

Animals at ELLA: A Great Course with a Terrific Professor

Jan McGregor

A small group of ELLA students were lucky this year to sign up for a new course: Animal Agriculture, taught by U of A's Frank Robinson. None of us knew what we were getting into; even though quite a few of us had lived for years on "olden-days" farms, we were all quite surprised that we had lived so long in such complete ignorance of how animal agriculture has changed in the last decade or so. And so many changes for the better! Better for the animals and better for the people who drink milk, eat meat, or enjoy bacon and eggs for breakfast.

Frank describes himself as a chicken gynaecologist...and he has a wealth of fascinating facts and amusing anecdotes that go along with the job. For example, why should you store eggs big-end-up? Why are eggs so spotlessly clean – straight from the chicken? What is the dirtiest job in Canada?? Can you just picture being a turkey artificial inseminator?? We won't go into details on that one!

Every day had surprises, starting on day one with a table of gift-wrapped presents on the first day of class. We each happily chose one, opened it, then were mystified. You guessed it...we had to figure out what our gift was and explain its use to the class. How many of you know what a ewe-spoon is?

Then we had two field trips to the U of A farm at south campus. What an amazing resource and center for world-renowned research right within our city! We had one day with chickens, hugging rare breeds, learning how eggs are sorted, seeing the so much more humane housing for laying hens that is now in widespread use, learning that all commercially raised broilers in Canada are now free-run and subject to welfare audits several times a year, seeing examples of how modern chickens are so incredibly feed efficient. The modernization, biosecurity and use of computers to raise and process happy and contented chickens is so impressive!



The next trip was to the pig barn to see where our bacon comes from and learn why three weeks in a spotless farrowing crate saves the lives of thousands of adorable and happy little piglets. And then over to the dairy barn to pat calves and Holstein

cows and see how research is done with feed rations and milk collection that can be individually tailored for each cow, yet give them the freedom to go outside with their buddies every day.



We looked at myths... about “antibiotic free” (all meat sold in Canada) vs “raised without the use of antibiotics” (would you qualify? Did you enjoy an ear ache as a child?), backyard chickens (and avian flu and salmonella), why dairy cows in the US die at age three while Canadian cows are happy and healthy to eight or nine. We also looked at politics...about supply management, US government subsidies, dairy

quotas, about price swings in pork production, why American milk doesn't meet Canadian health standards, but it can be imported on a pizza....

A fascinating course about what we eat every day! Sign up early next year.