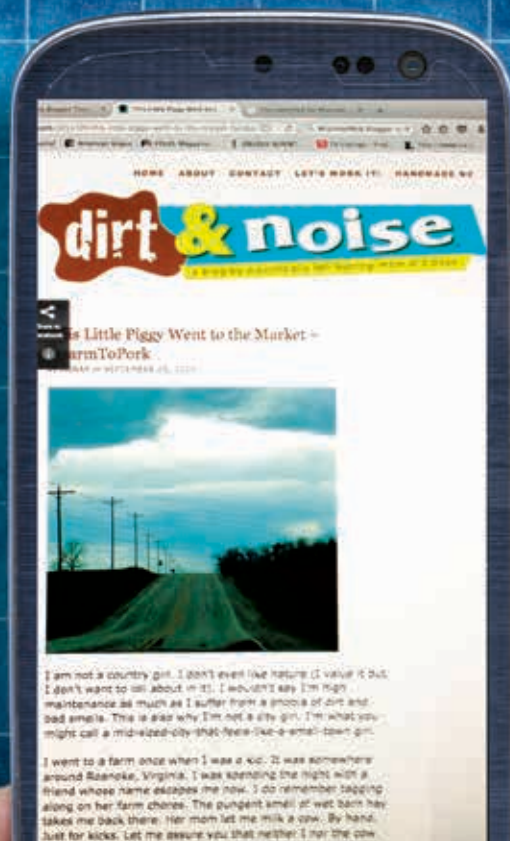


A Lesson in Transparency

Twelve female bloggers were invited on a very unique — and real — farm tour. What was the result?

by *Kindra Gordon*, field editor



What do real moms think when they visit a farm or a livestock processing plant? In September 2014, the American Agriculture Alliance initiated an event to find out. Working with the Pork Checkoff, the North Carolina Pork Council and the National Pork Producers Council, 12 “mommy bloggers” — many with an online following tallying a million visits to their blogs each month — were selected for the #FarmtoPork blogger tour, which revealed how pigs are raised — from insemination on a sow farm to a nursery to a finishing facility and, finally, the processing plant at Smithfield Foods. Participants met with farmers, veterinarians, swine nutritionists, researchers and employees involved in every step from farm to pork.

Although the women did not visit any beef operations, this opportunity showcasing transparency in the livestock industry garnered overwhelmingly positive results. It offers lessons that can be applied to other livestock sectors, as well.

At the American Ag Alliance Summit hosted in Kansas City in May 2015, two of the blogger participants, Ilina Ewen and Lisa Frame, shared how their experiences affected their views of American agriculture — and piqued their interest to visit more “real” farms in the future. Ewen’s blog is called *Dirt & Noise*; Frame’s is *A Daily Pinch*.

Ilina Ewen’s view

On taking food for granted: “Food, in this country, if you’re of a certain means, is something we take for granted. Experiencing the pig farm tour and, most recently, something similar I did with chickens, it has cemented this mind-set for me,” Ewen shared.

“I’m a home cook,” she continued. “We sit at our table every night. My children set the table. We have cloth napkins. We turn off the screens, and we sit down and have family dinner. That is what I hope to be my legacy when my children raise children of their own.

“So food is something that I take very seriously in my life, and I am admittedly a recovering food elitist. This experience changed me, and it made me value our food system in ways that I have taken for granted for my whole life, because I have never wanted for anything.”

On farmer’s integrity: “To meet the people who care so deeply about what they do for a living and to be with farmers and their families and to meet their children, who will take over their farms, is something most of us can’t say about our professions. . . . I think that the passion that’s demonstrated in agriculture is unparalleled in any industry,” Ewen said after her experience.

“We met farmers who’ve been farming their family land since the 1600s. That’s

How did blog readers respond?

While not required to do so, after their #FarmtoPork tour experiences, the bloggers had the choice to blog about their experience if they wanted. Many did, and the posts from the participants resulted in more than 20 million impressions, which represents people who saw the content. This included Facebook posts, Tweets, pictures on Instagram and blog posts.

