

THIS LAND

HERITAGE

BY TONI K. THAYER | PHOTOS BY LAURA WATILO BLAKE



This year we were going to do things differently. I'd made the effort to find a good, locally raised turkey for Thanksgiving—a heritage one, even—a traditional, old-fashioned bird for our traditional, old-fashioned meal. I wanted to know how the turkey got to our table, to understand what it was we were grateful for. This became a quest to learn about the life of the bird at the center of our feast and the people who raise them.

On the drive to the farm my kids admitted they were a little apprehensive. "I'm not sure I want to meet a turkey if I know I'm going to eat it," my 9-year-old son said. My 11-year-old daughter expressed a fear that I think lurks for many modern meat eaters, "What if it's really cute and I like it?"

For most of my life turkey came wrapped in white plastic with a pop-up thermometer in its huge breast. I knew that grocery store bird (more formally known as a Broad-Breasted White) was different from the wild turkeys that sometimes wander up from the ravines of Forest Hills Park and disrupt traffic, gobbling loudly, in my corner of Cleveland Heights. The heritage breeds descended from them, but I didn't really know how.

The first lesson I learned is that you have to plan for a local turkey. Small farmers produce limited quantities, and or-

"So all our turkeys are pasture-raised, but they aren't all heritage. We do have true heritage turkeys—those take the longest. They're hardier, better foragers, and they have more flavor when you cook them," Cara explained. "We also have a flock of Broad-Breasted Whites. They've been bred to grow fast and have that big, plump breast. And then our biggest flock is Broad-Breasted Bronze, which is sort of in the middle."

Meeting the birds

The first thing you notice when you meet the turkeys is the sound. To call it a gobble isn't really accurate. It's much more varied and musical—more of a many-voiced warbling mutter. The second thing you notice is that the turkeys are excited you're there. They run toward you, the warbling mutter going up a notch in volume and in pitch. The toms puff up and fan out their tails in dramatic display.

The heritage turkey flock has a place of honor right behind the house. On one side of the fence is the Tipton kids' play equipment and on the other—120 warbly turkeys. A mix of varieties—Blue Slate, Bourbon Red, Heritage Bronze, maybe a few

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ders must be made in advance so demand can be balanced with supply. You have to find a farmer and order early. Beyond that, there's lingo to master. Organic? Pastured? Heritage? I needed to figure out exactly what I was talking about.

When Cara Tipton of Tea Hills Farms, a seventh-generation family operation tucked deep in Ashland County, explained that she and her husband, Jason, raise not just one, but three different flocks of turkey, each on its own pasture, I knew I had found someone who could show me a few things.

The family has been rooted here since the original parcel of Tea Hills was purchased with money brought back from the Gold Rush. Each generation has done something a little different, innovating to keep things afloat, from potatoes and sweet corn to dairy cows. Cara's father, Doug, went chemical-free in the early 90s, and soon after organic, when he grew tired of how often the vet needed to visit his dairy herd.

Now, they've revolved back to a diversified operation, which mirrors where they started. Tea Hills poultry was an early entrant into local farm-to-table dining; Chef Parker Bosley sourced chicken from Cara's successful high school Future Farmers of America project. These days they deliver poultry to restaurants and to farmers markets throughout the region.

These curious four-month-old heritage turkeys, will reach maturity around the age of eight months, just in time for the Thanksgiving holiday.

Eastern Wilds—they're as multi-colored as their names would indicate. My favorites were the Slates, dusty bluish gray mottled with white. My kids liked the iridescence and the impressive blue head of the Bronze and the Wild.

Active and curious, true heritage turkeys were developed in the 19th and early 20th centuries to be sturdy, resourceful foragers, easy to breed, and less aggressive than their wild counterparts. The American Poultry Association recognizes eight heritage varieties, while the Livestock Breeds Conservancy lists 12. Several of these varieties had nearly disappeared by the late 20th century, before enterprising small farmers and curious consumers brought them back to market. Heritage varieties have smaller breasts, sturdier bones, and darker meat overall than modern commercial hybrids.

They are also funny. "These guys have a lot of personality," Jason said. "We like seeing them out here every day. Sometimes they even come up to the house to let us know it's morning."

My daughter, who was worried that she would take a liking to one, took a liking to many. They made her laugh. My son tried to herd them like a sheep dog. These birds aren't just fed well (when they're not foraging, they get organic grain raised here and on other local farms) and given room to roam, they have a relationship with their keepers.





