

UNITED TASTES

The Holiday Turkey Steps Out for a Smoke

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(Page 2 of 2)

“There is no magic here, just hard work,” Mr. Greenberg said, as he stepped down into the rectangular shed where Tony Wallace, a 27-year veteran of the company, loaded hickory logs in one of the three rolling fire boxes that fuel each of the 20 pit houses. (A typical East Texas barbecue man must stoop to fire a pit with a long-handled shovel. Here, pit masters like Mr. Wallace push webbed iron conveyances, loaded with smoldering coals, back and forth on an ingenious track-mounted system devised in the 1950s by Zelick Greenberg.)

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Allison V. Smith for The New York Times
Workers' aprons and gloves. [More Photos](#) »

Like many East Texas pit masters, Mr. Wallace is black. And like many who work at Greenberg, he is a seasonal employee. During the nine months when the pits are not in regular use, he does carpentry work. Ray Wallace, his brother, an eight-year veteran, drives a dump truck in the off-season.

In Tyler, jobs with Greenberg are hard won. Despite the fractured nature of employment, the company boasts two staff members who began working at the plant before Sam Greenberg was born. The Greenberg approach runs contrary to the heritage poultry movement of the last decade. “I buy the same birds you would buy in a grocery store,” Mr. Greenberg said. As a smile creased his face, he claimed never to have heard of heritage turkeys, the much-fetishized breeds rescued from the agricultural past, that live cage free and promise, when roasted, a more robust flavor than a typical grocery store bird.

“You don’t want a scrawny, long-legged bird on your Thanksgiving table,” said Mr. Greenberg, seated in his office behind a one-way mirror that faces a call center bullpen where, at the peak of the season, 40 or more operators swivel beneath bright fluorescent lights and peck turkey orders into terminals. “You want conformity in your bird. And that means a turkey with a big breast and short legs.”

To achieve that conformity, Greenberg sources broad-breasted white turkeys, the commodity market standard,

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Allison V. Smith for The New York Times
The company uses conventional turkeys. [More Photos](#) »

from Norbest, a Utah cooperative. “They come out good on the other end,” Mr. Greenberg said, implying, as barbecue pit masters do hereabouts, that excellence in smoked-meat cookery is determined by human resources, not natural resources.

Sam Greenberg has made a number of adjustments through the years. Unlike his father and grandfather before him, he no longer smokes kosher turkeys. In 1981, he stopped handwriting gift cards. Last year, Greenberg started accepting credit cards via its Web site, gobblegobble.com. (Previously turkeys were shipped, and invoices were paid on the honor system.)

He prefers, however, to focus consumer attention on his company’s hidebound ways. With the cadence of a salesman, he trumpets an aversion to change that would give pause to the most conservative Texas legislator.

On plant tours, visitors learn that Greenberg employees still hand-trim every bird, cutting the wing tips and neck flap from the carcass. And they knife-jab each turkey at least six times, so that the spice mix, which is robust with ground black pepper, can permeate the flesh. They hand-truss each pair of turkey legs, too, before hanging the

dressed bird in its pit house berth.

“I want to be known as the guy who didn’t mess up Greenberg Smoked Turkey,” Mr. Greenberg said, leaning from the window of a swooping black Mercedes with license plates that read “GIBLET.”

“If I mess things up, I’ll be messing with people’s holiday tradition, and I’m not inclined to do that.”

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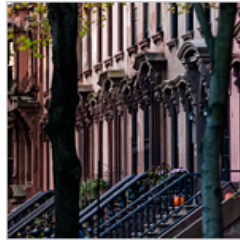
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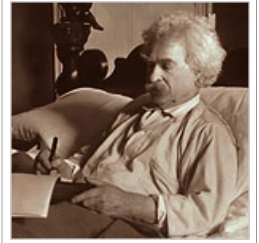
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