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# LET'S TALK TURKEY

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Christmas comes but once a year, so you won't want to scrimp on your bird. But which of the many varieties will make a cracker of a meal on the day? **ANNIE BELL** investigates

If you are only going to eat turkey once a year, it seems fair to want the very best. A bronze, correct? Actually, make that a free-range bronze. And, with today's deliveries and online shopping services, we don't even need to get up at 6am to join the queue snaking round the block. What could be easier? Mouse at the ready, add to basket, job done.

Or not, perhaps. A few more clicks takes me to Marks & Spencer's website, where I can choose from five different whole turkeys – a traditionally dressed free-range bronze, a free-range turkey, an organic bronze free-range turkey, a butter-basted Oakham turkey stuffed with pork, cranberries and clementines, and a Pembrokeshire bronze free-range turkey. Oh yes, and nine different types of crown and breast.

And suddenly I realise that, actually, I haven't got a clue. While it's lovely to have so much choice, I really don't know where to start. What should I be looking for and what is quality based on? Do all these different turkeys honestly taste that different?

It is hard to divorce the words "bronze turkey" from the farmer and breeder Paul Kelly, whose family have taken such pains to put it back onto our menus. "Up until the 1950s, all turkeys were bronze," Kelly says, deriving from the original bird, which came over from Mexico. But around the time that consumers started to demand ever-whiter bread, they also developed a distaste for the blackened stubble on a turkey. Through breeding the feather colour out of the bird, before long, a white became standard. "A white turkey in effect is an albino, in layman's terms," Kelly says.

And then, to satisfy the demand for white meat over dark, breeders concentrated on developing bigger breasted and faster-growing birds. And voilà, the "standard fresh" turkeys of the Sixties and Seventies that were all size and swank and no flavour became the norm on our Christmas tables. Little could save them except enough gravy to offset their shortcomings.

Some 30 years back, the Kelly family made it their mission to rescue what remained of the bronze stock, buying up isolated pockets from around the country and merging them into a single flock to establish a breeding programme. The Kelly bronze is the bird by which we judge all others, and they supply poults to farmers throughout the country.

Would that the story ended there, happily. Today, although all of the supermarkets will offer a bronze in their premium range, only about 75 per cent of those are what Kelly refers to as "bronze on bronze", that is both ma and pa. The remainder are bronze on white, the darker colour being the dominant gene, a practice that may well increase as retailers look to reduce costs by breeding the bronze feather on to fast-grown whites. Trying to find out whether your bird is pure or mixed breed is a hiding to nowhere. It certainly won't be in Ocado's small print, or any other supermarket's for that matter, and, often, even good independent butchers will be left scratching their heads and disappearing into the back room for advice.

So, as consumers, we need to look beyond the colour of the bird's feathers for other indicators, and the three words that speak volumes are "mature", "dry-plucked" and "hung". It is