Facing page top: The turkeys flock to Jason Tipton as he dumps organic grain in the pasture. Lower left: Cara and Jason with their kids, Sophia, 4, and Carson, 2 (6-year-old Adalyn was at school when the photo was taken). Lower right: A hertiage bronze tom (adult male). This page, top: A few days before Thanksgiving, westsiders wait in line at Crocker Park to pick up their pre-ordered turkeys. Lower: Fresh turkey waits in the fridge to be prepared for the holiday dinner.



Above: Young Carson visits a goat standing guard over the Eastern wild turkey. Right: Sophia helps out in the in-house processing facility.

Although turkeys are only 20% of Tea Hill's whole operation, these goofy animals dominate the scene from April through November. The Broad-Breasted Bronze flock, all 400–500, has the most picturesque location, on five acres of partly wooded hillside overlooking the creek across the road. The Broad-Breasted Whites are pastured down the hill, where they can be spotted roosting in the trees.

Yes, big white turkeys in trees. These birds can fly, which is saying something about their quality of life. The average Broad-Breasted White likely could not fly, even if it had the space to do so. The commercial standard since the mid-20th century, bred for quick feed-to-meat conversion and valued for its extra-large breast (more white meat, please), they are ungainly, un-aerodynamic, and unable to reproduce naturally.

Also a commercial variety, but crossed with heritage, the Broad-Breasted Bronze looks more like the classic turkey of your imagination—dark-feathered and grandly plump, foraging among the trees, and guarded by goats. Yes, goats. This flock is more out of the way than the other two, more at risk from predators like foxes, hawks, and raccoons, which is one of the dangers of keeping free-ranging fowl.

"You can tell what killed them by what state the body is in," Cara explained to me. "Raccoons start at the breast. Possums at the tail end. Sometimes mink come up from the stream down there, and you can tell by the bite mark on the neck."

The turkey or the egg?

Once I met the turkey, and the turkey farmer, I wanted to find the egg, and the turkey hen that laid it. That took us to Eagle Nest Poultry, another 30 miles west in Ocala.

Bill Karcher started working with turkeys in high school before going on to study poultry science and agricultural education at The Ohio State University, but he didn't do anything with heritage breeds until 15 years ago, when Cara Tipton and other small farmers started inquiring about them.

"I started poking around and found some local folks who had

some pockets of them here and there, mostly for show," he told me. From those he developed his own small breeding flocks, selecting for color patterns, body size and composition, and laying capacity.

Karcher's birds spend the warm months on pasture, and those not selected to be bred, make their way to Thanksgiving tables. The breeders go inside for the winter, where lights simulate the spring sunshine prompting them to lay beginning in January and continuing until midsummer, when they return to pasture. Hens will lay for two years, after which most retire to be admired on the poultry show circuit.

It's a labor-intensive process that illustrates why large-scale farming has embraced the Broad-Breasted White. "Heritage hens are just not good layers," Karcher said.

One of his hens lays about 88 eggs per season, compared to a chicken that will lay more than 200 in the same time. On top of that, only 80% or so of the heritage eggs are fertile, compared to more than 90% for Broad-Breasted Whites. Yet, every year the demand goes up.

After hatching at Eagle Nest, the day-old heritage poults begin arriving at Tea Hills in April, with subsequent waves of quicker-growing Broad-Breasted birds. They take a lot of work. Each fluffy baby has to be taught to drink, one at a time, all 800 or more. They spend their first several weeks in the nursery under red warming lights in pens that have rounded sides so the poults don't get lost in the corners and crush one another.

From an early age, tufty and bald like tiny buzzards, they like to perch on the water tank or the feed trays, and eventually on the walls of the pen, and beyond. By 6 or 8 weeks of age, they are put outside in a protected pen and soon allowed to roam free, chasing grasshoppers and warble-muttering for up to five months until Turkey Week finally comes.

Slaughtering and processing more than 800 birds and getting them fresh to market all to be bought and prepared for the same important meal on the same day is a marathon experience that leaves everyone nearly too exhausted to have a feast of their own.

"It's just nonstop," Cara told me. "And then we have to get



them to pick-up day, which is fun, but also crazy.” One year bad roads meant all the turkeys fell off the shelves in the truck. “We opened the doors and there was a pyramid of turkeys.” They pack them in boxes now.

People line up early for pick-up. If the exact size is important you want to get there first. Whether Cara and Jason have enough birds that exactly fit the bill depends a lot on the weather and other uncontrollable circumstances. “Most people understand, but some can get really hung up on a pound. But the turkeys don’t grow to order,” Jason said.

