

More than a Poultry Matter: Getting Sustainable Chicken into Driscoll Dining Hall

Introduction

It's a great day in Driscoll Dining: they're serving "Chicken Wings of Fire." The snappily named wings are a little spicy, with their tangy sauce that's reminiscent of Super Bowl Sundays and trips to the Forge, and they provide a nice contrast to Paresky salads and sandwiches. They're nicely arranged on a platter surrounded by a garnish of lettuce leaves and orange slices—all in all, an appealing, appetizing sight. It's easy to think of those Chicken Wings of Fire as having magically appeared on that garnished platter in Driscoll for everyone's dining pleasure. But those chicken wings did actually come from a chicken before they arrived at Williams—chickens a world away from the merrily clucking ones it's nice to imagine strutting around a family-owned farm in the Berkshires. The chicken wings in Driscoll, along with most of the chicken served at Williams, come from either Tyson Foods, Inc., or Pilgrim's, two of the largest chicken producers, processors and suppliers in the world (Tyson additionally produces beef and pork).

Tyson and Pilgrim's are huge, industrial companies that provide relatively inexpensive chicken. However, these chickens are raised and processed in ways that are unethical and unsustainable. Before they're hatched, Tyson chickens are genetically manipulated, as the company website maintains: "The modern chicken is much different from the birds of just a couple of decades ago. For example, the American craving for breast meat and further-processed products has had an effect on the shape of the bird. Breeders have been able to choose traits that fit our customers' needs better. These traits

are then passed on to later generations.” And from that point on, Tyson chickens continue to be raised like commodities or objects, instead of as sentient beings. At the Tyson hatcheries, “Tyson Team Members” sort the chicks into baskets of 100 each, and then send them to farms, where they are fed specially formulated feed and kept in large houses. While the Tyson website claims that these houses are “designed to keep the birds as comfortable as possible,” allow “air to circulate freely,” and are heated and cooled, the fact remains that the chickens are not allowed access to the outside, to their natural environment. The Pilgrim’s website evades directly answering the question “Are our chickens free range?” on their website by stating, “Our chickens are raised in large poultry barns, which protect the birds from environmental extremes while also allowing fresh air to circulate constantly. These structures offer the birds plenty of room to move around freely.” So frankly—no, these chickens are *not* free range, the qualifications for which stipulate that the poultry must have access to the outside, according to the United States Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Food Safety and Inspection Service.

While all of the above facts indicate what I believe to be a serious ethical problem with the production of Tyson and Pilgrim’s chicken, these chickens also present a problem regarding sustainability. Williams’ sustainability criteria for food served by Dining Services regarding distance, ecological certification, and social responsibility are set forth by the Zilkha Center for Environmental Initiatives; currently only about 10% of the college’s food satisfies at least one of the criteria. Those criteria are the following, according to the Zilkha Center’s website:

- Distance: Grown and processed within 250 miles of the institution.

250 miles is the working definition of “local” for Williams College food procurement.

- **ECOLOGICAL CERTIFICATION:** Ecological production methodology that is third-party certified (e.g. organic, IPM, certified naturally grown, etc.)
- **SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY:** Grown on a farm that operates as a cooperative, has a profit sharing policy, or has a social responsibility policy covering its producer relationships

Chickens from Tyson or Pilgrim’s meet none of these criteria. They are fed a diet of “the finest natural grain products, including yellow corn, soybean meal, vitamins and mineral supplements,” according to the Pilgrim’s website. The corn and soybean meal are almost definitely genetically modified, meaning that even if we don’t directly eat something genetically modified when we bite into a Chicken Wing of Fire, that chicken had consumed genetically modified nutrients. Furthermore, Tyson and Pilgrim’s plants are scattered all across the country. A Tyson hatchery, farm, and processing plant could be at three different places across the country—none of which are particularly close to Williams. The same goes for Pilgrim’s plants. According to a conversation I had with Katharine Millonzi, the Zilkha Center’s Sustainable Food Program Manager, it’s nearly impossible to trace from where exactly a piece of chicken at Williams has come, because it can go through multiple plants across the country.

