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Local farm-to-table farmers report steady season as they gear up turkey day

By EM HOLTER
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FEEDBACK



New Kent-based farmer Jim Marry has been selling his products for nearly five years. This year, he took on the challenge of raising free-range turkeys. (Jim Merry)

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West Point Bees Knees Farm owners Sarah and Dennis Williams began preparing for Thanksgiving in August.

Since its fruition, in 2016, the farm has worked to provide folks with farm-raised, clean produce and meats.

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From pigs to chickens to goats and rabbits, the farm has made a name for itself as one of the few farm-to-table industries in the region.

But, as the year winds down after most of the animals are processed and sold, the farm relies on its turkeys to keep them through the winter, Sarah Williams said.

“We only raise them once a year, but we really enjoy raising them,” Williams said. “They help us get through the winter because they’re a big sale, right as the whole farm is winding down.”

In four years, Williams said they’ve mastered the art of turkey farming — a skill she said took time.

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The first year, they ordered the birds in May. By November, the birds were nearly 40 pounds. So, they began ordering them later in the season.

In the first few years, over half of their turkeys died. But, they adjusted, learning techniques from other farmers, like keeping a chick in the coop with them to teach them where to find food and water, in order to keep them alive.

“So, turkeys are actually very fragile. They die,” Williams said. “But, now, we’ve gotten pretty good. We’ve got to less than 10% fatality rate.”



FEEDBACK

King William-based Bees Knees Farm has raised turkeys for four years. Throughout the years, owners Dennis and Sarah Williams have learned a lot about the birds. This year, they've nearly sold out. (Sarah Williams)

Last year, the farm-raised 42 turkeys. They sold out by mid-October. So, this year, they doubled their supply expecting for a strong holiday season.

Then the pandemic hit and with it brought uncertainty. With more than 80 turkeys, Williams said she was unsure they'd be able to sell them. But, she said the community came together and focused their efforts on local businesses.

By the end of October, the farm had sold all but four turkeys. Now, the farm is gearing up to harvest the turkeys this weekend to ensure they are fresh and never frozen.

“Usually, we have a big open house on the Sunday before Thanksgiving, when people come and pick up their turkeys and we give them a farm tour,” Williams said. “But this year, it’s definitely going to be different. We’ll still welcome people but it’ll be by appointment.”

While Bees Knees Farm has been raising turkeys for four years, across the bridge, New Kent’s Pomocray Farm owner Jim Marry decided to try his luck raising turkeys for the first time this year.

“It was an impulse decision. I found 40 poults on sale,” Marry said. “Since it wasn’t a lot of up-front risks, I thought it would be worth a try.”

For five years, Marry has focused most of his farming efforts on his sheep, lamb and wool. But, on any given day, he has chickens, ducks and, now, turkeys running around the farm.

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While Marry said he has had some issues with his turkeys getting stuck in places and needing help, his free-range model has proven successful. He's only lost a couple to raccoons.

"I found the turkeys easier to manage than chickens, but they are not very bright," Marry said. "My birds are completely free-range and so they are mostly self-managing."

According to Marry, his biggest mistake was purchasing his birds early. So, the birds were fully grown before harvesting. But, Marry said he's still managed to sell out his stock.

Despite the setbacks, Marry said he looks forward to the holiday season and working with the birds again.

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Em Holter is an award-winning reporter covering West Point, King William, King and Queen, New Kent, Williamsburg and James City County. At VCU, she studied both communications and history. Hailing from a small, rural community in West Virginia, Em strives to report on underrepresented spaces and give a voice to those who often go unheard.

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