

Picking a turkey

If you are vegan or at all squeamish, you may not want to read this post.

There's a turkey farm relatively nearby where you can pick your own turkey and help pluck and prepare it. The birds are well cared for and fairly open range (they're contained enough that they have a lot of space but they can't just wander off) and the people who run the farm are good people. Xander and Katja went last year. I don't remember what I was doing, but I couldn't come. They enjoyed the time there, though she was slightly freaked out by the bird flapping at one point. She has talked about it regularly since then as something that she was interested in and, I think, still processing.

This year I got to come, too. It was somewhat easier because one of us could help with the turkey and the other could be in charge of Katja. Since I hadn't been there before, Xander mostly handled Katja so I could concentrate on the turkey.

There were four other people there by the time we got started. One was a couple. The woman had been there the year before, just to pick up a turkey, but her boyfriend hadn't been before, either. They decided to stay and watch, though the lady was very worried that she would freak out. There was also a father and son who hadn't decided whether they were just going to pick up a turkey or pluck one. The boy (who was maybe 10 or so) ended up helping with ours.

One of the farmers went into the enclosure and got a turkey. She picked him up by his feet (he knocked her glasses off in the process!) and, once she was holding him, he was completely docile. Didn't flap, didn't object. She came out and handed him to me while she closed the door and put her glasses back on. Katja came around the corner with Xander and was rather surprised to see me with a turkey, which was pretty funny.

We took the turkey over to the processing area. The farmer put the turkey in a metal cone with a hole at the bottom and the turkey's head came through the bottom of the cone. She thanked the turkey for its life and then cut its throat, quickly. The blood was really red, which I should have expected. The farmer explained that all of the turkey parts that we didn't use got left out and the other animals (cats, dog, chickens, etc) cleaned them up. The blood was very nitrogen rich so it helped the soil when it was absorbed.

The turkey flapped a little bit in the cone but stopped quickly. There was a very large vat of very hot water a few feet away, so once the final twitches had stopped we put the turkey in the hot water to loosen up the feathers. One of the other farmers also turned it over and got the feet into the water for a while to loosen up the scales. I helped move the turkey from the hot water to the cool water bath. I ended up getting soaked down my right side, but that's why we wore clothes that weren't delicate.

Pulling the feathers out was interesting. The big feathers were pretty hard to get out. The smaller ones just had to be pulled the right direction. Katja helped for a while, but eventually got bored with it. Xander helped a lot with the feathers, too. We finished faster than I expected.

We moved the turkey to a table with a metal top and I pulled the rest of the feathers out with pliers while Xander and the young boy worked on pulling the scales off the feet. Apparently many people are somewhat disturbed by the idea of using the feet in stock because they've been in the dirt and grime, but they don't understand that the scales are removed before the feet are cooked. The toenails also crack and come off; the quick looks like a fully formed claw, just soft. We also worked on loosening the crop so it could be easily removed later; this is where some of the food is stored. Katja was quite involved in helping with this part, holding back the skin and asking questions about everything. She wanted to know

what was in the turkey's mouth so I opened the beak and she got to see the tongue. She was a little surprised that it was pointed.

Once we had all of the feathers and scales off, the turkey was hung over a bucket and we removed the internal organs. These will be used for stock. I accidentally punctured the intestines, so it got a little messy, but I got the useful parts out and they were rinsed, first in water, then in a little vinegar just to make sure nothing was left. I peeled the lining off of the gizzard (it was almost rubbery, but since it has to contain pebbles to help with digestion, that makes sense; I just hadn't thought about it before) and put it in with the rest of the organ meat. We then rinsed the turkey, chopped off the head and feet, singed the carcass to deal with the pinfeathers, and then bagged the body and the organs separately.

I was surprised that it didn't bother me at all. The lady who watched but was very worried about it said that she had a new respect for her food and understood more now than she had. Once she got over the initial unhappiness about watching something die, she was actually okay with the process. Katja didn't have any issues with it. We feel that it's very important that she knows where her food comes from. A turkey isn't just a big round thing on the shelf in a grocery store. It was a living creature that went through a long process before it came to our table.

I know that a lot of people will not agree with this particular parenting decision, especially since Katja is only four years old. On the other hand, by doing it now we are avoiding making it into a huge deal. I have a few friends who grew up on farms and saw animals slaughtered from when they were very young. Life and death are intertwined and, for them, they understood that. One of them became a vegetarian until she could grow her own food and make sure that the animals were well cared for. I can understand and respect that. I'd

like Katja to understand what she's eating. I don't want it to be a shock or a terrifying thing when she figures it out at nine or ten. She knows now that she's eating animals. If she decides at some point that she's uncomfortable with that, it will be a well-informed decision.

We don't eat much meat. What we do eat, almost exclusively, is free range, well cared for, and we've met the people who take care of the animals. It's something of a luxury, but one of the reasons we don't eat much meat is so we can be careful about the meat we do eat.

It was an interesting experience and we will definitely be back next year. It is, to me, a good thing to do. Also, the turkey tastes amazing!