

Kids Korner

Talking Turkey: Myth And Truth About The All-American Bird

WOOSTER, Ohio — Today, most of us think of turkeys only as a delicious Thanksgiving meal. But there was a time when the snooded-and-wattled creatures soared above the dinner table to play the role of deities.

Long before becoming an indispensable part of the Thanksgiving tradition and the holiday's most recognizable symbol, turkeys had amassed a popularity and significance of mythological proportions among the many and diverse original cultures of North and Central America.

In fact, the Mayas of southern Mexico and northern Central America were the first to domesticate the colorful bird some 1,800 years before the Pilgrims had a taste of it at Plymouth. Turkeys were served to the Mayan elite and were also used in ceremonies for healing, planting and praying for rain.

The Aztecs of central Mexico also raised turkeys. The bird was held in such high esteem that a religious festival in its honor took place every two hundred days. On the day of the celebration, people arose before dawn to pave the streets with the collected shells of turkey chicks that had hatched during that period of time.

Turkey (huaxolotl in the Nahuatl language) was also a hot buy at the markets of Tenochtitlan, capital of the Aztec Empire. Franciscan missionary Toribio de Benavente Motolina, in his History of the Indians of New Spain, tells us that in the suburban market of Tepeyacac alone, over 8,000 turkeys were sold every five days. The royalty also appreciated the turkey's succulent meat—one hundred turkeys were sent daily to the court of the poet-king Nezahualcoyotl of Texcoco, a nearby metropolis.

In the early 16th century, along with tomatoes, peppers, potatoes, chocolate and corn, turkeys were loaded onto Spanish galleons and carried back to Europe. The king of Spain decreed that every returning ship was to bring back 10 turkeys, five male and five female. In what may have been the fastest-rising gastronomic popularity of all New World products, turkey quickly replaced the stringy European peacock on banquet tables.

Much like the Thanksgiving account, the history and mythology of the turkey are full of fascinating tales and plenty of confusion. Here's a platterfull:

What's in a name is not what's on the plate

The turkey (Meleagris gallopavo) bears names, both common and scientific, that have nothing to do with its American origin.

Turkeys didn't come from Turkey. Nonetheless, they were given the name of this Eurasian country because they were at first confused with the guinea fowl, once believed to have originated in Turkish territory. Some sources claim that Columbus decided to call the birds tuka, which was the word for peacock in the language of India. Still, others say that the name turkey came from Native Americans who called the birds firkee, which sounds like turkey, or from the



The turkey is a respectable bird, a true original native of America, Ben Franklin once wrote to his daughter. "He is besides, though a little vain and silly, a bird of courage, and would not hesitate to attack a Grenadier of the British Guards who should presume to invade his farmyard with a red coat on." Photo by Michele Kunjappu, staff writer.

sound turkeys make when they are afraid—"turk, turk, turk."

The scientists who named the turkey didn't get it right, either, but added some more mythology into the stuffing mix. The genus name, Meleagris, comes from a Latin word for guinea fowl and from the Greek name Meleager, hero of the Caledonian boar hunt in Greek mythology. The species name, gallopavo, is made up of the Latin words for a cock (gallus) and a peafowl (pavo), meaning a chicken-like peafowl or guinea fowl.

Pavo is the "official" name of turkey in Spanish-speaking countries, but most folks still prefer indigenous names such as guajolote, totole, chompope and chunto. Another type of turkey, the ocellated turkey (Agriocharis ocellata), still roams wild in the Yucatan Peninsula and Guatemala. The Mayas used to call it cutz.

Blessed bird of abundance

Among Native North Americans, the turkey has a long history of association with spirituality and the honoring of the Earth Mother. It's a symbol of all the blessings that the Earth contains, along with the ability to use them to their greatest advantage.

Turkeys have an intricate mythology among the early inhabitants of the United States and Canada. Among other things, they helped create the world and showed humans how to raise corn and fight off evil spirits. The gobbler is shown outsmarting the owl (a common representation of death and the underworld) and challenging the powerful eagle in combat.