It took several conversations before I finally asked if it was hard to process these birds they’ve spent so much time raising. Jason shrugged. “Sure. Kind of.” Cara hedged: “It’s different for the chickens. Look at them.” She gestured to a pen of fat hens. “They’re so big they won’t be able to walk around soon. But the turkeys, I know it’s what has to be done. They wouldn’t be here otherwise.”

But what does it taste like?

Finally, with my 9-pound bird in a box, it was time to cook. Cara thought I probably got one of the Blue Slates. Although we couldn’t know precisely which bird this was, my kids and I could picture its ilk quite clearly.

I quickly learned that there’s a ton of conflicting information about cooking heritage birds, and it all seems really fussy and fraught. Jason says customers are nervous about getting heritage birds for the first time. “They ask me, ‘Will it be gamey?’ I tell them, ‘No, it will be delicious!’ It’s not like it’s a wild bird that’s been hunted. Those might be gamey.”

The basic options each has its staunch defenders. If you are prone to following recipes this is confusing. Luckily, I’m not. I went with high-temperature roasting, which is my preferred method for most things in the oven lately. This meant the bird cooked quickly, which was convenient for having it ready for a cross town trip. I would bring my heritage bird. My mother-in-law would make a store-bought bird. We’d have a not-blind, totally unscientific taste test.

The only problem with this plan was that the high temperature seared off most of the pan juices. A cloud of smoke hung about the downstairs, and making gravy was tough. Still, after the smoke cleared, I cut into the crisp, golden skin and found dense, silky flesh inside.

At the table, the two meats were visibly different. Mine was darker in general; the breast meat held together more. My mother-in-law’s turkey was a commercial organic bird from a good shop near her house. It was prepared well, and it tasted great. Yet nearly everyone agreed the heritage bird was just simply better. It had a rich flavor with unusual, appealing herbal undertones. Would I have thought it had a hint of grass and sunshine if I hadn’t seen the birds on pasture? Regardless, it was juicy and tender, with a firmness to the tooth that is not what I associate with roasted turkey.


“Much less like shredded paper,” my son said bluntly.

Unexpected traditions

I asked my kids on the way home what they thought of meeting their meal now. My son summed it up, “When you know how that turkey lived, you feel pretty good about eating it.” He was silent for a moment. “I wish I could only eat pigs that I had chased around, too.”

“Are we going to go back again when the new turkeys come next year?” my daughter asked.

“Oh, yeah! We should,” her brother exclaimed. I’m pretty sure he’d like to hire on as a farm hand.

“At the end of the day, it’s the customers that make this worthwhile,” Jason told me. Cara agreed. “We get to know people at the market, and what they like. At Shaker Square, we have customers who I first knew as little kids with their parents. Now they’re grown up and they come to us. They know where the meat comes from. We’re their farmer.” She paused and smiled. “We get to be people’s farmer. Like, they have a doctor, a dentist, a mechanic,” she paused again. “And a farmer. That’s us!” 

ROAST TURKEY

By Michael Symon

- 1 12-pound fresh organic turkey**
- 1 halved lemon**
- 1 halved red onion**
- 1 bunch thyme**
- 4 cloves peeled garlic**
- 1 quartered bulb of fennel**
- 4 cups chicken stock**
- 1 pound butter**
- 1 large piece of cheesecloth**
- 2 tablespoons salt**

Remove innards from turkey and rinse inside and out. Place lemon, onion, herbs, stock, and butter in large pot and bring to simmer. Place cheesecloth in pot and simmer for 20 minutes. Strain liquid and reserve vegetables and herbs and let them cool. Stuff cooled vegetable mix in cavity of bird and place on roasting rack in pan breast side up. Cover bird with soaked cheesecloth, pour liquid in bottom of pan, and place in 350° oven for 2 hours. Open oven, remove cheesecloth, and baste with liquid. Raise temperature to 400° and continue to cook for 20 minutes or until golden brown. Remove turkey from oven and make sure leg and thigh are at 160° internal temperature. Let rest for 30 minutes, then carve and serve.

TURKEY TETRAZZINI SOUP

This is a mash-up recipe that came about as a result of my desire to combine two favorite leftover turkey dishes, because I didn't have enough leftover meat to make both. Essentially it is a creamy turkey noodle soup, with a few extras. Please note, my grandmother always put olives in her tetrazzini, something that I have come to understand is not necessarily part of the standard dish, which for many people includes peas. To me, olives are essential; peas are not. You get to choose.