As a result, the bloggers also got some interesting feedback. At her blog *A Daily Pinch*, Lisa Frame says feedback was largely positive. She tells, “I’ve not lost any subscribers. I keep a pretty good firm handle on that. I’ve added a few since then.”

Frame says what was interesting is that her blog posts generated a lot of questions offline or through private messaging on Facebook. She’s also had invitations to private food groups on Facebook, as well as had national media from food magazines contact her and ask for her thoughts on the industry.

Frame says, “These are the crème de la crème, and they are talking about the industry. So it’s good to be in there and get their

pretty remarkable,” she noted. “To me, it was a privilege to visit these people, to intimately see their worlds, to ask questions. They laid it out there for us. There was no corporate spinning. I write corporate spinning for my clients. I can spot corporate spinning. I knew that they were being earnest and open.”

On slaughter: Ewen said that when it was time for the tour to visit the kill floor, each blogger had the option to not go.

“We all could opt out and say, ‘I don’t want to see this,’ and not one of us opted out of that experience,” she shared. “It’s a privilege to see where our food comes from.”

On insight gained: Ewen concluded, “We’re far-removed from the people who grow our food, who are responsible for food safety. Food safety is something we take for granted in this country. I didn’t know food science was even something you could study until I married a man who went to the University of Wisconsin. ... I had never been to a farm until we went on this pig tour. ...

“If you can take someone like me who, like I said, I’m a recovering food elitist, and you could sway my thinking, I think that opens up an opportunity to a whole new level of moms and dads who are making food choices for their children and talking about food from how it brings families together, how it teaches our children about cultures, how it teaches our children about our economy, our nation. All of these things are really vital in our food system.”

She emphasized, “If I hadn’t been able to see it firsthand, I wouldn’t be armed with the knowledge I have. So when I have activist friends spouting off whatever they’ve read on Facebook, I can always retort with, ‘I’ve seen it firsthand.’ I’m at least now making an educated decision. I’m making choices based on what I’ve seen

perspective and see what they’re saying and get their feedback to use it on my own, and to give them feedback as well when I see anything where they might have a negative about the industry.”

Ilna Ewen reports that her experience after her blog posts from the tour has been less positive. She says, “I get a lot of flak for being a sellout. I write a lot about different controversial issues. So I’m used to hate mail, and I don’t really care.”

She says she has also received a lot of private messages, but adds, “Mostly I’ve been able to turn what’s negative into something. I’ve either been able to diffuse it or turn it positive, and I go back to the fact that I can say I’ve seen it with my own eyes. So I’m making decisions and choices based on what I have experienced. That usually shuts people up.”

As a side note, Ewen says her husband is happy about what she learned from the farm tour. She explains, “Because now I can spend less money on cuts of meat and choices than I was 10 months ago, and I know that it’s the same quality and taste.”

Learn more about the bloggers who participated

Iowa pork producer and food blogger Cristen Clark was also among the dozen women on the tour. Her role was to answer any questions that the other women might have. Of the experience Clark wrote, “The thing that I witnessed from all the bloggers was how much they really respect the caretakers of the land and the livestock. ... It showed when they came out of the farrowing barn and then again when they were so attentive during the environmental portion of the tour.”

Clark blogs at FoodandSwine.com. The remaining tour participants included:

#FarmToPork Participants

Ilna Ewen, North Carolina
Lisa Frame, North Carolina
Jamie Harrington, Texas
Rachael Herrscher, Utah
Isabel Laessig, Florida
Thien-Kim Lam, Maryland
Kelly Pugliano, New York
Amy Roskelley, Utah
Carmen Stacier, Virginia
Gina von Esmarch, California
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and experienced and people I’ve talked to. I’ve done my own due diligence. You’re not going to invite [all of] America onto your farms, but to leverage people like me and Lisa, who can use our voices, I think is a huge opportunity for you to celebrate what you’re doing.”

