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## Suppliers Anxious Over Surplus of Heritage Turkeys

By [MARIAN BURROS](#)

IT is hard to believe, but four years after heritage turkeys were considered endangered - only 400 in existence - there is now a glut, glut being a relative term.

A group of six turkey farmers in Kansas finds itself with 2,000 heritage birds that have no designated Thanksgiving table to grace. It is an opportunity for more people to taste one of these rare breeds, the kinds of turkeys our grandparents ate before the Broadbreasted White took over the turkey world.

In a recent blind tasting in New York, one of those rare breeds, the American Bronze, and a wild turkey took top honors over supermarket and organic birds.

But the glut could put the turkey farmers out of business or put an enormous financial strain on the company that ordered the turkeys but has been unable to sell them.

Heritage Foods USA, once a sales arm of Slow Food, is now run by Patrick Martins, a former executive director of Slow Food, and Todd Wickstrom. It became an independent company in June 2004 to sell rare breeds of turkeys with names like Bourbon Red and American Bronze; other rare foodstuffs, like Berkshire pork; and beef, corn and beans that have also been designated as heritage.

Last winter Mr. Martins ordered 6,000 turkeys, and he thought he had them sold. But this fall two large purchasers backed out of agreements to buy 2,000 birds, he said. He declined to name the companies.

Since 2001 Mr. Martins has been doing business with Frank Reese Jr. of Lindsborg, Kan., who has raised turkeys since he was 5. In an effort to preserve the heritage turkeys, he has provided baby birds to other farmers to expand their numbers.

"Sometime in September, October, Patrick told me he was having trouble getting some of the birds sold," Mr. Reese said in a telephone interview on Monday. "Then he asked me what would happen if we don't get them sold, and I told him if he could get 5,000 of the 6,000 sold, at least we could break even. The main thing is, I don't want to borrow money to pay my farmers. One way or another they have to get paid."

Mr. Reese said he did not think Heritage Foods had put enough effort into selling the turkeys last winter.

Mr. Martins agreed. He said that when Heritage Foods became independent, the company might have paid more attention to products other than its turkeys.

"The turkeys were being put just a tad on a back burner when we took up pork and wild rice, and we didn't have Plan B and Plan C" in case anyone backed out of a contract, Mr. Martins said in a telephone interview. "In the end we will pay Frank. Whether Todd and I have to give up \$30,000 of our money, whether I have to end up living in Brooklyn instead of Manhattan, the farmers will be paid. It's going to put a stress on Heritage Foods."

It may not come to that. Krehbiels Specialty Meats, a processor about 15 miles from Mr. Reese's farm, has agreed to sell any surplus American Bronze turkeys. The birds, which are sold fresh and weigh from 10 to 19 pounds, cost \$4.49 a pound. Shipping and handling for next-day air cost about \$120, with second-day air about \$60 (877-240-0103). Telephone orders must be received by Nov. 18.

And Heritage Foods continues to sell fresh turkeys: from \$139 for a bird weighing 11 to 14 pounds to \$199 for those 19 pounds and bigger, with overnight shipping included ([www.heritagefoodsusa.com](http://www.heritagefoodsusa.com)).