

Kosher poultry business grows East Toronto plant serves observant Jews across Canada

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Rabbi Moshe Rubelow grasps a chicken by the nape to bare its throat for his knife. The bird is motionless.

"Blessed art Thou, O Lord, Our God, King of the Universe, who has made us holy through your commandments and has commanded us to slaughter," Rubelow prays.

He glides the blade up to a spot just below the bird's beak, and cuts. A trickle of blood appears. With a slight thumb-pressure under the beak, the esophagus and the trachea (resembling an ivory-coloured penny whistle) pop up. They are clear of any foreign matter that might have obstructed his knife.

Content that he has made a "kosher kill" - one that cleanly severed the bird's gullet (esophagus) and windpipe (trachea) with a single, continuous stroke - he washes the knife and turns to kill another.

Following a ritual that has remained unchanged for more than 2,000 years, the shochet (literally slaughterer) begins another workday at Chai Poultry Inc.

Partners Chuck Weinberg and accountants Maurice and Richard Pasternac have built a private company that serves the needs of observant Jews for kosher poultry throughout Canada. Chai's products are sold in chain stores such as Miracle Mart and Loblaws, as well as butcher shops.

In November, 1995, Chai - the Hebrew word for life, with the "c" and the "i" being silent - began shipping its blue-and-white packages to Royal Palate Foods, a California firm that wholesales kosher food throughout the United States.

Located in Toronto's east end, Chai Poultry is unique. From the moment chickens are plucked flapping from crates on the loading dock, until they leave as breasts or drumsticks in styrofoam packs, they are processed in accordance with Jewish dietary law. To do this, the company has the authorization of the Congress of Orthodox Rabbis (COR) that approves the religious staff and inspects the meat, and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (formerly Agriculture Canada) that enforces health and sanitation regulations.

Birds can't be electrocuted and killed as elsewhere. Jewish dietary laws require that they be slaughtered, one at a time, by a shochet.

"These men are highly qualified and observant religious professionals, who require years of training before they can do the job," says managing partner Chuck Weinberg. Four experienced slaughterers can kill 11,000 birds in a nine-hour day in peak season, he says.

Then, amid the snarl of eviscerating tools, religious staff inspects them for damage to the birds' thighs, shanks and internal organs that might make them "unkosher."

"They (Jewish dietary laws) have nothing to do with sanitation," says burly red-haired Rabbi Benjamin Kreitman, head of the religious staff. "They have to do with whether the meat is fit according to Torah law."

Since the law forbids eating meat that contains blood, birds must be soaked in cold water - not hot, because hot water sears blood into the meat - salted, and soaked again to drain out blood.

De-feathering is a problem, because hot water can't be used to loosen feathers. So the birds are spun through a series of four de-feathering machines before being inspected and sent back for more de-feathering, if necessary.

After soaking, they emerge from the tank, resembling a chorus line of portly, if headless, pink-skinned bathers. Weinberg and his partners bought the company in 1988. At the time, it was a small family firm with a 25 per cent share of the kosher poultry market in Ontario. The main competitor was Marvid Foods, a conglomerate-owned Quebec giant.

The partners tried to expand the company's market share, but it wasn't easy. Within a year, it was on the verge of bankruptcy as the competition proved more tenacious than the new owners had expected.

Weinberg says Chai Poultry has since rebounded to capture 80 per cent of the Canadian kosher market. (There are no figures on how many of Ontario's 350,000 Jews obey the dietary laws, but he estimates it's 50,000, or 15 per cent.)

While he would like to see Chai products on the tables of the general public, Weinburg knows it's a tough sell. Kosher chicken retails at \$4.37 to \$5.47 a kilogram, compared with \$2.84 to \$4.82 for non-kosher birds. Various factors drive up the costs, he says - from a longer processing time (it takes the company three hours to process a chicken, as opposed to 10 minutes in a non-kosher plant) to COR requirements for tamper-proof packaging.

So, the company contents itself with satisfying the needs of observant Jews.

"We want to make as wide a range of products - from turkey scallopini to ground-chicken and turkey burgers - for the kosher consumer as for the general public," Weinberg says.

Credit: Lawrence Papoff SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Illustration

Caption: Star Photo (JOHN MAHLER): CHILLING OUT: Chuck Weinberg and his partners bought a kosher poultry-processing business in 1988. After almost going bankrupt, they have now managed to grab 80 per cent of the Canadian kosher poultry market.

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