



HERITAGE BIRDS

TAKE FLIGHT

Advocates say local farm-bred poultry is more expensive, but it tastes better, supports sustainable farms and helps save breeds from extinction.



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PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEPHANIE KLEIN-DAVIS

LEFT. A heritage New Hampshire red chicken roosts in a shed on Bramble Hollow Farm in Montvale. Most of the New Hampshire breed is hatched on the farm.

RIGHT. Anna Wills tries to calm a hen she is holding after it was concerned about the family dog, Badger.



Cranberries. Check. Sweet potatoes. Check. Brussels sprouts, pecans, pumpkin. Check. Local, farm-raised turkey. Check.

As shoppers hurry through grocery store aisles over the frantic weeks that lead to the holidays, a growing number are choosing their bird someplace other than the Butterball display at the closest grocery store.

Though only a sliver of the approximately 230 million turkeys sold each year are locally raised, and an even smaller subset are heritage breeds, these non-commercial turkeys are more in demand than ever, according to the Livestock Conservancy, a North Carolina-based nonprofit dedicated to protecting rare and



Anna Wills exits the walk-in refrigerator with some of the processed chickens sold on the farm and to local area restaurants.

TIPS FOR COOKING HERITAGE POULTRY

- Familiarize yourself with whole-bird cooking techniques.
- Work with your farmer to find the size, gender, breed and age chicken, turkey or duck that's right for your purposes.
- Brine your bird.
- Use slow-cooking techniques (such as a slow cooker or low-temperature oven) to make the meat more tender.
- Prioritize moisture, making sure to add fat to the outside of the bird to create a crisp skin, then cook with wine, broth or water to keep your meat juicy.

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vanishing breeds. Customers buy them from area farms and farmers markets, from specialty grocery stores and through online distributors.

While choosing a bird raised on a family farm can be inconvenient (sometimes requiring customers drive a distance to pick up their turkeys at pre-arranged times) and more expensive, folks do it because they want to support a sustainable farm, they're drawn to a more humane life for the centerpiece of their meal, they aim to avoid antibiotics and GMO-feed or, if seeking out a heritage-breed turkey, they are choosing to eat a variety other than the nearly ubiquitous Broad Breasted White in order to keep it from going extinct.

"Saving heritage birds is done by eating them," says Anna Wills, owner with husband Brent of Montvale's Bramble Hollow Farm, which raises heritage breed chickens and pork. "And not just once a year as a special occasion but on a regular basis, continually supporting the farmers that are raising them. People ask: 'How can we save something by eating it, but that's what we need to do.'"

BREEDS BECOME EXTINCT

A century ago, turkeys and chickens came from small farms dotted throughout the country. Each region had specific breeds that thrived there. A dozen varieties of turkeys and some 50 varieties of chickens scratched in the dirt, ate bugs, mated and hatched eggs, and were eventually slaughtered, destined for tables not far from the farms where they'd spent their days.

Industrial farming concentrated large numbers of chickens and turkeys into huge complexes where the birds were bred to have overly large breasts, be arti-

"The more I learned how rare it is for us to eat anything other than an industrial breed, the more intrigued I got."

ficially inseminated, mature at a dizzying rate and live their entire lives without ever setting foot outside.

It was cheap and efficient. And it wasn't long before nearly all chickens finding their way to American tables were a hybrid bird, the Cornish Cross, while 99 percent of all domesticated turkeys were Broad-Breasted Whites.

The result of all this streamlining? Within the past 15 years, 190 breeds of farm animals have gone extinct worldwide, with 1,500 others at risk of becoming extinct. In the past five years alone, 60 breeds of cattle, goats, pigs, horses and poultry have become extinct, according to the Livestock Conservancy.

A heritage bird is defined as a breed that can reproduce naturally, live a vigorous life outside a cage, matures at a normal growth rate and traces its lineage to a breed that existed before 1950.

In 1997, the Conservancy tallied fewer than 1,500 breeding turkeys of any heritage variety left in the United States. The Narragansett breed had been reduced to fewer than a dozen breeding birds.

But animal rights activists, food safety experts, biodiversity advocates and farmers began pushing back. What happens, they asked, when drought or climate change make today's industrial farming model unsustainable? What if the future demanded a diversity of animals that was no longer available?

The Conservancy and others began bringing the plight of the heritage turkey to the airwaves. And chefs, home cooks and family farmers listened. By 2015, the number of heritage turkeys in the United States had jumped to nearly 15,000, an increase of more than 1,000 percent.

It was a message that reached Anna and Brent Wills of Bramble Hollow Farm. When they started farming 13 years ago, they hoped to raise heritage breeds, but then worried they couldn't earn a living doing it.

So they tried Cornish Cross chickens. But the Wills found the animals did not thrive in the good-pastured

RIGHT. A pastured heritage chicken (left) is known for its larger breasts of white meat. The Freedom Ranger chicken has smaller breasts and is known for its rich, flavorful dark meat.

