



Learn about turkey farming in the U.S.



# Jr. Animal Scientist

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# TURKEY TALK!

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# The Turkey of Today!

When you think about turkey, your mind probably drifts to memories of a golden-brown bird sitting on a Holiday table. You may even think back to Pilgrims gathered around long tables at the first Thanksgiving. However, the turkey of today doesn't look like the turkeys eaten by the pilgrims.

The turkey industry has become so much more than eating a roast bird at Thanksgiving. Since 1970 the US has increased its turkey production by 110%. This is because we have come up with so many new and tasty ways to eat turkey. In fact, turkey is now the 4th most popular protein source in the US and over 70% of the turkey we eat isn't on a holiday. We produce turkey to ship to other countries (500 million lbs/year). When you walk down the aisles of your local grocery store you can find turkey presented in many different ways; from simple ground turkey, further processed turkey, luncheon meats, and even turkey bacon.

## Turkey Fast Facts:

In 2016 the average American ate 16.7 lbs. of turkey.

Turkey consumption in the US has increased 110% since 1970.

Top proteins in the US are beef, pork and chicken. Turkey is #4.



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# The Modern Turkey

Turkeys themselves have changed too. A modern male turkey can grow 30 pounds in 18 weeks, and a female can grow close to 20 pounds in that time. That is much larger than their wild ancestors. Male turkeys average a mature weight of 18 to 19 pounds in their first year of life. The accelerated growth of these birds is a major contributor to the leanness of their meat, which is a reason turkey is regarded as a healthier meat choice. These fast growing and efficient birds have allowed the US to become a leader in turkey production and produce upwards of 240 million turkeys per year. In 2015 the top four turkey producing states were Minnesota, North Carolina, Arkansas, and Indiana. These states were responsible for over 50% of the total US production.

## Turkey Fast Facts:

Ben Franklin wanted the wild turkey to be the official national bird of the United States.

Turkeys were originally domesticated in Mexico and then brought to Europe in the 1500's.

The world record for the heaviest turkey was 86 lbs.



# On the Farm

Turkey farms today are large-scale modern operations that have been designed to raise birds in the most efficient way possible, while keeping the well-being of the birds in mind. Poults (baby turkeys) are brought into the farm either the day of hatching or the next day (depending on the distance from the hatchery) and placed into the house. The houses are long flat bottom buildings that allow the birds free reign. When the poults are placed, they are kept warm by what are called brooders. The most common type of brooder that is used hangs from the ceiling and creates a circle of heated air. The feeders and waterers are placed under the brooder so that the birds can decide where they want to spend their time. As the birds age the temperature will be gradually decreased until the brooders are no longer needed. The feeding and watering systems in most houses are adjustable so they can be raised or lowered with the size of the birds. This allows the turkeys to live in the same space for the entire growth period. From the time a male poult comes into a house at just a few ounces, to when it leaves as a bird of between 30 and 40 pounds, only 19-22 weeks pass. That means that 1 single turkey will on average gain more than 1.5 lbs, each week.



## What do Turkeys Eat?

Turkeys in the wild are omnivores. They eat seeds, berries, grass, insects, and have even been known to consume tadpoles. This diet is very nutritionally inconsistent, and turkey producers try to prevent that kind of inconsistency on farm. Turkeys in production are fed what is called a total mixed ration. This means that all the nutrients they need are supplied in one homogenized (mixed together) ground feed. Because birds do not have teeth, it is important that their feed is ground. If they were to be fed the same diet without being ground and mixed, not only would they waste a good deal of the nutrients by excreting them, they would also sort out the largest particles first. In the long term this would lead to nutrient deficiencies and poor performance.



# Meet a Turkey Farmer

Mike Maroney works for Perdue Farms and he told us what it is like to be a turkey farmer. Mike is the Manager of Live Production over Breeders and Hatchery. This means that he oversees everything that happens on a farm with over 150,000 turkeys. This farm is responsible for producing all the poults (baby turkeys) that will be raised by Perdue and made into the turkey we eat. Mike's job is to manage the good care of baby turkeys, make sure that his farm is working efficiently, and continually try to improve the production of his facility. Mike has worked at Perdue for 28 years, but he hasn't always been his current position. Mike has had many positions including; production manager, breeding manager, and many others. In these positions a larger part of his job was directly involved with the live production of birds, and this has always been his favorite part of the job.

