated in PASA’s on-farm research program investigating cover cropping, a topic that would prove to be very beneficial to the future of the farm. In 1997 Ziegler made the decision not to use chemical fertilizers or herbicides, thus beginning the farm’s transition to organic. “I didn’t really identify with my farming neighbors and their methods. PASA offers a fellowship with field days and social events that are important. Being surrounded by non-supporters it is great belonging to like-minded organizations such as PASA and PCO (Pennsylvania Certified Organic).”

Instead of chemicals he used a mix of poultry manure, compost, gypsum and lime. Ziegler says, “Fertility still is not 100% but we are still perfecting the rotation.” Current practices at the farm include conventional tillage with crop rotations including sod and legumes. His mechanical cultivation techniques include blind cultivation (scratching the surface of soil pre-emergence) and post emergence row crop cultivation. This enables one person to care for 60-80 per crop acres. Crops include corn, soybeans, small grains (oats and spelt) and hay.

So you may be wondering how a row crop farmer become interested in pastured poultry? The answer lies travel to a field day in Virginia back in 1998 presented by Joel Salatin. Salatin’s presentation of his pastured poultry operation along with grass-based methods, compelled Ziegler and wife Sherry to order their first group of chickens soon after. The farm already had 150 ewes and an expanded crop rotation but Ziegler was interested in exploring ways to increase income per acre on pastureland – so he decided to try pastured poultry.

For the Zieglers, 2000 marked the first year growing certified organic crops, which in 2001 included the poultry operation. Feed for the poultry came via a local mill with Ziegler supplying mineral supplements, to be integrated into the feed. Ziegler decided to make his own feed using a grinder and mixer on-farm. Sometimes he had extra feed,

which he sold to neighboring farms. He then expanded his marketing efforts of the feed by producing brochures and talking to PASA Conference attendees. It was a success! The following year, he did more marketing of the product in the form of brochures and spreading the word at the PASA conference. Soon PASA members were telling other PASA members and the endeavor was taking off. The feed was certified organic in 2001 and this year he expects to produce well over 150 tons, while diverse crop yields require creative thinking to supplement deficiencies. Ziegler has found a niche market for his products and says, "At least 80% of my customers are PASA members. These are people committed to the idea of local, non-GMO feed."

Today Ziegler's farm is thriving. The organic pastured poultry operation is successful with both chickens and turkeys and he also raises organic hogs and lamb. Ziegler has formed partnerships with customers in the community who enjoy a quality product, while his livestock enjoy fresh air and grass. He anticipates getting out of lambs for awhile due to low demand in the area and some hoof problems over the last few years and instead plans on incorporating some beef heifers into his livestock mix.

Ziegler has seen drastic changes in 10 years with the popularity of grass-fed livestock. He says, "Farmers are able to educate themselves and in turn share that knowledge with customers. Pastured livestock is not a fast process, it takes time, starting small and growing. It depends on building relationships with customers, so people are comfortable to call and ask questions." Customers for Ziegler's meats are mostly from neighbors and friends via word of mouth. He does have one customer who buys pork wholesale and sells it at a farmer's market in Allentown. "Bucky is a great guy to work with, he is thinking 'outside the box'", says Dave Laidacker, a local customer. Laidacker has been buying Ziegler's poultry for about a year. Laidacker feels, "Consumers are more concerned with price, not quality of food they are buying." As a PASA member and member of OUE (Organizations United for the Environment), he wants to actively promote sustainable agricultural practices and is proactive versus corporate farming.

As Ziegler looks toward the future, he would like to see PASA become involved with more in-depth marketing all over the state, such as the "Buy Local" campaigns being launched in the southeast and southwest regions. He also feels that processors and processing facilities are another large issue in the state. PASA could be instrumental in bringing back small-scale animal processing and influencing current regulations in regards to USDA inspections and changing rules with an exemption for small-scale meat production. His farm is certified organic in poultry but not pigs for two reasons: his pork production is not large enough to outweigh the costs of certification and there are no processors in the area that are certified organic. Now his pork is processed at an USDA facility near Towanda for wholesale.

He is also concerned with the current trend of conventional agriculture and the idea of 'get big or get out'. He says, "This is fostering a disassociation between the farmer, processors, customers and neighbors, while impacting animal health and the environment." "Our farm is an example of what can be done without getting big. People

appreciate connections with farmers producing their food and know they have integrity with what they are producing.”

Bucky Ziegler and his wife Sherry have been married for 25 years and have 5 children, Lori, Justin, Jodi, Elise, and Eric. They reside in Limestoneville, Montour County PA.