



Disrupted Thanksgiving

Coronavirus alters tradition. What's that mean if you raise turkeys?

By JEANNIE ORVINO
For the North Bay Business Journal

Celebrating Thanksgiving 2020. Resurgence of the coronavirus has added another layer of change: smaller gatherings, minimal travel and cooking at home or bringing in takeout for immediate family, if that.

That disrupted Thanksgiving has also left turkey producers and their clients to ponder: Did farmers raise enough of the right size birds? Did grocers order what will sell? With restaurants either closed, or forced to limit occupancy, how will this reduced demand for wholesale product affect the supplier?

If you are a poultry farmer, a meat purveyor or a grocer, the situation is either a bummer or a blessing; it depends on how well you read the tea leaves back in the month of March. And how well you are able to adjust on the fly.

RALEY'S SUPERMARKETS

Chelsea Minor, corporate director of Public Affairs for Raley's, says, "We learned a lot from the first wave (of the coronavirus) and projected an increase in demand. We pre-bought and pre-stocked many holiday staples which customers are already purchasing."

She says the largest supply of turkeys, both frozen and fresh, comes from Minnesota, but Raley's

also buys in California from Diestel under a "Fresh Plump and Juicy" label exclusive to their stores. The company is in a good position to make adjustments because some of their top meat suppliers (like Diestel, Foster Farms, Harris Ranch) are local.

"For Thanksgiving, we increased our turkey order, both fresh and frozen, by 20%," Minor continues. "We believe our supply chain is solid and have not seen a shortage of turkeys. Customers will have plenty of size options."

She does say that they are seeing larger turkeys in the frozen category. Turkeys were 'on the ground' longer, because processing facilities were dealing with chickens first.

The facilities were also challenged by worker shortages due to illness, and production was slowed down somewhat because of adhering to strict safety protocols.

"On the positive side, large birds mean more leftovers," says Minor. "And three families that might have shared one turkey at a gathering are now each buying their own turkey. Our poultry sales have been sky high."

OLIVER'S MARKET

Todd Davis is the meat and seafood coordinator at Oliver's Market, an employee-owned social purpose

corporation, founded in Sonoma County in 1988, with a "focus on local."

Davis says he ordered his Thanksgiving turkeys in March — 4,200 fresh birds to supply the four Oliver's locations, a quantity 5% higher than last year. He orders from Diestel Turkey Ranch and carries their Natural Petite, Natural Hens, Heidi Organic, Heirloom and Smoked along with some of the Willie Bird brand.

"The supplier produces based on the need of the retailer," Davis says. "In July or August, the supplier sends an update about how things are going and gives us an opportunity to adjust our order, but I didn't make any adjustments this summer."

Davis doesn't think he will have a problem for Thanksgiving because he ordered turkeys in two-pound increments and will have a variety of sizes.

"I believe people always order a bigger size than they need. National producers may be having difficulty, but our meat sales have been through the roof."

HERITAGE TURKEY PROJECT

Any cook who doesn't mind paying \$9.50 per pound



Todd Davis

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can purchase a locally-raised organic turkey for their Thanksgiving table through the Heritage Turkey Project. Catherine and Chuck Thode have been the stewards of this project for 15 years.

“The Project” turkeys have been bred and cared for by 4-H and FFA youth who are the direct recipients of the proceeds. Sales records from last year show that a boy who grew 24 birds earned a grand total of \$2,800; and a family group in Sonoma consisting of two siblings and a cousin raised 36 birds and earned \$4,800. Each turkey has a wing tab with a number that identifies the breed (Bourbon Red, Bronze, or Naragansett) and the young person who raised it.

“Of course, they have to buy large quantities of high-quality organic feed out of those earnings,” Catherine Thode notes. “These kids are operating in a competitive market scenario, and gain experience that may encourage them to become a turkey farmer. We need farmers!”

In this season’s Heritage Turkey Project, 15-18 young people and their families are raising over 250 birds for sale. The usual target is 225 but Thode believes that with more youngsters “distance learning” at home, the kids had time on their hands, and welcomed something to be involved in.

The never-frozen, fresh turkeys will be available for pickup right before Thanksgiving. “The meat of these birds is extremely flavorful, moist and tender. A New York Times review called them ‘the essence of turkey,’” Thode says proudly.

These birds take longer to grow to maturity — a characteristic of the heritage designation — but they beat out their industrial, broad-breasted cousins with infinitely better taste. As of the end of October, the project’s supply was nearly sold out.

Other definitive characteristics of heritage turkeys are that they mate naturally (hens are not artificially inseminated to produce their eggs) and they have a long productive life span. Their genetic lines are a few hundred years old. Not bred to have some body parts out of proportion, these turkeys can fly! That’s why a safe coop is one that has netting over the top.

Thode says that when the coronavirus hit in February, she was having doubts.