Mike grew up in agriculture, but when he started at Perdue he knew very little about turkeys. He has raised cattle and sheep, and even been a grain farmer. He then went to the University of Western Kentucky and earned a degree in agricultural economics. At Kentucky, Mike worked hard to gain experience in as many areas of agriculture he could. This included milking cows, building grain bins, and helping on tobacco farms. He always knew he wanted to work in agriculture and with animals, but he never imagined that he would be working with turkeys. Mike is very happy to have found his first job with Perdue, and he has enjoyed working with them all of these years.

Mike pointed out that turkeys are very social and can learn to really like people. The turkeys like to follow you around the house and watch you very intently, especially when they are young. Mike even told me a story about an employee who has a favorite turkey in every house she works in. She can call to the birds and they even let her pet them and sit in her lap!

Mike is a perfect example of how hard work and passion for your job can help you to have a happy life and a rewarding career.



## Turkey Fast Facts:

It takes a tom about 18 weeks to reach a weight of 30 pounds and it takes about 70-75 lbs of feed to get him there.

The white turkeys that are grown on farms are mostly a variety of the White Holland.

In 2015, 233.1 million turkeys were raised in the US alone.

# Help Your Family with Thanksgiving Dinner!

**(Always have a parent help with cooking instructions!)**

## Ingredients

4 cups uncooked spiral pasta  
1 garlic clove; minced  
3 tablespoons butter  
3 tablespoons all-purpose flour  
1 teaspoon salt  
1/4 teaspoon prepared mustard  
1/4 teaspoon pepper  
2 cups 2% milk  
1-1/2 cups shredded cheddar cheese  
2 cups cubed cooked turkey  
2 cups frozen mixed vegetables; thawed  
1/2 cup French fried onions



## Cooking Instructions

**(Always have a parent help with cooking instructions!)**

Preheat the oven to 350° and cook pasta according to package directions.

Meanwhile, in a large saucepan, sauté garlic in butter until tender.

Stir in flour, salt, mustard, and pepper.

Gradually stir in milk.

Bring to a boil; cook and stir 2 minutes or until thickened.

Remove from heat; stir in cheese until melted.

Drain pasta; place in a large bowl.

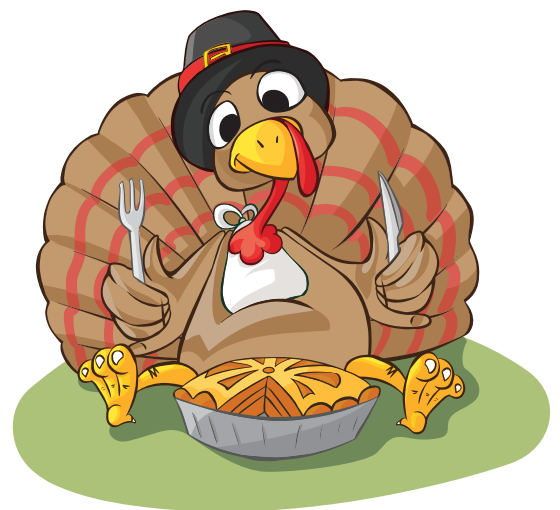
Toss with turkey, vegetables and cheese sauce.

Transfer to a greased 13x9-in. baking dish.

Sprinkle with French fried onions.

Bake, uncovered, 35-40 minutes or until heated through.

**(Always have a parent help with cooking instructions!)**



# Word Search!

Find the **Bolded** Words

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Q I L P R O T E I N U J P F F

**Tom** – mature male individual

**Hen** – female individual

**Poult** – juvenile turkey

**Poultry** – term used to describe birds that have been domesticated (examples include chickens, ducks, turkeys, and quail)

**House** – term used for a barn that turkeys are raised in

**Feed** – animal food stuffs (ex. corn, soy bean meal)

**Soy Bean Meal** – used as the primary source of protein in turkey diets

**Protein** – nutrient that animals utilize to build new tissue

**Crop** - digestive organ used to store food directly after it is eaten, it allows birds to consume large amounts at one time

**Gizzard** – digestive organ that is the source of mechanical digestion for the bird

**Snood** – appendage that hangs from the turkey's face (grows from the base of the beak), is more prominent in male individuals

**Beard** – hair that grows from the chest of the tom and is an indicator of maturity (females can sometimes have small beards)

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