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Preservation's Progress



PASTURE RAISED In the prairie grass at Good Shepherd Turkey Ranch in Lindsborg, Kan., a Standard Bronze pair stands out from the flock.

By [KIM SEVERSON](#)

Lindsborg, Kan.

DEATHBED requests take many forms, but rarely do they involve poultry.

Frank Reese Jr. was the recipient of one in 2004 when his mentor, the great turkey breeder Norman Kardosh, was 78 and in the hospital.

The old man, the one who taught Mr. Reese how to pick out a perfect Bronze when he was just a boy, knew he would soon leave his friends and his rare turkeys behind.

“He started crying and said, it’s you I’m leaving it to,” Mr. Reese, 59, recalled. “And right there I made a promise to him. I said I would not let these birds die off the face of the earth.”

To someone less smitten with turkeys, the birds Mr. Reese is now trying to save on his Good Shepherd Turkey Ranch, an 80-mile drive straight north from Wichita, look as

strange as space aliens. They have names like Narragansett and White Holland and once were the deeply flavored anchors of the Thanksgiving table.

On Sunday, Mr. Reese picked out the turkeys he believes will pass the best genetic traits to the next generation. They are the birds with the right markings, the best builds for a life on pasture and the right ratio of meat to bone so his turkeys don't end up like the average supermarket bird, with 70 percent of their bodies breast meat. The rest of his turkeys made their first and last trip off the farm, headed to a Nebraska slaughterhouse. By mid-November, they will be in the kitchens of people who paid as much as \$209 a bird.

Although these breeds make up far less than one percent of the 265 million turkeys produced in America last year, many chefs consider them the best thing to eat on Thanksgiving. Turkeys like Mr. Reese's take much longer to grow than mass-produced ones. Thus, they develop more fat and a robust flavor.

In the past five years, interest in Heritage breeds has exploded. But they are still hard to come by and some cooks have discovered that they don't always live up to their billing. For growers, finding baby turkeys that are bred to grow into delicious birds is both challenging and expensive.

Only someone with a trained eye can pick the best toms and hens to breed, and Mr. Reese is considered the best of the few people in the country who can do it. He is also the only one with a flock whose genetic line can be traced back to the late 1800s.

"He is truly a national treasure because he lives and breathes genetic preservation," said Anne Malleau, executive director of the Whole Foods Animal Compassion Foundation and an agriculture expert. "I have never met anyone with that type of knowledge of both the history and the breeds."

Mr. Reese moved into a farmhouse on his turkey ranch 20 years ago, after a tour in the Army in the 1970s and a career as a nurse anesthetist, a job he still does part time to help pay for his turkeys.

The century-old house is a showplace for things turkey, including hundreds of old turkey publications, turkey platters and rare framed drawings of turkeys. Somewhere among the papers, he thinks, there might still be a little essay he wrote when he was 5, titled "Me and My Turkey."

"I don't know why, but my love of turkeys has always been there," he said during a late summer walk through a flock of thousands.

Mr. Reese is trying to save both the vintage breeds and a culture of turkey-rearing once so popular that breeders numbered over a thousand and enthusiasts filled the old Madison Square Garden to watch turkeys the way people today flock to the Westminster dog

show. The five breeds he raises descend directly from the birds raised by Mr. Kardosh and by other heavyweight breeders, many of them women.

His Bourbon Reds come from flocks raised by Sadie Caldwell in Kansas and Gladys Hanssinger from Missouri. Other turkeys come from a line bred by Martha Walker, who in the 1930s advertised her “short-legged, thick-meated” Walker Bronzes in Turkey World magazine.

This year, Mr. Reese has plenty of new fans, including employees at Google who ordered 220, said Patrick Martins of Heritage Foods USA, a company dedicated to selling foods on the verge of disappearing.

When Mr. Martins and Mr. Reese started working together five years ago, they sold about 600 turkeys. This year, Mr. Reese and four other neighboring ranchers who now help raise his birds will sell about 10,000.