Serves 4–5

For stock

- Turkey carcass, cleaned of leftover meat.**
- 2 onions, roughly chopped (leave the skin on; it adds color to the broth)**
- 3 carrots, roughly chopped (you can also throw a parsnip in, if you have one)**
- 2 stalks celery, roughly chopped**

Bay leaf

- 5 or 6 stalks of parsley**
- 1 teaspoon whole black peppercorns**

Salt

For soup

- 3 tablespoons butter**
- 1 medium onion, diced**
- 1 clove garlic, peeled and smashed but not cut**
- 2 carrots, diced (or substitute parsnips)**
- 2 stalks celery, diced**
- 2 cups sliced mushrooms**
- 2 tablespoons flour**
- 5 cups turkey stock**
- 2 cups leftover turkey meat (or what you have)**
- ¼ pound broken fettuccini noodles, cooked al dente**
- ½ cup grated parmesan cheese**
- ¼ cup sherry (or more to taste)**
- 1 cup half-and-half or heavy cream**
- 1 cup sliced black olives or frozen peas**

Salt and pepper to taste

For garnish

- Minced flat-leaf parsley**
- Grated parmesan**
- Toasted chopped or sliced almonds**

When you make your turkey stock you can roast your bones for extra flavor beforehand, if you have the time and energy. Roast at 450° for 25 minutes or so—bones will be brown and sizzling. Put bones in stockpot with the rest of the stock ingredients. Add cold water to cover (at least 8 cups). Bring just barely to boil then turn temperature to low so water rests just below a simmer. Skim any foam from the top. Allow to barely simmer (bubbles should only rarely break surface) for 3–4 hours. Taste for seasoning. Strain stock and set aside 5 cups for soup. Extra stock can be frozen in ice cube trays then popped out and stored in a freezer bag for easy portioning. Use it anytime you need chicken stock.

To make the soup, sauté onion, garlic, celery, carrot, and mushrooms in butter until soft. Add flour and stir until just barely golden. Stir and slowly add 1 cup warm broth. Once the butter-flour mixture has incorporated add the rest of the broth along with turkey meat. Fish out garlic and discard. Then add noodles, cheese, sherry, cream, and olives and stir. Simmer for another 5 minutes. Taste and adjust for seasoning. Serve in flat bowls topped with parsley, cheese, and almonds.



Where to Order Your Own Local Turkey

Brunty Farms

Turkeys freshly processed or frozen, depending on size, the week before Thanksgiving. Pick-up at several area locations or at the farm in Akron. Brunty also sells chicken, eggs, beef, pork, and lamb. Call 330.594.7315 for more information. Order online at Buybrunty-farms.com, \$30 deposit required.

Chander Hill Farm

Turkeys are Broad-Breasted Bronze and Heritage. Pick-up freshly processed turkeys the weekend before Thanksgiving at the farm in Newbury. Chander Hill is a small operation that also has eggs, duck eggs, and pastured pork and lamb, and goose for Christmas. Go to ChanderHillFarm.com for more information. Call or text 440.313.4179 to order, \$20 deposit required.

Fresh Fork Market

Heritage sold by the pound, Broad-Breasted White sold by the bird. Pick-up Tuesday and Wednesday before Thanksgiving at a variety of area locations. Holiday dinner packages are also available. Go to FreshForkMarket.com for more information. General public and Fresh Fork shareholders can order online at FreshForkMarket.com/thanksgiving or call 800.861.8582, \$25 deposit required.

Plumcreek Farm

Turkeys are Broad-Breasted Bronze and Heritage. Pick-up the Tuesday before Thanksgiving at the farm in Valley City. Plumcreek has a CSA (full for 2015), sells goose for Christmas, and also posts extras and specials of eggs, pastured meat, and produce on Facebook. Call 330.483.0222 or email plumcreek-farm@zoominternet.net to order.



Tea Hills Farms

Choose from Heritage, Broad-Breasted White, or Broad-Breasted Bronze. Turkeys processed and delivered fresh the weekend before/week of Thanksgiving. Pick up at a variety of area markets or at the farm near Loudonville. Tea Hills also sells chicken, eggs, duck, Muscovy duck, beef, pork, and lamb, as well as a variety of seasoned ground chicken patties and sausage. Call 419.685.1689 for more information or order online at TeaHillsFarms.com.

Eye to eye with a Blue Slate Heritage tom.

Other small, local farms raising pastured turkey can be found online at LocalHarvest.org.