
WHAT'S IN SEASON

BY WENDY WASSERMAN

HERITAGE TURKEYS

An Unconventional Tradition

Ode to the food holidays of autumn and winter—when eating becomes an endurance test! First comes Halloween, then Election Day (I usually ponder politics over a pint of ice cream), National Homemade Bread Day (Nov. 17), National Chocolate-Covered Anything Day (Dec. 16), and then Hanukkah, Christmas, Kwanza and New Years. But the mother of all American food holidays is, of course, Thanksgiving.

When thinking about Thanksgiving, think about Iowa's turkey story. Iowa is among the top states for turkey production, but most of the birds are conventionally raised in coops where some of a turkey's favorite pastimes, roosting up high and pecking at fresh bugs and grass, are not encouraged. Iowa is also one of the greatest states for wild turkey hunting, where success rates for hunters are considered some of the nation's best. Most of these birds are descendants of flocks that were reintroduced to the wild by the Department of Natural Resources in the 1960s.

On the other hand, there is a cluster of poultry farms that raise heritage turkeys with an all-natural diet of bugs and grass, plus room to strut and roost. When that fateful day in November rolls around, these birds are long on tasty dark meat with thick, meaty thighs.

Tom Wahl and Kathy Dice start thinking about this every spring. Tom and Kathy are the owners and operators of Red Fern Farms, a sweet spot tucked along a gravel road in Wapello, about 25 miles southwest of Muscatine. Here, in addition to maintaining a fertile grove of chestnut trees (which they harvest as part of the Southeast Iowa Nutgrowers Association), pawpaws and persimmons, Tom and Kathy raise goats, broiler chickens and turkeys.

The turkeys that Tom and Kathy raise aren't the big-breasted white birds that end up on super market shelves and over 99 percent of Thanksgiving tables across the country. Red Fern Farm turkeys are the svelte dancer-like Narragansetts and waddling American Bronze turkeys—two heritage turkey lines bred from a long line of prized turkey progeny. In June, Tom and Kathy get their poult (turkey chicks) directly from a hatchery when the hatchlings are no older than 4 days. They are carefully and lovingly raised on a turkey's delight of fresh pasture, tasty crickets and plump grasshoppers. Tom and Kathy diligently rotate their grazing grounds, protect them from coyotes and do whatever else needs to be done to make sure they are happy.

There are eight heritage turkey varieties raised in this country: Standard Bronze, Narragansett, Bourbon Red, Jersey Buff, Blue

Slate, White Holland, Beltsville Small White and Royal Palm. They are all descendants of original breeds that were once plentiful throughout North America. Many heritage species were originally crosses between regional varieties of wild turkeys and domesticated birds, which makes sense because turkeys are one of the few animal breeds that originated in North America that have

since been domesticated. Despite their once plentiful numbers, these breeds were once on the verge of extinction and now are raised mostly on small family farms that have an interest in preserving food traditions.

Saving heritage breeds and the social, cultural and economic history that comes with these food traditions is one of the main missions of Slow Food's Ark of Taste project. Slow Food is an international organization dedicated to preserving food traditions and the communities that rely on them across North America and the world. Slow

Food's Ark USA is a list of all sorts of foodstuffs that have helped form America's history: from fruits and vegetables, cured meats, cheese, cereals, pastas, cakes, confectionery to, of course, heritage turkeys. Farmers who raise these breeds are also recognized for their dedication to food and cultural history.

Patrick Martins, former Slow Food USA director and co-founder Heritage Foods USA, called Iowa poultry farmer Henry Miller eight years ago in Kalona, about 15 miles south of Iowa City. Martins recognized Miller's dedication to the fine craft of farming and his concern for poultry, and convinced him to expand his poultry flock to include four breeds of heritage turkeys. Now, in addition to his chickens, Miller also raises a variety of heritage turkeys and is recognized by Slow Food USA as a farmer dedicated to preserving endangered poultry breeds. Like Red Fern Farms, Miller gets his birds direct from a hatchery when they are merely days old and raises them on free range pasture, without antibiotics.

Together, farmers like Tom Wahl, Kathy Dice and Henry Miller are carefully bringing back breeds once on the verge of extinction by creating a market demand. They are not alone, according to Heritage Foods USA, which specializes in heritage breeds of meat and vegetables. Until recently, there were fewer than 500 farmers raising heritage breeds; now that number is nearly 5,000. Each farmer might not have more than a dozen or two birds, but as market demand increases, so will their flocks.

So add the heritage turkey to your own Thanksgiving traditions. You can help preserve a bird, even if you don't take time out for National Homemade Bread Day.



A proud American Bronze Tom shows his colors.

TURKEY TIPS

Tips

Heritage turkeys are best purchased directly from the breeder, and you will probably need to add picking it up to your pre-Thanksgiving rounds. When you think about the size, include a few extra pounds to account for the weight of the feathers, bones and giblets. The breeder will process the birds and remove these extras for you, but if you want the giblets, say so. If you missed your chance this year, tell the breeder you are interested in a bird for next year. This will give him an idea of how many birds to prepare for.

To order

Red Fern Farm
Tom Wahl & Kathy Dice
13882 I Street
Wapello, IA 52635
(319) 729-5905
redfernfarms@lisco.com

Miller Farm
Henry & Ila Miller
1012 Juniper Ave
Kalona, IA 52247-9117
(319) 656-3518

Cooking Heritage Turkeys

When cooking a heritage bird, be aware that these turkeys take, on average, about 10 percent less time to cook than their conventional counterparts. Start them off at 425–450 degrees covered in parchment paper (not foil). The bird needs to reach an internal temperature of 140–150 degrees to be done, and the parchment paper should be removed at least 30 minutes before that time. You will also need to stay on top of basting to keep the bird moist.

For additional heritage turkey cooking tips, go to www.localharvest.org/features/cooking-turkeys.jsp

To Learn More

For more information about heritage breeds and their conservation, see:
www.slowfoodusa.org
www.heritagefoodsusa.com
www.albc-usa.org



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