

The Turkey Times

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Slipping a bit while standing pat

By Bob Neal

We had figured on 2009 as a stand-pat season, growing and selling roughly the same number of Turkeys as in each of the previous two seasons. And, we had intended it as a season to catch up and get ahead on revitalizing the farm.

The year didn't go quite as we had figured — but it never does — and we wound up raising but not selling 3,200 birds. We started well, though, on the revitalization efforts, which we'll detail in the spring issue of *The Turkey Times*.

Of the 3,200 Turkeys we raised, we had wanted to sell 2,800, leaving 400 to process through the winter and spring until new Turkeys had grown. But as the economy continued to crumble, our sales continued to slide, and we wound up with 700 birds in frozen storage.

The season began on Feb. 17, when we picked up 800 poult in West Virginia (Lewisburg). Some were less than an hour old when we put them into our car.

By 3 a.m. the next day, we had placed the 800 baby Turkeys in their brooder house. By early April, they were ready to live outdoors.

Spring began benignly with a dry April and early May. That let us work outdoors, and we mended feeders and fences and tilled and seeded our ranges

to perennial grasses.

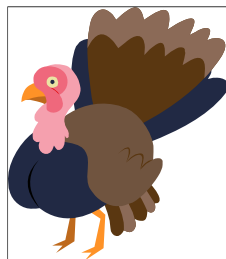
But then the rain came in May, and we were drenched well into August, losing whatever advantage we had held earlier.

The good early weather helped the birds gain weight rapidly. Turkeys eat less in the rain, so bright and dry days plump them up.

2009 in review

When we began dressing birds in June, we were pleased with the weights of our first flock.

Most of our poults come from Bob's Turkey Farm in Lancaster, Mass. We leave for Bob's at 4 a.m. on hatch day and return about noon with birds hatched about the time we had left the farm.



The May 7 hatch of 1,000, the June 11 hatch of 1,100 and the July 16 hatch of 550 were all placed on litter under propane stoves within nine hours of hatch.

All got off to strong starts, marred only by a heat loss on July 20, when our propane tanks ran empty.

We lost 53 birds that day, 49 of them from the June hatch that was six weeks old and getting ready to move outside. The birds piled under a drinker, trying to conserve body heat by getting into a small space. Instead, they triggered the water flow of the drinker, and the birds drowned as the water, which couldn't be turned off until a human intervened, flowed through their brooder.

The propane company made good on the loss, honoring our claim to the penny.

That overflowing drinker was discovered when Tyler Paine, a farmhand, began his workday.

Tyler is one of two crew members who returned from 2008. He worked full time during the summer and part time while he was in school at Central Maine Community College in Auburn.

Linda Chapman, who had worked 30 hours a week in 2008, returned in 2009 but for a shorter workweek.

We had the great joy of working this

season with our younger son, Chris, who began here full time in June and worked through October. Chris is a cook — he now works in Portland — and here he



took over most of the preparation for market on Saturdays and the vast majority of the pie-making. He also, like everyone else here, helped with farm work such as vaccination and mucking

out the brooder house, which is a weekly chore most of the season.

We had a fourth hand this past season, Derek Lindsay, who was hired for 30 hours a week and was a valuable part of the operation from June into November.

This crew brought our birds along pretty much on schedule and in good health. We had low mortality, other than the propane snafu, partly through vigilance during the birds' tenderest first five weeks and partly by culling threatened or hurt birds and putting them in sick bay to recover.

By mid-summer, it had become clear that sales would not keep up with costs in 2009, so we had to reduce the hours of much of our crew.

Tyler's hours dropped to 28 from 40 when school resumed. Chris dropped to 28 hours from full time, and Derek dropped to 20 hours from 30. We laid off our helper at the farmers market. In all, we cut payroll from 135 hours a week to 96 hours, nearly 29 percent.

To try to improve sales, we cut prices in mid-summer. Feed prices had fallen to \$484 a ton from a 2008 peak of \$535 a ton, and we returned to the price level of May-September 2008.

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A few bright spots shine through despite slower sales

(Continued from page 1)

In the meantime, we continued to try to operate as closely as possible to the pattern of the two previous seasons.

We try to develop two new products each year. In 2009, we developed one, breaded Turkey tenderloins. Still, the total number of items has passed 40, and we had hoped in 2009 to eliminate a few of the poor sellers. But in a weak sales environment, we decided not to drop anything that even a handful of customers wanted to buy.

Our Fryeburg Fair operation was the smoothest ever, and again we tried to win back customers by lowering prices. Instead, sales fell by about 5 percent, so we, in essence, sold the same number of items but for less money each.

In addition to dinners, sandwiches and drumsticks, we brought soup back to our menu, and it was a terrific success. One customer ate our soup all eight days of the show. Each day, we make at least two soups with our Turkey. Chris was the soup master. He was also, for the second consecutive year, our potato and gravy master, and the two chores kept him fully engaged at the fair.

Fryeburg was one of eight activities in which sales dropped this year.

