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Bringing Heritage Turkeys Back to the Thanksgiving Table

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Turkey is a common sight on Thanksgiving. (Photo credit: Photodisc/Getty Images)

The centerpiece of many Thanksgiving dinners in the United States is a roasted turkey. According to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), it is expected that over 240 million broad-breasted white turkeys—the standard turkey found in your local supermarket—will be raised in the United States. This Thanksgiving alone, according to the National Turkey Federation, it is estimated that Americans will consume more than 46 million turkeys. However, a growing number of small-scale poultry producers across the United States are eschewing modern industrial farming practices and instead are raising unique and rare breeds of turkeys that have been around since the very first Thanksgiving feast in 1621.

An Introduction to Heritage Turkeys

According to the Heritage Turkey Foundation, heritage turkeys were originally bred for fine flavor, beauty, and thriftiness, a quality that referred to the amount of meat produced from the quantity of food fed to the turkey. Turkeys are a quintessential American food—all domesticated turkeys in the United States are descendants of wild turkeys native to North and South America.

There are three criteria a turkey must meet to qualify as a heritage turkey, according to the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy (ALBC). These qualities include the following:

- The turkeys must reproduce naturally by mating. In order to qualify as a heritage turkey, the turkey must be the result of naturally mating pairs of both grandparent and parent stock.
- The turkeys must have a long productive outdoor lifespan. Breeding hens must be productive for five to seven years. Breeding toms must be productive for three to five years. It is imperative that the turkeys have the genetic ability to withstand the rigors of living outdoors.
- The turkeys must have a slow, natural growth rate. The birds should reach marketable weight in about 28 weeks. This long period of growth lets the birds develop strong skeletal structures and healthy organs prior to putting on muscle mass.

There are a number of different breeds of heritage turkeys. Many of the turkeys were originally bred for qualities such as productivity or specific color patterns. Among the breeds that are named by the American Poultry Association as standard breeds are Black, Bronze, Narragansett, White Holland, Slate, Bourbon Red, Beltsville Small White, and Royal Palm. Two other popular varieties of heritage turkeys include the Jersey Buff and White Midget.



This male turkey (commonly called a 'tom') is an example of the Bourbon Red heritage breed. (Photo credit: Keith J Smith/Alamy)

Over the past ten years, populations of heritage breeds of turkeys have been on the rise. According to Marjorie Bender, ALBC research and technical program director, in 1997 there were 1328 breeder birds; just five years ago, that number had grown to 10,404 breeder birds. Though most heritage turkey breeds are still endangered, their populations are much more secure than they were over a decade ago.

Comparing Heritage Turkeys to Standard Turkeys

What makes heritage turkeys different from the standard turkeys you might find in your local supermarket? The standard turkey you most often find in the supermarket is a breed called the broad-breasted white turkey. These turkeys have been bred to provide a large amount of breast meat. Because of their abnormally large breast-size, the turkeys are unable to reproduce naturally. Instead, artificial insemination is necessary. Without human intervention, these turkeys would go extinct after just one generation.

In addition, while heritage turkeys must be free to roam, most broad-breasted white turkeys are raised in confined conditions. Due to these confined conditions, the turkeys are given antibiotics and other supplements to prevent the spread of disease. Heritage turkeys are certified antibiotic-free. The diets of both types of birds are also different. Since heritage turkeys are allowed to roam freely in the outdoors, they feed on a natural diet of insects, seeds, and grasses. Industrial turkeys are fed a steady diet of grains. According to research conducted by the USDA Sustainable Agriculture and Research Education Program, meat from turkeys that spent some portion of their lifetime outside had 21 percent less total fat, 30 percent less saturated fat, 28 percent fewer calories, 50 percent more vitamin A and 100 percent more omega-3 fatty acids.

One of the biggest differences between a standard turkey and a heritage turkey is the length of time it takes for each to reach maturity. Standard turkeys reach an average weight of 32 pounds over a period of 18 weeks. This length of time to maturity is 10 weeks earlier than it takes for heritage turkeys to reach maturity. To put this value into perspective, a market-ready standard turkey is the equivalent of an 11-year-old child weighing 300 pounds.

Drawbacks and a Look to the Future



Over 99 percent of the turkeys raised in the United States are of the broad-breasted white variety. (Photo credit: INSADCO Photography/Alamy)

expensive.

One of the benefits of industrially-raised turkeys is their low cost in the marketplace. Raising a large amount of turkeys in a small space under standardized conditions lets producers sell them at the supermarket for a lower price. Because heritage turkeys require more space and take longer to grow to maturity, they are more expensive to raise. This added expense is passed on to the consumer. Compared to a standard supermarket turkey, heritage turkeys are often exponentially more expensive.

Because most heritage turkeys are produced by small-scale farms, they are often fairly difficult to procure. Most heritage turkeys are accounted for long before the Thanksgiving holiday. Although the production of heritage turkeys remains a niche industry, a growing interest in organic and sustainably-produced food products is helping to bring the breeds to the forefront. Without the farmers' intervention, many of the breeds of heritage turkeys would go extinct. By continuing to raise these rare and unique breeds of turkeys, poultry farmers help to maintain the genetic diversity of turkey species.

"Endangered breeds are a significant part of biological diversity in agriculture," Ms. Bender said. "These breeds are important to conserve because they provide options for the future. Agriculture will change, [and] the animals will be able to meet the new demands only if we assure their survival."

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- [Definition of a Heritage Turkey](#)
- [American Livestock Breeds Conservancy](#)
- [Heritage Turkey Foundation](#)
- [National Turkey Federation](#)
- [Thanksgiving Day Facts](#)

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