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## The ultimate Christmas turkey guide, from picking a quality bird to dry-brining and cooking tips

Plumping for a less common bird this Christmas could boost taste and welfare, so it time to try your turkey 'rare'?

By Xanthe Clay

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What's on the table for Christmas this year? For most of us it looks like it will be

turkey, even if family gatherings are likely to be smaller than usual. Turkey suppliers such as [Copas](#) and [KellyBronze](#) are reporting healthy sales – no doubt boosted by some of the four million-plus Britons who would usually be abroad on Dec 25, and will now be staying at home instead.

But having plumped for the festive bird, which turkey will it be?

Not so long ago, a turkey was a bog-standard bird, probably a broad-breasted white, the kind favoured by large-scale turkey farmers and supermarkets. Extremely fast-growing, it offers great value, and mild (some say bland) flavour with a very high ratio of popular breast meat to leg.

However, there are serious welfare questions around the breed and farming methods, in particular over evidence that the huge breasts of these animals are too heavy for their spindly legs.

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For farmers, though, it is commercial breeds like that broad-breasted white that come with the information they need to run their businesses, the charts showing growth rates and “feed conversion” – how much they will have to spend on food for each pound of weight gained.

[The Rare Breeds Survival Trust](#), in conjunction with Prof Philippe Wilson and Prof Emily Burton, of [Nottingham Trent University's poultry research unit](#), is conducting a research project to compare the meat quality and leg health of rare breeds of turkey, starting with Norfolk black, against commercial white turkeys.

The aim is to encourage more farmers to stock rare breeds, and not just because they are delicious, although the team will be investigating the flavour with tastings and protein studies next year. Making these breeds commercially viable means they will be more widely farmed, protecting the dwindling stocks.

This is important for the gene pool and the future of farming, says Prof Wilson, who sits on the farm animal genetic resources committee at [Defra](#). “The genetic make up of these native breeds is unique, and allows them to adapt.”

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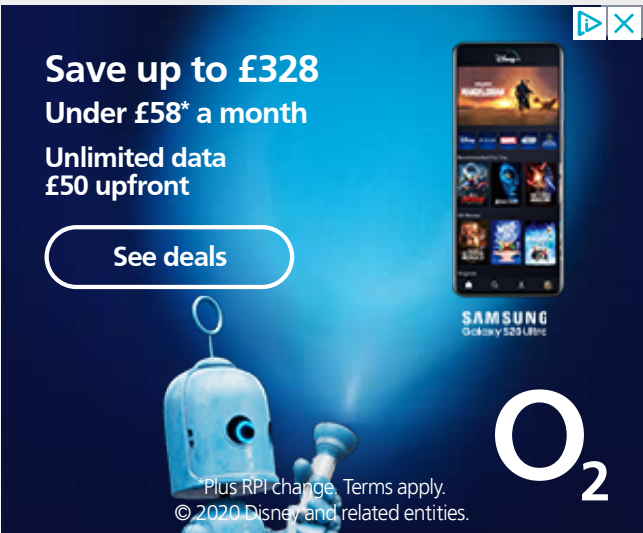
Commercial breeds, the professor says, are bred to “get the most wonderful productivity from them – but that always comes at a cost, which is the animal’s resilience to change.”

Hang on, though – what’s all this talk of native? Turkey isn’t native to us, it originated in the Americas. Indeed, there is an oft-told tale that the turkey very nearly became the national symbol of the United States, as Benjamin Franklin regarded them as “more respectable” than the eagle, which the president thought was “of bad moral character”.

But, explains Wilson, “Defra defines ‘native’ as a population being bred in this country for more than 40 years, and many turkeys were brought over in the 1700s and 1800s, and ended up producing the breeds that we now call native, such as the Norfolk black.”

According to Berkshire turkey farmer Hannah Moss, the term “native” is better, “as ‘heritage’ and ‘tradition’ have been overused”. A key difference between native breeds – as I shall now call them – and commercial white turkeys is the time they take to grow, she explains. “My turkeys are hatched in April and are slaughtered in December, at 28 weeks old. Most supermarket birds are 16 to 18 weeks old – some may even be 14 weeks.”

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This has an impact on the way they cook, says Moss. “The time they have is spent putting on meat weight, rather than developing their bones. You end up with a smaller-framed turkey massively covered in meat, and a smaller cavity.”

When you buy a native breed bird, it has a huge cavity, with a less-heavy covering of meat, although it should still be copious. Once in the oven, the space allows the hot air to get in and cook the bird more quickly, from the inside as well as the outside.

That depends on the bird being cooked empty – not so much as a lemon should go inside, says Moss. “The rule is, never stuffed.” Never foil, either, as wrapping will stop the skin crisping. Less is more – which sounds like an excellent plan for this



Christmas.

## Choose your colour



The Norfolk Black: Plump for rare or speciality birds this Christmas - they could taste better! | CREDIT: Getty Images

## Bronze turkeys

A larger bird, with males weighing up to 13kg, with a full flavour and a slightly larger breast than a Norfolk black. It's the most widely available native breed turkey. Free-range bronze turkeys are available from suppliers such as [copasturkeys.co.uk](http://copasturkeys.co.uk), [pipersfarm.co.uk](http://pipersfarm.co.uk), [abelandcole.co.uk](http://abelandcole.co.uk) and [riverford.co.uk](http://riverford.co.uk).

