

walls

WILLMAR POULTRY COMPANY | 2401 4TH AVE. SW, WILLMAR, MINNESOTA | EST. 1945



PHOTO BY CAMERON WITTIG

IF THESE WALLS COULD TALK. The Willmar Poultry Company hatches 87 million turkeys a year. It's the biggest turkey hatchery in the world, doing its part to keep the world champion turkey producer title belt around Minnesota's waist.

"They're building a hatchery down in Iowa that's supposed to be bigger," operations manager Neil Miller says with a wink. "But they haven't been able to ramp up to our production levels yet." Each week, the Willmar hatchery takes in around 780,000 turkey eggs trucked in from local farms. ("We pay \$.98 per egg," Miller says.) From that roe, a 28-day long hatching cycle commences, culminating in 670,000 "day-old poults," the technical term for the tiny downy

yellow turkeys. They are, without a doubt, the cutest, cuddliest rings in the industrial turkey production chain.

As Miller opens a door in the hot, humid incubation building, a feminine, Siri-esque voice calmly warns "ALARM HATCHER BAY TWO" over the intercom. A machine slowly tilts a massive block of eggs 60 degrees back and forth each half-hour. "Everything we do here kinda mimics the hen," he says. I imagine being under a 100-foot tall cyborg turkey as she simulates an organic routine; nudging and squatting, fussing over proprietary ovum.

Once they're hatched, the little birds are taken by conveyor belt through a Rube Goldberg

device manned by a dozen workers wearing medical masks. The sex of each bird is identified. They're separated into toms and hens, and then vaccinated and placed on a whirring beak trimmer that inhibits the hardness of the beak cells with UV light. They're then stored in boxes and trucked to processors like Jennie-O and Butterball.

People rarely invoke the mass-scale ingenuity of the American industrial food chain during the Thanksgiving prayer, but this year, when you're gathered around your perfectly golden-brown bird, think about its giant robot turkey mom two hours due west in Willmar.

—Steve Marsh

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