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TURKEY FARMS | LONG ISLAND

Consumers Have Taste for Local Birds

By JAN ELLEN SPIEGEL

MARK MILOSKI'S turkeys make a racket, surrounding him as he enters their 25 acres at his farm in Calverton.

"Turkeys always want to come and see what you're doing," he says, unfazed by the sea of squawking white-feathered [birds](#).

"That's going to be a good one," he says, identifying a tom much larger than the hundreds of hens. "You can tell by his feet. Those look like tree trunks."

This scene is normal for mid-October — the same as it has been since 1946, when Mr. Miloski's father, Will, started the farm that still bears his name, Will Miloski's Poultry Farm. But this year, while Mr. Miloski is raising his usual 4,000 birds for Thanksgiving, enough to keep his the largest turkey operation on Long Island, there is a new consideration: ethanol. Turkeys, like other farm animals, are competing for corn with the ethanol industry.

"What I'm paying for grain right now is phenomenal," said Donald Dixon, manager of Eastport Feeds, which supplies Miloski's and the other three turkey farms on Long island with a mixture that is largely corn and soybean. "These prices haven't been this high in 10, 12 years."

National data from the [United States Department of Agriculture](#) shows corn production is up 26 percent over last year, but the use of corn for ethanol has doubled since 2005, and the price of corn is about 30 percent higher than it was a year ago.

Throw in escalating fuel prices and the surcharges many Long Island farmers encounter because of the hauling distances for feed and for everything else, and the increase in cost can be substantial.

"The feed has gone up dramatically," said Mr. Miloski, who put the cost at 30 to 35 percent above last year.

Which means that if you manage to score one of his fresh free-range turkeys — sold first come, first served (no preorders) — you'll pay 10 percent more this year: \$3.29 a pound, substantially more than a supermarket turkey.

But for turkey true believers, price isn't the point.

"The taste, there's no comparison," said Harry Kutner, 60, a [Garden](#) City lawyer and a 25-year customer who stopped in Miloski's on a quiet Monday morning last month to pick up a chicken. "My wife initially thought I

was nuts to pay the per-pound price when you can get it free as a come-on at some supermarket. And I insisted, and it's been good ever since."

Getting a fresh Long Island turkey requires a certain amount of fortitude. Neither Long Island nor New York State is a turkey powerhouse. The New York Department of Agriculture estimates the state will produce 630,000 turkeys this year, a 20 percent increase over the last decade. (The nation's largest turkey producer, Minnesota, expects to raise 46 million turkeys this year.) Plainville Farms near Syracuse produces about 600,000.

Long Island's four turkey farms, plus two other outlets that no longer raise their turkeys on Long Island, offer free-range, fresh birds, though none uses organic feed, which all say is in short supply and prohibitively expensive anyway. Together they provide fewer than 10,000 Thanksgiving turkeys.

It's a niche market, but it typifies the interest that consumers around the country are demonstrating in locally produced food. That's what prompted Betsy Kennedy, 55, of Aquebogue, to visit Miloski's for the first time recently to ask about a Thanksgiving turkey.

"You know what's going into it," she said. "You know what they're feeding it. You know it's not being irradiated and getting all kinds of hormones and things like that."

Niche market or not, Long Island turkey producers sell out each year. Eve Kaplan-Walbrecht and her husband, Christopher, began raising turkeys at their organic farm, Garden of Eve in Riverhead, three years ago with about 60 birds. They're up to 100 heritage Bourbon reds, which go for a premium price of \$6.25 per pound.

"People who can afford it will pay as much as it takes to get something that tastes great," Ms. Kaplan-Walbrecht said. "People get so excited about them."

Which is the main reason she and other turkey farmers stay in business. Turkeys are problematical to raise — susceptible to disease, cold and a host of variables that seem to crop up during their four-month lives.

"If something can go wrong, it will," said Arthur Ludlow, 56, who's been raising turkeys at the family farm in Bridgehampton for 40 years. They are a sideline to what is now Mecox Bay Dairy, a cheese operation after 130 years as a potato farm.

Mr. Ludlow remembers the time he found half his turkeys dead for no apparent reason, though he thinks weasels might have killed them. With feed costs and all the other difficulties, he said, he considers getting out of turkey producing every year.

"I have so many customers that would be so upset if I stopped, so I'm kind of stuck," he said.

But it's tempting. Turkey farmers know their largely once-a-year product struts around on extremely valuable land.

"It's always in your head," said Richard King, whose North Sea Farms in Southampton will raise 700 turkeys this year — up from 50 when he started a dozen years ago.

For Mr. King, the positives still outweigh the negatives.

“It’s fun,” he said. “We can keep doing this — we’ll see how it goes. You never know. The goal is always to stay.”

From \$2.99 to \$6.25 a Pound

BRIDGEHAMPTON Mecox Bay Dairy, Mecox Road; (631) 537-0335. 250 turkeys, \$3.15 a pound; sold by advance order.

CALVERTON Will Miloski’s Poultry Farm, 4418 Route 25; (631) 727-0239. 4,000 turkeys, \$3.29 a pound; first come, first served, starting Nov. 17. No credit cards.

HUNTINGTON Makinajian Farm, 276 Cuba Hill Road; (631) 368-9320. 600 turkeys raised in upstate New York, \$2.99 a pound; sold by advance order.

KINGS PARK Raleigh’s Poultry Farm, 335 Old Indian Head Road; (631) 269-4428. 1,500 turkeys raised in Pennsylvania; advance orders until around Nov. 17.

RIVERHEAD [Garden](#) of Eve Farm, 4558 Sound Avenue; (631) 680-1699.

www.gardenofefefarm.com. 100 heritage turkeys, \$6.25 a pound, sold by advance order.

SOUTHAMPTON North Sea Farms, 1060 Noyac Road; (631) 283-0735. 700 turkeys, \$3.29 a pound; advance orders until Nov. 21.

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