

Fresh in focus **Turkey**

Features

Farm Profile: Oakridge Acres

Ontario Trillium Foundation Grant

Fresh in Focus: Talking Turkey

Buying Turkey in Waterloo Region



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Issue # 9

December 2004

Local Farm Profile: Oakridge Acres

You are what you eat! This old expression used to conjure images of cutting back on candy and making sure you had an apple a day. Things were simple when it came to food.

In recent years however, agriculture and the food industry has changed enormously. Modern farming is done on a larger scale, new crop production and animal husbandry techniques have been introduced and food of all types and varieties can travel thousands of kilometres before making its way to the table. While the business of agriculture and food has become more efficient and consumers have benefited from increased choice and affordable food prices, it may be more difficult to know exactly what we're eating. The average consumer is increasingly disconnected from his or her food. If "we are what we eat", how many of us really know what we are?

As farmers who deal directly with consumers, Mark and Cindy Gerber of Oakridge Acres recognize that more people are concerned about food and what they feed their families. They, too, share this concern and are committed to producing top-value products that inspire confidence. They take pride in their naturally raised Black Angus freezer beef, Omega 3 chickens and turkeys. And, if their growing list of customers is an indication, this commitment to quality is

In 1996, Mark and Cindy purchased the 175 acre farm outside of Ayr from Cindy's parents. Mark grew up on a dairy farm near Millbank and both he and Cindy wanted their two children to grow up in a rural environment. Their transition to farming has been gradual. They started off with a couple of cows and have spent the

past 5 years building their herd. According to Mark, the original plan for the farm was to produce



Oakridge Acres

Black Angus breeding stock, not sell freezer beef directly to consumers. That was before the BSE (mad cow) crisis and the resulting drop in cattle prices. Like many farmers, especially those raising beef cattle, the Gerber's were left to wonder "what else can we do with the farm property to make things work financially".

What really started the ball rolling were friends who knew that the Gerbers raised Black Angus cattle and wanted to buy sides of beef from the farm. (The Black Angus breed is famous for its marbling which gives the meat cuts extra flavour.) A few initial beef orders would plant the seeds for a business that now focuses primarily on consumer-direct sales—prompting Mark to leave his off-farm job and take up farming full-time.

In efforts to diversify the farm, the Gerbers have begun raising chickens and turkeys. Like the beef cattle, the birds are naturally raised, which means they are not grown in cramped quarters, don't receive hormones or antibiotics, and are fed a natural diet free

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Farm Profile Cont...

from common feed additives that sometimes include "animal proteins or fats". In fact, all the livestock feed is prepared on the farm. Mark mixes their own oats and barley with locally grown



corn, soybean and flax seed, guaranteeing a healthy, wholesome diet. The addition of the flax seed in the chicken feed also helps promote the production of omega 3 fatty acid, a particularly healthy polyunsaturated fat that helps reduce the risk of heart disease and lower blood pressure.

Almost a year ago, Mark and Cindy met with another farm family (Cam and Debbie Shapansky) who

were involved in marketing Katahdin Lamb from their farm near Breslau. They found much in common and decided to create a new company, Well Fed Food to sell their products primarily from the Gerber farm. "Well Fed Food—for the health of it" is an expression of both families' desire to provide a healthy, safe product to their customers. In this case, well fed applies to both animals and people alike! While cuts of beef and lamb are available for sale year round, chickens and turkeys are also available for order. The turkeys are now ready just in time for Christmas.

Both the Gerbers and the Shapansky's want to get the Well Fed Food message out to the public. Well Fed Food offers a periodic newsletter featuring their products, along with recipes and other information. This past October, the Gerbers also hosted a fall farm event. Although the weather was cold and wet, 150 people came out to the Oakridge Acres farm to visit the farm, learn about agriculture and sample some of the best tasting beef and lamb around, barbequed to perfection.

As the holiday season approaches and families gather around the table, local farmers like Mark and Cindy Gerber want you to "be what you eat"—well fed.



For more information about Oakridge Acres and Well Fed Food, contact Mark or Cindy Gerber: 632-7653 or via email, oakridge@golden.net



Our Food, Our Community:

Trillium Grant for Foodlink

Foodlink is pleased to announce that the Ontario Trillium Foundation has approved a 2-year grant for Foodlink totaling \$123,800.



