

East Coast consumers gobble up free-range turkey

Brett Bundale · SaltWire Business Writer | Posted: Dec. 16, 2019,



Joe Ebbett, owner of Ebbett's Meadow Brook Farms in Tatamagouche, is preparing for his busy season. - Eric Wynne

On a northern Nova Scotia farm, a gang of turkeys wobbles behind Joe Ebbett, pecking at the grain he tosses from a bucket. It rounds off a diet of fresh greens, seeds and insects.

The white-plumed birds move into a barn as the temperature drops – a shift that changes their free-range status to “specialty range.” But the farmer says allowing them to live longer ensures the freshest turkey for Christmas Day.

“People like the taste, the moisture,” says Ebbett, who runs Ebbett’s Meadow Brook Farm in Tatamagouche with his wife, Lorenda. “Once they try it, they often buy our turkey year after year.”

Few holiday traditions are as steadfast as turkey on Christmas. While glazed ham, roasted salmon or baked tofu might be classics to some, many festive meals are only complete once a golden-brown bird is served.

Last Christmas, Canadians gobbled up 2.4 million turkeys – nearly 40 per cent of all whole turkeys sold in 2018. Birds grown by large commercial producers – like those sold under the Butterball brand – continue to dominate sales. But consumers are increasingly seeking out free range, local and organic options.

Linda Little, a Nova Scotia author who raises a small rafter of turkeys on her farm near River John, says people often remark on the high quality and rich flavour of the meat.

But it's about more than taste, she says.

"These animals have been raised with a quality of life and a certain amount of respect for the fact that they are living beings," Little says. "People like to know where the turkey has been and what its life was like."

Indeed, Ebbett's Meadow Brook Farm, which sells turkey from a farm house on the property, has become an annual outing for many families.

"We have lots of people that come here from the city and make a day of it," Ebbett says. "You can hardly get through the yard here three days before Christmas."

Despite rising demand for turkey from small farms, some argue the turkey marketing board is an obstacle for smaller growers.

Turkey Farmers of Canada oversees the supply management system for turkey in Canada. The national agency allocates quota, controls imports, charges a production levy and sets minimum prices for turkey. Any farmer that wants to raise more than 25 turkeys must obtain a license from the organization to operate.

"There's a whole series of laws that have squeezed out small local abattoirs," Little says, pointing out that the market for local free-range turkey is different than for commercial poultry.

Steven Eadie, chairman of Turkey Farmers of Nova Scotia, says the rules are in place to protect both humans and turkeys.

"It's about protecting the consumer and animal welfare," he says. "If those birds get sick and die, it's a stain on the whole turkey industry."

Eadie says someone interested in raising free range turkeys can apply for a speciality license. They would then have their farm inspected to ensure it meets certain conditions.

"We don't want to hinder anyone but there are rules and regulations to follow," he says.

Within Atlantic Canada, only New Brunswick and Nova Scotia grow turkeys commercially.

Eadie, the co-owner of Greenwood Poultry Farm in Antigonish, says Nova Scotia only produces about four per cent of what's grown in Canada but eats the most turkey per capita.

Although he says free range turkey is still a niche market, Eadie agrees the demand is growing.

That's despite the fact that free range turkey from a local farm can cost three times the price of a commercial turkey.

Ebbett says while his turkeys don't gain weight as fast as other birds because they're "out running around," he receives a better return than commercial turkey farmers.

He charges about \$4 a pound at his farm, and other vendors charge about a dollar more. Yet the price doesn't seem to curb demand.

Kelly Currie, who works at the Mastown Butcher Shop, says she's received several calls a week since last month from shoppers looking to buy fresh turkey from Ebbett's farm for Christmas.

"People say the flavour is incredible and they don't seem concerned about the cost," she says. "With some of our turkeys, they're 20 pounds and it's \$4.99 a pound, so you're looking at \$90 for a turkey."

Compare that to a Butterball turkey in this week's Sobeys flyer at \$1.57 a pound, and it's clear that the demand for fresh, local, free range turkey is strong.

It's a trend the Nova Scotia government is hoping to bolster by helping retailers and suppliers better identify local products.

Agriculture Minister Keith Colwell said in an email that the department is promoting the buy local movement as a way to benefit the economy, environment and farmers.

He pointed out that there are many Nova Scotia-grown foods – beyond just turkey – that would enhance a traditional Christmas dinner such as turnips, sweet potatoes, potatoes, carrots and local dairy products.