

Many turn to heritage bird for authentic Thanksgiving

NATALIE JACEWICZ 6:02 p.m. PST November 23, 2015



(Photo: Provided)

Martin Aguirre, 15, faced the same debate many Americans do the week of Thanksgiving. Three days before the feast, he puzzled with his family over a grocery store's banquet of turkeys and wondered which plastic-wrapped bird to pick.

"I look for natural, no added hormones," he said, as he pressed his fingers against a candidate bird at the Safeway on North Main Street in Salinas. "I'm pretty sure those things are unhealthy."

He need not worry about hormones — despite labels vaunting "hormone-free" birds, federal law prohibits hormones in all turkeys. But many Americans are deepening their search for "natural." For an authentic Thanksgiving taste, they turn to their ancestors.

Today's turkey is a long trot away from the one American Indians and Pilgrims knew.

"The turkeys that have been selected by the industry are ... very, very different from a heritage bird," said Alexes McLaughlin, director of marketing for Heritage Foods USA, an organization that promotes conserving ancestral foods. "When the dollar is your only goal, you end up sacrificing flavor."

She explained that European colonists brought turkeys from Central America back to Europe centuries ago, where they developed multiple breeds of the bird. They returned to the Americas with these breeds and then re-crossed them with wild turkeys, creating a bounty of turkey varieties: Narragansett, Bourbon Red and American Bronze, to name a few.

Unlike today's big-breasted, snow-white turkeys, these darker progenitors could run, fly and mate. Their increased activity gave them meatier thighs, and McLaughlin says their fat made them more flavorful. But they also required more time to grow and pastures to roam. In the 1950s, the commercial turkey industry began using artificial insemination to select for fast growth and large breasts, which maximized production but endangered heirloom strains.

McLaughlin said Americans have lost more than flavor.

"Biodiversity is important for a safe food supply," she said.

Modern-day turkeys raised in close quarters are more susceptible to diseases like the avian flu that claimed 8 million turkeys earlier this year.

Some farmers are reintroducing the old birds to the public that once loved them.

Mary Pitman, of Mary's Free Range Turkeys near Fresno, breeds heritage turkeys, among them, Narragansetts. According to Heritage Foods USA, American Narragansett turkeys number fewer than 1,000. But their popularity is growing. Cook's Illustrated recently rated Pitman's turkeys the country's tastiest heritage birds.

"Everyone's on a heritage turkey hunt right now," Pitman said. "There are only a very few left in the valley, maybe in some of the Save Mart stores."

She raises her turkeys on pasture where they can eat worms and grass and grow for seven months, roughly twice as long as non-heritage birds. They run, fly and mate naturally, special treatment funded by consumers. Instead of \$2 to \$4 per pound — the price of a normal turkey — heritage turkeys could command \$6 to \$8. Pitman sold more than 4,000 heritage turkeys this year.

The heritage craze means that Pitman's family will have no heritage bird for themselves this Thanksgiving, opting instead for the farm's organic, non-heritage variety.

"It's not that one is better than the other," Pitman said. "It depends on what you prefer."

She recommends non-heritage turkeys for white meat lovers, and heritage for dark meat fans. Because heritage turkeys have smaller breasts, she advises a shorter cooking time to avoid drying them out.

McLaughlin also has some advice for those who missed out on heritage turkeys this Thanksgiving.

"Plan ahead and order ahead of time."

The government does not regulate the term "heritage," she explained, so consumers should research their purchase to support farmers breeding true heritage birds.

"It costs a lot to raise them," but she said the investment pays off. "They're a worthwhile contribution to our food system and ecosystem."

Read or Share this story: <http://bit.ly/1HjhQai>



TOP VIDEOS



MORE STORIES



5 California Things to Know for Today (</story/life/my-free-time/2015/12/03/5-california-things-know-today/76718102/>)

</story/life/my-free-time/2015/12/03/5-california-things-know-today/76718102/> Dec. 3, 2015, 7:52 a.m.

</story/life/my-free-time/2015/12/03/5-california-things-know-today/76718102/>



Salinas Valley weather

</story/life/my-free-time/2015/12/03/salinas-valley-weather/76717938/>

</story/life/my-free-time/2015/12/03/salinas-valley-weather/76717938/>

Dec. 3, 2015, 7:49 a.m.



'Tis the Season (</story/life/my-free-time/2015/11/19/tis-season/75980984/>)

Dec. 3, 2015, 7:42 a.m.

</story/life/my-free-time/2015/11/19/tis-season/75980984/>

Unique Wedding Invites



weddingpaperdivas.com

New Stunning 2016 Collection. The Leaders in Wedding Stationery!