



Community

Raising Christmas turkey

Students at the American Farm School in Thessaloniki have been working overtime to furnish markets with more than 20,000 turkeys just in time for the holidays

By Angelike Contis

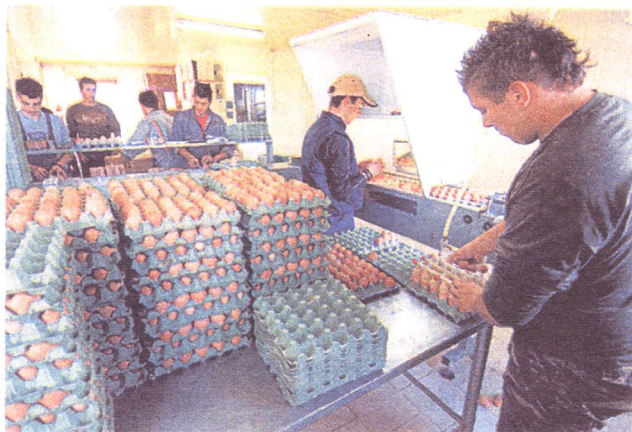
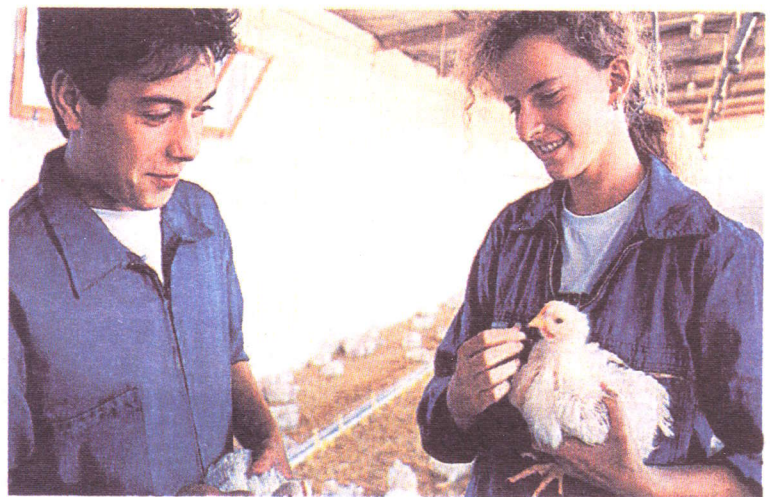
THE YEAR 2005 may have been rough for turkey breeders in Greece, but Thessaloniki's American Farm School seems untouched by the recent avian flu paranoia. Its students have been busy preparing over 20,000 turkeys for Thessaloniki and Athens markets. Not only is production at previous years' levels, but demand may be up.

"Whenever there is a scare," explains the school farm's director, Thanasis Giamoustaris, "people buy more of our products." He cites the school's relative isolation and safety concerns as big advantages.

But while most producers would think of expansion only after achieving high supply and a trusted brand name, the school has other priorities. To be sure, the tuition-free institution, which has raised turkeys since the 1960s, profits as the income supports student scholarships. But Giamoustaris notes: "We don't want to evolve into a major industry." He says the education imperative and zoning laws prohibiting expansion mean that "we're trying to make better and better turkeys, eggs and milk every year - rather than increasing production - even though there is space in the market".

On a daily basis, American Farm School students follow classroom work with farm experience, such as animal husbandry, harvesting flowers and making wine. The 300-odd students learn "how to do things properly", says Giamoustaris, including understanding entrepreneurship as well as "producing healthy, safe food".

Raising turkeys in a "nice, clean, dry" environment is a priority, the director says. A part-linseed diet boosts the health benefits of the turkeys and



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Omega 3 egg-laying chickens. (The eggs were first introduced in Greece, in conjunction with Aristotle University, in the late 1990s.) Constant innovations include feeding the turkeys herbs, like oregano, in order - not to flavour the meat - but give the animals antioxidants and anti-microbial natural agents.

"We follow every safety precaution," Giamoustaris repeats, pointing out that, unlike on organic farms, "you won't see our turkeys feeding in the garden." While he believes the avian flu scare "ruined a lot of farmers for no apparent reason", Giamoustaris says American Farm School birds are prevented from

potentially dangerous contact with wild animals. Human visits are also carefully regulated. The high-profile institution, however, receives more government inspections than your average farm.

Meanwhile, its educational turkeys, which average 5 kilos and are never frozen, are making their way to their final resting places - a holiday table near you.

✓ *In Athens, the turkeys are sold at sales points including AB Vassilopoulos supermarkets. In Thessaloniki, they are found in butcher shops or can be ordered from the school at 7.3 euros per kilo (tel 2310-492714)*