The grant will enable Foodlink to build a results-oriented organizational model to guide the creation of a more sustainable, community-based food system in Waterloo Region. One of the key outputs of the grant will be the creation of a business plan for Foodlink outlining a comprehensive strategy to support the movement towards food-localism.

For more information contact: Peter Katona, Executive Director Foodlink Waterloo Region (519) 747-7641 katona@rogers.com

Finding Local Turkey

Looking for a farm-fresh turkey for Christmas? Be sure and consult Foodlink's 2004 Buy Local! Buy Fresh! Map for farm listings. It's usually a good idea to call ahead.



B&B Farms Ltd. Map Listing # 2 1263 Scotch Line Rd., Elmira Tel. 664-2413

Cedar Spring Flowers Map Listing # **16** 1547 Cedar Spring Rd., Elmira Tel. 669-4529

Elmer and Alma Gingrich Map Listing # **32** 3546 Manser Rd., Linwood Tel. 698-2747

Junel Holsteins & Unfactory Farm Map Listing # **40** 5415 Streicher Line, Millbank Tel. 656-2691

Oakridge Acres Map Listing # 56 2132 Greenfield Rd., Ayr Tel. 632-8180

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Talking Turkey!

History and Origins

Celebrations often revolve around food, and for those who celebrate Christmas, no food is more symbolic

than the holiday turkey. A roasted turkey with all the trimmings is a meal fit for a king, but it had humble beginnings back in North America. The turkey, a bird more closely related to pheasants and partridges than chickens, has been roaming this continent for the past 10 million years, and there is archeological evidence to support domestication of these birds over 2000 years ago. About 500 years ago, turkeys found themselves on the Spanish conquistadors' ships heading back to Spain with all the other Aztec treasures. They made the return voyage to the "New World" with early settlers who crossed them with wild indigenous stocks, creating birds of a very different feather from their native cousins.

Wild turkeys are covered with dark feathers that help them blend in with their woodland homes. The bare skin on the throat and head of a turkey can change colour from flat gray to striking shades of red, white, and blue when the bird becomes distressed or excited. Commercially bred turkeys, however, are mostly white. Their colours have been purposely bred out because the pigment from the feathers would discolour the turkey's skin during dressing.

Wild turkeys are found in hardwood forests with grassy areas. They spend their days foraging for food like nuts, seeds, small insects, and berries. Their nights are spent in low branches of trees. Turkeys have excellent vision (their field of vision is 270 degrees!) and hearing. They are able to fly short distances at up to 90 km/h and can run at speeds up to 40 km/h. Turkeys bred for today's markets, however, are unable to fly because their breasts are thicker and heavier than their wild cousins. Domestic birds weigh twice as much as wild ones.

Where did the name Turkey come from?

There are a few theories as to where the name Turkey came from, and it has nothing to do with the country of the same name. Possibly, the name resulted from "firkee", an aboriginal word for



turkey. Or, perhaps, because the wild turkey's call sounds like "turk-turk". History reminds us that Christopher Columbus believed his journey across the Atlantic would bring him to India. Upon finding the turkey in the woods, Columbus named it "turka",

which is a peacock in the Tamil language of India. Although the turkey is a type of peasant, Columbus can't be blamed for trying to identify this large, native bird!

Nutritional Value

In the past, turkey was considered as a once-a-year treat. They were only available as whole birds sold in late fall and early winter. Today, however, turkey is becoming a regular part of the North American diet due to its low fat content. As a result, turkeys are being produced in greater numbers and are available in many different cuts. Ground turkey is one of the leanest ground meats available with 3g of fat per 100g serving.



Do you prefer white or dark?

As any well-seasoned turkey eater knows, a typical turkey has about 70% white meat and 30% dark meat. At the Christmas meal, one of the most interesting conversations will involve a discussion on the merits of the dark legs and thighs over the white breast meat. Most of us have a preference, but few of us know why we choose one type over the other.

It's all a question of muscle fibers. Red fibers predominate in the leg and thigh muscles of birds like turkeys causing the meat to appear dark. The breast tissue, however, is composed mainly of white muscle fibers. Turkeys are ground dwelling birds that spend all of their waking hours walking, running, and scratching for food. The muscles in their legs are adapted for constant use and do not fatigue easily. The fibers in these muscles are full of myglobin, which transports oxygen (remember that oxygen is transported by red blood cells, which give blood its red colour).

