

The Turkey Times

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The Versatile Turkey learns some new tricks



By Bob Neal

For The Turkey Farm, 2010 was a year of juggling some new activities even as we put aside some of the things we used to do.

After I suffered a heart attack on Feb. 7, we discontinued wholesaling, a step we had mulled for a few years but hadn't found the courage to take. My arteries provided the courage.

As we moved to all-retail, our range of activities rose, while we reduced our flock size by 31 percent, 2,200 as opposed to 3,200 in 2009.

We were able to spread Turkeys less densely on our ranges, and we were able to plant pumpkins and squash as Turkey feed.

At market, we began introducing seasonal items.

Our response to a cholera outbreak that began on Oct. 23 was swift and decisive, but couldn't save more than 200 infected Turkeys. And, it affected our Christmas operation.

Finally, we breathed easier as feed prices ebbed slightly. But then they took our breath away with sharp increases at the end of the season.

On the farm

The farm has six to seven acres of fenced range. At 100 square feet per bird, our ranges can accommodate about 2,700 Turkeys. To do that, we need good weather and good timing.

We can control one but not the other, and many autumns the ranges are too wet to be comfortable homes for the birds. So, we try to keep the ranges at or below optimal density.

As it turned out, 2010 was a nearly
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Pumpkins and new sausage add flavor to the farm in 2010

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perfect growing season, with warm, dry weather until mid-August before the wet autumn, which seems to have become our new normal, set in.

On March 31, we began the growing season with 400 poults hatched at Nicholas Turkeys in Lewisburg, W. Va.

Our subsequent hatches were from Bob's Turkey Farm in Lancaster, Mass., 1,000 on May 6 and 1,100 on June 10. The June birds started going onto range just as we began dressing the March flock, so we never had all the birds on range at once.

That took a great deal of pressure off our land.

The reduced pressure let us plant two ranges, about an acre, to pumpkins and squash. We plowed strips 42 inches wide and about 12 feet apart across both ranges and planted the pumpkins and squash in hills, six seeds to a hill, about six feet apart.

We cultivated three times and then let the pumpkins grow unchecked.

By mid-September, we had fields of bright orange, cream, green and blue. Just before we headed off to the Fryeburg Fair early in October, we turned Turkeys into those pens.

The birds took right to the pumpkins. By season's end there were few signs that these had been pumpkin fields. But volunteer plants in spring will mark the fruits that the Turkeys missed and the seeds they expelled.

Planting pumpkins nearly doubles the amount of food we can grow for our birds.

Modern Turkeys grow way too fast to be able to forage for all the food their bodies need. In the past, we provided perhaps 3 to 5 percent of our birds' feed by planting broad-leaves and perennial grasses.

With several tons of pumpkins in their ration, the birds got maybe 7 to 9 percent of their food from our land.

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The largest proportion of foraged feed we know of for Turkeys is about 20 percent, on a farm in Virginia that has hundreds of acres of grass and can move birds to new pens every day.

Market changes

After adding an item or two a year to our product line, we began last year to add seasonal items.

Late in February, we started making korv, a Swedish potato sausage, plus a Midwestern potato sausage, also Swedish, that derives its distinctive flavor from caraway seed.

In June, we introduced bratwurst and smoked Bavarian summer sausage. In September, we added a sausage with Maine apples and leeks and resumed making cranberry sausage and smoked kielbasa.

We also added two year-round sausages, smoked andouille and chorizo.

Andouille is a Cajun sausage long on garlic and cayenne. It is the spiciest sausage we make.

Chorizo comes from the Hispanic world and has as many versions as there are Spanish-speaking countries. We chose a Mexican chorizo that has coriander and cayenne.

All have been well received.

We have also begun packing several of our sausages in both loose (bulk) pack and links. Our first two sausages (mild and spicy) have long been offered in both loose pack and breakfast links.

Now we have added loose pack for the three fruit sausages (blueberry-maple, cranberry and apple-leek). The links for blueberry-maple are breakfast size (3/4 inch in diameter) and the others are sandwich size (1 1/4 inch.).

Cholera — again

On Oct. 23, a Saturday, an employee found six dead Turkeys piled in a corner of the brooder house. The next day, she found four.

On Oct. 25, there were 86 dead birds in three pens and the brooder.

We took two carcasses at once to the Animal Diagnostic Lab at the University of Maine. There, Dr. Anne Lichtenwalner, the Extension veterinarian and pathologist, and Brenda Kennedy-Wade, lab technician, wasted no time autopsying the carcasses and finding that their condition was consistent with cholera.

