

Before There's Thanksgiving Turkey, You Must Have An Egg

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MT. CRAWFORD, Va. — At Sonny Meyerhoeffer's Double M Farm, some 10,000 turkey breeder hens are kept.

That's because if you want a turkey at Thanksgiving or any other time, first you start with a turkey egg.

The breeder hens lay the eggs that hatch poults at a nursery. The nursery then distributes the young birds to turkey growers who manage their growth, until the turkeys have arrived at the stage of maturity where they are shipped to the market.

"Breeder hens are at the forefront of everything," said Meyerhoeffer.

Every year, Meyerhoeffer's breeder hens produce some 1.4 million eggs for a hatchery operated by the Pilgrims Pride organization.

Beginning at 3:45 a.m. and going until 5:30 p.m., the Double M staffers work on shifts that vary, seven days a week. The eggs daily are collected 13 times.

The precious eggs are gathered from 5 a.m. to 2 p.m. They are taken to the egg room, where automatic washing and sanitizing takes place. In the drying process, excess water is evaporated by a fan. The eggs are placed in a cool place immediately thereafter.

"You get them in, wash them, and cool them off," Meyerhoeffer said, "That's what keeps them from incubating."

In conjunction with a computer clock, some 80 percent of the birds lay eggs on nests that are operated automatically. Air pushes the big girl off the nest



On the lawn of their Mount Crawford home, Sonny Meyerhoeffer, Double M Farms, stands with his wife, Marie and their children who are still at home — Benjamin, 13 and Oriana, 11. The dogs are Lady, a golden retriever and Junior, a border collie still in the puppy stage. Double M Farm produces breeder hen eggs. Upon being hatched, the poults grow into chubby birds, especially popular for Thanksgiving feasts.

Photos by Gay Brownlee, Virginia Correspondent

and the egg deposit is gathered. At the nests, remaining manual labor is necessary to persuade the turkey to briefly vacate the roost, because in a snug environment the incubation process can start before it should.

The Double M crews experience has developed to a fine skill — mainly sight and touch. The workers have handled so many eggs it is possible for them to identify a reject in a hurry.

Double-yokers, for instance, all-white instead of spotted Shells, eggs with dirt, cracked or soft shells, and eggs that are too small — these will be infertile.

"Its all done by eyesight," said Meyerhoeffer.

Fertile eggs represent money. Its imperative that no defective specimens reach the hatchery. There is a limit on how many rejects are allowable per thousand eggs. If the number goes higher, there will be a penalty.

A big shift in the environment has occurred in the years since Meyerhoeffer's dad also raised breeder hens. In today's controlled atmosphere, the birds no longer roam the range as they were permitted to in days gone by.

In regard to laying her eggs, light plays a critical role in the life of the breeder hen. The amount of light around the bird is closely monitored in terms of hours of exposure.

Meyerhoeffer estimates his grandfather purchased the farm in 1939. He is the third generation on the land, and his kids, the fourth generation.

Benjamin, 13 and Oriana, 11 are the only children living at home. Their mother, Marie Meyerhoeffer, home schools them.

Thanksgiving Day is always special to the Meyerhoeffers. Marie said even though you give thanks all year long, Thanksgiving is a special time to be thankful for blessings, especially for health and freedom.

Its also a day of deer hunting for Benjamin and his granddad.

"If theres any football on (television), we watch," Benjamin said. His team would be the Washington Redskins.

As far as the meal, the mashed potatoes and gravy are the best part for him, plus pumpkin pie, but Benjamin said it can't be too sweet.

"I'm thankful for food and family and that we are in a free nation," said the teen-ager.

Oriana loves Thanksgiving Day for a host of reasons, but primarily, "because my whole family is together and we have good food," she said.

Last year Oriana did a wonderful colored pencil drawing of the first Thanksgiving. The representation shows a well-dressed Pilgrim and Indian woman, apparently urging guests to join them at the long table with its platters of steaming food.

"I love drawing. I basically draw a picture for every holiday, she said."

This year for a very different experience on the big day itself. The Meyerhoeffers are going to Charlotte, N.C. to assist with Operation Christmas Child. Benjamin and Oriana, meanwhile, will be visiting with their maternal grandparents.

The Meyerhoeffers will be assisting those who check the festive shoe boxes the final time before the Christmas shipments are sent around the world to children who would not otherwise receive presents. Operation Christmas Child was founded by Franklin Graham.

"We will be the last people to see them (gift-filled boxes) before they are shipped," Marie said.