“Farmers were struggling from



HERITAGE TURKEY PROJECT

TALKING TURKEY

Butterball Turkey’s “Turkey Talk-Line” (1-800-BUTTERBALL 800-288-8372 or text 844-877-3456) has been providing a panel of professionals to answer an advice line for more than thirty years.

According to the Washington Post, Turkey Talk’s director estimates a big uptick in business this holiday season.

“With more panicked first-time cooks wanting to know about thawing times and cooking temperatures, we think our call numbers are going to soar. Part of our job this year will be to help people relax a bit and try to celebrate the good.”

fires and floods already, and now we had to wonder, will people still have gatherings? Should we reduce the price? But we decided to go forward and open up sales sooner to better gauge the demand.”

She also observed, “One benefit of the pandemic is that people started to get more in touch with where their meat was coming from and more diligent in buying directly from farmers where they could. Families feel safer getting their food from a CSA box or a farm stand.”

COVID-19 safety protocols have required a change in the procedures for customers picking up their birds. Upon a suggestion from their collaborators at Slow Food Sonoma County, the staff is using

SignUpGenius software to schedule 30-minute time slots with a maximum of six people in each slot. This allows time to do the paperwork, control the flow of personnel, and move the product from cold storage.

“It’s all part of the learning process for the 4-H kids,” Thode says. “Farmers are constantly adapting to circumstances.”

DIESTEL TURKEYS, WILLIE BIRD

Early in the summer of 2020, Willie Bird Turkeys, an iconic Sonoma County agricultural business founded by the late Willie Benedetti, was sold to Diestel Family Ranch. Benedetti was a fourth-generation rancher who got his start, like the Heritage Turkey participants, raising turkeys for an FFA project. Heidi Diestel, another fourth-generation rancher, says that her family was “honored to acquire the brand and keep Willie’s legacy alive.”

In its prime, Benedetti’s operation raised 85,000 turkeys a year, and became famous as well for his smoked products and barbecued turkey legs whose aroma permeated many a local street market and county fair. Unfortunately, with the cancellation of fairs and closure of theme parks, the demand for mass quantities of those delicious turkey legs has dried up.

The Diestel Ranch is one of the few independent family-owned and operated farms supplying turkey products to California and the Pacific Northwest. Heidi, whose brother Jason and husband Jared Orrock both have executive roles at Diestel, does not reveal production numbers or figures.

“We have an array of customers: grocery chains, organic and co-op groceries, online, some Whole Foods, and Williams Sonoma that takes our Willie Bird turkeys,” she says. “Since 1949, we have always provided the most sustainable and natural environments for our birds. We don’t push the turkeys to grow up faster than what is naturally intended.”

Heidi says the pandemic year has been “volatile.” While restaurant orders have been down, retail products have been in higher demand—smaller turkeys, turkey breasts and parts, turkey sausage.

“We didn’t adjust anything drastically. It was a question of whether we could sell the product we were raising. We don’t like to make big shifts; we make slow, methodical



Heidi Diestel



ERIC WORDEN

What’s left of the large brick oven and rotisserie at Eric Worden’s home after the Glass Fire.

‘We plan to come back strong’

By JEANNIE ORVINO
For the North Bay Business Journal

Linda Gile has worked for Willie Bird Turkeys for nearly 28 years, doing the bookkeeping before Willie Benedetti’s operation was bought by Diestel in August 2020, and currently, continuing her administrative duties for the store on Highway 12 near Llano Road.

She keeps track of the holiday turkey orders and does “a host of other things including making sandwiches in the deli.”

The store has been allotted 3,000 fresh turkeys and 1,000 smoked for this season.

Customers are requesting smaller sizes, but Linda tells the story of one gentleman who has, for decades, reserved her two biggest birds for a family gathering.

That Thanksgiving feast won’t be happening this year, though, and not primarily because of COVID-19 restrictions.

At the end of September, Eric Worden’s property on Los Alamos Road in east Santa Rosa was devastated by the Glass Fire; it reduced five family homes and more than 15 other buildings to ashes.

Worden, 61, used to prepare one turkey in a specially-outfitted oven and another on a brick-lined rotisserie in his living room. (A 2017 photo of a 48-pound turkey roasting on the spit remains posted on a wall at the Willie Bird store.)

“My grandfather purchased the property in 1940, and when I bought it from him in 1981, the party came with the house,” Worden says. “I was talking with the architect, and the rebuild plan includes a living room that can host 75 or 80 people. We plan to come back strong.”

Worden has ordered Willie Bird’s two largest turkeys anyway ... and is donating them to Meals on Wheels.

“We’ll deliver them on the Monday before Thanksgiving, in honor of the 88th turkey day party we would have had.”



Nichole Worden takes over turkey basting duties in 2017.

NORTH BAY PEOPLE & BUSINESS SHOWCASE

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Kristel Corson Promoted to New Position at Clover Sonoma as Chief Revenue Officer

Corson has been promoted to chief revenue officer (CRO), a newly created role for the company. The CRO position was set up to drive company growth through expansion into new markets and product categories. Corson will continue to be an integral member of the senior leadership team at the company, leading the sales and marketing departments.

