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Passion for Poultry

Young entrepreneurs hatch nation's largest free-range chicken operation.



Brothers Austin and Dustin Stanton of Centralia are still completing their educations, but they already have hatched the nation's largest free-range chicken operation.

Story and photos by Linda Geist

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Here a chick. There a chick. Everywhere a chick chick.

Flocks of mid-Missourians are crowing about the brown eggs sold by two Centralia brothers who started their business when the older brother was in first grade and inspired by a University of Missouri Extension 4-H project.

Dustin and Austin Stanton of Stanton Brothers shared their story of how they hatched a large business with teen would-be entrepreneurs attending Summers @ Mizzou's Build-a-Business Camp recently.

Dustin is a junior in the MU College of Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources. Austin is a 17-year-old junior at Centralia High School.

In 1999, Dustin's first-grade class hatched baby chickens through MU Extension 4-H's "Hatching Chicks in the Classroom" program.

Names were drawn for the lucky winner who would take home the baby chicks that were incubated and hatched.

Dustin brooded when another classmate won the chicks, so badly that his uncle bought him six chicks. His love of chicks hatched a business. By 2007, he had 500 chickens. It is now a 12,000-poultry operation, the largest free-range operation in the nation.

At the crack of dawn, the brothers begin feeding the free-range Hy-Line, Bovar and Tetra chickens. It's a daylong job to gather, wash and box the eggs, which they

chickens

A 4-H classroom chicken-hatching project inspired Dustin Stanton to begin raising chickens. A six-chick hobby has turned into a 12,000-chicken egg business.

transport to retail outlets in mid-Missouri, college residence halls, nursing homes and grocers. They also sell their eggs at the Columbia Farmers Market and are the sole supplier for Isle of Capri Casino in Boonville.

They grind 5–7 tons of feed weekly from milo grown on the farm that has been in their family since before Boone County was an actual county. Their parents operate a 1,200-acre grain and cattle operation and help with the egg operation as needed.

Dustin does marketing while Austin handles production and technical duties. Working and living together might cause some brothers to cry fowl, but the Stantons feather their nests with competitive fun.

Because their operation has grown so much, they now have two part-time employees and are building a state-of-the-art facility that offers automation of egg gathering, washing and packaging.

When the new 40-by-200-foot facility is finished, chickens can lay their eggs on angled, elevated nests so that the eggs will roll to a conveyor belt that carries them to automatic washing, grading, sorting and packaging machines.

They hope the automation increases production levels and makes their processes less labor-intensive. Their job is not “sunrise to sundown.” They say it is “sunrise to whenever the job is done,” and some days that might be midnight or later. They spend vacations combing the country for new equipment and learning

how to improve their already successful business.

The Stanton brothers have had many successes, and many failures, along the way, including first picking a breed of chicken that is a “meat” chicken. They have consulted University of Missouri Extension specialists and learned through FFA and college courses.

They plan to stay on the family farm after they finish school because they think it is important to produce quality food locally and efficiently.

They want to preserve the rural way of life they and their fine-feathered friends enjoy. Now that’s something to crow about.

Read about an MU course that helps agriculture students understand the realities of returning to the family farm.

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