for poultry to be USDA-certified natural, it must be the following: “A product containing no artificial ingredient or added color and is only minimally processed. Minimal processing means that the product was processed in a manner that does not fundamentally alter the product.” Tyson and Pilgrim’s chicken is not certified natural. Getting natural, local chicken at Williams would have more tasty benefits than the sustainable ones, as well. In an interview with Mark Thompson, the Executive Chef of Dining Services, he said, “Being a chef you can see the difference [between natural and Tyson or Pilgrim’s chicken], absolutely. It’s just a more tender bird, I believe. That’s the big part. And it stays moist.” I initially wanted to replace the chicken in all of the dining halls on campus with local, natural chicken, but after doing some initial research, found the costs of doing so to be prohibitive. After interviewing Mr. Thompson and Robert Volpi, the Director of Dining Services, I came up with a proposal to focus just on Driscoll Dining Hall, instead of on all the dining halls, and to replace the chicken breasts and quarters (which come from Tyson and Pilgrim’s) with local, natural chicken produced and processed by Misty Knoll Farms, a local farm in New Haven, VT. According to their website, “Misty Knoll Farms is a family-owned and operated farm producing the finest naturally raised free-range turkeys and naturally-raised chickens available from Vermont.” While the chickens are not free-range, they are natural and local—so a big step in the right direction from Tyson and Pilgrim’s. Williams currently purchases very small amounts of poultry from Misty Knoll, so there is some kind of existing relationship between the two places.

Setting

Misty Knoll Farms is located in New Haven, VT, a little over 100 miles away from Williams. Misty Knoll sources its chicken to several distributors, including Black

River Produce, from where Williams buys the Misty Knoll chicken (Figure 3). Black River Produce is about 25 miles from Williams—275 miles closer than the nearest Tyson distributor, which is in Buffalo, New York.

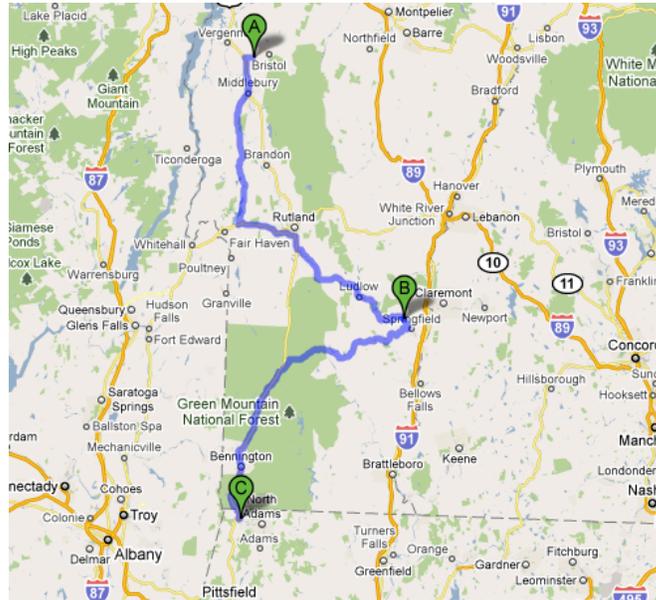


Figure 3. Distance from Misty Knoll Farms (A) to Black River Produce (B) to Williams (C).