Breast muscle supports the wings and is therefore key to a bird's ability to fly. In the turkey, the breast muscle is composed of white fibres used only for short bursts of activity (such as escape from a predator). Since these muscles are low in myoglobin, they fatigue quickly, and are unable to sustain lengthy flight times. Other large birds more capable in the flight department, such as ducks and geese, have red muscle throughout the breast tissue.

Big Bird!

The Guinness Book of Records states that the largest dressed weight (cooked, with dressing) recorded for a turkey is 39.09 kg (86 lbs) on December 12, 1989.



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Turkeys and the Christmas Tradition

For centuries going back to ancient Egypt, goose was the main course of the Winter Solstice feasts. For the wealthy in medieval England, swans, peacocks, and even cranes were roasted to celebrate festive occasions.



But, by the mid 1500s, turkeys had spread to England from Spain, and had become a popular alternative. Historically farmers would cull their animals in the late fall because they couldn't afford to keep large stocks through the winter. Coincidentally, Christmas celebrations occurred shortly after the flock size was reduced, creating the tradition of serving this large bird for Christmas dinner. In North America, the Thanksgiving holiday also made use of the autumn flock thinning.

Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol" is also credited for popularizing the serving of turkey for Christmas dinner. In it, Ebenezer Scrooge purchased the large prize winning turkey for Bob Cratchit and his family to enjoy for Christmas dinner after acknowledging the error of his ways.

Why do we stuff turkeys? Chickens, turkeys, and other fowl have a cavity after they are cleaned and the idea of filling it up with another dish probably resulted from the "because it was there" principal. Filling the space with another savoury food saved time and dishes, and made use of the turkey's tempting juices. Polite Victorian society preferred the word *dressing* to *stuffing*, but today the two words both refer to a starch-based mixture placed inside a bird, roast, or vegetable.

Thawing a Turkey

A turkey can be frozen for up to a year. There are two ways of thawing a turkey for roasting:

- 1. The Refrigerator Method is ideal as it keeps the meat cold until it is completely defrosted. Place the turkey on a tray on a bottom shelf in the refrigerator. Allow 5 hours defrosting time per pound (or 10 hours/kg)
- 2. The Cold Water Method can be used to speed up the process. In a large container, cover the turkey completely with cold water and change the water every hour. Allow 1 hour per pound (2 hours/kg)

Roasting a Whole Turkey

- 1. Preheat oven to 325° F
- 2. If stuffing, do so while the oven is preheating. Spoon stuffing lightly into turkey instead of packing because the stuffing expands while cooking. Allow ½ cup of stuffing per pound of turkey.
- 3. Place turkey on a rack in a shallow roasting pan and insert meat thermometer in the deepest part of the inner thigh, but not touching the bone.
- 4. Roast uncovered, or loosely covered with foil. If you choose to baste your turkey, limit the number of times you open and close your oven (once an hour is sufficient).
- 5. Turkey is cooked when the meat thermometer reads $170^{\circ}F$ (77°C) for an unstuffed turkey or $180^{\circ}F$ (82°C) for a stuffed turkey, and the juices run clear.
- 6. Remove turkey when cooking is completed and let stand 15 to 20 minutes to allow the juices to set.

Why do turkeys gobble?

Male turkeys gobble, hens do a clicking sound. The gobble is a seasonal call for the males. They also gobble when they hear loud noises and when they settle in for the night.

Turkey Breeds

Most commercially produced turkeys in Canada are White Holland's (a large variety with all white plumage). Prior to the 1960s the Bronze turkey was the chief variety.

Other common domesticated breeds include: Bronze, Broad Breasted Bronze, Broad Breasted Large White, Black, Bourbon Red, Narragansett, and Beltsville Small White. Heritage breeds still exist in North America but they are extremely rare.



Production and Consumption in Canada

Canada is the seventh largest producer of turkeys in the world at 19.6 million a year. 10 million whole turkeys are consumed annually in Canada, and that's about 4.2kg per person. The rest is consumed in parts – breasts, legs, and sandwich meat.

More than half the turkeys consumed annually are eaten at Thanksgiving and Christmas.

Turkey Production in Ontario

Ontario produces nearly half (45%) of Canadian Turkeys. According to Statistics Canada, the province of Ontario produced 8,357,000 birds (67,189 tonnes) in 2003. Total production was valued at \$117,879,000.

