

Pecking Order Changes in Poultry World

By Kay Fike Jones



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Ryn Laster McDonald, left, and Yvonne Vizzier Thaxon.

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When Ryn Laster McDonald was earning her Mississippi State degree in poultry science in 1993, she was one of only two women in the program that began at the university in 1946.

Today, females make up more than a third of the 42 majors, said Michael Kidd, department head. The increase is credited, in part, to the academic major's job placement, which, at 100 percent, can't get any better. That's right, even in these tough economic times, all MSU graduates find jobs—and most get two or more offers each. Kidd said there are plenty of jobs to be had.

The poultry industry is Mississippi's top agricultural income producer, exceeding \$2.32 billion in sales in 2008. The industry employs nearly 25,000 people directly, with another 23,000 indirect jobs created. Wages and salaries paid to poultry employees exceed \$1 billion.

If those facts weren't enough, consider that Jackson is home to Cal-Maine Foods Inc., the world's largest egg processor and Wal-Mart's biggest supplier of eggs.

The job security was what drew McDonald to poultry science after earning an earlier bachelor's degree in English in 1991. Her first degree was a direct influence of her mother, who writes English textbooks. Attending MSU was not a question.


"I didn't know you could go somewhere else," she said, laughing.

After completing the English degree, McDonald entered law school at the University of Mississippi. Once she enrolled, she soon concluded the law just wasn't the career she wanted.

"My daddy came and got me," she recalled. "We loaded up my stuff in a cattle trailer and went home."

McDonald found her way back to MSU, this time to study poultry science. Concentrating on poultry because of the job placement rate, she soon found herself totally immersed in the business of chickens and their feathered kindred.

"I came (to poultry science) for the jobs, but I found out I am passionate about it," she said, adding that she credits her major professor, Yvonne Vizzier Thaxon, for that passion.



Thaxton began teaching poultry science courses at MSU after working nearly 30 years in the poultry industry. When she started her career in the industry, she was usually the only woman in the technical meetings.

"I never had to wait in line for the bathroom," Thaxton quipped.

McDonald praises Thaxton for "teaching me to be passionate about the industry." That passion led the Raymond native to earn not only another bachelor's degree, but also master's and doctoral degrees from Mississippi State.

After first working in research and development in Nashville and, later, at Marshall Durbin in Hattiesburg, McDonald moved to Cal-Maine, where she has been for more than a decade. She is the company's director of food safety, a position she takes "very seriously." Food safety is a "constant battle," she said.

"You must stay vigilant," McDonald added.

"The poultry industry is constantly searching for technology to further improve raw poultry safety," Thaxton agreed. "Fully cooked product is about as safe as it can be because the industry does everything that it can. The biggest problem, I think, is the lack of kitchen hygiene knowledge in the general public."

McDonald said Cal-Maine works to keep consumers safe by its practices, such as tracking every egg the company processes. That's more than 25 million eggs a day.

"We even know where the soap comes from that we wash the eggs in," she added.

In addition to consumer safety, there is the issue of humane treatment for birds in the production process. According to McDonald, Cal-Maine deals with layers (hens that lay eggs). Other plants, such as Marshall Durbin, where Thaxton and McDonald once worked, process broilers, the meat birds. Whatever a company's focus, both women said "the dignity of the birds" is considered to be paramount.

"We ensure that our workers have respect for all living things and treat them with dignity," McDonald emphasized. "Also, because stress affects the taste of meat and eggs, the better we treat the birds, the better they perform."

She, Thaxton and Kidd, the department head, agreed on another popular poultry misconception: that commercial poultry is fed hormones. Not so, they said; rapid growth of the birds is due to genetics, not force-fed growth hormones.

Returning to the matter of food safety, McDonald gave high praise to the Arlington, Va.-based Safe Quality Food

(SQF) Institute. The SQF Institute is a division of the Food Marketing Institute, established to administer the SQF program, a leading global food safety and quality certification and management system.

The SQF program "has been really good for us," she said. Its certification and management program validates companies' compliance with international and domestic food safety regulations so consumers can feel safer about their food supply.

"We've passed the highest safety level with SQF there is," McDonald proudly pointed out. "We tell our workers to relate food safety policies back to their children—would they want their children eating this if the safety was compromised?"

But what about being rare women in a man's world? McDonald and Thaxton responded to the question by recalling how they were "tested" by some male counterparts when first beginning their careers. The "tests" ranged from the condescension of having an animal held before their faces and being told "This is a chicken," to the purposeful shock of leading them on a visit to the slaughterhouse floor. Not only did they survive their "initiations," they went on to include some of those doubting Thomases among their closest friends.

"Any teasing, or whatever, usually clears up when they realize you know your stuff," McDonald said.

And they do know their stuff. Thaxton remains the only woman to have served as chairperson of the Mississippi Poultry Association (MPA) board of directors, a position she held in 1991. Happily, that will change next year when McDonald becomes the second woman to hold the chair.

With offices in Jackson, the association is comprised of poultry and egg companies, producers from these companies and other businesses that help support the industry. MPA's three main missions include member education, generic product promotion and federal and state governmental relations.

These days, McDonald often is on the road lecturing, writing and visiting other production plants. When she takes on the board position, chances are she'll be seeing a bit less of her husband, Jim, and daughters Carlee, 11, and Camryn, 7.

Whether a wife, mother, professional, or association leader, however, for McDonald, it is all about helping others. As with her family, she obviously loves her career and believes in the life she has chosen.

Why else would she spend hours on the telephone trying to solve the problem of the cook whose meringue didn't turn out right because "It surely must not have been the eggs!?"