Overall, sales in 2009 were down about 15 per cent from 2008. This was the second consecutive year of falling sales. Unlike 2008, though, we were unable to stem the flow of red ink and kept the farm operating only by drawing on our savings account. We may replenish the

2009 in review

savings when we process and sell the birds that are in the freezer.

Lowering prices to spur sales meant that the amount of meat sold to generate each dollar of income had to rise by 5 percent if we were to stay even in item sales. It did not, and the decline in items sold for the year was nearly 16 percent.

Our biggest decline in sales was at our most important spot, the farmers market at Crystal Spring Farm in Brunswick. Total sales fell by 18 percent on the 25 Saturdays that we sold at Crystal Spring.

Cash sales were higher in 2009 than in 2008 on six market days, lower on 19.

Draws on CSA accounts were higher on 11 days, lower on 13, with one day even.

Income at wholesale declined sharply, as well. Sales of the frozen year-round items that we take to eight

stores, two kitchens and a co-op fell by 12 percent. This decline had begun in mid-2008 and accelerated in 2009.

Thanksgiving wholesale receipts fell by 15 percent, a figure that could have been even higher if the average size of bird ordered hadn't risen by nearly a pound.



Christmas wholesale also fell, but mostly because we instituted a minimum order size, and only three stores decided to take orders to meet that minimum. We decided we could no longer afford to send a truck to Bangor for three Turkeys or to Mount Desert Island for 11.

So, most of the Christmas decline in wholesale is self-inflicted.

There were three increases in sales: at our farmstore, which had fallen by 20 percent in 2008 but rose by 13 percent last year; at Christmas at Brunswick, where we had 33 orders instead of 31; and in Community Supported Agriculture subscriptions. See the article on page 3 about our season with CSA.

The chart below shows the results in each of 10 areas and what the sales change meant in the number of birds sold. CSA is not listed even though the amount invested in CSA rose. Most of those shares are still open, so we cannot yet determine what the effect will be on the number of 2009 birds used for CSA.

By year's end, we were in the red and beginning to look carefully at what to do about it. We expect the farm to change dramatically this season, and we are considering options.

We will keep you posted.

ACTIVITY	SALES CHANGE	BIRDS USED
Brunswick market	- 18%	- 55
Farmstore	+ 13%	+ 10
Brunswick Thanksgiving	- 6%	- 14
Brunswick Christmas	+ 6%	+ 2
Thanksgiving retail at farm	- 7%	- 15
Christmas retail at farm	- 3%	- 4
Fryeburg Fair	- 5%	- 17
Wholesale frozen	- 12%	-100
Wholesale Thanksgiving	- 15%	- 77
Wholesale Christmas		- 50
TOTAL		- 320

WINTER AT FORT ANDROSS

The Turkey Farm is selling at the Brunswick market at Fort Andross again this winter.

We plan to be at every market, weather permitting. We'll be on vacation Jan. 23 and Jan. 30, but Tyler Paine of our farm crew will stand in for us. So, look for The Turkey Farm every Saturday through April 24.

As always, we welcome advance orders. We work pretty much alone during the winter, so we'll appreciate

as much advanced notice as you can give us on orders.

We take all of our regular products to Fort Andross, but the limited space available (77 square feet as opposed to 200 at the summer market), means we can't take so many of each item. So, come early and come often.

The market is open from 9 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. every Saturday through April 24.

See you at the Fort.

Community Supported Agriculture growth was a 2009 highlight

The bright spot in 2009 was the support of our farm through Community Supported Agriculture, or CSA.

In all, 102 people bought 127 shares during the year, investing a record total of \$23,250 in the production of our farm. This was nine more sharers and nearly 20 more shares than in 2008.

In 2009, two sharers bought four shares each, renewing each time the share balance drifted down toward zero. Others bought more than one share, too.

Community Supported Agriculture fosters a direct relationship between farmer and eater. The farmer offers shares in the season's production, the eater buys a share of that production before the harvest.

Both parties benefit. The farmer gets cash up front, a guaranteed market and the comfort of local support for her work. The eater gets the best food available, the certainty that food will be there and the comfort of pumping life into Maine's tender farm economy.

In the case of The Turkey Farm, the eater gets a bonus: interest.

We pay, in Turkey, interest on each share, and the rate of interest rises as the share size rises.

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

We offer five share amounts, and shares and renewals can be bought any time.

Sharers may pick up Turkey at our farm or at our stand at the Brunswick farmers markets (Fort Andross in winter, Crystal Spring in summer).

Some people work for a share, and we accept work sharers during our busiest times, late spring and all through the fall.

Work sharers receive \$162 in Turkey for two days of work for the farm. Last year, five sharers worked a total of 12 days. One of those donated the proceeds of a day's work to the Good Shepherd Food bank (see adjacent article).

We will publish the workdays schedule in the spring issue of The Turkey Times.

Help yourself, help feed Maine's hungry

Nothing The Turkey Farm has done in the past decade or so has been more rewarding than using Community Supported Agriculture to help feed the hungry in Maine.

Starting slowly and picking up speed recently, we have been able to move nearly \$2,000 worth of top-grade Turkey to the Good Shepherd Food Bank in Auburn, the umbrella distribution center for more than 600 food banks in Maine.

