

Pastured Turkeys Can Be Enjoyed Before They Get To the Thanksgiving Table

Christine Kelly-Begazo

Indian River County Agriculture Extension Agent

This is the time of year in Florida when our thoughts turn to family gatherings, giving thanks for all the blessings that we have and the longing for cooler weather and trees turning spectacular autumn colors. It is also a time in which millions of turkeys will be lovingly prepared and eaten with gusto. Not all American families will partake in this traditional bird though. Depending upon ethnic background and cultural customs, the main course at the Thanksgiving meal could consist of ham, duck, goat or even rabbit. But without a doubt, for many Americans, the most sought after would be the famed turkey.

Most of us are used to going to the supermarket and buying a frozen, factory-packaged bird that has been genetically modified to meet the requirements of a holiday meal for millions of families. Scientists have worked long and hard to develop the “perfect” turkey that will be tender, moist and juicy no matter what kind of cook you are. These birds are generally error-proof and I have benefited from cooking these birds with accolades from satiated family and friends. Last Thanksgiving though I tried something different that changed our holiday meal.

As an extension agent working with small-scale farmers, I like to support this growing industry and I purchased a bona fide pasture-raised, free-range turkey from a local producer, Linda Hart, owner of Crazy Hart Farm located in Fellsmere. I knew my turkey long before we cooked and ate it, or rather; I knew the flock from which it had come from. I knew the land it had walked on and I knew the farmer who raised it. We had a special relationship, that Thanksgiving turkey and I that went beyond the frozen food section of a grocery store. As Linda consulted with me about her pastures and organically-raised poultry, I watched those turkeys grow from awkward and shy chicks to confident and strutting juveniles.

Until the day in which they were harvested (a politically correct word for ‘slaughtered’), those turkeys followed Linda around like she was their mother. I will never forget the day I saw Linda sitting on the turkey roost one early evening trying to teach the young birds to do this themselves (turkeys roost off the ground in the night just like chickens). It seems that some breeds of turkeys are not very smart and she literally had to instruct them on how to be a turkey. They strutted around her property eating bugs, seeds, grass and weeds. Linda worked hard to keep them healthy and well-fed in a sustainable and organic fashion. If turkeys could be happy, this flocked seemed to have it all.

Raising these turkeys was not without difficulties though and they enjoyed playing tricks on Linda and her unsuspecting neighbors. The birds would occasionally escape the property and get out onto the road to follow neighbors enjoying a walk, kids on bikes, cars passing by and the odd tractor. Open doors were invitations to find turkeys in the front seat of a car like they were going for a Sunday ride. They would get into the neighbors' yards and leave messy presents on porches and on top of anything they flew into. I found all of these antics very amusing as I sat at my desk in Vero Beach and I looked forward to Linda's calls as the turkeys grew—and as the fated day of Thanksgiving drew near.

No hormones or antibiotics were given to these birds and water was not injected to make their meat tenderer. After frequent visits to the farm, I knew how those turkeys were being raised and I knew what I was going to feed my family for Thanksgiving—fresh, free-range poultry that had enjoyed a good life before finding its way to my dinner table. Harvest day was a flurry of feathers, flapping and frazzled nerves. Turkeys tried to escape but the children of another Fellsmere family ran after them and helped pluck feathers after the birds had been...well, harvested. A few days later, I picked up my cooled and dressed bird ready for my family's feast. I have to admit though I sorely missed seeing that flock greet me at the pasture gate with welcoming gobble sounds and aggressive flapping of their wings.

Linda and her nearest neighbors were very happy to see the birds go for another year but I nostalgically, and possibly romantically, yearned to have them peck annoyingly at my earrings again. My family enjoyed one of those birds for Thanksgiving dinner and again at Christmas time with all the trimmings including stuffing, sweet potatoes and pumpkin pie. I too enjoyed our holiday dinners but I happily knew that next year Crazy Hart Farm would once again have turkey chicks that would follow Linda around looking to her for motherly care and instructions on how to be a good turkey. These thoughts made me smile as we bowed our heads in thanks in front of that steaming braised turkey on the table.

Christine Kelly-Begazo is an agriculture extension agent in Vero Beach, FL. Linda Hart of Crazy Hart Farm can be reached at (772) 913-0036 or email texzun@bellsouth.net