

COUNTRY LIFE

Talking TURKEY

The run-up to Christmas is the busiest time of the year for Essex-based turkey farmer Paul Kelly, whose KellyBronze turkeys are, for so many, the high point of the festive table

In the mid 1980s, with just £2,800 left in the company's coffers, Paul Kelly and his father Derek made a decision that would make or break the family firm. After more than a decade spent rearing turkey stock from Oregon for Christmas from their family home in Essex, the Kellys were facing ever-increasing competition from the supermarket giants, and the future of the business looked bleak.

With cash in hand, they went around the country and bought up all the existing Bronze turkeys, brought them back to Essex and started to breed them in the wild. The concept was almost unheard of back then – turkeys roaming freely in copses, pastures, stubble fields and woodland during the day, and sheltered in open-sided pole barns with deep straw at night. As the company website states, a KellyBronze turkey is “more than a breed – it is a philosophy”.

Within a few years, KellyBronze had become an award-winning brand that could claim royalty among its customers. Today, of the 10 million turkeys bred for Christmas in the UK every year, 10,000 of them are KellyBronze.

“When we first started, everything was new to us,” says father-of-three Paul. “We experimented as we went along, and we still experiment today to keep improving.”

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Running the business has been a real family affair, with Derek and his wife Molly, Paul and his sister Lyn all involved in making it a success. In 1990 a visit to the Kelly farm by Delia Smith to feature it on one of her TV programmes, and a subsequent mention of KellyBronze turkeys in her cookery book *Delia Smith's Christmas*, gave a much needed and welcome boost to the family's fortunes.

“That was the turning point,” says Paul. And to this day, Delia remains friends with the family. In fact, on the day of my visit, Derek, now retired, had been invited by Delia to watch her beloved Norwich play football.

The reason why KellyBronze has become synonymous with Christmas dinner is no secret – it lies in the superior flavour and texture of its meat. After hatching in spring, the turkeys mature naturally over several months on a diet of locally grown cereals and vegetable protein, without additives, drugs or growth promoters.

“They also love fruits, especially raspberries and blackcurrants,”

reveals Paul as he introduces me and my daughter to some of the turkeys roaming wild in one of the copses the family rents from a local landowner. Paul's turkeys are an inquisitive bunch, with the smaller birds taking their place behind the leaders of the pack as they edge forwards to find out more about their visitors in brightly coloured wellies. As the late autumn sun breaks through the trees, you can see the beautiful sheen on the birds' feathers glistening green, bronze and gold.

After spending the summer and first few weeks of autumn roaming freely outdoors, the turkeys are brought in undercover in November, before the temperature drops too low and the bad weather descends. They are then killed and hand-plucked (Paul is one of the fastest turkey-pluckers around – three birds in 11 minutes and 31 seconds) and hung in a chilled environment for at least 14 days to develop an even fuller flavour.

You might expect that, like Santa, Paul and his family get to put their feet up for a bit from Boxing Day.

But you'd be wrong – from Christmas onwards, Paul is thinking about next year's turkeys. The breeding and hatching season lasts until May, and the new birds are released into the wild in June.

Paul's passion for what he does is contagious. A tour of the farm, a meet and greet with the turkeys, and back to Paul's for the best turkey rolls ever and you realise that there are a lot worse jobs than being a turkey farmer.

His passion, vision and business acumen have resulted in a clutch of awards. This year alone KellyBronze won Best Christmas Traditional Product for the eighth year running at the British Turkey Awards, and was awarded a coveted 3-star rating at the Great Taste Awards, organised by the Guild of Fine Food.

“We have won numerous accolades,” says Paul, “not just for the taste of our birds, but also for the way we farm them. Our facilities are inspected to ensure compliance with food hygiene regulations.”

In order to ensure the quality of KellyBronze turkeys is protected during transport to shops and homes, they are carefully wrapped and boxed. And to help you make the most of your Christmas meal, also included is advice on cooking, recipes, tips and some special decoration for the festive table.

INTERVIEW: SARAH HAMILTON-WALKER