It began in 2005 when sharer Neil Brown of Norway asked us to find a worthy recipient for the balance of his share. Neil and his wife, Dr. Marjorie, Howe, buy a large share every year and use it for Thanksgiving Turkeys for friends and family. Then, in 2005, he donated the balance, and we chose Good Shepherd, with Neil's approval. Neil and Marjorie repeated the request the next two years.

In the meantime, we had been trying to find a way to deal with unused share balances. When a sharer falls by the wayside, we can't maintain the balance, unused, forever.

Last spring, the two ideas came together, and we began donating the unused balances to Good Shepherd.

Here's how it works. A share runs through the last day of the month a year after it was bought. So, a share bought Jan. 18, 2010, expires on Jan. 31, 2011.

Although almost all shares are used up and are renewed well before the expiry

date, some balances are left hanging.

We leave them to hang for 90 more days after expiry to allow the sharer to renew without losing the balance of the original share. But if there is no activity in those 90 days, we move the balance (including the interest we pay on the share) into an account for Good Shepherd. When the account reaches several hundred dollars, we call Good Shepherd for an order, and the food bank's truck picks up the order on its regular run through this area.

The pleasant surprise in this program has been the sharers who stepped forward with additional gifts for Good Shepherd. A couple in Brunswick bought a large share and told us to send all the proceeds to Good Shepherd. Another sharer in Brunswick donated her remaining balance at the end of the farmers market season. A couple in Chesterville told us to send about a third of their share to Good Shepherd. And so on.

We shipped nearly \$1,000 worth of breast cutlets and ground Turkey in August and 14 whole Turkeys Christmas week. Since then, several hundred dollars worth more has been allocated to Good Shepherd, and we expect, through sharers, to make a mid-winter donation.

The upshot has been that no shares ever expire unused, and that the proceeds from some of our CSA shares have been put to a very good use.

Thank you.

CSA Order Form

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Fill out and send to The Turkey Farm, 219 Mile Hill Road, New Sharon, Maine 04955:.

Please sign me up for the following share in Community Supported Agriculture:

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

Please sign me up for a work share in (circle) May

Name _____

Address _____

Town _____ State _____ Zip _____

Telephone _____ E-mail _____

Home front security

For 24 years, we have kept our farmstore door unlocked so customers could pick up items even if we weren't there. This has worked especially well for CSA sharers.

But we must change the policy. After we left the plant on Jan. 7, someone stole nearly \$1,200 worth of tools and other items plus a small amount of cash.

We believe we know the thief, and we have reported the loss and the identity of that person to the State Police. The thief clearly knew our operation. The thief found about \$20 in quarters from a cubbyhole in the truck dashboard where we put change from Turnpike tolls. Only someone who had driven the truck for us would have known where we stashed the change.

The thief also knew where we used to hide our day's receipts when we closed for the night, and the thief knocked over some crates trying to find them there. We no longer put the money in that spot, so there were no bills to steal.

But the thief knew us well enough to walk out to the barn, leaving boot prints in the snow, and steal our chainsaw. In addition to the chainsaw, which will cost \$500 to replace, and the quarters, the thief also took a shop light and its battery packs, worth about \$75; a pair of combat boots that Tyler Paine, an employee, wore when he was a Marine and used on the farm, worth about \$200; a digital scale worth about \$400; and the change from the cashbox. For some reason, the thief also opened our display freezer doors, which could have started the meat there thawing.

For now, we will continue our regular hours of 2-6 p.m. on Wednesday and Friday and 10 a.m.-2 p.m. on Saturday. We are also open by chance. But when we are not in the plant, we will no longer leave the doors unlocked.

We are sorry for the inconvenience, but we cannot afford to expose our property to such easy access when thieves are about who know how we operate.

Recipe

Indian-spiced breast cutlets

2	tsp. garam masala	1/2 tsp. cinnamon
1	tsp. sugar	1 lb. Turkey breast cutlets or steaks
1/2	tsp. salt	4 tsp. olive oil

Preheat the broiler.

In a small bowl, combine the garam masala, sugar, salt and cinnamon. Rub the mixture all over the cutlets or steaks. Then rub with the oil. Let sit for about 4 minutes.

Broil 4 inches from the heat for 3 minutes per side (cutlets) or 5 minutes per side (steaks) or until the Turkey is just cooked through but still juicy.

Serves 4.

Adapted from The Rodale Whole Foods Cookbook (2009)

Recipe

Smoked Turkey melt

1/2 lb.	smoked Turkey breast slices
3 slices	Swiss cheese
12-15 spears	asparagus
9-12	grape or cherry tomatoes
6-9	pimientos (optional)
3 slices	whole wheat or other whole grain bread

Boil the asparagus until almost tender. Toast the bread. Arrange the smoked Turkey breast slices on the toast. Cover each slice with a slice of Swiss cheese. Arrange asparagus, tomatoes and pimientos on the slices. Heat in a 325-degree oven until the cheese melts.

Serves 3.

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please forward