



Sterling's
Ekonk Hill
Turkey Farm
sells more
than just
turkeys

By Christina Levere



LET'S BE HONEST.

November isn't a great time of year to be a turkey. Unless you're one of the lucky birds strutting in the grass, basking in the sunshine and gobbling with your buddies — all 4,000 of them — at Sterling's Ekonk Hill Turkey Farm.

Katherine Hermonot, one of the daughters in the Hermonot family, which owns and operates Ekonk Hill, said the family never imagined they'd have so many, but that's what's nice about the Hermonot family's farm: everything and everyone seem to have fallen into place organically.

The Hermonot family has always been a farming family. In the 1990s they lived in western Connecticut, where they leased a dairy farm. After concluding that a bottling plant was too expensive to pursue, they packed up and, in 1998, moved to a hobby farm in Sterling and decided to raise poultry. At the time, the farm was only six acres.

The family had a long-standing tradition of raising everything that was served on their table so, naturally, turkeys were one of the animals they chose to raise; because the farm sat on Ekonk Hill, they named it Ekonk Hill Turkey Farm.

"We started with 15 turkeys and a farm stand," Katherine said. "It kind of took off from there. People saw the turkeys and asked if we were selling them, and it started the thought process. My two older brothers, Jonathon and Christopher, and my father, Richard, said, 'Let's try this!' So we grew the number of turkeys we had to 30. That went well. We sold every turkey. It's doubled every year since, roughly. We eventually hit 1,200, and now we are at 4,000. Every year we grow a little more."

Perhaps "a little more" is a misnomer. Ekonk Hill is now the largest grower of pasture-raised turkeys in Connecticut, and in 2015 their farm grew by 2,800 percent.

But before we get to all of that, let's talk turkeys.

WHICH BIRD IS BEST?

Ekonk Hill raises two types of turkeys: Pasture-Raised Broad Breasted White Turkeys and Free-Range Heritage Turkeys. The Broad Breasted White Turkeys are the most popular; they are, commercially, the most widely used breed of domesticated turkey. They range in size from 10 pounds to 40 pounds.

"They are the plumpest birds, with a nice big breast



The Hermonots: Ashley, left, Katherine, and Elena





THE NATIONAL TURKEY FEDERATION (WWW.EATTURKEY.COM – REALLY!) REPORTED THAT IN 2017, ABOUT 45 MILLION TURKEYS WERE CONSUMED. ACCORDING TO STATISTICS FROM THE UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE (USDA), THAT’S MORE THAN 18 PERCENT OF ALL THE 244.5 MILLION TURKEYS RAISED ON AMERICAN FARMS IN 2017.

and long legs,” Katherine said. “They have the most white meat, which is usually what people prefer.”

Heritage Turkeys, on the hand, range in size from eight to 14 pounds. They are bonier, but they have more dark meat, and their meat is tastier. Heritage Turkeys are one of a variety of domestic turkey that retains characteristics no longer present in the majority of turkeys raised for consumption since the mid-20th century. That’s important to the Hermonot family: “We really support keeping genetic diversity alive,” Katherine said.

What separates Ekonk Hill’s turkeys from their mass-produced counterparts is the bird’s diet and lifestyle.

The turkeys are raised on open green pas-

ture with access to feed, shelter, sunshine, corn to seek shade under, dust to roll in, bugs to snack on and fresh air. Katherine noted that in the farm’s early days, the turkeys were kept by the road, but that they wandered too much. Where they are now, set off from the road and behind an electric fence on more acreage, keeps them safe from curious passers-by — and traffic. An Anatolian Shepherd named Blue keeps watch over them at night.

The birds don’t receive growth stimulants or hormones (many commercial farms use low levels of antibiotics in the feed as a growth stimulant). If a turkey gets sick appropriate measures are taken but with all of that fresh air, green grass and sunshine, the birds stay rather healthy. The birds aren’t

shipped to another location for slaughter — they’re processed humanely right there on the farm in a state-inspected facility — which means less stress for the animal and a better-tasting meat.