They sent samples to Arko Labs in Iowa, which was already making a vaccine for our birds against fowl cholera type no. 9, which infected our flocks from 2002 through 2004.

Arko has typed this new invader as fowl cholera no. 4. There are nine types of fowl cholera.

We probably never will know how the cholera got onto our ranges this time. Cholera requires a live host, so it could have come in with an animal that isn't affected by the cholera but carries it.

We also took immediate bio-security steps on the farm.

We cruised for mortality four times a day. We isolated clearly sick birds in one brooder bay to separate them from others that might pick up the disease by pecking sick birds.

Each of us who went onto ranges wore one set of boots to work in the infected ranges and another set to work in the uninfected. We washed and sanitized the tractor each time we took it to an uninfected range.

The bio-security measures worked. At the outbreak, we had three infected and three uninfected ranges. One uninfected range was bordered on two sides by infected ranges, yet

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Financial results: An encouraging disappointment

The financial outlook for relying solely on retail sales is strong.

For the final 11 months of 2010, we depended on our farmstore, farmers markets, our food concession at the Fryeburg Fair, Thanksgiving and Christmas. And, we undertook our 21st year of Community Supported Agriculture, which continued to grow. (See article on page 5.)

We showed sales gains in all those areas, save Christmas.

Farmstore

Our farmstore is a small part of our

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overall picture, accounting for about 6 percent of our annual cash sales.

But many CSA sharers draw on their shares at our store, and, of course, most of our Thanksgiving business is at the store, so it is a key part of our business.

Cash sales of year-round frozen items rose 8 percent in 2010, the second straight year of growth.

A different sales pattern emerged, though. The farmstore usually starts

slowly and builds through the year, with the largest sales in the fall. Last year, though, summer sales were very strong while spring and fall held about even. Winter is always a lonely season at the store.

Farmers markets

Last year was our 10th full season selling at the Crystal Spring Farmers Market in Brunswick, which runs from May through October.

The gains, while modest, were the first at Crystal Spring in three years
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Quick and careful action keeps flocks healthy for Thanksgiving

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we held off the disease from that range for nearly three weeks, until the birds there were ready to slaughter for Thanksgiving.

The other two uninfected ranges also stayed clean the rest of the year.

Besides the bio-security, we vaccinated the birds in the infected pens. On Oct. 25, we injected penicillin into more than 700 birds.

Almost at once, the daily mortality dropped below 10. But 10 adult birds is a daily loss of \$400-\$600 in sales.

Those losses continued until the birds had tested negative for penicillin, and then we injected the birds with oxy-tetracycline. Penicillin and oxy-tet mix disastrously, so the birds had to be free of the penicillin first.

The oxy-tetracycline stopped the cholera almost in its tracks, and our losses were low until we began Thanksgiving slaughter on Nov. 17, which was past the prescribed withdrawal time for oxy-tetracycline.

We had a great deal of help through this from Dr. Laura Leighton, a veterinarian at Penobscot Veterinary Services in Bangor. Dr. Leighton, a graduate of the University of Maine and of the veterinary school at the University of Pennsylvania, is developing a specialty in avian medicine.

Christmas slaughter

The cholera forced us to a step we had never taken, slaughtering the Christmas Turkeys early.

On Nov. 21, we dressed and froze the Christmas birds.

We told everyone who ordered for Christmas that the birds had been frozen for about four weeks and why. Two people canceled their orders.

By dressing the Christmas flock early, we broke the cycle of the cholera, which cannot survive more than a few days outside a live host.

Feed prices

The cost of feed soared in 2008 but had declined a bit in 2009. Prices in 2010 started lower than they had closed in 2009 and continued to drop slowly.

USDA forecasts and the advice of people who know commodity prices told us the price of corn and soy, the major ingredients in feed, would continue to drop slowly.

So, in September, we set our Thanksgiving price at \$2.95 lb., the same as in 2009.

Big mistake. Feed prices jumped by 13 percent in October and a bit more in November, and we were left holding the (feed) bag. Turkeys eat half the feed of their lives in the final quarter to third of their lives, so the price increase at the end went right down their gullets.

Now, with predictions that Congress will continue to suck up to the Iowa lobby and raise the requirement for ethanol in gasoline, the price of corn may rise again. The U.S., alone among ethanol-making countries, uses corn for ethanol.

The result, for us, is two increases since October in the prices we charge and a tightly held breath that we won't have to raise them again.

Finances: Slight gains in every category but one

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Cash sales rose 4.8 percent from 2009, a nice gain but 17 percent below our peak in 2007.

CSA draws at Crystal Spring set a record, up 14 percent from 2009 and up 6.9 percent from the previous record, set in 2008.