Some stories tell how Indian shamans would turn themselves into turkeys and prowl around other villages. In Hopi creation myths, a male turkey was the first bird to try to raise the sun in the sky—that's how he burnt his head, which remained bald for posterity.

There is also the popular Zuni

tale of the Turkey Girl. In it, a ragged turkey herder hears that a Dance of the Sacred Bird is to be held in a nearby village. Her avian friends use their magic to turn her clothes into splendid garments, hawk up silver and jewelry they had collected in their crops for years, and send her off—charging her to return before sunset or prove herself "mean of spirit."

As an animal totem, the turkey is called the "giveaway eagle" or the "life giver." Thus, it is associated with shared blessings, harvest, fertility, grounding and self-sacrifice.

Mesoamerican god of grace

Among the ancient cultures of Mesoamerica—which comprises modern-day Mexico and most of Central America—the turkey occupied a place of honor.

It was, first of all, the most common embodiment of the Aztec god Tezcatlipoca—a powerful warrior, magician and diviner who saw prophetic visions in his mirror of obsidian, from which his name (which means "smoking mirror") was derived.

Tezcatlipoca is typically regarded as a dark and sinister god. However, when the deity manifested himself as Chalchiuhtotolin ("the jeweled turkey"), he conferred good fortune upon people. In Christian terms, Chalchiuhtotolin's powers can be seen as a type of grace. Although Tezcatlipoca could tempt humans into self-destruction, when he assumed his turkey form he could also cleanse them of contamination, absolve them of guilt, and mitigate their otherwise inexorable calendar-based fate. No other god could perform this last function.

To the Aztecs, the deified bird also resided over ritual self-mortification. The ornament he wore over the beak was emblematic of blood sacrifice and the head and neck skin suggested evisceration. The turkey was a walking sacrifice, whose rituals could be copied by humans.

his General History of the Things of New Spain, Spanish missionary Bernardino de Sahagn reports that "those people who wish harm on others give them to eat or drink that beak of flesh (snood) the bird has over its beak, which makes them unable to use the virile member."

The Mayas also revered the turkey. In the Temple of Inscriptions of the ancient city of Palenque (Guatemala), there's an image of a sacred turkey, or "Emerald Fowl," to which offerings of maize paste were made.

Eagle out, turkey in

It's true that the turkey became the chosen bird of one of the United States' most significant holidays. However, it's also true that it lost the race to becoming the country's national symbol of pride—an honor that went to the magnificent bald eagle.

In the late 1770s, Benjamin Franklin suggested that the turkey should be the symbol for the fledgling United States. He argued that the bald eagle was no better than a pirate and a fish-eater.

"The turkey is in comparison a much more respectable bird, and withal a true original native of America," Franklin wrote in a letter to his daughter. "He is besides, though a little vain and silly, a bird of courage, and would not hesitate to attack a Grenadier of the British Guards who should presume to invade his farm yard with a red coat on."

In the end, the turkey lost to the bald eagle by a single congressional vote.

Smart Stuff

with Twig Walkingstick

Dear Twig: What's a Canaan fir? I saw some for sale on a Christmas tree lot.

The Canaan (pronounced "ka-nane") fir is a type of balsam fir. Balsam firs are evergreens that are very popular Christmas trees. People like balsam firs because they're dark green and pretty, hold their needles well, and give the whole house a nice balsam smell. And Christmas tree farmers like them because they're "high value" trees. They sell for more money than other Christmas trees (like pines).

But something makes Canaan firs different. Namely, they're able to grow in soggy soil and in places that sometimes get late frosts in spring. Brrr! Their roots don't rot, and they don't freeze their just-opened buds off. Ordinary balsams can't say that, although they can't talk anyway. The Fraser fir, another high value tree, can't say that either. So farmers who can't grow other firs are happy to plant the Canaan fir.

Canaan firs come from the mountains of West Virginia. An Ohio State forestry scientist, Jim Brown, has worked for more than 20 years to learn more about them in order to help farmers grow them. Result? The Canaan firs you see for sale.

If you happen to buy one, think of Jim and thank him as you hang the lights and tinsel.

Ornamentally,

Twig