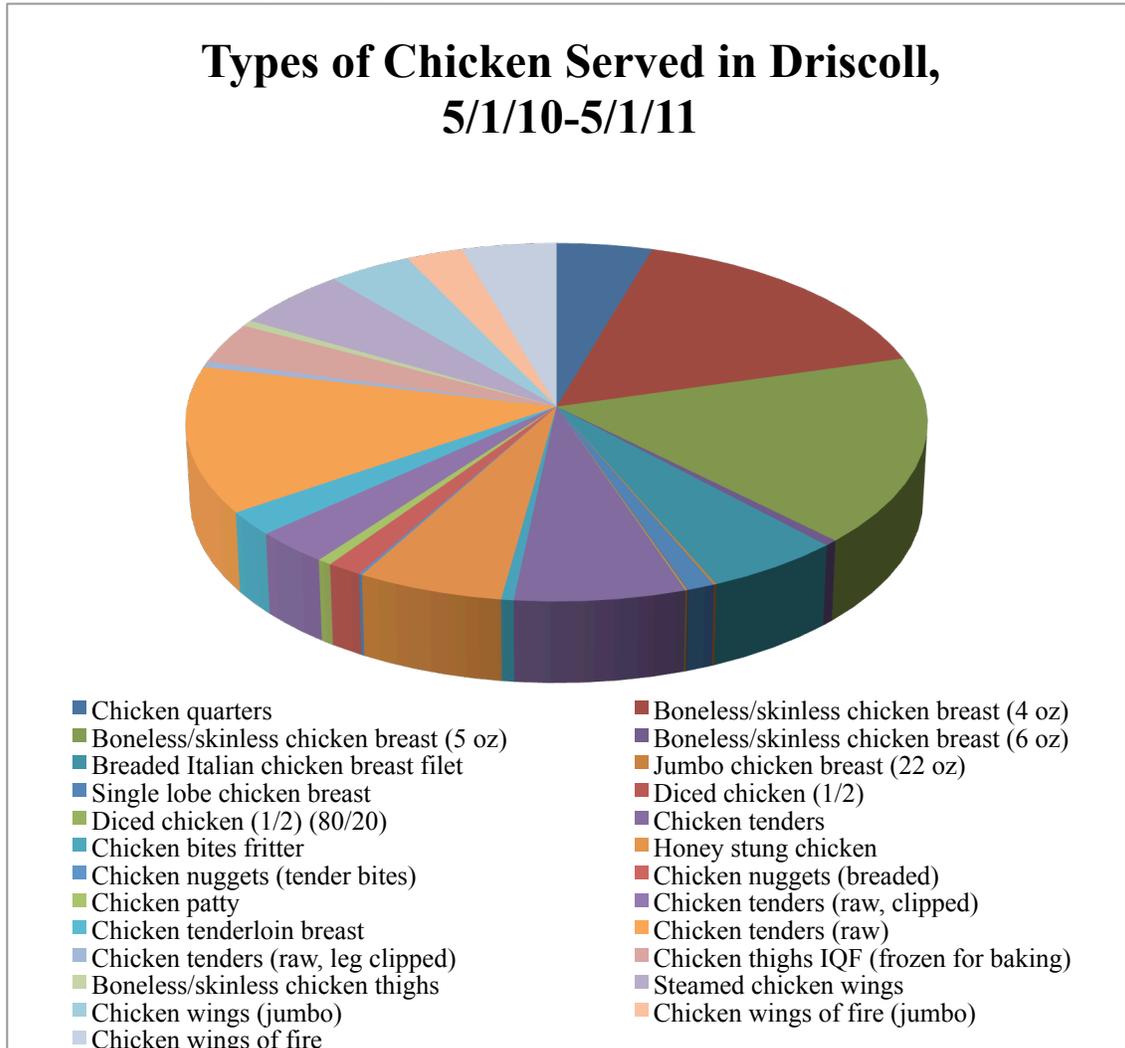
Data

Table 1: Chicken purchased by Driscoll, 5/10-5/11

Chicken product	Amount Spent 5/10-5/11
Chicken quarters	\$2,095.01
Boneless/skinless chicken breast (4 oz)	\$7,389.81
Boneless/skinless chicken breast (5 oz)	\$7,844.69
Boneless/skinless chicken breast (6 oz)	\$241.68
Breaded Italian chicken breast filet	\$2,535.92
Jumbo chicken breast (22 oz)	\$48.34
Single lobe chicken breast	\$508.74
Diced chicken (1/2)	\$21.19
Diced chicken (1/2) (80/20)	\$28.34
Chicken tenders	\$3,178.32
Chicken bites fritter	\$231.12
Honey stung chicken	\$2,724.04
Chicken nuggets (tender bites)	\$60.99
Chicken nuggets (breaded)	\$649.92
Chicken patty	\$266.24
Chicken tenders (raw, clipped)	\$1,408.59
Chicken tenderloin breast	\$1,005.80
Chicken tenders (raw)	\$6,115.00
Chicken tenders (raw, leg clipped)	\$244.80
Chicken thighs IQF (frozen for baking)	\$1,693.71
Boneless/skinless chicken thighs	\$254.22
Steamed chicken wings	\$2,527.81
Chicken wings (jumbo)	\$1,827.92
Chicken wings of fire (jumbo)	\$1,247.96
Chicken wings of fire	\$2,070.32
	\$46,220.48

From May 1, 2010 to May 1, 2011, Driscoll Dining Hall spent \$46,220.48 on all chicken products, none of which came from Misty Knoll (Table 1), according to information from Dining Services.

