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The Holiday Turkey Steps Out for a Smoke



Allison V. Smith for The New York Times

Michael Sanders rolled a rack of smoked turkeys to the packaging station at Greenberg Smoked Turkey in Tyler, Tex.

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Tyler, Tex.

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LAST week, Teresa Braziel bought her "first Greenberg of the season," a nine-pound turkey, nestled in a white cardboard box, printed with the slogan "The Holiday Aristocrat."

Like many residents of this 100,000-person city in the piney woods of Texas near the Louisiana line, she claimed her spice-rubbed and hickory-burnished bird from the front counter at the Greenberg Smoked Turkey headquarters, a squat complex of interconnected cinder block and sheet metal buildings, shrouded in a seemingly perpetual shawl of gray-green smoke.

"This is my nibbling turkey," Ms. Braziel said. "We'll eat on this one — turkey and mustard with crackers, turkey salad, turkey chili — while we get ready for the parties." In

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Allison V. Smith for The New York Times
Tony Wallace handles the hickory for Greenberg turkeys. [More Photos](#) »

the coming weeks, she will buy three more, for a holiday open house, for [Thanksgiving](#) and for Christmas. And she will ship 20 more to friends in Dallas, Houston and beyond.

[Greenberg Smoked Turkey](#), founded in 1938 by Samuel Isaac Greenberg and now run by his grandson Sam Greenberg, will sell about 20,000 turkeys to walk-in customers this season, priced at a little more than \$4 a pound. Beginning on Monday of Thanksgiving week, a line will snake down the street and into the working-class neighborhood that surrounds the plant. To alleviate parking squabbles, Greenberg employees will shuttle customers about in golf carts.

For an independent producer that has built a reputation on pit-cooked poultry and personalized service, that may seem like a lot of turkeys to smoke and a lot of logistics to manage. But local sales are just the tip of the wing.

By the time Sam Greenberg closes for the holiday season on Dec. 24 and hands each of his 200 employees a free bird, more than 200,000 turkeys will have emerged from the company's 20 brick-lined, hardwood-fired pit houses. Packed frozen, they thaw in transit and land two to three days later on doorsteps across the nation.

From New York to California, customers — some of whom claim three and four generations of patronage — will build family meals around Greenberg turkeys that, thanks to a daylong swirl in smoke, deliver the succulence that eludes most holiday cooks.

Samuel Isaac Greenberg was 17 in 1903 when he came to the United States as a Jewish immigrant from Poland. Disembarking in Galveston, Tex., he made his way north to Tyler at the invitation of the congregation Ahavath Achim. According to Hollace Ava Weiner, an author of the book "Lone Stars of David: The Jews of Texas," he was recruited to serve as a religious leader.

As the hazan, he led prayers and chanted from the Torah, Ms. Weiner said. As the mohel, he circumcised male babies. And as the shochet, he butchered animals, including geese and turkeys, following Jewish rituals.

By the 1930s, when Tyler boasted more than one shochet, Samuel Greenberg was selling smoked kosher turkeys to Jews and non-Jews alike.

He rubbed those birds with a spice mix attributed to his mother, Jennie Greenberg. Working in a metal shebang with a sand-covered floor, tucked in a back corner of his milking barn, Greenberg and Elva Cole, a black colleague who probably stoked the pits, hung the turkeys from a nested pair of ceiling-mounted wagon wheels and smoked them over hickory logs.

Few records of the early days of the business remain. But every Greenberg tells the story of the six turkeys ordered in 1938 by a Dallas customer. Purchases were traditionally picked up on the farm, so they had to figure out how to get the turkeys to Dallas, about 100 miles west. Zelick Greenberg, a son of Samuel, packed the turkeys in a candy store box, added straw for cushioning, and shipped them by rail from Tyler.

Word of Samuel and Zelick Greenberg's work spread by mouth. And by rail. And soon by mail. The birds that arrived on the other end were not typical smoked turkeys. "What my father did was not a casual smoke," said Sam Greenberg, a ruddy-faced 52-year-old, who may never have met a stranger.

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“Those turkeys weren’t honey-colored, they were really, truly smoked,” Mr. Greenberg said, his voice rising to a shout, as if an increase in volume could convey the intensity of the charred hickory fog that permeates his family’s turkeys, rendering the birds a color best described as burnt umber with a black licorice wash.

A version of this article appeared in print on November 10, 2010, on page D1 of the New York edition.

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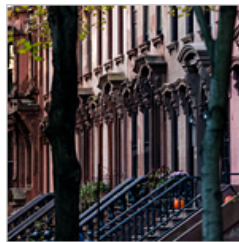
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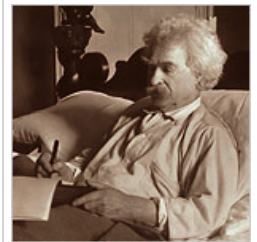
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