

Wind Dancer Ranch



What's The Difference?

Our Heritage breed turkeys are completely different birds than the commercial turkey. They are different because of their breed, what they eat, and the humane, natural life they live. Their bodies are built for function rather than the optimized production of white meat. As free-ranging omnivores their diet includes grass, bugs, seeds, nuts, and grains. Sometimes they eat my tomatoes and figs when I cannot keep them out of the garden. And they live a natural turkey life being able to run, forage, fly, bathe, and mate. They are active and range all over the farm visiting the almond orchard, walnut orchard, front porch, and garden several times a day.

Heritage Turkey Body Shape

The first thing you will notice if you have a Heritage turkey tom is the dramatically different body shape than you are probably used to with commercial birds. The breast bone will be very pronounced. There will not be quite as distinct of a difference if you got a Heritage hen. While there definitely is less white meat on a Heritage bird than a commercial bird, it is not as much less as you might think from looking at that pronounced breast bone. They are simply shaped differently - their rib cage is more "vertical" while the commercial bird's is more "horizontal".

Heritage Turkey Meat Texture

Our birds take full advantage of their free range lifestyle and as a result their muscles are very toned. The breast meat will have a texture more like a pheasant or wild bird. The legs have done a lot of walking and could be tough if overcooked. We recommend a recipe like the steam roasted one below to keep them tender. Keep them moist, cook quickly, and cook to a safe but not overheated cooking temperature.

Heritage Turkey Skin Texture

A Heritage turkey's skin is thicker than a store bought bird and has a good layer of fat in and beneath it. Don't be afraid of the fat - it's a good thing and naturally bastes the meat. The skin burns more easily so you need to watch how it is browning and cover with foil when it just starts to brown (you can uncover later if it's not brown enough). Evenly browned skin will be very tasty and much thicker than you are used to with store birds.

Cooking Heritage Turkey

Here are some tips on cooking a Heritage breed turkey.

Brining

Brining is not necessary to experience the flavors of these birds. It won't hurt anything but we highly recommend skipping the brine and just letting the natural flavors come through.

Cooking Styles

Oven roasting, rotisserie, and hot oil frying all work well. Just keep in mind that you want to cook at a hot temperature in a short amount of time. "Hot and fast" is the mantra. If you are frying in hot oil please make sure your kettle is large enough for your bird. A hen or tom under 14 lbs should be okay. But once you get above 14 lbs that breast bone might be too big for smaller kettles.

Giblets

The giblets will be in a plastic bag in the body cavity. If your bird was a particularly good eater there might be some of the body cavity fat saved in your giblet bag. This fat is excellent for adding even more flavor to your stuffing when cooked with the giblets or in your basting liquid.

Steam Roasting Recipe

This recipe is a good starter recipe if it's your first year cooking a Heritage turkey. Be sure you note these two very important points:

- ALWAYS cook your stuffing before putting it in a Heritage turkey. Because the birds are cooked hot and fast the stuffing will not cook completely if it's only cooked inside the bird.
- Use a meat thermometer to determine when the bird is done (not a pre-set pop up thermometer - a pre-set pop up will over cook the meat).

Set your oven to 450 degrees. Plan on cooking the bird 1 hour for every 7 lbs of size.

Rinse the bird well and pat it dry. Put the pre-cooked stuffing in the bird - there are two places for the stuffing on these birds. The first is in the body cavity and the second is in front of the breast bone where you see two big flaps of skin. Fill the cavity behind those skin flaps with stuffing till its bulging and then truss the skin with a couple of trussing needles.

Put approximately 1 to 2 inches of water in the bottom of the roasting pan. The water should come partially up the thigh of the bird but not cover the breast meat. The purpose of this water is two-fold. It will steam the dark meat keeping it moist and tender. And it will serve as the basis for your gravy by catching the drippings. Without this water you won't have gravy as the drippings won't survive the high oven temps. You can add spices, herbs, and veggies to the water depending on what you like. Some ideas include:

- Wine, sherry, or beer
- Herbs - particularly to compliment your stuffing flavor
- Onions, carrots, and other root veggies
- Butter and/or body cavity fat

Roast the bird at 450 degrees and keep an eye on the skin. Whenever the skin just starts to get golden cover the bird with tin foil. Baste often through the cooking - start with butter and then later in the cooking cycle you can use the juice at the bottom of the roasting pan.

Roast at 450 degrees for half of the estimated cooking time then reduce the heat to 400 degrees. Baste often and keep an eye on the water at the bottom of the pan - don't let it evaporate completely. Add more if necessary. At the end of your cooking time you want enough of this water left to make gravy - but not so much that the drippings are too diluted.

Cook the bird until it reaches 140 to 160 degrees in the thigh. William Rubel suggests cooking to 145 degrees and we cook to 150 degrees with our own bird. Check the meat near the bones - if it is red cook a bit longer. If it is just slightly pink or clear cover the bird with foil and let sit (outside the oven) a bit longer. 160 degrees is the absolute max I would cook to but it will dry out the meat quite a bit.

After Thanksgiving: Don't forget to make turkey soup and stock. You will be surprised at how much meat is left on the bones. Make stock, pull out half the liquid and freeze it, then add more water and make your soup. Delicious!