When Corson was brought on as Director of Marketing in 2015, she was tasked with refreshing the Clover Stornetta Farms brand, a brand that hadn't been updated in more than a decade. As part of that transformation, the Clover Sonoma brand was established as a celebration of the company's heritage in Sonoma County for over three generations. Most significantly, Corson championed



Clover Sonoma's B-Corp certification as a way to align the business with its care for people, the community and the planet. Since taking over as VP of Sales and Marketing more than a year ago, Corson built a high-performance team to take on the significant opportunities ahead. In particular, Corson and her team have built upon the strong retail and food service customer relationships Clover Sonoma has enjoyed for many years and developed new and lasting relationships that will propel the company's growth.

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changes.”

The Diestel Turkey brand features both fresh and frozen whole turkeys from six to thirty pounds, and organic, all-natural, heirloom and pasture-raised varieties. The farm does some of its own processing and works with other out-of-state processors, choosing them based on who has the correct equipment for what item.

Heidi Diestel says, “It’s steady as she goes. Since 1949 we’ve done everything but compromise the principles we were founded on to raise the leanest, cleanest, most delicious birds that money can buy.”

PITMAN FAMILY FARMS

Pitman Family Farms raises and processes chicken, turkey, duck and geese in Sanger, California, and has a facility in Utah where they handle 75-80% of their turkey business.

For the west coast, it has hundreds of thousands of turkeys and tens of thousands of heritage turkeys available. Shoppers in the North Bay will see the company’s “Mary’s Free Range” poultry brand at Mollie Stones, Berkeley Bowl, Petaluma Market, Fircrest Market and Big John Markets to name a few.

“About the supply, we always overproduce,” says Northern California Sales Representative Dan Sinkay. “In June, we reached out to our customers to see if they wanted to make adjustments to the holiday orders they placed in February. We offered smaller, frozen turkeys earlier to give our customers some insurance in case they ran out of small fresh turkeys.”

He explains that a small turkey is 8-12 pounds; a small to medium is 12-16 pounds.

Prior to the pandemic, restaurants and caterers would order bulk quantities of chicken thighs or breasts in large wholesale packages. But buyers at grocery stores want a cut-up chicken in a compact package for home use. This required Pitman Farms to engineer their plant to make more retail packaging, which is very labor intensive to produce.

Sinkay says other changes have included the development of additional products like breakfast sausage, deli meat and chicken hot dogs, as well as responding to increased popularity of ground turkey.

“What makes ground turkey in demand now is that it is relatively inexpensive, it freezes well, and can substitute for ground beef in anything from pasta sauce to burgers to tacos.”

VICTORIAN FARMSTEAD MEAT

Adam Parks, owner of Victorian Farmstead Meat Company, declares on his website: “You have reached the mecca of locally and sustainably raised meat, and

your partner in providing your family with the best that Sonoma and Marin counties have to offer.”

Parks, 50, grew up ranching in Tomales on his family’s 1,000-acre sheep ranch. After a business career in insurance and professional golf, he moved his young family to his grandparents’ farm in Sebastopol and co-founded VFMC, with his wife Laura, in 2010.

After 10 years in the meat business, Parks has only one brick-and-mortar location, inside Community Market at the Barlow Center. That butcher shop accounts for about one third of company revenue. The rest of it is divided between a consistent VFMC presence at farmers’ markets from Sonoma to Danville to San Jose (35%) and online sales (30%). Only about 5% of his business is in wholesale.

Parks’s original order for turkeys from Pitman Family Farms was in February before the pandemic hit, but it soon became apparent that “this situation was not going away. David Pitman made a decision to put more birds on the ground, so we would have a larger selection by Thanksgiving.”

Parks says he has nearly sold out his 400-turkey order.

“Our business doubled at the beginning of the pandemic when people were worried about not being able to get meat,” Parks recalls. “Families found out about us, learned that our products were different, of higher quality, humanely pasture-raised, and saw that the price gap was not as big as they thought.”

Because Victorian Farmstead already had a fleet of vans from selling at ten farmers’ markets every week, the company was able to pivot quickly to home delivery. At that time, Parks and his wife made a decision not to charge a delivery fee. “That really built up our business. On the 16th of March, we were able to make our first home deliveries—the benefit of being small and nimble!”

Parks reveals that last year his company did just over \$1 million in revenue and he expects to do more than \$2 million this year.

In a sense, the dramatic changes because of the pandemic were a big boon to small ranches and farmers.

“I can go down to Pitman and see how they are raising the poultry, be assured that their feed is non-GMO certified or organic and that they are operating to the standard we like,” Park says. “Even after things evened out with the meat supply, for every customer who returned to grocery store meat departments, we gained more. Our customers got accustomed to high quality and convenience. And with us, they have a personal butcher to consult with, not like at a chain where you talk to three different guys and they give you three different answers.”



Adam
Parks