BELOW. Brent and Anna Wills have three geese they use to stave off predators and protect their flock of chickens. The Heritage New Hampshire Red chickens are fenced part time and also free-range.



Spatchcocked Roasted Chicken with Lemon and Basil

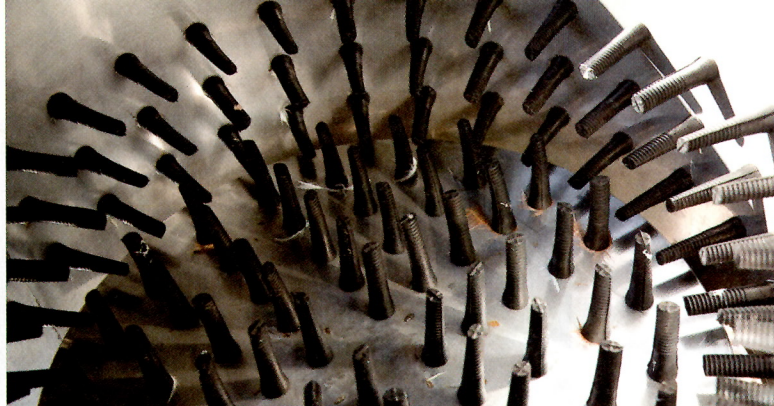
Meredith Leigh came to Roanoke in August to lead a workshop on cooking heritage poultry. She grilled, deboned, roasted — and even made sausage with — New Hampshire chickens from Bramble Hollow Farm in Montvale. This easy-to-make spatchcocked chicken dish was moist and oh-so flavorful — a favorite of many of the night's participants. Leigh shared this recipe from her first cookbook, "The Ethical Meat Handbook: Complete Home Butchery, Charcuterie and Cooking for the Conscious Omnivore." Her newest cookbook, "Pure Charcuterie," will be published this month.

INGREDIENTS:

- 1 whole chicken, backbone removed
- 2 whole lemons
- 2 cloves of garlic, minced
- A dozen or so basil leaves, finely minced
- ¼ cup butter, softened
- Sea salt
- Fresh ground black pepper
- ½ cup dry white wine

- Dry the chicken well with towels, then place breast up in a baking dish. Press firmly on the chicken's breast until you hear a slight crack, allowing you to lay the chicken flatly in the pan. Preheat the oven to 425F.
- In a small bowl, zest the lemons over the softened butter, then squeeze the juice into the bowl. Add basil and garlic and mix thoroughly to form a compound butter. Next, carefully loosen the chicken's skin and rub the compound butter into the meat, in between the skin and the meat. You'll do this on the breast and on each leg, working to get the butter mixture evenly distributed. Sprinkle the skin with generous salt and pepper and place the bird in the oven.
- Roast for 15 minutes, allowing the skin to brown, then turn the heat down to 350F and pour the wine into the bottom of the pan. Return to the oven and roast until a thermometer inserted in the breast reads 160F. Allow the chicken to rest slightly before carving.





The defeathering device used in the processing of the farm-raised chickens on Bramble Hollow Farm

life they were providing for them. They would arrive through the mail, diminished by their trip. The Crosses would become further stressed by outdoor weather, foraging for food, predators.

"This is why we don't want to raise these industrial breeds," Anna explains.

Through trial and error, the Wills landed on New Hampshire chickens, a breed from the 1930s that seeks its own food in clover, grubs and insects, that grows quickly, but not abnormally. It's a breed that — unlike hybrids — can reproduce naturally, which makes Bramble Hollow both more sustainable and independent of an outside hatchery to provide them

with the means to their livelihood. It also allows the Wills to work toward breeding heritage chickens more appealing to customers.

One of the biggest challenges for heritage poultry farmers is convincing buyers to embrace the smaller breasts and stronger flavor of a heritage bird. That, and convincing them to pay a price that can be three times as high as a supermarket bird. Heritage chickens can be priced 30 percent higher than even pasture-raised industrial birds, largely because the heritage birds take twice as long to mature, requiring more feed costs.

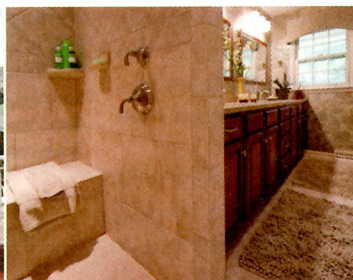
The Wills have made it work by supplying Local Roots restaurant in Roanoke with their chickens; they've also worked to build a healthy list of loyal supporters.

"We're just really, really lucky to have awesome customers," Wills says.

