

Five centuries of domestication and breeding in breast-obsessed America have turned the turkey into a sort of Pamela Anderson of poultry, a glorified vehicle for a pair of breasts.



They'll be home for Christmas



JACOB RICHLER

Just like us, but a couple of weeks ahead of schedule, turkeys are now getting fat for Christmas. And like us, they are no longer doing this *al fresco*, but have been forced by snow and winter temperatures to take all their meals indoors. So the first thing to remember when buying a bird for the festive table is that if your butcher tells you his fowl are

free-range, he's lying and you should be shopping somewhere else, somewhere honest.

"The birds I brought in for Thanksgiving were incredible," says Mario Fiorucci, proprietor of the organic-as-can-be Healthy Butcher on Queen West. "They were grown by a Mennonite farmer, David Weber, who grows his own organic feed. People said they were the best turkeys they ever had. But he can't grow them indoors, so I can only get his birds in the fall."

Right. There is nowhere for birds to range free right now in Canada, except for maybe a small slice of British Columbia. So if you want a free-range bird, you need something that has been shipped up from the United States, or something frozen. And unfortunately most birds arriving here from there are both, fattened so fast with their hormone-rich diets that their white, tasteless flesh is three sizes too big for their skeletons, has been injected after death with MSG and vegetable fat, comes prepackaged with a pop-out thermometer, and wears some scarily evocative brand-label such as Butterball.

How the wild turkey evolved to this state of affairs is a sad story. For I hear the wild birds, native to these parts, make fantastic eating. If you have a .22 handy, you can apparently find a lot of them in local woods these days, and they are a much easier shot now that the leaves are gone from the trees. And it's a sure hit at night because they freeze motionless if caught in the beam of a flashlight. A two-year old female is apparently as good as they get, especially at this time of year when they are at their fattest.

But there are two things to be very careful about.

"When they come down, you better watch out," an intrepid hunter I

know cautioned me recently. "I got hit by one once. F—!"

And the other thing, of course, is that is not very legal to hunt for them at this time, or to shoot females, and all this is especially not-all-that legal when perpetrated with a .22 and a flashlight by night, unless there is no one else around. But if you do manage to bag one, you can roast it as you would a store-bought bird, or deep-fry it outdoors in a vat of peanut oil. Either way, the results will be flavoursome and fantastically succulent.

The brown-feathered wild bird consists almost entirely of dark meat. While five centuries of domestication and breeding in breast-obsessed America have turned the creature into a sort of Pamela Anderson of poultry — a glorified vehicle for a pair of breasts — the contemporary farm turkey consists almost entirely of white meat.

Then of course, it is near impossible to find a bird that is two years old. Thanks to intensive rearing, an appetite spurred by constant daylight thanks to fluorescent lighting, a diet laced with hormones, antibiotics and a dozen-odd other drugs used to keep the birds alive and hungry when they are crammed into the pen, an average Christmas bird can hit a table-ready 16 pounds or so in four to five months. Alas, they taste better when they're grown slower.

"We sold nearly 200 turkeys at Thanksgiving and so I've ordered 300 for Christmas," Fiorucci says. "They come from two dif-

ferent suppliers. Some come from a small organic farmer in Quebec, but the birds are small, about 10 pounds. The majority come from Clement poultry in Newcastle. He's a fourth- or fifth-generation farmer and he's been playing around with his feed for a long time. There's an art to feeding them right. So his birds are bigger. They're six months old; they've spent four months outside and two in."

A Clement bird should be able to get into the mid-teens in weight. Or at any rate, enough so that an average family can scrape by with one instead of two birds. And what you forfeit in volume you will make up in flavour, because the Clement bird is far more closely related to its wild progenitor than the birds in the supermarket.

"They're white-bronze turkeys," Fiorucci explains. "Their feathers aren't pure white but, say, 75% white and 25% black or brown like the wild bird. They've got longer shanks [a sign of natural growth rate], and the meat is a little darker. It's a lot closer to the original wild bird."

"I hope they sell, or we'll be making a lot of turkey sausage around here."

I shouldn't worry.

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The Healthy Butcher, 565 Queen St. West, one of Toronto's few sources for fresh organic meats. For Christmas, a limited number of rare bronze turkeys will be available.

