

All About Heritage Turkeys

What is a heritage turkey?

Heritage turkeys are historic breeds of turkeys that were originally designed to be raised outdoors, in free-range production systems. All of today's turkey breeds descend from wild turkeys native to North and South America. Many of today's heritage turkey breeds come from turkeys that were brought to Europe in the 1500s and domesticated, then later brought back to North America.

Today's turkey market is heavily dominated by just one breed, the Broad Breasted White. This turkey has been developed for industrial production: it has been bred for the maximum amount of breast meat, making it so heavy it cannot breed on its own. The turkeys gain weight so fast that they tend to have severe respiratory and immune problems.

Heritage turkeys, on the other hand, were bred to live outdoors, before the invention of large-scale industrial production. They have stronger immune systems, are hardier, and tend to be good foragers. They grow much more slowly than industrial breeds: heritage turkeys take 26-28 weeks to mature, while industrial production breeds like the Broad Breasted White reach their full weight in just 14-18 weeks. This slow growth rate makes heritage turkeys more expensive to produce, but it also is a big part of what gives them a richer and fuller flavor.

Superior flavor is not the only reason to consider cooking with heritage turkeys. By choosing a heritage breed, you can "eat it to save it," effectively supporting genetic diversity. Industrial turkey production is heavily dominated by just one breed of turkey; if no one wants to eat heritage breeds, there is no reason for farmers to raise them, and they may well go extinct. Cooking with heritage birds helps maintain genetic diversity by creating the markets necessary to maintain these rare breeds.



A Narragansett Turkey. Photo from the Animal Livestock Breeds Conservancy (ALBC).

Cooking a Heritage Turkey

Turkey farmer Ted O'Harte says there are three steps to creating a delicious, flavorful bird: Breeding, Feeding, and Cooking. The first two steps are up to the farmer: Heritage breeds have great flavor, and when they are raised outdoors on pasture, their flavor is enhanced by a diet including bugs and weeds from foraging. The final step takes place in the kitchen. Heritage breeds must be treated differently from your everyday Butterball.

First off, farm-fresh turkeys are not injected with salt, as many industrially produced turkeys are. Second, pastured birds move around more than confined turkeys, so they have more dark meat. Third, they grow more slowly, giving them more time to develop flavorful meat. They tend to be smaller and therefore cook faster than industrial turkeys.

Chef Beau Vestal of New Rivers in Providence, RI notes, "We use the Narragansett Turkey and the main key that most people miss is brine, brine, brine!" LocalHarvest.org recommends cooking heritage turkeys more quickly at a higher temperature, rather than slow-roasting at a lower temperature, to prevent the meat from drying out. More advice at <http://www.localharvest.org/features/cooking-turkeys.jsp>

Finding a Heritage Turkey

Ask your local farmers! They may require reservations in advance and may sell out early, so be sure to contact them early. Many producers who raise other kinds of meat or poultry may also raise turkeys for holidays.

Chefs Collaborative has a number of members raising heritage turkeys. Even after turkey season has passed, you'll love the amazing range of heritage-breed pigs, lambs, cattle, poultry and more offered by all of these farms. A few of our members raising heritage turkeys include:

- **Norfolk, MA:** Ted O'Harte of [Brambly Farms](#) raises mostly Bronze and White Holland turkeys, along with a few Royal Palms, Bourbon Reds and Narragansetts.
- **Patrick Springs, VA:** Craig Rogers of [Border Springs Farm](#) raises Bronze turkeys.
- **Marlow, NH:** Lisa Richards raises delicious Midget White turkeys at [Mack Hill Farm](#).
- **Bluffton, GA:** The Harris family of [White Oak Pastures](#) raises Bronze turkeys using a rotational grazing method along with cows and sheep.
- **Fellsmere, FL:** Linda Hart raises Narragansett turkeys on pasture at [Crazy Hart Ranch](#).

Remember that heritage breeds are rare, and finding a heritage turkey may not be easy. The American Livestock Breeds Conservancy (ALBC) provides a list of heritage breed turkey producers at http://albc-usa.org/documents/Turkey_Producers.pdf. You can also find producers near you via LocalHarvest at <http://www.localharvest.org/>, your area's Buy Fresh, Buy Local chapter, or other local foods organizations. Slow Food's Ark of Taste also lists producers of specific heritage breeds at http://www.slowfoodusa.org/index.php/programs/details/ark_of_taste/. And if you can't find a heritage turkey producer nearby, Heritage Foods USA works with family farms to provide mail-order heritage turkeys at <http://www.heritagefoodsusa.com/>.

Heritage Turkey Breeds

The ALBC provides a list of heritage turkey breeds at <http://albc-usa.org/cpl/wtchlist.html>. Some highlights include:

- **Beltsville Small White:** Developed in the 1930s to meet a demand for smaller turkeys, this very small bird has become rare as demand has shifted to larger birds.
- **Black, aka "Norfolk Black" and "Black Spanish":** The Black Turkey is a descendant of Mexican wild turkeys. A popular variety in the early 1900s, this slightly smaller turkey breed has lustrous black feathers.
- **Bourbon Red:** Developed in Bourbon County, Kentucky in the 1800s, the Bourbon Red is a gorgeous dark reddish-brown bird that has gained some popularity in recent years due to its excellent flavor. Larger for a heritage breed bird.
- **Bronze:** A very popular turkey for much of American history, the Bronze is a hardy cross with the classic brown appearance of wild American turkeys combined with the large size and tameness of domesticated birds.
- **Midget White:** The Midget White was developed to meet an anticipated demand for very small turkeys that never actually arose. It is famous for its excellent flavor.
- **Narragansett:** A larger, multicolored heritage breed with excellent meat quality and flavor, developed in Narragansett Bay, RI. Narragansett turkeys were the standard New England breed in the 17-1800s.
- **Royal Palm:** A small white-and-black turkey mostly grown for its gorgeous plumage, but also for its tasty meat.
- **Slate:** A medium-sized grayish-blue heritage turkey named for its unique color.
- **White Holland:** A large snow-white turkey popular throughout the 1800s and early 1900s for its light-colored pinfeathers, which give a "cleaner" appearance to the carcass. White turkeys were bred by the Aztecs before Europeans came to the New World.

Sources & More Information on Heritage Turkeys

American Livestock Breeds Conservancy (ALBC): <http://albc-usa.org/HeritageTurkey.html>

LocalHarvest: <http://www.localharvest.org/features/heritage-turkeys.jsp>

Heritage Foods USA: <http://www.heritagefoodsusa.com/>

Slow Food USA: http://www.slowfoodusa.org/index.php/programs/details/ark_of_taste/



Bronze and White Holland Turkeys at Brambly Farms, Norfolk, MA.