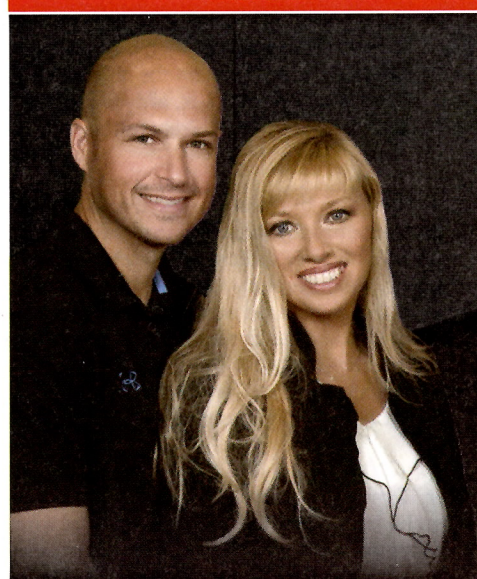
MESSAGE IS SPREADING

On a recent Thursday evening, two dozen foodies crowded into The Kitchen, a commercial and teaching space owned by the local nonprofit, LEAP for Local Food in Roanoke's West End neighborhood.

Writer, butcher, farmer Meredith Leigh had trekked there from the Asheville, North Carolina, area to lead



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the group in a workshop on how to prepare and cook — and appreciate — heritage breed chickens.

She chopped and slathered, tied and stuffed, ground and cased. Her take-home message: Anyone can make heritage poultry taste delicious.

She was there to educate: Yes, a heritage bird would be tougher — because it used its muscles in life — but also tastier, for the same reason.

"Over time, our culture has disproportionately favored tenderness over flavor," she explains.

Creating customers is an important piece in saving heritage breeds. The farmers can raise them. But if no one's buying, then the farmer can't afford to keep growing them.

But if that night — along with the resurgence of the heritage turkey — is any indication, the market is on its way.

Anne Franklin and two friends traveled three hours from Culpeper to learn more about heritage birds. Franklin first began thinking about where her meat comes from on a visit to help a local chicken farmer process birds. She then moved to raising her own chickens for egg-laying. She came to the workshop for inspiration. She left vowing to seek out more heritage breeds when buying hens for egg-laying — and to turn



the roosters she didn't need into tasty chicken sausage.

"The more I learned how rare it is for us to eat anything other than an industrial breed, the more intrigued I got," she said.

Leigh says that is the way of the future. "It is growing," Leigh says of awareness, as well as the numbers of heritage birds. "The needle does move. It just moves slowly." ▲



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Hens roost in a shed on Bramble Hollow Farm.

HOW TO FIND A LOCAL TURKEY

The only area farm selling heritage-breed turkeys is Leaping Waters Farm in Alleghany Springs. Several other farms raise Broad-Breasted White turkeys on pasture, which means the birds are not kept in cages and are allowed to forage their own food. Here's how to find a local turkey.

- Leaping Waters Farm raises two heritage turkey breeds, the Standard Bronze and the Narragansett. Contact farmer Alec Bradford at 268-5498 or leapingwatersfarm@gmail.com for availability and pricing.
- Four Corners Farm in Franklin County has pastured turkeys for sale with on-farm pickup dates and limited delivery to the Grandin Village Farmers Market. Pastured chickens are also available. Contact Ian or Carolyn Reilly at 334-1044 or info@fourcornersfarm for availability and pricing.
- Weathertop Farm in Check has pastured turkeys for sale with on-farm pickup dates of Nov. 10, 19 and 21. Pastured chickens also are available. Contact Sarah or Cedric Shannon at 651-2010 or info@weathertopfarm@gmail.com for availability and pricing.
- Roanoke Co+op in Grandin Village sells frozen local, pasture-raised turkeys from Polyface Farms in Swoope and from Weathertop Farm in Check throughout November. 343-5652 or <http://roanoke.coop>
- Bramble Hollow Farm in Montvale raises heritage breed and pasture-raised chickens. Contact farmers Anna and Brent Wills at 947-0337 or anna@bramblehollowfarm.com to reserve chickens for 2018.



Fincastle

Holiday Home Tour with Marketplace
Sat., December 9th, Rain or Shine
 Sponsored by Historic Fincastle, Inc. (HFI)

Tickets: \$15 per person (\$12 for HFI members)
 Sold at the Fincastle Baptist Church, 7330 Roanoke Road
 (Route 220) beginning at 9:30am on the morning of the event

Homes on Tour - 10am to 4pm

- Israel Christian House circa 1772
- Botetourt County Historical Society Museum circa 1806
- Clear Dawn circa 1962
- Broad Oaks circa 1770
- Neighbors' Hill circa 1888
- Rustic Lodge circa 1779

Marketplace - 9:30am to 3pm

The Marketplace is FREE to shop and will be held in Fincastle Baptist Church. It features 45 area craftsmen and artisans selling wonderful items for that last minute gift or home decoration. HFI Souvenirs will be available for purchase.



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