

Cargill offers more traceable turkeys for Thanksgiving dinners

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Kristen Leigh Painter

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Cargill is expanding its traceable turkey program this holiday season so more consumers can know the name of the farmer who raised their Thanksgiving bird.

The Minnetonka-based agribusiness tested the program in Texas last year with its Honeysuckle White brand. Consumers responded so favorably the company decided to nearly quadruple the number of traceable birds available in stores this November and December.

Cargill is also broadening the availability to major metropolitan areas in about 30 states, including Minnesota. A limited number of fresh whole birds are also available through online retailer Amazon.

It's the latest example of a large food manufacturer responding to consumers' desire for more information about how and where their food was grown.

"We knew it was something consumers said they wanted, but then to actually see a lot of positive response really sealed the deal on why were doing it and why we should continue to do it," said Kassie Long, Cargill's brand manager for Honeysuckle White.

The tracing is enabled through a technology called blockchain that allows multiple users to add information to a "digital ledger" that is shared across a network of computers. Because the data is constantly updated and stored in countless places, it is harder to hack and easier to verify.

The food industry likes the idea of using blockchain for food safety so contaminated food could immediately be traced. But beyond some of the obvious internal incentives for companies, many manufacturers are beginning to see the emotional benefit blockchain could play with consumers, said Lauren Demeritt, chief executive of The Hartman Group, a consumer foods research firm.

“Consumers really want to hear the narrative,” Demeritt said, “Narratives about the care and intent that went into products can really drive sales. If you can trace that back to people and families, there is a halo around (the product).”

The traceable birds all contain a code on its packaging that a shopper can enter in a text message or on the company’s website and then immediately receiving the location of the farm, the name of the farmer or family, images and any other biographical information that producer wanted to share.

Farmers have been enthusiastic about the program, Long said, as it gives them a chance to share more about themselves directly with consumers who may not know much about raising turkeys.

Cargill’s Honeysuckle team has spent the last year growing its network of farms in the program from four to 70 independent turkey operators in Texas and Missouri. That ups the number of traceable turkeys in the marketplace from 60,000 to 200,000 at thousands of U.S. retailers, including several across the Twin Cities. The company is still only selling them during the winter holiday season, but said it is considering other key sales days during the year.

Cargill says it is not charging its customers more for the traceable turkeys, but it’s up to the retailers to set the price it sells them to consumers. Traceable Honeysuckle White turkeys on Amazon will cost more than in stores to cover shipping costs, a company spokeswoman said.

Farmers markets have long offered consumers a place to buy food with details about its origins. This has spilled into co-ops, boutique food stores and now mass market retail. Cargill, the world’s largest agricultural commodities supplier, is synonymous with the consolidated food system. It is the third largest turkey company in the U.S., having processed 1 billion pounds of meat in 2017, according to a database maintained by Watt PoultryUSA, a trade publication.

But even large producers and manufacturers are recognizing the benefit of giving consumers more information about their processes and sourcing – even if it’s traceable stock is a small fraction of its overall production.

“Traceability in our food system is always a good thing. Companies are all looking for ways to differentiate themselves and I think anything that gives consumers more information is good,” said Helene Murray, executive director of The Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture at the University of Minnesota.

There are other ways for consumers to trace their Thanksgiving bird, Murray said. She buys hers from Minnesota-based Callister Farm at the St. Paul farmers market, but applauds any company trying to improve transparency in the supply chain.

Demeritt said public concern is fading over greenwashing — a problem where companies make their products appear better for the environment and people than they might actually be through marketing.

“Mainstream consumers are wanting some of these premium attributes that maybe only a small group wanted a few years ago,” Demeritt said. If advances in technology can be applied to the way food values have changed, then that’s positive for most consumers, she said. “They now have access to these narratives and stories that they can buy at a price that is much more palatable than it probably was in the past.”