## Slate

These are grey-feathered turkeys, although a clutch may occasionally include a "blue". The pointed breast means it isn't the best-looking turkey, but aficionados love the delicate flavour. Free-range slate turkeys are available from Newbury-based farmers Hannah and Lee Moss. There is a website – [legacyturkeys.com](http://legacyturkeys.com) –

but this year's birds must be picked up from the farm.

## **KellyBronze**

A commercial brand rather than a breed, although all birds come from a 75-year-old bloodline of slow-growing turkeys. The brand requires growers to keep their turkeys to a minimum age and feed them on a specific diet. They are then dry-plucked and hung for at least a week. Available from [kellybronze.co.uk](http://kellybronze.co.uk).

## **Bourbon Red**

A red-feathered breed, originating in Kentucky, and with a strong gamy flavour. These are slightly smaller than other breeds, although the males can weigh around 10kg, with females about 6kg. Free-range Bourbon reds, raised on the Suffolk-Essex border, hung for seven to 14 days and dry-plucked, can be ordered from [farmison.com](http://farmison.com).

## **Norfolk Black**

Norfolk black turkeys are descendants of some of the first turkeys to be brought here from America, and in the 18th century, large flocks would be walked to market in London from East Anglia. Driven to the brink of extinction in the 1960s, the breed was saved by the Peele family and you can still buy the distinctively gamy-flavoured birds from their farm near Norwich. See [peeles-blackturkeys.co.uk](http://peeles-blackturkeys.co.uk).

## **How to cook the perfect bird**



"Native birds have more space inside, so they cook better. The rule is, never stuff them" | CREDIT: Getty Images

## Dry brining your turkey

It's not strictly necessary to brine a native bird, although if I were roasting a broad-breasted white, I'd consider it vital. That said, even for a "posh" turkey, it improves the flavour and makes it easier to carve. I used to wet brine my turkey in a vat of salt water, but dry brining is easier all round.

If you are cooking a crown, use half the amounts below.

## INGREDIENTS

- ◆ 3 level tbsp fine sea salt (45g)
- ◆ Grated zest of a lemon
- ◆ 1 tsp smoked paprika
- ◆ 1 tsp freshly ground black pepper



- 1 Mix all the ingredients together. Run two teaspoons over the inside of the turkey. With your fingers (take off any rings), gently ease the skin of the turkey away from the breast, legs and thighs.
- 2 Rub a teaspoon of the salt mixture under the skin over each breast, and another over each leg and thigh. Rub the remaining salt over the skin. Put the turkey in a deep dish in the fridge (I empty the bottom “salad drawer” and use that) for 36 to 48 hours. Ideally, it should be uncovered, as this makes for a crisper skin, but you can wrap it in greaseproof paper or a plastic bag.

## Roasting a native breed turkey or turkey crown

The best way to guard against overcooking is to use a probe thermometer to check the temperature of your bird. Bear in mind that the temperature will rise a good 5C – and probably 10C – while the turkey rests.

- 1 Bring the turkey out of the fridge at least two hours before you plan to cook it. Season with salt and pepper if you haven’t brined it. Untie any trussing.
- 2 Heat the oven to 180C/ 160C fan/Gas 4.
- 3 Put the turkey breast-side down on a rack in the roasting tin (a V-shaped rack works best). Add six to eight large unpeeled cloves of garlic to the tin. Don’t cover the bird at all.
- 4 Roast for two hours for a 5kg turkey, adding 15 minutes for every kilogram above that.
- 5 Halfway through the roasting time, check the temperature of the bird at the thickest part. In a white turkey, this is the breast, above the wing. In a native breed, it is more likely to be in the thigh. Check the temperature every half an hour from here on.
- 6 Continue cooking until the temperature reaches 60C, then take the bird out. Keep in a warm spot to rest: if you like, you can cover it with foil and wrap it in towels. It should rest for at least an hour. Wrapped, it can rest twice as long.

## Leftovers



We are likely to have more leftovers than usual this year. Here's how to tackle them with no waste.

After Christmas lunch (next day is fine) strip all the meat from the bones. Have four bowls: for white meat, dark meat, skin and one for tiny scrappy bits. The meat can be frozen for up to two months. As for the bones and skin, make stock and turkey scratchings.

## **Stock**

Put the bones in a pot or slow cooker and cover with water. Add parsley stalks, carrot peelings, a bay leaf and half an onion. Simmer for four hours (or overnight in a slow cooker). Strain and refrigerate, lifting off the fat that sets on top.

## **Turkey scratchings**

Lay the skin flat on a baking tray (one with a lip) and sprinkle with salt, plus a little cumin or chopped thyme if you like. Cover with a second tin, to press the skin flat, and bake for 15 to 20 minutes at 180C/Gas 4 until teak-coloured. Lay on kitchen paper to drain and crisp up. Eat as a snack or crumbled over a lettuce salad with a spiky mustard dressing.

## **Scraps**

Make rissoles by chopping the scraps and mixing with an equal volume of buttery mashed potato. For every 500g mixture, beat in a small egg, and shape into patties. Dip into flour, beaten egg and then breadcrumbs. Pan fry until golden on each side, and eat with mayonnaise and pickle.

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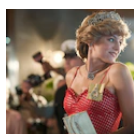
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