Figure 4: Types of chicken served in Driscoll 5/10-5/11



In addition to more basic chicken breasts and chicken quarters, Driscoll also bought many types of what Mr. Thompson called “convenience products,” specialty chicken items like chicken tenders and chicken wings (Figure 4).

Out of the total spent on chicken from May 2010 to May 2011, Driscoll spent \$17,571.19 (Table 1) on 7,519.59 pounds of chicken breasts and quarters (see Table 3 in

Appendix). Black River Produce sells Misty Knoll whole chickens cut up into 10 pieces to make them workable for Dining Services for \$3.00/pound (Sparks).

$$7.519.59 * 3.00 = \$22,558.77$$

If Williams were to purchase an amount of whole, cut chicken equivalent from Misty Knoll to the breasts and quarters from Tyson and Pilgrim's, it would cost \$22,558.77.

$$\$22,558.77 - \$17,571 = \$4,987.58$$

$$(\$17,571.19 / \$22,558.77) * 100 = 78\%$$

This would cost Dining Services an additional \$4,987.58, a 78% increase from the current expenditure. Dining Services also spent \$5,146.20 on different kinds of chicken wings last year chicken wings (jumbo), chicken wings of fire (jumbo), and chicken wings of fire (Table 1).

Discussion

While at first the idea of putting natural, local chicken into Driscoll seemed more like a hopeful idea than a real possibility to me, doing so would actually be feasible. I would argue that it is worth it to add about \$5,000 to Driscoll's food budget to have a significant portion of its chicken be sustainable, satisfying two of the Zilkha Center's sustainability criteria. If that were not possible, however, the \$5,000 could be made up in a few ways. As demonstrated in the Data section, if Driscoll stopped serving chicken wings, it would save \$5,146.20—enough to make the switch to Misty Knoll chicken to replace breasts and quarters. Also, Black River Produce said that if Williams were to negotiate a long-term contract with them, they could possibly lower the price of \$3.00/pound slightly (Sparks), so the cost of the Misty Knoll chicken might be slightly

less than \$5,000. Also, if Meatless Mondays is continued, Dining Services could possibly work with that plan to reduce the amount of money spent on chicken. Working with Meatless Mondays does present some problems, however, because according to Mr. Thompson, meatless food products can be even more expensive than meat; further, he was wary that a lack of meat in Driscoll could push carnivorous students to other dining halls, and Whitman's could run the risk of being overrun and overcrowded.

This proposal does not put entirely local, natural chicken into Driscoll—convenience products like chicken nuggets and chicken tenders would still come from Tyson and Pilgrim's chicken (Figure 4). Mr. Thompson said that it would not be possible to get those products from Misty Knoll or local suppliers, so as long as those items remain on the menu they'll have to come from larger suppliers. Even Misty Knoll chicken is still not ideal: while it is natural and local, much better for sustainability practices than Tyson or Pilgrim's chicken, it is not free-range or organic, two certifications that I'd love to see more food on campus have. There are not many other alternatives, however, because of a lack of many USDA-certified processing facilities in New England and within an area that's local to Williams. The New England Small Farm Institute in Belchertown, MA has a Mobile Poultry Processing Unit that acts as a slaughterhouse for several small farms, and Westminster Meats in Westminster Station, VT is also a USDA-certified slaughterhouse—but the only other USDA-certified facilities (besides Misty Knoll) in New England are private (Sauvain). Westminster Meats' chicken is not certified natural; and Misty Knoll is capable of meeting Williams' high chicken demand, something that not many small farms could do. So while not perfect, Misty Knoll chicken is definitely a step in the right direction. Increasing the

amount of natural, local chicken in Driscoll would make Williams more competitive with similar colleges regarding sustainable food practices: currently about 20% of Middlebury College's food is local, and they buy "mostly "natural" chicken" (Biette).

Working towards a more sustainable campus will be a long journey requiring some sacrifices from everybody. Replacing the chicken breasts and quarters currently served in Driscoll with natural, local 10-piece chickens from Misty Knoll would be one step towards achieving the college's sustainability goals. I urge Dining Services to consider doing so: as Mr. Thompson said, "We're all for it."

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Information in data tables is from Dining Services courtesy of Robert Volpi and David Dethier.

Appendix

Table 3. Driscoll chicken information, May 2010-May 2011.
(I attached the Excel file as a separate document because the table was too big to fit legibly into this report.)