When animals endure high stress before slaughter, it affects the tenderness of the meat. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) notes: “The carcass meat is darker and drier than normal and has a much firmer texture. The muscle glycogen has been used up during the period of handling, transport and pre-slaughter and as a result, after slaughter, there is little lactic acid production, which results in Dark Firm and Dry (DFD) meat. DFD meat means that the carcass was from an animal that was stressed, injured or diseased before being slaughtered.”

Finally, Ekonk Hill doesn’t use additives or preservatives during processing. The turkeys are sold fresh, not frozen. While the folks at Ekonk Hill do their best to give customers the closest weight to the size they request, they cannot guarantee exact sizes.

“There are things that cause a bird’s size to fluctuate,” Katherine said. “Warm weather means the turkeys eat less. Last fall was really, really warm, and the birds were smaller because of it. Customers understand there are fluctuations.”

Customers also understand that they’re paying a higher price for the birds, which range from \$4.99 per pound for Pasture-Raised Turkeys and \$11.99 per pound for Heritage Turkeys. In comparison, a Butterball frozen turkey can cost as little as 99 cents per pound, depending on where you shop.

“It’s an extreme holiday purchase for me,” Laurie Loftus, of Pawcatuck, said. “But I got the biggest bird I could get [at Ekonk Hill], and it’s worth it. I worked on an organic pig farm in Maine and I’m spoiled from that — the meat tastes so much better.” A fan of darker meat, Laurie opted for the Heritage Turkey. “It was off the chart delicious,” she said. “I’d never go back to a conventional bird. The vast majority of my diet is organic. I like that I know exactly what I’m getting. There’s a level of appreciation in that. It’s a lifestyle.”



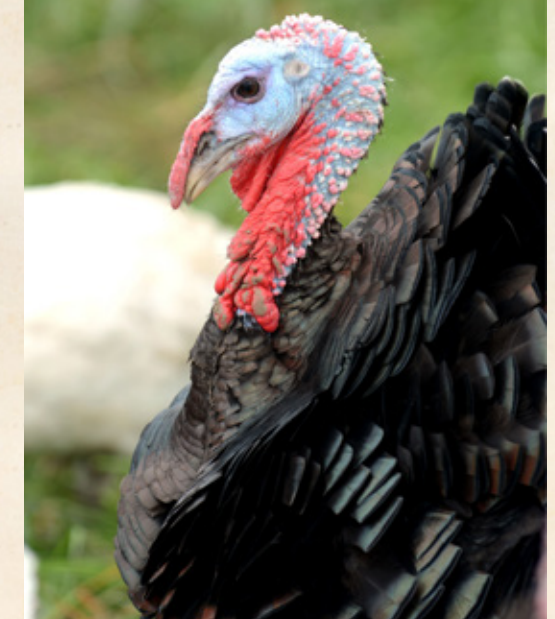
BROAD BREASTED WHITE

HIGHLY POPULAR • PLUMPER •
MORE WHITE MEAT • SHORTER BREAST BONES •
LARGER BREASTS



HERITAGE

BONIER • MORE DARK MEAT • PRIZED FOR
RICH FLAVOR AND BEAUTIFUL PLUMAGE





Other aspects of the farm have grown as well. The family opened a seasonal country store that sells their own baked goods such as apple cider donuts, locally-made soaps and salves, handcrafted candles, specialty pickles, pottery and maple syrup. It also sells the farm's dairy products, turkey pies and other frozen meats. In 2006, Katherine's mother Elena started making homemade ice cream at the Brown Cow Café (inspired by the farm's Jersey cow, Blossom) within the store.

So that's where the Hermonots were: steadily growing at a comfortable pace, acquiring new products and machinery and extra manpower when needed, until 2015, when the farm across the road — Highland Farm — suddenly went up for sale.

"We never thought that would happen," Katherine said.

The farm had been owned by the Frink family for decades and now its 347 acres were up for grabs. According to Katherine, the family didn't sleep a night that week as they contemplated what to do. Stay at a comfortable size and continue to slowly grow? Or springboard from 12 acres to 360 acres in a matter of days?

"It was do or die," Katherine said, "and we jumped in. We weren't ready, but what if someone else bought it?"