Ewen said overall she believes there is a need to focus more on the faces behind the people growing our food.

She concluded, “We owe it to ourselves to really think about our food source and access to food, not only for people like me who can afford what I want, but feeding children who didn’t draw the same lot in life that my kids drew. So I think that’s something huge that you guys (farmers) are doing to feed our kids and providing nourishment.”

Lisa Frame’s view

On reconnecting:

Frame noted that her great-grandfather was a farmer, her great-uncle moved to the family farm, and two cousins recently returned to the family farm.

Of this tour

experience and revisiting farm life, Frame said, “For me, as someone who is looking at the fishbowl, and all of you are in the fishbowl, I was also a skeptic and an elitist before I went on this trip. What this trip did was it opened the eyes, and it really got me back to looking at where I came from, from where my family came from, where my family still is. I’m looking at the roots they planted many, many years ago.”

On making changes: Frame said the tour truly changed her purchasing habits, and she has been able to influence the purchasing habits of family members and friends.

“I have people who are picking up the phone and calling me,” she said. “They’re in the grocery store, and they’re like, ‘This chicken is huge,’ or, ‘This piece of pork is huge. Is it okay to buy it?’ I’m like, ‘Yes, it’s okay. It is safe. It is great.’ We learned that because you opened your doors.”

Frame said it was important that the tour let them see everything as that helped them learn and set aside their own personal biases.

“That was a big thing for us,” she said. “We had to set aside any personal bias that we had about your industry because we watched the movies. We’ve read the books. We, in our own lives every day, we see the activists. We follow what they’re doing. We see news rolling across our Facebook feeds. We see bad information. We see bad science. ... This tour has given me the opportunity to open up and tell the stories of you.”

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On what made the biggest impact:

Visiting the breeder facility as the sows were giving birth was the most impactful to Frame, she said.

“The people that were looking over the sows and the piglets, they were genuinely as invested in them as they would be their own children,” she explained. “This is not something you can fake — the pride and the adoration and the love that they showed for these animals and the enjoyment they get of coming to work every day to make sure that they are well taken care of and that their needs are being met. It came across for us at all levels.”

On slaughter: Frame shared that she toured a traditional kill floor many years ago, but on this tour, the new processes in place to ensure humane animal treatment impressed her.

“They were giving them a little gas to put them to sleep and then bleeding them,” she explained. “For me, I was like, ‘You know what? That’s brilliant.’ That’s such a great job that the industry is doing, because if you’re looking at it in a family of hunters, you don’t want adrenaline rushing through the meat

“We owe it to ourselves to really think about our food source and access to food, not only for people like me who can afford what I want, but feeding children who didn’t draw the same lot in life that my kids drew.”

— *Ilina Ewen*

if they were scared or excited, because that ruins the meat. So for me, when I’m looking at the pork industry, they give them a little gas. They go to sleep. Chicken industry, they give them a belly rub and a back rub before they go in. So they’re soothing them, and they’re calming them. I think that was the big thing for me.”

Interested in more tours

For the future, both women indicated they’d like to continue to visit farms.

Said Ewen, “I think that I would be curious to see what happens with beef and turkeys and ducks and produce. I kind of want to see it all. . . . What I hope to do is to continue to be a voice for our food systems and access to food and food security and all of those things that are intertwined.”

For her two sons, who are 9 and 11, she added, “One of the things I would love to be able to do with them is show them a farm. I’ve been to pig farms, chicken farms and cotton farms recently. Every time I’m in those places, I think ‘I really want my kids to see this.’ They don’t learn about these things in school anymore. . . . I would love to have some kind of a program where parents and kids get to do this together. I think that would be brilliant. It’s a huge missed opportunity, not only economically, because they’re our future consumers, but they’re also our future advocates.”



Editor’s Note: *Kindra Gordon is a freelance writer and cattlemaster from Whitewood, S.D.*