The Turkey Farm is a charter member of the Fort Andross Winter Market, which began in January 2009.

We sold eight times in 2009, and our weekly sales averaged about half of our weekly sales at Crystal Spring. In 2010, though, we sold on 21 Saturdays, and weekly sales by the end of the season had risen to nearly two-thirds of the Crystal Spring average. That trend continued in the final two months of 2010.

The markets at Crystal Spring and Fort Andross are the largest outdoor and indoor markets in Maine and are easily the best in which we have participated. In 2010, we tried a new market in Farmington, but after four weeks we were spending more on labor to staff the market than we were taking in.

This fall, we tried the Midcoast Winter Market in Topsham, but with a result similar to Farmington. We continue to look for another market.

Fryeburg Fair

In our 21st season at Fryeburg, sales rose by 6.7 percent. This was the first increase since 2007, but was still more than 7 percent below 2007 and 8 percent below our best year, 2004.

Cost increases more than ate up the sales increase, with rent rising more than 10 percent, and most supplies rising, as well.

A big one-time added cost came the day after the fair, when our largest truck rolled over on Route 5 in Lovell. Neither driver nor passenger was

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hurt, but it cost more than \$1,000 to move and repair the truck enough to drive it home.

Insurance covered only the damage the truck did to other property, such as the utility pole it severed. We must stand the rest of the damage.

When it went over, the truck was carrying our four convection ovens and our steam table and our lights from the fair. All show effects of the crash, but we haven't assessed the extent of the damage.

Thanksgiving

Last year was our best year for retail Thanksgiving sales, especially at the farm.

We sold about 900 birds, up from 675 in 2009. Our previous best Thanksgiving had been 2008, when we sold 725 Turkeys at retail.

Part of the success was adding a new pickup point. We had discontinued our Portland drop when the Miss Portland Diner was sold. In 2010, we returned to Portland, using the park-

ing lot of Woodfords Congregational Church UCC.

It was a smashing success. Thirty-three orders picked up in 2009 at Brunswick were picked up in 2010 at Portland instead, and we added a commercial customer, who bought 52 Turkeys for his employees. In all, we had 110 orders at Portland.

The Brunswick pickup held strong at 188 orders. After you account for the 33 orders that went to Portland, the Brunswick total was down 12 from 2009 and down 42 from 2008.

The Orono pickup got stronger with 41 orders, up from 32 in 2009.

In all, 339 birds were picked up at the remote drops.

Christmas

Selling only out of the freezer — we had dressed the Christmas birds on Nov. 21 — we sold 102 Turkey at Christmas, down from 135 in 2009.

The bad news

Because of the cholera, the farm lost money last year and couldn't pay off its line of credit at the Androscoggin Bank.

To reduce costs and retire the line, I am working alone this winter.

We have laid off our two farm employees and our market helper at Brunswick. We expect the layoffs to last from two to four months.

Both farm workers have found winter jobs. The market helper is a student at Brunswick High School and will be able to concentrate on her studies and sports during the layoff.

This is a return to 2005-2008, when we had no winter crew, and I did all the meat-cutting and sales. We'll call back the crew as soon as we retire the final few thousand dollars on the line of credit. Then, we can begin borrowing on it again.

Welcome

If you're a new customer, welcome to The Turkey Times.

This is our quarterly newsletter, in which we keep regular customers posted on doings at the farm, on agriculture issues and on ordering procedures. We also publish recipes for Turkey, and we welcome yours for testing and publication.

We mail The Turkey Times to all regular customers in January, April, July and October. It is available on our website, theturkeyfarm.com.

We hope you enjoy it.

CSA continues to set records for the farm

Pardon us for sounding like a broken record — remember records?— but the strongest segment of our season was again Community Supported Agriculture.

During 2010, we set records (the milestone type) for CSA participation at three levels. We sold more shares (150) to more people (112) for more money (\$26,500) than ever.

Those figures are up from 135 shares, 104 sharers and \$21,500 in gross sales in 2009.

Thank you.

CSA, which came to Maine in 1989 and to our farm in 1990, continues to grow in Maine and nationally. According to localharvest.org, which compiles statistics on CSAs, there are 89 CSA farms in Maine.

Nationally, localharvest.org lists 3,229 CSA farms. The USDA reports that 12,549 farms market part or all of their production through CSAs, as of April 28, 2010.

Also according to localharvest.org, we are at the low end of the average size of CSA farms. It says 52 percent of farms have 101-500 sharers.

About 19 percent of our gross income and about 17 percent of our sales comes from CSA. The difference lies in the interest we pay on shares, with the average sharer drawing 9 percent more in products than she pays for the share.