Someone else didn't.

NEW PASTURES

Now that the Ekonk Hill Turkey Farm had grown by 347 acres, the family expanded their brood of chickens, geese, turkeys and capons (or castrated roosters) into more pasture-fed animals. They added two breeds of cattle: Angus cows and Highland cows. Angus cows are a Scottish breed of small beef cattle whose native color is black. Highland cows, named for their place of origin in the Highlands and Outer Hebrides islands of Scotland, have long horns and wavy coats. The family named each and every cow.

"We named the Highland cows after Vikings," Katherine said. As for the Angus cows, "Broccoli is the friendliest."

The additional acreage also enabled the family to grow and sell hay, which is how Mel Wirth, a hobby farmer from Foster, Rhode Island, came to know the family.

The Wirths raise pigs, turkeys and guinea hens who eat hay, and "Ekonk Hill put an ad on Craigslist for hay, and they had a good price so we started getting our hay from them," Mel said. Things were moving along smoothly until one night, when the Wirths found themselves in a dire situation.

"Right before we were supposed to get a big snow storm I realized my husband didn't get any hay, and we were about to run out," Mel said. "It was a big deal because our goats were pregnant and needed to eat." (A lack of food can mean nutritionally-induced pregnancy problems in does).

"I couldn't wait until the next day because if the snow was heavy, which is what it was expected to be, it would hard to transport," Mel said. "So I texted Katie at 10 p.m. and said, 'Please, we need hay before the storm' and she met me at the barn at 11 p.m. and helped me load up 10 bales of hay. I



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a dairy farmer in Woodstock.
 “Is there a desk job for me?” Katherine asked. “No. I wouldn’t have it any other way. When I was away [she studied sustainable agriculture abroad] I always wanted to be here. We all work alongside each other.”

FINALLY, TURKEY TIME

When I asked Mel if the Wirths’ turkeys would ever don decorative holders on their legs for Thanksgiving, her answer was an emphatic no. “Our turkeys are more like pets.” (The couple took in one male from someone who was moving, then got the turkey a friend. “The first one came with the name Tom, so we thought it befitting to name the second one Jerry,” she said.) “We don’t slaughter our animals. And because our turkeys are so big they actually scare away predators like hawks and foxes.”

The Wirths have, however, ordered turkeys from Ekonk Hill for Thanksgiving and likely will again. For her, it’s the humane and ethical treatment of the birds — a philosophy in harmony with her own about how animals ought to be treated — that sets the farm apart.

“People don’t understand that the turkeys at Ekonk Hill have a better lifestyle than commercially raised turkeys,” she said. “Lifestyle makes a huge difference. They’re fed a better quality of feed, they are not shoved into cages or small spaces. They’re happier.”

And that translates into a better tasting bird — which is really, really important because, let’s be honest, after your friends, in-laws and extended family have finally departed and you’re finally alone with all of those juicy leftovers, well, that might just be the most delicious part of the Thanksgiving holiday.



don’t know many people who would do that. She understood the situation.”

And that’s where the emphasis on organic comes in: After spending time at Ekonk Hill, it’s easy to see that the term extends to much more than a way

to grow food. You see that raising and caring for animals is in the Hermonots’ blood. Her sister Ashley also helps at Ekonk Hill. Katherine’s brother Christopher raises sheep on his farm in Franklin. Her other brother Jonathan is



SPECIAL EVENTS AT EKONK HILL TURKEY FARM

Throughout the year, the farm hosts a number of fun activities, including classic car shows, sheep shearing day and ice cream socials. The always popular Harvest Festival, held in the fall, includes a corn maze, scavenger hunt, moon bounce, visits with barnyard animals, wagon rides, pick-your-own pumpkins and pumpkin decorating, face painting, games of corn hole and more. Don’t forget to try the Hot Gobbler Sundae, made with mashed potatoes, stuffing, turkey, gravy, and a dollop of cranberry on top, and their seasonal ice cream flavors such as Holly Berry (raspberry ice cream with dried cranberries and white chocolate chips) and Cranberry Nut, cranberry ice cream with dried cranberries and walnuts.

