

Why you should order your Suffolk Christmas turkey now

It might only be September, but some shops have already started teasing the festive period – with a number of food suppliers already fully in the Christmas spirit this year. And boy, does it look to be a busy one.

Food producers and suppliers up and down the country are having to plan ahead even earlier for this year's festive season – contending with issues such as Brexit, the ongoing pandemic, and a recent gas shortage.

One of Suffolk's biggest turkey farms, Turnbull Turkeys, is based in the heart of the Suffolk countryside. A family affair, the farm has proudly been producing traditional Christmas turkeys and chickens for over 60 years.

But Alistair Turnbull, who runs the farm with his wife Julie, has already noticed an influx in inquiries ahead of December 25 due to the news surrounding food shortages.

"We've already had more bookings this year, but as far as we're concerned, we've got a similar number of birds as we normally do," he explains.

"Last year was a very good year for us, as Covid meant more people stayed and ate at home. We actually ended up selling out of turkeys, and I think it could be the same this year."

But with this year's Christmas the first one since the UK officially left the EU, new rules on workers have meant farms across the country are struggling, as they may have previously relied on manual labour from the continent.

"I think generally in the turkey market this year, the biggest problem is the lack of workers from places such as Eastern Europe.

"Last year, we were very lucky ourselves to employ local labour to help us out, and that all went very well. But in the past we have relied on labour from Europe, as do a lot of other farms still. And

Local suppliers explain why planning this far ahead for your Christmas dinner is the best way to ensure your festive preparations go to plan, writes **Danielle Lett**

Brexit has really impacted that, as well many other industries."

With that in mind, and Christmas in the not-so-distant future, Alistair will once again be looking locally to source his workforce in order to help rear his free-range bronze and farm fresh white turkeys. And his advice for anyone looking to get their hands on a plump bird this year? Start thinking ahead now. Leave it too late, and you may end up disappointed.

"Order early to guarantee yourself a turkey. Buy British, and buy local. Certainly, with ourselves, we order these birds in February and we've had them on the farm since June, so we can't suddenly increase how many we have. What we've got is here – and once it's gone, it's gone. If there's one thing the last year and a half has taught us, it's to support your local businesses."

Over in south Suffolk, Lavenham Butchers' Greg Strolenberg is already planning for this year's festive season – with local supplies and rising import prices already causing headaches.

"We've got a good relationship with our farmers, but what I've just found out is that our Cambridgeshire supplier of English turkey breast has just closed up business. That's quite a big blow to us," he explains.

"We get all of our free-range birds from a local farmer in Suffolk – but a lot of people have turkey breasts or crown as it's

smaller. I think what you're going to find this year is there's going to be a lot of imported turkey breast coming through this year."

According to Greg, a lot of imported turkey meat comes in from countries such as Poland and Italy – but with the Brexit trade deal meaning no tariffs apply to food and goods traded between the UK and EU, price hikes are an incredibly likely possibility.

"Who knows what the situation will be in regards to Brexit? It'll be interesting to see how prices go up compared to last year. But across the board, everything is going up, even what they're advertising to pay lorry drivers.

With every container and every load, the cost will go up. It's a worrying situation, which will certainly have a knock-on effect. It's a tricky one as we've not been in this situation before."

If you do find yourself without a turkey this season, there are a number of alternatives that Greg recommends.

"We sell a lot of beef, pork, and venison around Christmas time. Regardless of what you want though, the best thing to do is to go to a butcher and put in an order now. Shop local and hopefully they'll look after you.

"Supporting local butchers ensures your future, as well as ours. By doing that, you're keeping the trade going, year on year, and you can keep getting those products. But if no one supports us, these businesses slowly disappear."



To freeze or not to freeze?

If you want to get ahead, and you've got a big enough freezer, then you could buy a frozen turkey now (or a fresh turkey and freeze it), ready for December 25. There is no difference in quality between a fresh and a frozen turkey. Make sure that you check the cooking instructions on the packaging well ahead of time. Some turkeys can be cooked from frozen if the manufacturer's instructions say so, but bear in mind it's quite likely that your turkey will have to be defrosted before

it goes into the oven. And if so, it needs to be defrosted thoroughly to avoid the risk of food poisoning. If the turkey is not fully defrosted, it might cook unevenly, which means that harmful bacteria can survive the cooking process. If your turkey is large it might take longer than you'd think to thaw out, so allow plenty of time. The Food Standards Agency say turkeys should be defrosted in the fridge rather than at room temperature. Make sure your fridge is set to 5C or lower – you can get a

fridge thermometer to check. A large turkey weighing 6-7kg could take up to four days to fully defrost in the fridge. If there are no instructions for defrosting your turkey on the packaging, you can work out how long it will take to thaw completely. The Food Standards Agency recommends allowing around 10-12 hours per kilo in a fridge. Always defrost your turkey in a container large enough to catch any juices to avoid cross-contamination with other food in your fridge.

Feature

Julie and Alistair Turnbull, of Turnbull Turkeys. Inset, Greg Strolenberg of Lavenham Butchers

Pictures: TURNBULL TURKEYS/GREGG BROWN



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