

How she pulled up stakes and became a butcher

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Heather Marold Thomason was a graphic designer in her early 30s, running a firm in Brooklyn with her husband, Brad, when she “took a flying leap off of a career cliff” to become a butcher. After an internship six years ago in central Pennsylvania, followed by a job at the Local Butcher Shop in Berkeley, Calif., she moved to Philadelphia in 2014 to help open the butcher counter at Kensington Quarters in Fishtown, which started as a butcher shop/restaurant but gave up the retail business a year later. With coworker Cecilie May, Thomason left to create Primal Supply. It’s not a butcher shop. Thomason contracts with local farmers and slaughterhouses to bring locally sourced, traceable, sustainable meats to chefs such as Matt Buehler at Vetri Cucina, George Sabatino at Aldine, John Patterson at Fork and High Street on Market, Andrew Wood at Russet, and Bill Braun at Tired Hands. Home cooks can pick up weekly “butcher’s club” CSA orders at a few locations. Final cutting and packaging are done at a USDA-inspected plant in Southwest Philadelphia shared with 1732 Meats.

You quit a career to become a butcher?

Food was just definitely the other thing in my life. I spent my 20s being a professional dinner party host, and we were members of a food co-op and a CSA, and we went to the farmers’ market every weekend. I befriended some farmers and started to learn about the broken supply chain for small local livestock producers trying to raise meat, get it legally slaughtered and processed for sale, and then hustling it out of frozen coolers at the farmers’ market.

In 2011 or so, I started thinking, “This is not the work that inspires me anymore.” I was spending all of my energy and time investing in local foods, buying through a food co-op and farmers. Fleishers opened a butcher shop in my neighborhood in Brooklyn, and the business side of me saw the need that that business filled. I figured that if I could just learn this trade, then maybe I could figure out how to have a place in this food economy that I was already a part of and be a restorative link in the supply chain for pastured meat.

How did you learn?

The short story is that I left my house in Brooklyn and drove 3½ hours to Newport, Pa., and spent the day with Brooks Miller at North Mountain Pastures. They needed another apprentice for the season. He said, “Well, you’d have to move here and you’d need to be here full time from April until the end of the harvest season at Thanksgiving, and we all take one weekend off a month, and that’s it.”

By the time I drove home to Brooklyn, I walked in the door and was like, “So, guess what I’m going to do?” I just knew it was the thing. I have a really supportive husband. We’ve been married for 12½ years. I took our car, and I left Brad and our dog and our design business and I moved there. It was great. I learned so much about farming and sustainable farming, livestock farming, all the things that I base my sourcing practices on now. It toughened me up and made me realize that I could definitely do this work.

How did Primal get started?

At Kensington Quarters, I started working directly with all these farmers and slaughterhouses to bring all the meat in for the butcher shop and restaurant. Cecilie and I were running the butcher counter and [chef] Damon [Menapace] was in the kitchen. Everybody saw us cutting meat and cooking meat, and it’s so much logistics and coordination and refrigerated trucking, and all these things. Chefs started showing up at the counter and asking me, “How are you doing that? Can you help me?”

You can't really wholesale out of a retail shop. We also started talking about the idea that the work I was doing was actually scalable, and I could serve the city rather than just one restaurant and one small community butcher shop. Also, we had customers at the counter who were always coming in and saying, "Oh, I wish you'd deliver to other neighborhoods. It's so hard to get to Fishtown." Nick [Macri] opened La Divisa [at Reading Terminal Market] about a year after we opened, but there was otherwise no game in town for this product and level of service, and fresh meat, not frozen.

Are you competitive on price?

There is a value to this product that is all the input the farmers put into it, the cost of moving it within a local supply chain, our labor and all that. You get what you pay for. It is not an inexpensive product, but for what it is, for being traceable, pasture grass-fed beef from local farmers, I think we're pretty competitive. For someone who cares about where the meat came from — the Whole Foods shopper, the small business supporter — I think our prices are competitive with Whole Foods.

Can Primal get too big?

Yes and no. I'm really conscious of that. I think that being too big would be starting to get greedy about how much product we can buy and sell and trying to move outside of that market, and it would just also dilute the purpose of what we're trying to do. I mean, really at heart, what I'm doing is working to build up a supply chain in the region that supports farmers, and to then establish a market within the city that supplies eaters. Whether that's selling directly to home consumers or putting the meat in the hands of the chefs who have infinitely more reach than we do ... I crunch a lot of numbers. I have about 12 farmers in my network now. I have lots of others that want to be in our network and are kind of on deck. So the supply is pretty solid and growing, and I'm always ahead of that.

I think for our next move, we're going to grow into our own facility so that we can just be more efficient about our work and have a retail market where we can sell more. Right now, I buy three [cows] a week. I'm about to tip the scale to four as soon as I close a few little loops in how we use things. Cecilie and I believe that what makes us special is that our business is built on relationships. I sit at my farmers' kitchen tables, I stand in the back of the restaurants and I talk to chefs, I understand their menus and how they cook, and I consult them on things and I ask them how it's working and when it isn't, we change it.

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