Virtually all of turkeys raised in the United States come from one basic line, a broad-breasted White that George Nicholas developed in California in the 1950s. By the 1960s, he had perfected a breed that produced meat so efficiently that it became the industry standard.

The problem is, the birds can't fly or reproduce without the help of artificial insemination, and their bland meat has produced a nation of diners for whom dry, overcooked Thanksgiving turkey is an annual disappointment.

“It's as if everyone in America was eating only one kind of apple,” Mr. Reese said. “It's like saying we will only use Red Delicious apples for everything.”

The dominance of the broad-breasted White concerns those who worry that American agriculture is on the brink of losing its once-diverse strain of plants and animals. For the last 20 years, the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy has been working to save turkeys like the ones on Mr. Reese's farm.

Under the conservancy's definition, turkeys can be called heritage only if they show a specific set of genetic traits, which include natural mating, a long lifespan and slow growth rates.

Mr. Reese dislikes the term heritage because he believes it is in danger of losing its meaning, the way organic did. For instance, crosses of Bronze turkeys and broad-breasted Whites are becoming popular among some specialty turkey farmers who sell them as heritage birds, according to the Heritage Turkey Foundation. Very few breeders are trying to preserve the genetic lines that meet the American Poultry Association's Standard of Perfection, which was developed in 1874.

Some producers have watched their heritage turkeys die or fail to grow enough, either because the farmer didn't know how to raise them or the hatchery that sold the birds

wasn't selecting for genetic traits that would allow the birds to grow properly and dress out into meaty, well-proportioned roasting birds.

Mr. Reese, who calls such hatcheries the turkey equivalent of puppy mills, said that unless good breeding birds are selected from flock to flock, successive generations will keep getting smaller and scrawnier.

“People will eat these turkeys for a while as a novelty, but if we don't keep the quality up and make it as good as it can be, people will stop buying them,” he said.

Some growers have already given up, citing the high price of buying the baby chicks called poults, and headaches raising them. The owners of Willie Bird, a free-range turkey farm in Sonoma, stopped a few years ago.

“We really tried with them but they didn't grow fast enough and ate a lot and they flew around a bit,” said Greg Brodsky, who manages the operation. “They were just too hard to control.”

For the true believers, Mr. Reese remains one of the keepers of the flame. He was honored in September at a lunch in New York hosted by [Mario Batali](#) and Joe Bastianich. The Animal Welfare Institute, which sets standards for humane care of agriculture stock, based its lengthy list of standards for turkeys on Mr. Reese's operation. And to help him keep his heritage breeds from extinction by preserving their genetic pool, the institute is working with the American Poultry Association, the Animal Compassion Foundation and others to help him create the Standard-Bred Poultry Institute.

Along with Brian Anselmo, 27, his friend and business partner who lives on the farm, Mr. Reese plans a big classroom and buildings to house students who will come to the ranch to learn what it takes to hand-pick breeding turkeys and raise them properly. Of course, it will have a big test kitchen. Because along with breeding knowledge, the recipes for roasting antique poultry with more muscle and firmer flesh have been lost, too.

“At this point, if I were to die, this would all end,” Mr. Reese said. “If I am going to keep the promise to Norman as I originally intended, I have to get people to eat them again but I also have to teach people what it means to raise a real turkey.”

Pursuing Heritage

True heritage turkeys, which haven't been bred with other types, can be difficult to find. Order soon. Some local New York sources have already sold out.

Frank Reese's turkeys are available at his Web site, reaseturkeys.com, or through Heritage Foods USA, heritagefoodsusa.com. In New York City, try Gourmet Garage at (212) 941-5850 or Dean and DeLuca at deandeluca.com or (800) 221-7714.

Sources for other heritage birds include D'Artagnan at dartagnan.com.

Local producers who might still have heritage turkeys can be found at localharvest.org and at slowfoodusa.org/ark/turkeys.html. (Some listings are out of date. Willie Bird, for example, no longer sells heritage birds.)