Not long ago, CSA generated about 6 percent of our gross income.

Our farm's sales pattern is two-pronged, with strong year-round sales in the Brunswick area through two farmers markets and with steady but much slower year-round sales at our farmstore in New Sharon.

Thanksgiving sales, on the other

hand, are far stronger at the farm.

The dual nature pertains in CSA sharing, as well, with about 51 percent of sharers (57 individuals) in the Brunswick area.

Those 57 sharers in Brunswick bought a bit more than \$15,000 in shares, or about 58 percent of the total invested in our CSA in 2010.

Last season was our first full season of linking our CSA to the Good Shepherd Food Bank in Auburn. Good Shepherd is the umbrella or-

ganization for Maine's 600 food banks.

In 2009, we began donating unused parts of expired shares, including the interest, to Good Shepherd.

Quite a number of sharers liked the idea so well that they directed us to send part of the proceeds of their shares to Good Shepherd. Others bought entire shares or made contributions beyond their shares to GSF.

In 2010, Good Shepherd asked us to donate in the form of ground Turkey, to stretch the dollars farther.

We shipped 268 pounds of ground Turkey, with a value of \$1,362 to Good Shepherd. We also sent GSF the list of contributors so it can send a c k n o w l - e d g e m e n t s .

N a n c y Perry, who shepherds our contributions at GSF, told us the ground Turkey is grabbed right up by local food banks.

We are extremely grateful that our sharers and we have been able to provide so much great food for Maine's hungry.

How CSA works

In Community Supported Agriculture, people who eat food share the risks with farmers. Sharers invest ahead of time in the season's harvest and collect proceeds as the season unfolds.

In our case, sharers also collect interest on their investment, and the interest rises with the size of share (see box).

Besides the interest, sharers get the best Turkey available and get the satisfaction of helping to keep Maine farms strong.

Besides the money to pay for the season's production, the farmer gets a guaranteed market and gets the satisfaction of knowing customers support her work.

The payout		
Share	Interest	Yield
\$100	6 %	\$106
150	8 %	162
200	10 %	220
250	12 %	280
300	14 %	342

CSA Order Form

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Fill in and send to The Turkey Farm, 219 Mile Hill Road, New Sharon, Maine 4955:

Please sign me up for a share in Community Supported Agriculture for:

(circle) \$100 \$150 \$200 \$250 \$300

Name _____

Address _____

Town _____ State _____ Zip _____

Telephone _____ E-mail _____

Recipe***Easy Turkey tenders***

1 lb. Turkey tenderloins, steak or breast cutlets,
cut into strips about 1/4 inch thick
4 tablespoons butter, melted
2 teaspoons Worcestershire sauce
1 sleeve Ritz or other low-salt crackers, crushed

Mix butter and Worcestershire sauce. Marinate the Tur-

key pieces until they are well coated, about 10-20 minutes. Roll marinated Turkey pieces in the crushed cracker meal.

Place on a greased cookie sheet and sprinkle with parmesan cheese.

Bake in a pre-heated oven at 300-325 degrees for 10-15 minutes, until the internal temperature of the meat is 160-165 degrees.

Serve immediately.

Serves four.

Coming attractions: Some new, some making seasonal returns

The newest addition to our lineup is Turkey chili, made with our chorizo.

The dilemma with chili is always whether to use beans. We decided to start with chili with beans to keep down the price you pay for the chili.

We launched it Jan. 8 at \$7.50 a quart and \$4.00 a pint. It is fully cooked and needs only reheating.

We have nearly completed the phasing in of our new casings for sandwich sausages. We have switched from pork to collagen casings.

Quite a number of customers had asked us for a line that avoided pork, and we looked for a long time to find a casing we could use.

We finally found it at Mid-West Research in Wichita. Collagen is a processed product made from beef hides. It is thinner than paper and doesn't stretch, twist or tie off as well as pork. But it makes a more uniform casing, and it is easier to strip from the sausage, if that's what you want

to do with it.

Our breakfast sausages (mild, spicy and blueberry-maple) will continue to be made with natural casings, which are sheep.

By late winter, look for the return of both potato sausages, kory and our Midwestern potato sausage spiced with caraway seed.

We're also beginning to work on recipes for shepherd's pie. We have offered it at market in the past, with mixed results.

The trick with shepherd's pie is keeping the mashed potato topping in good condition. To freeze mashed potatoes is an involved process that calls for emulsions, chemicals, etc. We prefer not to go there.

So, we'll probably make our shepherd's pie in small batches and sell it fresh-made each week at market. That would avoid the freeze issue.

We are always open to suggestions.

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please forward