

King of turkeys rules the roost

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DANBURY'S famous turkey farmers are preparing for a bumper Christmas after building a state-of-the-art hatchery capable of producing 200,000 chicks a week.

The Kelly family, who run Kelly's Turkeys, are now the UK's market leaders when it comes to the traditional festive bird, a far cry from the 1980s when they spent everything they had on the last remaining flock of rare-breed Bronze turkeys.

After helping re-popularise the free-range production of turkeys, they are now supplier to celebrity chefs like Gordon Ramsey, Delia Smith and Jamie Oliver, and even supply the turkeys for Prince Charles's famous Duchy range. The firm has an annual turnover of £9 million.

Now the Farmgate Hatcheries arm of the Kelly's empire, which helps produce turkey chicks, or poults as they are known in the industry, to other family-run firms across the country is expanding.

Pedigree

Paul Kelly, the managing director and face of the famous brand, believes that increased sales of free range, slow-grown and bronze meat in supermarkets means there is a much bigger market for his pedigree turkeys.

"You can't expect an exquisite eating experience if you only spend £25 on a turkey. You have to spend the money to get a mature turkey that has been dry-plucked and hung," he said.

The new technology means Danbury's hatching machines now replicate the conditions an egg would be kept in when it is being hatched by the hen.

"Every other part of our business in terms of the breed we use, the processing, the free range, the dry plucking of the hen is all artisan traditional methods, but when it comes to our hatching, that is the one area of our business now where it is all state of the art," said Mr Kelly, who holds the Guinness world record for being the faster turkey plucker and carver.

The development is part of an £800,000 five-year programme to develop breeding capacity in the pedigree farms in Essex and



HANDFUL OF POULTS: Paul Kelly with some of the young turkeys destined to end as Christmas dinner

Ayrshire in Scotland. The hatchery can now produce up to 200,000 poults a week, an increase of 40,000.

Mr Kelly also hopes that the larger capacity for hatching turkeys will allow more sales in Europe and the United States.

He said: "The biggest challenge we have got is getting the American consumer to appreciate that this is an artisan product all plucked and processed by hand, and no one in

America does it, they're all honed in on producing it as cheaply as possible"

Mr Kelly and his wife taste-test the best selected turkeys each February, March and April to ensure what they are breeding will give the best tasting meat.

"The first thing we taste is the fat, and from that I immediately know whether it will be good or bad," he said.

Each Kelly's turkey is about

double the price of a regular bird, but contains nearly double the breast meat, he claimed.

Mr Kelly wants to challenge the negative attitude towards turkey meat by persuading people to spend more for a better-tasting bird. "I want people to come away from Christmas dinner and say that was amazing. That has to be worth the extra £2.50 a person, and once people have made the jump, people will keep coming back."