According to trivia statistics found at the National Turkey Federation Website — www.eat-turkey.com — an estimated 46 million turkeys were consumed on Thanksgiving Day 2002.

In general, about 95 percent of Americans "gobble" down turkey at Thanksgiving.

Overall in the U.S., 271 million turkeys were grown in 2002.

Marie raves about her mothers homemade stuffing and reports that she and her siblings were taught to wash their hands in order to tear two loaves of white bread into small pieces. The bread cubes dried either on top of the counter or speed dried in the oven.

Following is that recipe (half the original amounts) and two Thanksgiving salads that Marie herself makes.

STUFFING

1 loaf white bread, broken into pieces and set out to dry or speed-dried at a low temperature in the oven.

2 onions, chopped
1 stick of butter, melted

½ of a large bag of Pepperidge Farm Herb Seasoned Stuffing Mix

¼ tablespoon salt
Pepper to taste

Enough water to moisten the batch

In a large bowl, combine all ingredients with the dried bread and toss loosely. Stuff in the turkey cavity and around the outside if necessary. For roasting the bird, follow directions specified on the turkey wrapper.

Note: Chopped celery is optional. You can use sage and chicken broth instead of water.

CARROT SALAD

2 pounds carrots cooked tender but not soft

1 medium onion sliced thin
1 green pepper sliced thin

1 can condensed tomato soup
½ cup sugar

½ cup salad oil
⅓ cup vinegar (part lemon juice, if preferred)

1 teaspoon dry mustard

Cook carrots in salt water until tender, drain. Mix other ingredients together and pour over carrots. Store in refrigerator overnight.

CRANBERRY ORANGE RELISH

3 packages fresh cranberries (9 cups)

3 oranges, including peel, but with seeds removed

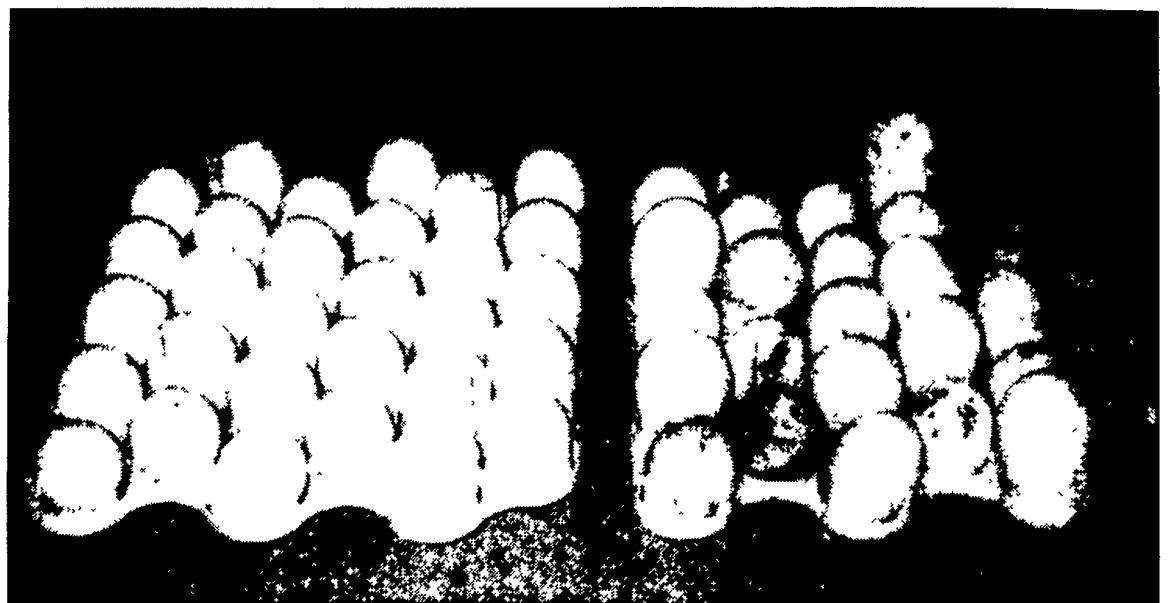
3 cups sugar

3 cored apples with peel left on
Handful of nuts (optional)

Grind everything to a relish consistency (overgrinding will result in a mixture that is too watery). Chill well and serve.



Oriana exhibits a few things that remind her of Thanksgiving — a Pocahontas doll that usually displayed at the living room window, her own drawing of the first Thanksgiving, and the turkey candy dish of golden glass thats always filled with goodies.



The acceptable eggs are on the flat at left. They are shipped to the hatchery. Opposite them is a flat rejected for reasons of dirt, double yolks, inferior shells, and small size.